

2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

SERBIA

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2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

For Serbia

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SERBIA

Capital: Belgrade
Population: 6,739,471
GDP per capita (PPP): \$18,200
Human Development Index: Very High (0.802)
Freedom in the World: Partly Free (62/100)

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.3



Since the opposition in Serbia largely boycotted parliamentary elections in June 2020, the parliament is now dominated by the ruling parties, with just a few opposition members of parliament (MPs). This allowed the parliament to become a stage for attacking opposition groups, CSOs, and the independent media in 2021. In its Serbia Report 2021, the European Commission finds that “inflammatory language against political opponents and representatives of other institutions expressing diverging political views was...used during parliamentary debates.” Defamatory statements, smears, and threats from the parliament came on top of the years-long negative smear campaign against independent actors conducted in the pro-government media and tabloids.

The president scheduled new elections for the spring of 2022. Representatives of the European Parliament (EP) facilitated a dialogue between the ruling and opposition parties aimed at improving the electoral environment. Some opposition organizations criticized the process after the ruling party rejected substantial improvements to the electoral process. In its analysis, the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) concluded that the final proposals that came out of the EP-facilitated dialogue would not meaningfully improve the integrity of the election process.

In recent years, the number and quality of environmental CSOs, grassroots organizations, and local movements have increased. Such entities are now the most vibrant segment of civil society. Their efforts peaked towards the end of the year when thousands of people mobilized against the Rio Tinto mining project and the government, which backed it. Protesters were fined and attacked by hooligans and police using excessive force. Some of the protesters’ requests were met when the government withdrew the Law on Expropriation from parliamentary procedure and proposed amendments to the Law on Referendum and People’s Initiatives. Although the protests yielded significant results, it is unclear if the controversial mining project will continue.

Apart from this significant success, the institutional channels for civil society and government dialogue are essentially closed. Some mechanisms for participation in decision making exist, but these processes are usually dominated by government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) and political-party-organized NGOs (PONGOs), and working groups’ decisions and the topics they address do not reflect the worsening reality in the country.

Overall CSO sustainability did not change in 2021. While the legal environment and service provision both deteriorated during the year, advocacy improved slightly after years of decline. State harassment of CSOs continues to be a significant issue, with new administrative pressures, like financial inspections to determine funding irregularities, recorded in 2021. While demand for services increased during the pandemic, the government decreased funding while increasing referrals, putting enormous pressure on CSO social care providers. Other dimensions of CSO sustainability remained at the same level as in 2020.

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector is still the most advanced aspect of CSO sustainability. A wide range of resources and services are available to different types of organizations. The demand for such services remains high, but the ability of these organizations to absorb and implement new knowledge and skills is questionable. At

the same time, the concentration of significant bilateral and multilateral funds on large, primarily Belgrade-based CSOs diminishes the opportunities for grassroots and mid-size organizations to receive funding directly and build their capacities to compete for larger grant schemes.

According to the Serbian Business Registry Agency (SBRA), there were 35,733 registered CSOs as of December 31, 2021, a 3.1 percent increase from 2020. There are also 996 endowments and foundations, a 5 percent increase from 2020. Many grassroots initiatives still avoid registering and instead choose to work as informal groups, primarily because they fear state impediments.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 4.8



The legal environment governing CSOs deteriorated in 2021, as state harassment of activists, media, and CSOs increased. Harassment took many forms—lengthy financial inspections, threats and violence by hooligan groups suspected to be connected to the ruling party, and frequent decisions by the Ministry of Interior to ban assemblies and charge activists with misdemeanors and fines.

The Law on Associations and the Law on Foundations and Endowments still serve as the primary framework laws for CSOs in Serbia. CSOs continue to be able to register easily through regional SBRA offices. However, electronic registration is still not available for CSOs, although it was introduced for other legal entities in 2021.

In a contentious process, the Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022 to 2030 (familiarily known as the Strategy for the Development of Civil Society) was drafted in 2021. Although several CSOs took part in the working group drafting the Strategy, a significant number of the most prominent human rights and civil society development CSOs—under the banner of the Three Freedoms platform—boycotted the strategy’s development. The boycott was based partly on the short timeframe and non-participatory manner of public discussions for the Strategy’s development, but were primarily driven by the government’s lack of action to address the increasing attacks on civil society and independent media.

In 2021, parliament adopted two crucial laws that affected the legal framework for CSOs’ operations—the new Law on Referendum and People’s Initiative and a new Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance. Both laws were adopted swiftly, justified by the emergency of European integration processes, through non-transparent manners. For example, although the government allowed interested parties to comment on the draft Law on Referendum and People’s Initiative for twenty days, the competent ministry provided a non-existent e-mail address for the submission of comments. Both laws were adopted in late 2021.

The initial version of the new Law on Referendum and People’s Initiative contained provisions that would have imposed undue restrictions on citizens’ involvement in decision making by instituting an obligation to authenticate signatures when launching a people’s initiative, which involves high administrative fees. In response to protest demands, amendments were made to the law that removed the fee for signature authentication. However, other problematic points in the law remained unchanged, including the lack of a legal remedy in cases in which the National Assembly fails to officially consider initiatives that have been submitted.

The new Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance failed to address the key issue that hindered the law that it replaces. Namely, although the Law gives additional competencies to the Information Commissioner to fine state authorities that do not comply with information requests, the fines will be paid out of public funds. Additionally, the law fails to oblige the government to develop a procedure to enforce the Commissioner’s decisions. Thus, the long-standing practice of state bodies ignoring the Commissioner’s decisions is likely to continue.

According to reports from Three Freedoms, state harassment of CSOs was a significant problem in 2021. Although there are no legal obstacles to CSOs accepting funds from foreign donors, the Center for Judicial Research (CEPRIS), a CSO whose members are prominent critics of Constitutional amendments affecting the judiciary proposed by the government, was subject to a month-long financial inspection, allegedly to determine the regularity of its funding. State-affiliated print tabloid Srpski Telegraf published an eight-page supplement on CSOs and independent media that questioned their funding sources and missions. Those targeted in the supplement were on the so-called “list” of fifty-seven subjects investigated by the Serbian Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (APML) in 2020. The nature of the information provided in the supplement provides reason to believe that APML provided Srpski Telegraf with this information.

Another concern is the Ministry of Interior’s continued practice of denying approvals for protests and assemblies due to its alleged inability to ensure the safety of activists during these events. For example, police banned the properly-notified assembly of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) focused on removing a mural of convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić. In response, YIHR addressed the European Court of Human Rights, which obliged the Government of Serbia to report on the steps it took to ensure the protection of YIHR activists.

Individuals attending environmental protests at the end of the year were attacked by extremists and hooligans in some cities, while police failed to protect them. In some cities, police also used excessive force on protesters. In addition, several thousand protesters were charged with misdemeanors and fines for “illegal detention on the road.” Most of these protesters stated that the police failed to identify themselves at the protests. Also, police officers visited many activists in the early morning on protest days, coming to their homes or workplaces to “warn” them that they would be breaking the law if they participated in protests.

CSOs are legally allowed to earn income through the provision of goods and services by charging fees and establishing social enterprises, but the tax legislation still treats them the same as regular businesses, neglecting their social missions. CSOs are allowed to freely engage in fundraising campaigns. There are also no legal obstacles to CSO participation in public procurements, but the state still does not recognize the broader value of their participation, and there are no socially responsible public procurements. CSOs do not receive tax exemptions on income from donations, although some international grants are exempt from value-added tax (VAT) in accordance with bilateral agreements. Legal entities can classify donations to CSOs as expenses, thereby lowering their taxable income.

Partners for Democratic Change, the National Coalition for Decentralization (NKD), Civic Initiatives (CI), and other large organizations provide legal information and support to activists and CSOs. However, the scope of legal aid is limited.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.0

The organizational capacity of the sector remained unchanged in 2021. There continues to be a significant capacity gap in the sector based on organizations’ size, years of operation, geographic focus, and field of operations.

In 2021, CSOs continued to effectively build and engage their constituencies through the use of crowdfunding, social networks, online petitions, and organizing protests. For example, Kreni-Promeni organized a petition opposing the Rio Tinto mining project that was signed by tens of thousands of citizens. More experienced CSOs with stronger capacities provided concrete forms of support—including legal aid, technical support for street actions, and communications support—to grassroots and local organizations.



CSOs’ strategic planning practices did not change significantly in 2021. With the support of the USAID-funded INSPIRES project, several larger CSOs continued to increase their resilience by introducing different strategies,

tactics, tools, and networking to respond to the challenges facing civil society, including state harassment and political polarization. Also, more than twenty mid-size CSOs were engaged in strategic planning processes as part of the institutional support provided within the For an Active Civil Society Together (ACT) program.

Although experienced CSOs continue to have sound internal management systems, most organizations still do not have fully functional and transparent governing structures or management procedures, including a clear division of responsibilities. On the other hand, newly established initiatives and grassroots groups continue to operate through flexible and adaptive structures that reflect their ad hoc nature.

According to data from the Resource Center (RC), CSOs mainly utilize internal monitoring procedures for individual projects at the initiative of their donors. CSOs carry out internal evaluations even less frequently than project evaluations. Even when such evaluations are conducted, CSOs are rarely able to incorporate learning into their programs.

Only larger organizations, which make up a small percentage of the sector, have permanent staff. In many cases, CSO staff continues to migrate to the public or for-profit sectors. A significant number of CSOs have reported staff burn-out since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating a new need for capacity-building support.

Volunteerism is underdeveloped in Serbia. According to the Charities Aid Foundation's World Giving Index 2021, which reports data from 2020, Serbia has the lowest rate of volunteering among the countries studied, with just 5 percent of respondents indicating that they volunteered in the previous month. While some larger CSOs have protocols for volunteers and volunteering programs, others—especially smaller organizations—are underdeveloped when it comes to volunteer management. The Law on Volunteerism, which requires significant administrative procedures for longer-term engagement of volunteers, seems to further discourage CSOs from seeking volunteers, and vice versa.

As a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, community mobilization still took place primarily online in 2021. Given this, CSOs continue to have a clear need for modern IT equipment, skills, and knowledge to better use new online tools and platforms. Local CSOs, particularly in rural areas, still have challenges mobilizing citizens online.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 4.4¹



The financial viability of the CSO sector in Serbia did not change significantly in 2021.

There continued to be a lack of government funding for independent CSOs (at both the local and national levels), and the public resources that were available were redirected toward GONGOs and PONGOs. As Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) stated in its Publicly on Public Competitions research, although the state directed most of the budget funds allocated for civil society (EUR 53 million) towards CSOs in 2021 (as opposed to religious groups or sports clubs, as has sometimes been the case in the past), a closer analysis reveals irregularities in public calls for funding, including favoritism towards certain CSOs and media and a lack of proper and transparent evaluation of funded projects.

For instance, in one-fifth of the public calls for financing, a single organization received half of the total funds allocated.

Overall, the corporate sector contributed 33 percent of the total donations received by the sector in 2021, according to Catalyst Balkans. In comparison, mass individual donations account for 61 percent of the total sum

¹ The score for the Financial Viability dimension was recalibrated in 2018 to better reflect the situation in the country and to better align it with other scores in the region, rather than based on change from the previous year.

donated. The most supported causes were health care (34 percent), support for vulnerable groups (17 percent), education (13 percent), and poverty (12 percent).

CSOs are becoming more aware of and proactive in seeking alternate funding sources. According to preliminary findings of Catalyst Balkans' Serbia Giving 2021 research, the share of the total number donations by companies and individuals that went to CSOs fell from 51 percent in 2020 to 41 percent in 2021. However, as a pandemic year, 2020 was exceptional, and the amount given in 2021 was more than double that in 2019 (EUR 42.5 million in 2021 vs. EUR 18 million in 2019). Out of the total donated sum, 75 percent of all recipients were CSOs, showing a steady increase. However, a single organization—Budi human Foundation, which primarily focuses on the medical treatment of children—received an astounding EUR 22 million, more than twice the amount it received in 2019 (EUR 11 million), and more than a half of all donations Catalyst recorded in 2021. CSOs are also developing new fundraising methods. For example, the National Association of Parents of Children with Cancer developed a mobile fundraising application that has steadily attracted corporate partners.

Compared to 2020, when companies suspended most of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs and funds and directed their efforts entirely towards pandemic relief, corporate philanthropy slowly returned to its previous dynamic in 2021. New trends in corporate philanthropy are emerging as companies are becoming more open to supporting human rights, including women's rights and LGBTI rights. For example, IKEA supported the celebration of International Day against Lesbophobia, Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia.

Bilateral and multilateral donors and foreign private foundations continue to be crucial financial resources for CSOs. The Swiss government provided a total of just over CHF 3 million (EUR 2.9 million) to Serbian civil society in 2021. Amongst this support was the ACT program, implemented by CI and Helvetas with funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The program Your Place in Serbia is implemented by a consortium led by NKD with funding from USAID; the program awarded approximately \$200,000 in 2021. NKD awarded another \$226,000 in grants under an EU-supported program. The Belgrade Open School (BOS) awarded grants with support from the EU Delegation in Serbia and the British Council. Grants offered by the Trag Foundation (TF) are also a significant source of funding for CSOs; in 2021, TF awarded a total of almost \$1.2 million to CSOs and grassroots groups in Serbia, most of which comes from foreign donors. In 2021, grant opportunities were available for a growing number of organizations and needs. For example, ACT, TF, and NKD offered various funding schemes, including action grants and core support. However, the concentration of significant bilateral and multilateral funds on large CSO consortia diminishes the opportunities for grassroots and mid-size organizations to receive funding directly and become eligible for larger grant schemes.

CSOs' access to commercial financial opportunities did not change much in 2021. ERSTE Bank issued four loans to CSOs during the year (the same number as in 2020), but these were smaller in value: EUR 220,000 in 2021 compared to EUR 379,217 in 2020. CSOs used these loans to purchase business premises, invest in rental properties, and pre-finance project activities. ERSTE reports growing interest among CSOs in this financial instrument.

Income-generating activities are still quite limited. The government rarely outsources services or accredited training to CSOs. At the same time, companies more actively engage CSOs to provide specific services. For example, companies often outsource CSOs to help them design diversity and gender-equality policies. CSOs also provide training for company employees on topics like gender balance and sexual harassment. Although the Law on Social Entrepreneurship is still pending in the parliament, the Coalition for Solidarity Economy Development (CoSED) expects it to expand and enable income-generating activities. In 2021, only a small percentage of CSOs earned substantial income from selling products. Earning income by renting assets is even rarer; TF is one of few examples, but the income it generates from renting an apartment it owns represents a small portion of its overall budget.

CSOs have limited fundraising capacities. According to a survey on e-learning needs conducted by Catalyst on a small, unrepresentative sample of CSOs, 41 percent of respondents stated that their organization does not have a dedicated person responsible for fundraising. Close to one-third of survey participants have only a single part-time person focused on fundraising.

CSOs' financial management capacities did not change notably in 2021. Large CSOs, foundations, and international NGOs (INGOs) have stable procedures and undergo external audits. However, mid-size and grassroots organizations still do not have essential internal capacities for financial management and rely almost exclusively on external accounting agencies. According to the research Capacity Needs Assessment of Grassroots Organizations

in Serbia conducted by TF, CSOs do not recognize financial systems and procedures as a priority in organizational development, indicating a lack of understanding of the importance of financial management.

ADVOCACY: 4.1

CSO advocacy improved slightly in 2021, as demonstrated by the significant citizen mobilization around environmental issues that achieved tangible results.

In 2021, the environmental movement, which consists of various local organizations, networks, grassroots groups, and individuals, organized a series of environmental protests across the country, in addition to a number of other advocacy efforts at the local and national levels. As a result of these efforts, the government—for the first time since the ruling party SNS came to power—took a step back and accepted citizens’ demands. Thus, in December 2021, the government withdrew the Law on Expropriation from parliamentary procedure and returned it to the parliament for reconsideration. The government also proposed amendments to the Law on Referendum and People’s Initiative because of citizen pressure in the streets. Other draft laws were also withdrawn in 2021 because of opposition by CSOs and professional associations; these include the Law on Police, Law on Waters, Law on Consumer Protection, Law on Obligations, and Law on Protection of Financial Services Users.



On the other hand, cooperation and communication between the government and CSOs continued its multi-year downward trend. Although the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue continued to invite CSOs to participate in different working groups with the government, CSOs generally perceive this to be an effort to mask its substantial lack of cooperation with the civil sector. Many CSOs, primarily members of the Three Freedoms platform, refused to participate in the development of the Strategy for the Development of Civil Society until the government took steps to address the increasing attacks on civil society and independent media, including through an institutional resolution to the so-called list case. CSOs also left the Working Group on Security and Protection of Journalists and the Working Group on Law on Public Information and Media. CSOs in the Working Group on the Law on Public Information and Media noted the substantial political influence of GONGOs, which represent the majority of the thirty-five members, thereby undermining the efforts of independent CSOs. Moreover, this working group ignored CSO input and supported government proposals that are inconsistent with the constitution, international laws, and good practices. In addition, while the government officially invites CSOs to participate in decision-making processes, ministers, MPs, and other state officials publicly denounce and insult some CSOs, raising further questions about the true motives behind the invitations for cooperation.

Although non-cooperation is the norm, there was still some room for joint work between CSOs and the government in 2021, primarily around issues that were not “sensitive” or question the power of the government or the president. For example, the government accepted proposals to the draft Law on Social Entrepreneurship made by CoSED and other CSOs. However, that space seems to be shrinking as well. For example, the Philanthropy Council, consisting of prominent businesses, CSOs, and the government, did not meet once in 2021, despite CSO invitations and the Council’s successes in previous years. State representatives in the Philanthropy Council rejected the proposed abolition of VAT on food donations suggested by CSO and business members of the Council, even though the proposal had wide support from companies, banks, and citizens and was in line with the EU Guidelines. The Law on Same-Sex Partnerships is another example. Although the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue’s working group on the draft law brought together representatives of prominent LGBTI CSOs and experts, the draft produced by the Ministry at the end of the year was not presented to LGBTI or the working group members and the entire process ground to a halt by the end of the year.

A growing number of local CSOs are building their advocacy capacity thanks to civil society support programs offered by ACT, NKD, TF, and BOS. Through these programs, local CSOs receive training and mentoring support in advocacy tools, strategies, legal mechanisms, and other topics.

As was the case in 2020, there were no CSO advocacy campaigns related directly to the civil society regulatory framework in 2021.

SERVICE PROVISION: 4.5



CSOs' provision of services deteriorated slightly in 2021 as government funding and recognition of CSO services continued to decline, despite increased demand for those services.

The socio-economic consequences of the pandemic increased the population's vulnerabilities, leading to an increased need for social services, the predominant focus of CSO service provision. Despite this, the government decreased funding for CSO service providers. Moreover, when a CSO does get government funding, it is usually insufficient. For example, Women's Center Užice received just \$10,000 from the local budget, not nearly enough to cover the annual cost of providing services for the entire Zlatibor county.

These dynamics also resulted in a higher rate of referrals from public institutions to CSOs without any increase in financial support. For instance, Novi Sad Center for Social Work stopped providing services to victims of gender-based violence and instead referred all sexual violence cases to the CSO Center for Support to Women Kikinda. This significantly increased the organization's workload and budgetary needs. In some cases, CSOs also had to compensate for the lack of necessities like food and hygiene products for the beneficiaries of institutions. For example, CSO Atina provided necessities for beneficiaries of the Center for Victims of Trafficking.

As a result of these increasing burdens, many CSOs failed to meet the requirements to renew their licenses to provide services or had to decrease the availability of their services. For example, the Human Rights Committee from Vranje reduced its SOS Helpline service for women victims of domestic violence from twenty-four hours a day to four hours due to the lack of financing.

Furthermore, in some communities, the government-funded Social Services Provision Centers are draining resources from the social services budgets while not providing quality or crucial services. This further fortifies the impression that the state perceives CSOs as competitors rather than partners in the provision of social services.

The state's provision of social care and health services is declining, sometimes leaving CSOs as the only available providers of support, particularly in areas related to HIV and gender-based violence. For instance, Association Rainbow had detected almost 20 percent of all HIV cases in its area.

The goods and services CSOs provide mostly reflect the needs and priorities of their constituents and communities. Many organizations, like Association Rainbow, Association Da se zna!, Forca Pozega, and the A I I Initiative, have good outreach programs and communication with their constituencies. CSO providers of social services offer their services without discrimination regarding race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

CSOs have proved to be quite agile, providing quality services despite the shift to remote work and digital platforms. New online tools helped them extend some services and expand their reach. For example, the number of attendees of seminars and accredited training organized by CSOs continued to increase in 2021, due to easier access, including the lack of travel. However, the provision of some forms of direct support, like psycho-social assistance, decreased in quality, as in-person forms of support are more effective.

Few CSOs recover the costs of service provision. Although CSOs have some knowledge of the market demand for their products or services, it usually seems to be inadequate. For example, when starting a social enterprise,

many CSOs have trouble understanding the significance of marketing strategies, supply chains, or the minimum market they need to engage.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 3.3

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector remained largely unchanged in 2021.

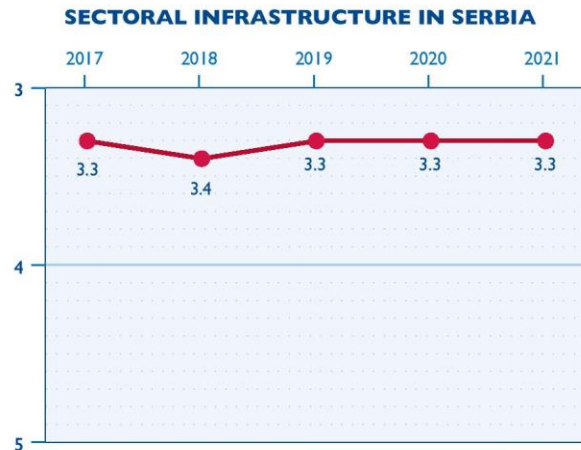
With EU support, CI, along with three local and four other national organizations, continued to be the key resource providers for CSOs through the RC program. RC builds CSOs' capacities through the provision of training, consulting, and mentoring in critical aspects of organizational development, such as financial management, operational management, fundraising, human resources, public relations, advocacy, networking, and monitoring and evaluation.

Major regranting programs, such as those implemented by TF, BOS, CRTA, and NKD, also provide various training and mentoring services to their grantees that complement the goals of the financial support they provide. Although these programs offer a wide array of support, there is still high demand for additional training. In particular, CSOs lack skills in communications and financial management. There is also an evident weakness among CSOs, especially among smaller and less experienced organizations, to identify their needs. Also, given that most local, small, and mid-size CSOs have no or just a few regular staff, their ability to attend training and absorb and put new knowledge into practice is limited.

In addition to the three already established community foundations (CF) in Novi Pazar, Obrenovac, and Zaječar, three new CF initiative groups—in Pančevo, Niš, and Stara Pazova—emerged in 2021. Through TFs' Our Local Foundation – the Community has a Say! program, these groups, which are all expected to register in 2022, have already raised a total of nearly \$30,000 from citizens and businesses in their local communities and have supported thirty-five grassroots and local CSOs.

There are still no coalitions representing the whole CSO sector, nor are there plans to form such a coalition. Many CSOs are members of issue-based coalitions formed to either advocate for changes in the regulatory framework or protect rights and freedoms. The Three Freedoms Platform, a network of more than twenty-five organizations, presents the strongest voice in protecting and promoting the freedoms of association, assembly, and information. There are also long-standing CSO coalitions in the fields of philanthropy, social economy, monitoring of the judicial sector, and women's rights. In addition, new alliances emerged in 2021. These include the Coalition for Media Development and several environmental-protection alliances, such as Ecological Uprising and the Network of Women for Nature Protection.

CSOs and businesses continue to cooperate mainly around the development of philanthropy and the social economy, including through the Coalition for Giving. There is also more evidence of cooperation in less traditional areas, such as sexual harassment and gender equality. In 2021, CSOs tried to involve academia into their actions more, and there were more opportunities for university students and professors to cooperate with CSOs. For example, TF collaborated with the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory to research the emerging community foundations. At the end of 2021, CoDSE started to map workers' unions, cooperatives, academic representatives, and other actors with a plan to begin networking the following year. Although the government initiated cooperation with CSOs through the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, as well as various working groups, no true partnerships emerged during the year.



PUBLIC IMAGE: 4.8



The CSO sector's public image score remained the same in 2021, with both positive and negative developments recorded.

Pressure and attacks on CSOs by tabloids, pro-government media, and public officials increased in 2021. In particular, these attacks targeted anti-war and transitional justice organizations. For example, Women in Black is continuously the subject of smear campaigns, threats, and physical attacks on its property. Other CSO leaders and prominent figures were also publicly smeared. For example, ruling party MPs called leaders of CRTA "foreign mercenaries" at a parliament session after CRTA filed a complaint against an MP for violating the newly adopted Parliamentary Code of Conduct. The leader of Kreni-Promeni was accused of being a foreign

mercenary while leading environmental protests.

The negative campaign against CSOs, which starts with state officials and then cascades to the media, has a vast outreach. All television stations with national coverage, including RTS (the public broadcaster), TV Pink, TV Prva, TV Happy, and TVB92, are considered pro-government. In its media analysis of these TV stations, CRTA reports that "between July 2020 and the end of June 2021, representatives of the ruling majority garnered as much as 93% of the time in television programs covering political actors, while the opposition was present in the remaining 7% of the time." Also, "the tone of reporting on the ruling majority was mostly neutral (63%) and positive (37%)," while "negative tonality makes up 94 percent (2,826 times) of the total recorded mentions of opposition actors, while the remaining 6 percent (178) can be assessed as neutral."

State officials, MPs, tabloids, and pro-government media also attacked independent journalists and those challenging the government and the president. The independent Journalist Association of Serbia recorded 151 attacks on journalists in 2021, a slight decrease from 189 in 2020. However, as 2020 was characterized by extreme police brutality and a months-long lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the number of attacks in 2021 can actually be considered as a continuation of the negative trend over the last ten years. For example, journalists were verbally and physically attacked while reporting on the environmental protest and received warnings from police officers not to attend protests, despite calls from media associations for the police to provide journalists with a safe environment to work.

While the dominant media continue to spread a mainly negative image of civil society, CSOs were actually more visible in the public in 2021 due to CSOs' efforts to address the current socio-political circumstances, including poverty, environmental issues, lack of social support, and state harassment. On one hand, CSOs are more committed to mutual coordination and solidarity to push back against the government and pro-government media attacks. At the same time, CSOs are proactively starting joint campaigns to mobilize citizens, such as the Get Vaccinated campaign (launched by 141 CSOs and media) and the Raise the Minimum Wage campaign. In perhaps the most notable and effective campaign, Kreni-Promeni's Rio Tinto – Get off the Drina! Campaign aimed directly at the Rio Tinto mining project and indirectly at the government, as the government strongly backed the project despite public fears of its harmful effects on the environment and the project's lack of transparency. There is also a noticeable increase in media use of key terms related to activism, civic engagement, and resource mobilization in the last four years, including 2021, with NKD media clippings recording an annual increase of 15 percent.

Grassroots initiatives, especially those focused on environmental protection, help improve civil society's public image, particularly in local communities where they have direct contact with people and are building strong reputations. Some citizens perceive the entire environmental movement as a generator of change. Other organizations, like the Belgrade Center for Human Rights and CI, also helped improve the sector's image by providing legal and financial support to prosecuted protesters and activists.

Although there is a noticeable increase in the communications capacities of CSOs due to the contributions of different civil society support programs, most organizations still use "project" language when trying to reach the

citizens. CSOs are increasingly skilled at using social media, but this is still generally not at a level that would make them more influential in shaping public opinion.

Self-regulation remained a low priority for CSOs in 2021. Established CSOs, as well as some smaller and local organizations, continue to publish annual reports. However, CSOs make limited effort to provide the public with information about their finances, with the exception of the largely unreadable financial statements that are accessible for every registered organization through SBRA.

Disclaimer: *The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.*

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