

Information on the activities of the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society during the state of emergency

May 2020

In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 virus infection, and on the basis of the Decision on declaring a state of emergency ("Official Gazette of RS", No. 29/20), on March 15, 2020, a state of emergency was declared in the Republic of Serbia, which lasted until May 6, 2020, when the Decision on the abolition of the state of emergency came into force ("Official Gazette of RS", No. 65/20). During this period, the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the competent authorities determined and took measures to protect the population and the economy from the spread and consequences of the COVID-19 virus.

Striving to ensure the efficient functioning and realization of the scope of competences determined by the Regulation on the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society ("Official Gazette of RS", No. 26/10) in compliance with the prescribed measures, the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society (hereinafter: the Office) focused on supporting the work of civil society organizations and initiating and encouraging cooperation between public authorities and civil society in providing support to particularly vulnerable categories of the population in the mentioned period.

In order to fully inform the interested public, the Office has prepared Information on the activities of the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society during the state of emergency with the intention to inform the public about all activities undertaken in these specific circumstances, which are not regular activities of the Office.

The activities include:

ANNOUNCEMENTS

During the state of emergency, the Office published three announcements in order to appeal to the public to recognize the role and contribution of civil society in the current circumstances, ensuring its sustainability and calling for cross-sectoral cooperation:

- With the first announcement, the Office appealed to the donor community to show understanding and to find adequate answers to current challenges together with the beneficiaries, which will not only enable the functioning of civil society, but also reach the end users of

projects, the citizens. In this way, we expressed support for the appeal of the International Network of Civil Society Organizations CIVICUS and invited donors to provide a flexible approach in the implementation of the projects of civil society organizations, which were supported by them;

- In the announcement marking the International Roma Day, the Office, among other things, expressed its full support for all efforts and activities aimed at providing adequate protection and prevention measures for the members of the Roma national minority in Serbia, and called on the competent authorities to communicate and cooperate with associations and other civil society organizations dealing with the position, rights and needs of our fellow citizens belonging to this minority community in the implementation of these measures;

- The Office appealed to local self-government units and their crises headquarters to make the principle of partnership a base for their relations and cooperation with civil society organizations in a state of emergency while taking into account all prevention and protection measures when engaging civil society representatives in joint activities. Also, this announcement pointed out that civil society, as in previous similar situations, made its capacities available and showed readiness to contribute to overcoming the current situation, and called for its recognition and involvement in activities at the local level.

INITIATIVES

In order to provide support and enable the operation of civil society organizations in conditions of emergency, but also to ensure their sustainability upon return to regular activities, the Office sent six initiatives to the competent authorities during the state of emergency:

- Having in mind the process of rebalancing the budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2020 in order to eliminate the harmful consequences due to the disease COVID-19¹, the Office sent an initiative to the Ministry of Finance with a request to reconsider the need to reduce funds from budget line 481 - Grants to NGOs. This initiative highlighted the need to preserve and ensure the sustainability of civil society organizations, especially those operating in local communities that base their work on budgetary support. The competent ministry was asked not to reduce the funds from the budget line 481-Grants to non-governmental organizations significantly, in order to provide basic conditions for the work of civil society organizations and further development of inter-sectoral cooperation, which proved to be a significant mechanism to support citizens during extraordinary conditions;

¹ See the Regulation on Amendments to General Revenues and Income, Expenses and Expenditures of the Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2020 in order to eliminate harmful consequences due to COVID-19 disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus ("Official Gazette of RS", No. 60/20)

- Based on the input from the Association of Citizens "Team 42" from Leskovac, the Office addressed the competent authorities initiating the repeal of the order of Headquarters for Emergency Situations of the City of Bor which "orders all citizens' associations and volunteer groups to make all their human resources available for assistance to the oldest citizens in the form of bringing groceries and medicines to their home address and organizing medical assistance." The order was abolished and replaced by a recommendation.

The office also responded to the order with identical content that was issued by the Headquarters for Emergency Situations of the city of Zajecar, which was then abolished.

Based on the above, and in order to prevent similar situations, the Office published an announcement mentioned earlier in the text, appealing to local governments and their crisis headquarters to base their relations and cooperation with civil society organizations on the principle of partnership and to take into account all prevention and protection measures when engaging civil society representatives in joint activities;

- Based on the address of the Association of Organizations for Assistance to Mentally Underdeveloped Persons of Serbia (Association of MNROs of Serbia), the Office sent an initiative to the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs asking them to provide financial support and working conditions to enable regular functioning and sustainability of these associations in the coming period, as well as other important services and support they provide to their users, especially during a state of emergency;

- Based on the address of the association "Human Rights Committee Vranje" and the Association of Roma Women "Osvit" from Nis, the Office addressed the Cabinet of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia and the Cabinet of the Deputy Prime Minister and the President of the Coordination Body for Gender Equality to express its support to the proposal made by the associations mentioned above to amend the Regulation on measures during a state of emergency (Official Gazette of RS, No. 31/20, 36/20, 38/20, 39/20, 43/20, 47/20, 49/20, 53/20, 56/20, 57 / 20, 58/20, 60/20) in order to exempt women, girls and children who are exposed to domestic or partner violence from the ban on movement during curfew;

- Based on the initiative of the Office and in cooperation with the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government, which coordinates the participation of the Republic of Serbia in the Open Government Partnership, information regarding the activities of the Republic of Serbia in preventing the spread of COVID-19 virus were published on the website of this international initiative along with the information on the forms of support provided to citizens in the stated circumstances which have been undertaken in accordance with the values of the Open Government Partnership.

INFORMING

During the state of emergency, the Office sought to provide and distribute all relevant information related to the work of civil society organizations using existing channels of communication – website, social media profiles of the Office and mailing lists.

In this domain, the following should be especially emphasized:

- Special sections (banners) have been created on the home page of the Office's website, which directly refer to the official website of the Ministry of Health dedicated to the coronavirus www.covid19.rs and Be a Volunteer Platform;
- News were published and distributed on the implementation of the Regulation on fiscal benefits and direct payments to economic entities in regards to civil society organizations, obtaining permits for movement during curfew for providers of personal assistance and domestic assistance and instructions on how to submit these requests through the eGovernment portal, collecting donations by "Catalyst Balkans" and results of the research done by Civic Initiatives on the needs of civil society during the epidemic;
- As a national contact point, the Office regularly published all relevant information regarding the EU program "Europe for citizens", for those who were interested to apply as well as for existing beneficiaries whose implementation of projects within the Program was prevented due to a pandemic;
- Information was published and distributed regarding eight public calls supporting projects of civil society organizations. Five of them are directly related to support for the activities of civil society in the context of the pandemic, namely calls published by Trag Foundation, Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation, the Council of Europe, Central European Initiative and European Youth Foundation;

During the state of emergency, the Internet presentation of the Office had more than 15000 visits in total.

In addition to the proactive informing mention above, during the state of emergency, the Office responded to over 50 inquiries from citizens and civil society organizations related to measures, competencies and activities of individual state bodies and general population in the conditions of possible spreading of coronavirus infection, which were sent to the official e-mail address of the Office office@civilnodrustvo.gov.rs. In this way, support was provided to civil society organizations as well as to the citizens themselves in performing their professional and regular life activities

COOPERATION WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

During the state of emergency, the Office was in continuous communication with state bodies, civil society organizations and other interested stakeholders, trying to provide conditions for civil society to continue working in the current circumstances and to encourage solving the problems of citizens through cooperation between the two sectors.

In addition to intensive cooperation with the competent authorities and civil society organizations, which was achieved within the aforementioned initiatives, in the field of cooperation with civil society, the following activities stand out:

- In order to exchange information and coordinate activities in the field of support to particularly vulnerable categories of the population, during the state of emergency, the Office was part of a group that was initiated by the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Team of the Government of Serbia (SIPRU). In this way, representatives of state bodies and representatives of civil society organizations cooperated in mapping and monitoring the needs of the social protection system, then mapping and monitoring the needs of civil society in relation to vulnerable groups, as well as mapping and monitoring potential support options;
- During the state of emergency, there was constant cooperation with Civic Initiatives as the Resource Center for civil society organizations in the Republic of Serbia;
- Continuous communication and cooperation also took place with the Coalition for Giving and its members in order to improve the conditions for voluntary donations with the aim of protecting the population from infection with the COVID-19 virus and its consequences.