



Joint statement by the civil society actors from the Western Balkans on COVID-19 pandemic

29 April 2020

As the coronavirus continues to spread across our countries and regions, we are all concerned about the severe consequences of the pandemic on our daily lives, as well as about the long-term impact of the crisis. We, the civil society actors from the Western Balkans, stand united and determined to continue joint efforts with local, national, regional and international actors both to alleviate the negative socioeconomic impact of the crisis, and to build more just, sustainable and democratic societies.

Together, we:

- *Express our heartfelt sympathy for the victims of COVID-19 and their loved ones;*
- *Stand in solidarity and express our deep appreciation for the front line actors who are risking their lives to provide support and essential services to those affected and wider population;*
- *Commend the swift responses and evidence-based approaches to COVID-19 by the governments of the Western Balkans six.*

Today, more than ever, people need reassurance that their governments are responding urgently, responsibly, and decisively to mitigate the social and economic consequences of this crisis ensuring full transparency of their actions, and developing comprehensive strategies for ‘the day after’.

We believe it is imperative that governments, health institutions, donors, media, business and civil society actors:

- *Demonstrate solidarity and undertake collective action to respond to the crisis in an effective and efficient manner;*
- *Help the most vulnerable in our societies during these uncertain times;*
- *Undertake research and analysis to better understand, predict and anticipate the social-economic and other impacts of the pandemic;*
- *Devise recovery strategies and plans to prepare for ‘the day after.’*

We call on:

Government institutions to provide timely and fact-based information, in accessible formats and languages for different sections of our societies. This includes information on COVID-19, and transparency how the pandemic is managed particularly related to:

- measures undertaken to prevent the spread of the virus, unemployment and job losses, and to engage with and support affected communities, especially the most vulnerable and hard to reach;
- ‘financial emergency and recovery packages’;
- impacts of curfew and other measures that may endanger human rights, mental health, environment, safety and security, including domestic and gender-based violence;
- payment of taxes during the pandemic (income, pension contributions, property, etc.); utility and other bills (electricity, water, waste, rent); bank loans, interests and fees;
- countering disinformation and divisive rhetoric; combating all forms of stigma and discrimination; supporting and protecting front line actors and efforts that build trust and amplify solidarity;
- protecting and supporting refugees and asylum seekers trapped in appalling conditions at our and the EU borders;
- working closely with and supporting governments in the region including through sharing information, knowledge, resources and technical expertise;
- ensuring that restrictions to protect public health are of limited duration, proportionate, evidence-based, and reviewable by a court;

- ensuring financial support for all SMEs and the self-employed affected by the pandemic, to compensate for their losses, and to enhance their resilience, innovation, entrepreneurial, and growth potential after the crisis.

Political parties:

- demonstrating unity and cooperation, and supporting measures to tackle the immediate and long-term consequences of the pandemic.

Media outlets:

- have a vital obligation to report in a professional and ethically responsible manner, and to provide the public with timely, accurate, reliable and objective information;
- countering fake news, myths and stigmatization related to the pandemic;
- helping the public understand events, measures taken by authorities, and means for protection through simple messages;
- providing space to different actors and communities, particularly the most vulnerable sections of our societies.

Private sector:

- demonstrating social responsibility by supporting their employees in these difficult times, not using the pandemic as an excuse to reduce their number;
- working closely with the government institutions and other actors and be up-to-date with the measures and available financial instruments tailored to support the private sector.

Civil Society:

- keeping communications ongoing, exchange information and experiences on the impact of and responses to pandemic, and on innovative/creative ways of doing work during the crisis;
- continuing to give voice to vulnerable groups and advocate for their protection and support;
- upholding high standards and accountability while providing support during the crisis, including when sharing evidence, best practices, data and resources on what works to counter the virus;
- drawing lessons from the crisis with aim to inform policy choices afterwards during the recovery process;
- engaging responsibly, along with media, in countering fake news, myths and stigmatization related to the pandemic.

EU and donor community:

- stressing the importance of governments to uphold democratic values and principles, and respect human rights;
- continuing information exchange and interaction with actors including on how the pandemic is affecting their priorities, plans, programmes, and funding;
- demonstrating ongoing commitment to help mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic to the civil society as a whole, and not only those focusing on the emergency situation relief;
- continuing collective action and coordinate a needs-based, inclusive and coherent financial support/response for the Western Balkans countries to alleviate the immediate and long-term consequences of the crisis.

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List of signatories (in alphabetical order):

ADP-Zid, Montenegro
ALFA Centar, Montenegro
Association "IRSH", Albania
Balkan Green Foundation (BGF), Kosovo
Bulgarian Hub for United Balkans, Bulgaria (in solidarity)
Center for Advocacy and Democratic Development (CADD), Serbia
Center for Economic Prosperity and Freedom (CEPS), Montenegro
Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS), Serbia
CIVIL, North Macedonia
Community Business Development Center (CBDC), Kosovo
European Movement Serbia (EMinS), Serbia
Fondacija za razvoj i demokraciju (FRD), Bosnia and Herzegovina
Gender Alliance for Development Centre (GADC), Albania
HandiKOS, Kosovo
Institute for Democracy and Development (IDD), North Macedonia
Institute for Development Policy (INDEP), Kosovo
International Debate Education Association South East Europe (IDEA SEE), North Macedonia
Kosovo Youth Atlantic Treaty Association (KYATA), Kosovo
Krenar Shala, civil society activist, Kosovo
LGBT Forum Progress, Montenegro
NGO Aktiv, Kosovo
Protection and promotion of Environment, Culture and Art (proECA), Kosovo
Research Center for Security, Defense and Peace (ICBOM), North Macedonia
Sexual and Gender Minorities Association SUBVERSIVE FRONT Skopje, North Macedonia
The Balkan Forum
Youth Initiative for Human Rights – Kosovo