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KOSOVO: CIVIC RESPONSES IN TIMES OF PANDEMICS



The COVID-19 epidemic has proved to be an emergency of global proportions that has consumed governments and societies to an extent not seen in recent history. Borders have closed, economies have shut down, and hundreds of millions of people find themselves confined to their homes for an indefinite period. Many states, including highly developed and modern democracies, have faced a challenge to keep the spread of the virus under control while at the same time respecting the fundamental principles of basic human and civil rights. The battle against an invisible enemy has inspired widespread anxiety and panic. It has cultivated a situation in which the line between necessary sacrifices for the greater health and security of the general population and overreach on the part of state actors is more ambiguous than ever.

COVID-19 IN KOSOVO

The first cases of the virus in Kosovo were confirmed on the 13th March 2020. The government reacted by introducing restrictive measures to counter the further spread of the virus. Most of the restrictive measures mirrored the responses undertaken by other countries across Europe and the world. Those included a declaration of a state of emergency that restricted the free movement of individuals and closed cafes, restaurants, shopping centres and other businesses considered to be non-essential. To ease the economic consequences that affected these business sectors, the government introduced 15 economic measures to support those most affected by the pandemic restrictions. The measures included financial support such as covering rent and minimum wages, subsidised by the government. However, receiving timely information and government support appeared to be more complicated than it seemed. Pre-existing complex social, political, and institutional dynamics prevented the state from extending equal treatment to all of Kosovo's communities.

CHALLENGES OF NON-MAJORITY COMMUNITIES



Despite good intentions and efforts of equal treatment of all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, the Kosovo government has demonstrated a lack of capacity to address the needs of all communities in Kosovo by introducing restrictive measures. Limitations to respond to the needs of non-majority communities and the inability for institutional reaction caused by the political crisis and collapse of Kosovo government and abandoned non-majority communities more vulnerable facing challenges in attaining institutional assistance. National minorities became exposed to economic consequences and security incidents. The lack of qualitative and timely information in their languages, as well as slow response of official institutions, put them in a vulnerable situation in these unprecedented pandemic times.

“With the start of the epidemic and the state of emergency, my family and I got into trouble, there was a lot of different information and misinformation, we were confused. Information from the central institutions were not translated or translation was catastrophic in our language.”

Mirijana Petrović, RRCG Local Coordinator

In response to these events, NGO “AKTIV”, with the support of the ALVED project, established a Rapid Civic Response Group to regularly monitor the situation in municipalities with a significant proportion of non-majority communities and serve as their voice in advocating for support needed from the public institutions.

“The situation in non-majority communities, due to the pandemic, became more complicated every day, there was an urgent need to use our capacity to raise our voice and echo these concerns to the public institutions and general public”

Aleksandar Rapajić. RRCG HUB Coordinator

RAPID CIVIC RESPONSE GROUP (RRCG)

METHODOLOGY

The Rapid Response Civic Group consists of twenty-two civil and community activists across Kosovo representing Serbian, Albanian and Gorani communities. These activists worked as field coordinators in 17 municipalities across the country. Most of RRCG representatives were also members of advocacy group "Empirica", which is a network of individuals and organisations that advocate for the rights of the Kosovo-Serb community, and through the support of which Aktiv seeks to amplify the voices of the non-majority communities in Kosovo.

The RRCG established a Hub in North Mitrovica, which consisted of a Coordinator, an Assistant Coordinator and an Advocacy Campaign Coordinator. The Hub made itself available for field coordinators at any time during the period from 25th April to 25th June, coordinating and leading activities, including the advocacy ones. The role of the Hub was to coordinate the gathering of information from the activists in the field through a systematic approach after which all of the information received was checked for accuracy. Besides, the Hub provided all the core information which enabled the AKITV team to design and implement the advocacy actions to address the challenges that the non-majority communities were facing.

COLLECTION OF INFORMATION

The Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator had daily contact with the field coordinators who were passing real-time information in the form of standardised reports and using other ways of communication (e.g., phone calls and messages). The information provided by the coordinators was very diverse. It included data on such issues as the lack of official information in Serbian about the pandemic, the lack of translations of information on measures taken by the government or the dissemination of information problems in non-majority communities.

The data received from the field coordinators reached the Hub where the Coordinator and Assistants controlled its validity, sorted it and took decisions on possible advocacy actions. Verification of collected information took place in several steps. In the early phase of work, Aktiv did not inform the field coordinators who the other coordinators were. That allowed the coordinators at the Hub to triangulate data from neighbouring places or the same region. The second step of data verification was desk research conducted by RRCG Hub. In the third step, the coordinators were contacting official institutions to check certain information.

The response system mechanism was technically feasible through SMS and social media communication (including Viber and Facebook). The exchange of information was intensive – RRCG HUB received a total of 300 reports.

IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS

The unusual situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has resurfaced problems that non-majority communities in Kosovo have faced in the past. After the collection of all the reports, the RRCG managed to structure the identified challenges into larger categories as listed above.

- **Poor information dissemination in non-majority languages.** The information shared during the pandemic was poorly disseminated among non-majority communities. Pandemic-related news was shared mostly through Albanian-speaking media, while the Serbian-speaking media published information with significant delay. Public institutions, including ministries and Albanian majority municipalities, often published information on social media networks without any translation to Serbian or other non-majority languages in Kosovo.

- **Poor and/or lack of translation in non-majority languages.** Many official statements from public institutions such as ministries and municipalities were not translated at all. The RRCG identified cases of low-quality Serbian translation on official resources. Press conferences of public pandemic crisis matters often lacked Serbian translation.

- **Increase of security incidents in Serbian communities.** The RRCG observed a rise in crimes in areas inhabited by Kosovo Serbs, which led to security concerns within the Kosovo Serb community. The list of identified crimes included arson, physical attacks and robberies.

- **Challenges accessing economic-aid.** Because of the low quality of the information provided in the Serbian language on official websites of public institutions (ministries and agencies), poor performance or lack of Employment Offices in Serb-majority municipalities, and complicated explanations of application procedures, it was more challenging for non-majority communities to apply for the economic-aid package designed to lessen the pandemic consequences through the 15 measures adopted by the Government of Kosovo.

- **Inadequate and/or lack of institutional response.** Central public institutions did neither plan nor address the challenges of the Serb community, leaving the needed management to crisis centres and ad hoc institutions whose capacity and legality is questionable. Moreover, Serbian communities in central Kosovo did not find an adequate response either from the Serbian health institutions operating in Kosovo.

ADVOCACY ACTIONS



In response to identified challenges, NGO "Aktiv" through RRCG advocated both inform relevant institutions and request from them addressing the issues that needed so. The actions are outlined below.

- **Request** to improve communication with non-majority communities addressed to the Government of Kosovo (through the Empirika advocacy platform).
- OP-ED published **calling for better cooperation** between Belgrade and Pristina.
- **Press release** on translation challenges pointing out the problem of non-compliance with the Law on the Use of Languages when the measures on the restriction of movement in Kosovo came into force without an official translation into Serbian.
- **Open letter** to the Ministry of Health and institution of Ombudsperson regarding the problems faced by citizens in accessing institutions due to measures restricting the movement of citizens in Kosovo.
- **Publication** on Covid-19 institutional challenges and proposed solutions, pointing out specific problems and recommending ways to solve them.
- **Public statement** requesting the broadcasting of RTV MIR (through the Empirika advocacy platform).
- **Public statement** to address non-majority communities' security concerns (through the Empirika advocacy platform).
- **Public statement** on non-majority community challenges accessing the Pandemic Economic Aid package.
- **Public statement** on lack of translation to non-majority community languages.
- **Infographic** "COVID19 Crisis - Active Citizens Response"
- **Infographic** "Rapid Response Civic Group – Incidents"
- A **video-cast** informing more significant audiences on the findings of the RRCG through social media.

To ensure greater media and advocacy reach, NGO "Aktiv" coordinated all advocacy activities with many partner organisations, especially with the 12 members of Empirika Advocacy Platform. Furthermore, RRCG HUB through Aktiv representatives advocated additionally during television and radio shows, with the support of a network of journalists with whom Aktiv enjoys strong cooperation.

RESPONSE TO ADVOCACY

- The Consultative Council for Communities that operates within the office of the President of Kosovo adopted AKTIV's recommendations and addressed them to the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, as well as Kosovo's Employment Agency.
- The Ombudsperson Office accepted AKTIV's public letter, based on which it filed a complaint as well as initiated an investigation of potential human rights violations.
- National Centre for Border Management (NCBM) responded to AKTIV's public letter by assuring that all publications will be published in the Serbian language in the future.
- Potential minor improvements in dissemination of information in Serbian language by Kosovo public institutions.

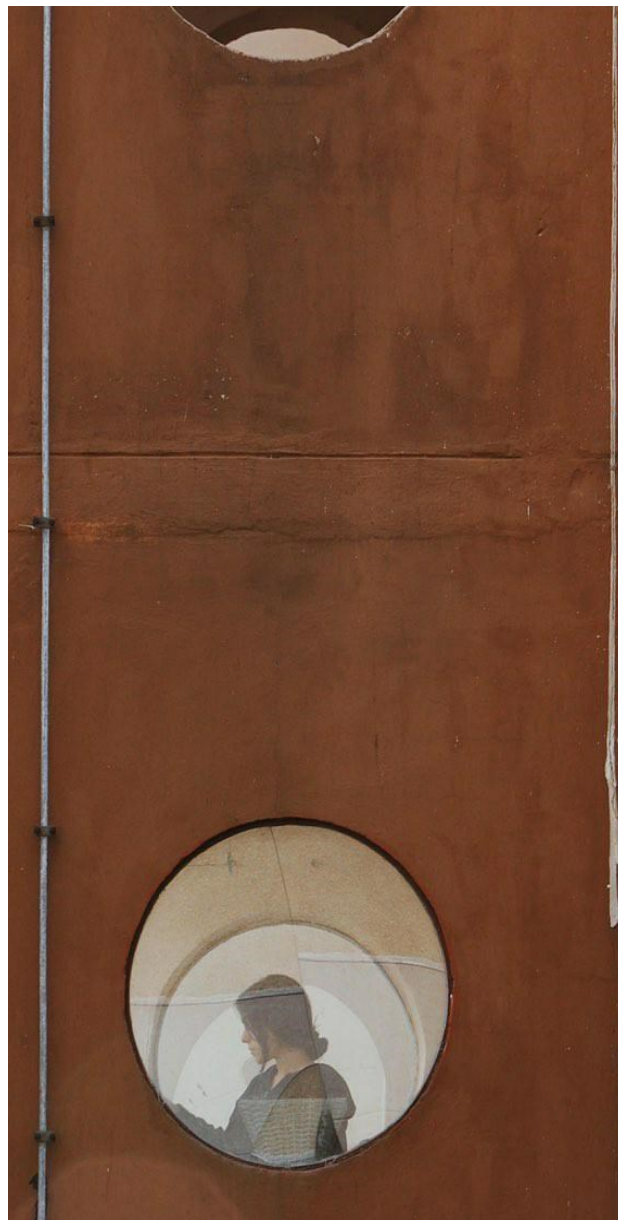
FUTURE OF RRCG

The RRCG methodology has been tested and proved successful in situations where rapid response is needed to shed light on the challenges a community is facing, and communicate those challenges to the proper authorities. Some of the critical criteria in establishing such a Rapid Response Hub are the speed of response, verification of the received information and understanding of adequate advocacy actions that could be tailored individually to the problem. Another critical element to ensure the success of the methodology is to have a diverse network of activist reporters who are present in the field, in all the geographical areas the communities you are working for residing. Aktiv is going to apply the RRCG methodology in future projects where an efficient communication channel with communities is needed.

This type of direct communication with people in the field and faster exchange of information, and thus the ability to react quickly to problems, has proven to be very effective. The network of our field contacts remains active even outside the project activities and the information will continue to arrive in the future.

Miodrag Milicević, NGO Aktiv Executive Director

Through the RRCG methodology, Aktiv managed to collect real-time information on different challenges faced by non-majority communities and was able to channel those challenges to key government stakeholders. Although with a limited impact in improving all the challenges the communities faced, Aktiv was able to contribute significantly by making public institutions aware of the difficulties more vulnerable communities were and are facing during these pandemic times.



For more information please visit www.peacefulchange.org and www.ngoaktiv.org

Kosovo: Civic Responses in Times of Pandemics: Case Study

Author: Peaceful Change initiative

Photos by: Besfort Sylja, Arben Llapashtica



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