

DECEMBER 2020

RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

Overview of activities of Civic Initiatives aimed at
mitigating the consequences caused by the COVID-
19 pandemic



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DECLARATION OF A PANDEMIC AND IMPOSING A STATE OF EMERGENCY

Due to the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and after the Decision on declaring COVID-19 caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus an infectious disease and the Order banning indoor gatherings in the Republic of Serbia, a state of emergency was imposed in Serbia on March 15, 2020.

The adoption of this decision also enabled the adoption of measures that prescribe the derogation of certain human and minority rights.

The introduction of the state of emergency, as well as the declaration of a corona virus pandemic had a great impact on the work of civil society organizations. Most of them had to react quickly and adjust their activities to the new situation.

NEW SET OF ACTIVITIES OF CIVIC INITIATIVES

Remembering the days of genuine solidarity, coordination and accountability shown by the civic sector to the citizens of Serbia in 2014, and aware of the seriousness of the current situation and the declared state of emergency, in March 2020, Civic Initiatives began a new set of activities aimed at mitigating the consequences caused by the pandemic.

Activities included coordination and joint work with organizations from all over Serbia, monitoring the activities of organizations, as well as violations of basic rights of citizens during the state of emergency, informing citizens, advocating for greater involvement of organizations in combating the effects of the virus, enacting and amending regulations that would fit the current situation and, finally, online trainings to strengthen the capacities of organizations, but also teachers of civic education.

COORDINATING CSO ACTIVITIES TO MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19

The declaration of the pandemic and the adopted measures to suppress the effects of the virus have also changed the activities of civil society organizations. In order to increase the efficiency and coordination of activities already carried out by organizations, as well as better coverage of the most vulnerable citizens, Civic Initiatives created a [questionnaire](#) for civil society organizations about their activities, the needs of groups they work with, and services they will provide to citizens during the pandemic.



145

*Organizations from all over
Serbia shown on the map*



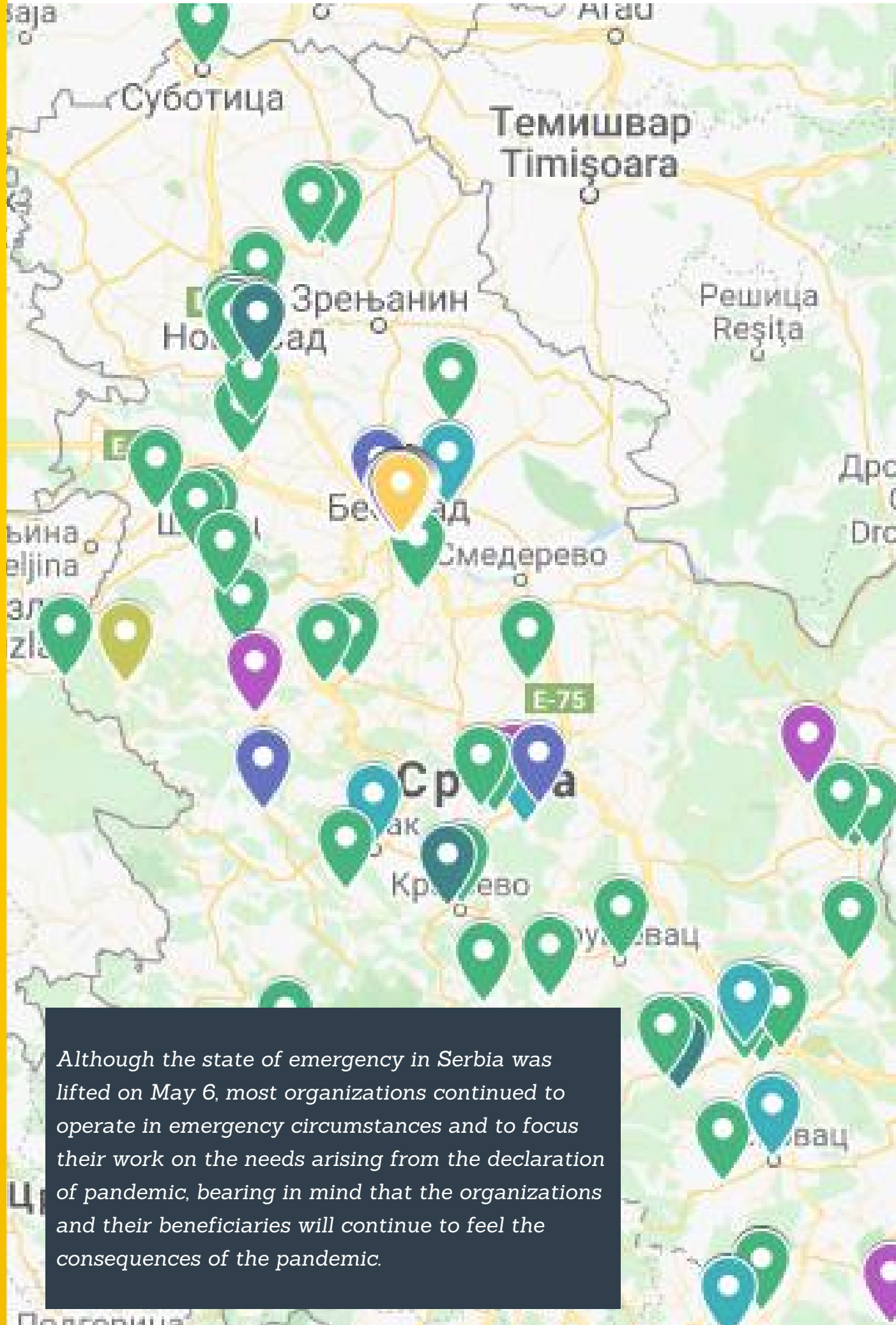
1/3

*Organizations focused their
activities on humanitarian
work*

Also, for ease of reference, an interactive map was created that helped coordinate organizations and connect the needs and services that organizations provide, or need. The map has been regularly updated with new activities and needs of organizations and it has been visited more than 10,000 times so far. You can visit the map - [here](#).

THE MAP

The map includes 145 civil society organizations from all over Serbia. The largest number of organizations, almost a third, focused their activities on humanitarian work. Other areas in which the activities of organizations can be classified are monitoring, information, psychosocial support and advocacy. It is especially important to emphasize the activities of organizations that work with the most vulnerable groups, through information on the poor current situation and possible consequences of the pandemic on the groups they deal with, namely people with disabilities, women, children and the elderly, as well as migrants and the homeless.



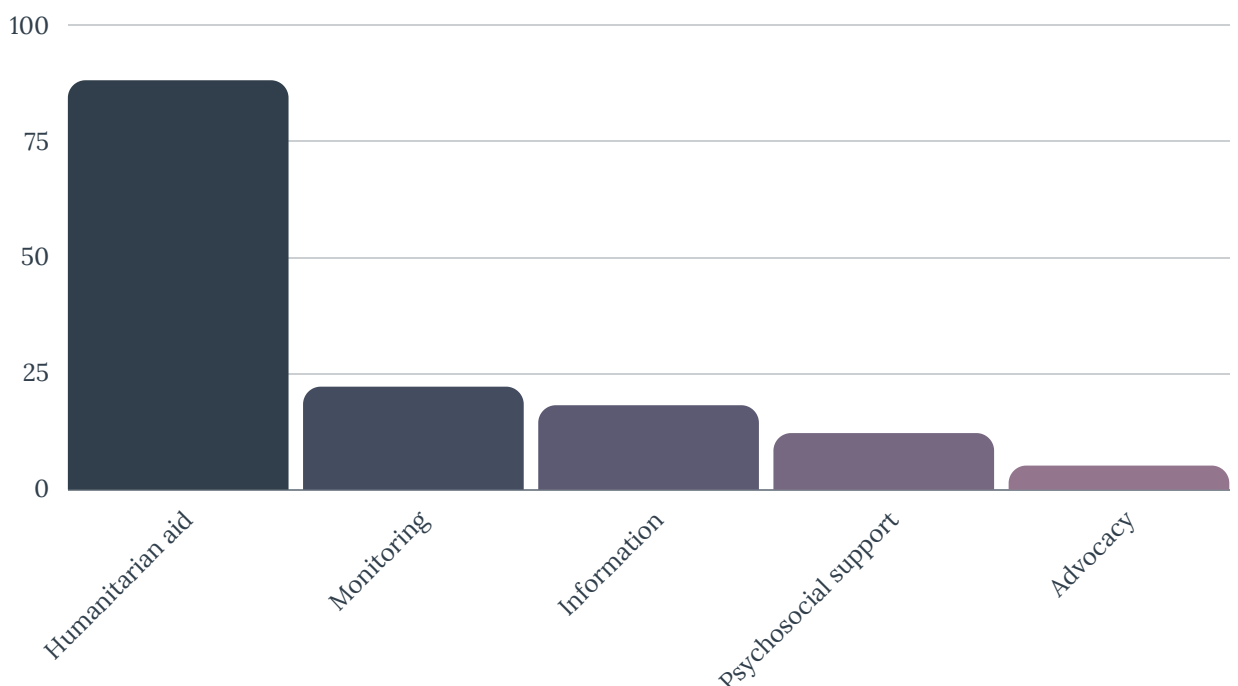
Although the state of emergency in Serbia was lifted on May 6, most organizations continued to operate in emergency circumstances and to focus their work on the needs arising from the declaration of pandemic, bearing in mind that the organizations and their beneficiaries will continue to feel the consequences of the pandemic.

MONITORING

REPORTS ON THE CSO ACTIVITY IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

In addition to coordinating the activities of organizations, Civic Initiatives published information on civil society activities in the form of [monitoring reports](#) in the period from March 15 to July 15. The methodology of gathering information for the report included desk research on the activities of organizations (including publications on social networks and in the media), as well as direct contact with organizations by e-mail or telephone. The reports were published on a weekly basis and the monitoring included a total of 11 reports on the activities of civil society organizations in response to COVID-19.

As mentioned, the activities of the organizations could be grouped into five areas: humanitarian aid, monitoring, advocacy initiatives, psychosocial support and information. The largest number of organizations covered by monitoring carried out activities in the field of humanitarian aid (88), followed by monitoring (22), information (18), psychosocial support (12) and advocacy (5).



REPORTS ON THE CSO ACTIVITY IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

It is important to note that some of the organizations carried out activities that fall into several areas. When it comes to individual activities within these areas, these are: providing legal assistance, human rights monitoring, providing psychological assistance, dealing with health care, networking, education and fundraising.

Slightly less than half of the organizations are active in Belgrade, and other CSOs are located throughout Serbia.



THREE FREEDOMS UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS REPORTS

The measures that the Government of Serbia adopted in order to combat the virus after the declaration of the pandemic and during the state of emergency significantly affected the respect for the basic human rights of all citizens of Serbia. During that period, the citizens of Serbia had limited rights to free movement and assembly.

Although it remained questionable whether they were appropriate to the current situation, the restrictions on these rights were prescribed by the relevant institutions.

On the other hand, the monitoring of civil society organizations pointed to a very noticeable threat to the right to expression and information, the right to health and social protection of citizens, as well as labor rights.

THREE FREEDOMS UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS REPORTS

With this in mind, the Three Freedom reports - recording cases of violations of rights to freedom of assembly, association and information, published by Civic Initiatives on a biweekly basis since August 2019, during the state of emergency and immediately after its abolition, were published twice a week.

Given the current situation, these reports, in addition to cases of violation of the rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression, included violations of all other human rights. In the period from March to October, [26 reports](#) were published, and, out of that number, 13 reports were published during the state of emergency.

During the state of emergency, the following number of human rights violations were recorded: freedom of association (7), freedom of assembly (0), freedom of expression (49) and other human rights (45). From March to the end of October, the following statistics of violations were recorded: freedom of association (20), assembly (3) and expression (96). All Three Freedoms reports are available [here](#).

26

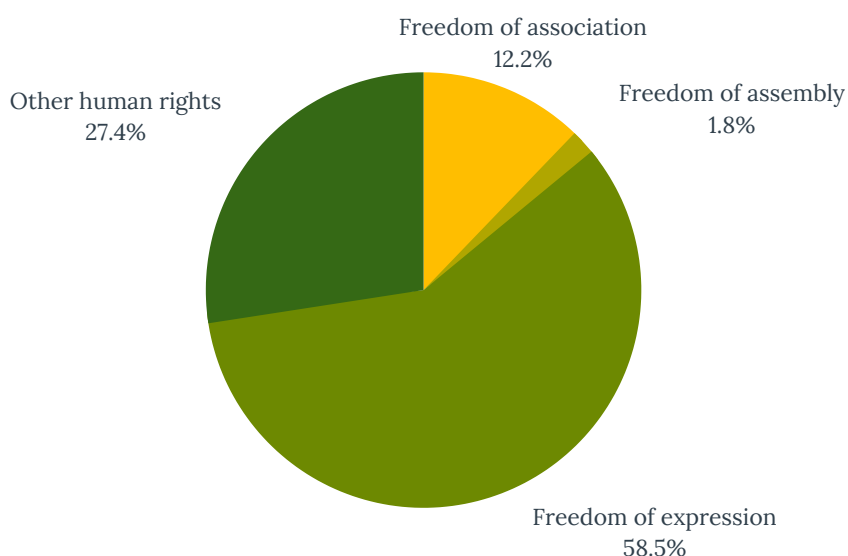
reports published from March to October

13

reports published during the state of emergency

119

recorded cases of violations of basic human rights



CSOS FROM SOUTHERN SERBIA: COVID-19 RESPONSE

In the period from mid-May to mid-July, 5 reports which included monitoring of civil society organizations in three municipalities in southern Serbia: Bujanovac, Presevo and Vranje were published. Information was collected in cooperation with local organizations from these three municipalities. Local organizations collected information through desk research as well as direct contact with other organizations and media in these three municipalities.

The information presented in the reports refer to general information about the municipality itself, general information about civil society organizations, information about local media, general information related to COVID-19 as well as the response of civil society during the crisis caused by the virus.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FROM SOUTHERN SERBIA

COVID-19 RESPONSE



Bujanovac



Preševo

Vranje

INFORMATION

THE DAY AFTER PODCAST

During the state of emergency, Civic Initiatives' *Boiling Point* podcast was published as a special issue, dedicated to the social and political consequences of the pandemic, called [The Day After](#). A total of 68 episodes of this series were filmed and published, with 69 guests from various spheres of society - activists, journalists, experts and artists.

In their interviews, they commented on current political developments in the context of the virus, presented the challenges they face in their local communities due to the virus, and tried to answer questions about what different aspects of our lives would look like once this crisis passes.

In early November, the podcast continued with new topics and a new title. This new edition is called [Out of the Center](#), and its focus is the activist scene in local communities outside of Belgrade.



68
episodes

69
guests

JOURNALISTS IN ISOLATION

A journalist in isolation actually sounds like an oxymoron. People and a profession that is all community-oriented through conversations and contacts, suddenly, like many citizens, found themselves locked between four walls. Their view of the outside world from this perspective was the reason for a series of texts published by Civic Initiatives during the state of emergency, wanting, above all, to offer a view of reality from another angle to which neither they nor we, as readers, are accustomed to.

15

Journalists in isolation articles

6

articles on reporting from the local communities during the state of emergency

A total of 15 articles were published in this series. The authors were journalists from all over Serbia. All the articles are available on Civic Initiatives' website - [here](#).

REPORTING FROM LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Local media are under increasing pressure. Far from the eyes of the public, they often become the target of arrogant politicians and authorities. Such a situation did not change during the COVID-19 pandemic. With this series of texts, Civic initiatives wanted to show on concrete examples how citizens in the smaller local communities in Serbia were informed during the state of emergency.

A total of 6 articles were published that presented the situation in Kragujevac, Valjevo, Čačak, Vranje, Niš and Leskovac. You can read the articles on Civic Initiatives' website - [here](#).

1

Appeal to the state and local self-government bodies not to reduce the allocations for citizens' associations and the media due to the declared extraordinary circumstances and not to stop the already planned activities.

2

Address to the Ministry of Finance regarding the Decree on fiscal benefits and direct benefit to Private Sector Companies during the state of emergency.

3

Proposal to the Ministry of Finance for amendments to the Decree in order to enable the extension of the VAT exemption to goods and services for all donations.

During the state of emergency, Civic Initiatives regularly reacted to the adoption of solutions and implementation of practices that resulted in insufficient transparency of the competent authorities, inconsistency of newly adopted acts with applicable regulations and lack of involvement of all stakeholders - primarily civil society organizations, in decision making and activities that have contributed to further narrowing the space for organizations to operate.

Civic initiatives also directed and supported the sending of several initiatives in order to interpret the adopted decisions and amend the existing regulations in order to make the humanitarian activities carried out by the organizations more efficient and impactful

4

Summarizing and [publishing](#) the recommendations contained in the set of documents prepared by the UN experts, which call for the principle of inviolability and promotion of basic human rights to be incorporated as one of the main pillars when developing the strategy and selection of measures to combat the COVID-19 virus.

5

[Complaint to the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection](#) due to incomplete response of the Institute of Public Health of Serbia "Dr Milan Jovanović Batut" regarding data related to the public health of Serbian citizens.

6

[Initiative to the Ombudsman](#) to initiate the procedure of control of the legality of the work of the Ministry of the Interior, in connection with the actions of the police on citizens' reports related to gatherings of citizens who lit torches from residential buildings in the evening, as well as in connection with granting movement permits to these groups during the ban on movement.

SUPPORT TO INITIATIVES, ANNOUNCEMENTS AND PRESS RELEASES

- [Open letter to donors](#)

who are active in the Western Balkans to adopt a more proactive and flexible approach in order to help those in urgent need as quickly and efficiently as possible.

- [Condemnation of police brutality](#) during the July protests in Belgrade.

- [Social protection protocol](#) for civil society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- [Open letter](#) to the European institutions to recognize the role of the civil sector in crisis.

- [Open letter to the European Commission](#) after the presentation of the strategy for overcoming the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the draft of the seven-year budget for the EU.

ONLINE TRAININGS

A large number of Civic Initiatives' activities planned for this year included the organization of trainings and learning opportunities. As this has become impossible in the current situation, all trainings have been transferred to the online space.

1,200

PARTICIPANTS

Resurs
 Centar

40

TRAININGS

RESOURCE CENTER FOR CSOS

Resource Center continued to strengthen the capacities of organizations through various online trainings and courses. Resource Center also launched a [blog](#) with tips for working from home and remotely, and other useful information for the work of the association in the new circumstances.

CIVIC EDUCATION

In the previous period, several training modules were held for teachers of civic education. Thanks to the rich experience and competencies of the teachers who participated in the seminar, materials and examples of good practice were produced, which were singled out and shaped into an [online manual](#) for teachers, adapted for distance learning.

85

PARTICIPANTS

Civic
 Education

5

TRAININGS

NEXT STEPS

Civil society did not stop during the pandemic.

The organizations have effectively adapted their activities to provide assistance to the most vulnerable and to defend human rights.

Civic initiatives will continue to contribute to the coordination of civil society activities, greater respect for rights and information of citizens, as well as greater transparency of institutions regarding better response and mitigation of the consequences caused by the pandemic.

Also, within the [ACT project](#), a call for urgent support grants for monitoring, advocacy and information of citizens about the pandemic has been opened in December, which will provide additional support to associations, informal groups and the media to represent the voice of communities in which they operate and bring citizens' problems to the attention of decision makers.

These activities were carried out within projects supported by the following donors:



**#EY
ЗА ТЕБЕ**



United Nations
SERBIA



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

**Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC**



FONDACIJA ZA OTVORENO DRUŠTVO, SRBIJA
OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION, SERBIA



TRANSITION
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

**For more information on Civic Initiatives' activities visit our
website www.gradjanske.org/en**