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# THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA IN CRISES MANAGEMENT IN ALBANIA:

## THE DEVASTATING EARTHQUAKE OF NOVEMBER 26, 2019 AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Funded by  
UK Government

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## THE DEVASTATING EARTHQUAKE OF NOVEMBER 26, 2019 AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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*The authors produced this report for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. The views and opinions expressed in this report are that of the authors and do not reflect those of the Government of the United Kingdom or the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.*

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## FORWARD

The objective of this publication is to offer an in-depth analysis about CSOs and media engagement on the management of crises in Albania by carefully assessing the role of CSOs and media during the devastating earthquake of November 2019 and the Coronavirus pandemic. An important part of the publication is to provide recommendations on what can be improved in terms of a more effective role of the Civil Society and Media in the management of crises.

Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, Albania was hit by a devastating earthquake of November of 2019. Both the earthquake and its aftermath and the ongoing pandemic can be considered as unprecedented crises for a country like Albania.

A report released recently by global civil society alliance CIVICUS, 'Solidarity in the Time of COVID-19', highlights the irreplaceable role of activists, NGOs and grassroots organisations during the pandemic and calls on states to work with civil society to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and create a better post-pandemic world.

A WFD study on CSOs Participation in Decision Making in Albania notices a mission drift of CSOs as a result of limited sustainability with limited impact in actual social, political and economic transformation. While the civil society sector has expanded in terms of the overall number of CSOs outside Tirana over the past five years, this has not resulted in the consolidation of a vibrant and genuine civil society. Both public institutions and CSOs must commit to their share of responsibilities for effective collaboration to take place.

We hope this study will further improve the national discourse in terms of needed improvements for an effective engagement of CSOs and media in such unusual events.

The study was realized by a trio of researchers, Blerjana Bino, Orkidea Xhaferaj, and Lutjona Lula and was supported by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD). The Foundation would like to thank the researchers for their dedication in preparing this document.

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**Sokol Haxhiu**

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Studies have confirmed the essential role that civil society organizations (CSOs) and media play in crises and disaster management, particularly in emergency responses, aid and relief, post-recovery and preparedness and mitigation of risks. Albania has faced consecutive unprecedented crises over the past year, initially with the devastating earthquake of November 26, 2019, followed by the outbreak of COVID-19, still unfolding itself as not only a public health crisis, but also a social-economic one. Against this background, this study conducts an in-depth analysis of CSOs and media in Albania's recent crises by carefully assessing the role of CSOs and media during the devastating earthquake of November 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study applies a qualitative research design approach with a robust analytical and explanatory framework by using in-depth interviews (13), focus groups (2), a validation workshop (1), and content analysis of media outlets' articles on the earthquake and pandemic. This primary data is supported by a survey of literature and secondary resources through desk research. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the role of civil society and media in crises. Still, follow-up studies should consider combining qualitative and quantitative methods when exploring the role of media, in particular, during a crisis.

### **The devastating earthquake of November 26, 2019**

#### **► Key features of the role of civil society**

CSOs, both at local and national levels, mobilized their resources to provide emergency support. CSOs provided direct support from fundraising among members and from donations. They served as liaison points of information between affected households and those providing food and other necessities. The internal work and usual working practices of CSOs were generally not affected directly, and the sector's response was immediate. Most organizations managed to raise donations in terms of food and clothing, with national CSOs, mainly working in the humanitarian area, also providing financial aid for reconstruction. Most importantly, psychological help through volunteers, especially in camps, was especially timely and relevant for the affected citizens.

On the other hand, the main concern raised by CSOs is the lack of coordination of public authorities with all stakeholders to respond promptly to a crisis. Several

cases demonstrate the lack of coordination and a pattern of delivery of donations to only one destination while leaving other affected areas uncovered. Almost no local municipalities took advantage of the CSOs' contacts and networks for communicating updates and coordinating delivery. Local NPOs report that 'empty municipal offices' were the main problem they faced. Furthermore, time management and maintaining a swift response on collecting and delivering donations were challenging, particularly considering the limited coordination with public authorities responsible for managing the crisis. Another challenge was working while dealing with personal fear on the field. Yet another concern raised was identifying causes needing support and coordination with other actors to provide the necessary assistance/service.

### ► **Key features of the role of the media**

The study confirms the media's indispensable role in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake with information, mobilization, focusing on human life stories and awareness-raising. Social media was also used to call for help, raise awareness, raise funds, gather volunteers, organize, and coordinate assistance and support. The earthquake's media coverage is linked to the disaster's successive stages: the immediate aftermath of the earthquake strike and rescue effort, aid and relief, and recovery and impact. The most prominent frames used to structure the news were: human interest and safety, damage and consequences, attribution of responsibility, solidarity and mobilization, reconstruction, and international support. A positive development was the dedicated media space to experts, engineers, and scientists. Academic and scientific institutions' role was limited, however, with individual experts receiving central attention, highlighting the constraints of the higher education and research sector in Albania. Some watchdog functions of the media are also notable, particularly regarding attribution of responsibility for the crisis. Social media was also used to denounce abuse and mismanagement, even when mainstream media did not cover it. However, on the downside, there was limited media follow-up and investigation of the earthquake's consequences or responsible parties. A significant concern raised by media professionals and others was that media access to public information was limited with a lack of transparency from governmental institutions and delays or circumventing of the Law on the implementation of Public Consultations. Another major issue was the proliferation of fake news and disinformation, particularly on social media and online news portals.

In terms of social media, the study finds a lack of noticeable risk reduction activities and preventive measures in the social media landscape with no specific communication crisis strategies before November 26th, 2020. No particular attention was paid to scientific information and evidence concerning Albania's earthquakes, despite the country being considered to have high seismic activity. On the other hand, social media was vital in delivering news coverage of the disastrous earthquake. Posts, reposting, and resharing of analysis, comments, warnings, and other content were massive. Social media also served to counteract

the information gap provided by authorities using alternative information sources. This, however, proved to have its drawbacks in terms of the quality and reliability of the information. Social media served the public authorities' need to amplify messaging and official information, thus complementing and sometimes acting faster than mainstream media. Facebook, in particular, proved crucial in raising donations, encouraging volunteerism, and developing awareness campaigns. Social media also served to amplify messages focused on reconnecting families and communities and restoring community life and business activities. Echo-chambers and click-baiting remain primary concerns regarding the reach and quality of information in the online space.

## **The COVID-19 pandemic as more than a public health crisis**

### **▶ Key features of the role of civil society**

The impact of COVID-19 on the civil society sector was considerably more significant than in the case of the earthquake. The pandemic and measures that were introduced subsequently, directly affected the work of CSOs on a national level. Albeit with some difficulty, the sector did manage to shift most of their work online and adapt to a 'home office mode.' The projects continued online, and donors overall have accepted financial amendments. CSOs have used alternative ways of operation and reaching out to target groups and stakeholders by using the possibilities offered by digital tools.

Nonetheless, after the initial confusion and some re-orientation, CSOs provided support at home, in communities, and online and undertook new initiatives to provide health care services to chronic disease patients in palliative care and others. Humanitarian organizations provided emergency support and implemented post-recovery programs. Various forms of activism were noticed, particularly surrounding the demolition of the National Theatre building.

On the other side, some key constraints persist. Local CSOs have fewer opportunities to get online tools, and in the beginning, it was challenging to summon up tech-savviness internally. The expected impact of projects was not as predicted since some of the target groups could not be reached and did not have the same level of needs, requiring physical or field operations. This is mostly observed for local and small CSOs operating mainly on donor-funded projects, although they managed to mobilize volunteers to assist their community through online support or mask distribution. In areas also affected by the earthquake (Durrës and Lezha), COVID-19 was covered by CSOs with direct aid as municipal councils continue to have reconstruction still on their agendas, and other sectors are left aside. Another issue raised is the lack of single emergency management and an information office that could provide accurate information and be the primary source of information for coordinating, checking, and accessing accurate information and data. A significant downturn regarding democratic processes during the COVID-19 pandemic and a limited



role of CSOs in holding governmental powers accountable was noticed in the first three months following the outbreak. While the pandemic was instrumentalized by the Government to further expand its executive powers, civil society actors have been pushed away from the decision-making process with no effective consultation during the pandemic. Considering the perpetual political crisis, the COVID-19 crisis has exposed fragilities in the Albanian democratic processes, and the system of checks and balances remains in a precarious situation.

### ► Key features of the role of media

The media faces serious challenges under the COVID-19 crisis regarding freedom and security, such as health and security risks posed to journalists and media staff when reporting from the field. Limited know-how, infrastructure, and procedures are available on reporting in times of a pandemic to protect oneself, protect others, and follow ethical guidelines. Various reports confirm that a climate of insecurity, intimidation, and pressures to journalists continues with a clear trend of decline in media freedom and a shrinking space of critical and independent media. COVID-19 challenged media operations, particularly in financial resources, with a decrease in advertising and outlets going out of print or business. While there was an increased need for accurate and reliable information from the media during the crisis, media faced a lack of access to information and transparency with the Government monopolizing the public information. The content analysis shows that the main frames of media coverage of COVID-19 were fear of the 'invisible enemy,' human interest, public health and safety, awareness-raising, impact, and the way forward. Few media have utilized the Government as Saviour frame, particularly in the early stages of the outbreak. In contrast, others have focused more on criticism of the Government's response and crisis management.

The role of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic is can be compared to its role in the earthquake. Even though media covered the outbreak in China and then in Europe, particularly in Italy, there is no noticeable community resilience building up in the social media before mid-March 2020. Social media was vital in the delivery of news coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak. Posts, reposting, and resharing of analysis, comments, warnings, and other content were massive. Panic-inducing comments, posts, and false content were also present, with fake news becoming viral. Social media was also used by CSOs to raise awareness, coordinate, and provide support to various groups. However, fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories became even more dominant than during the earthquake. Echo-chambers and click-baiting remain primary concerns regarding the information's reach and quality in the online space. Notwithstanding, social media played a vital role in communication, psychological well-being, community resilience, calls for help, collecting donations, and exposing abuse.

Generally, the study points to the media's crucial role as a critical information provider amidst a climate of fear and a lack of information. The media provided

relevant information through awareness-raising campaigns and ample space for experts, doctors, and public health officials. Continuous field reports, especially from hospitals, showed deficiencies in crisis management, which the public had no other way of knowing, considering the lack of information from Governmental sources. Media harnessed advanced technology and managed to combine professional reporting with citizen-created content. Programming was adapted to lockdown measures by using online platforms.

On the other side, the media points to a lack of access to information with isolation, lack of transparency, monopolization of information, and contradictory and confusing information as key issues hindering their role. The politicization of the Albanian media continued during the first weeks of the pandemic, where there was a generally positive tone towards the Government and fewer watchdog functions were performed. However, as the pandemic became the 'new normal,' media resumed their usual framing nuances along with political or other interests. Some recently established media providers and some online portals remain professional.

## **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The capacity of CSOs in Albania should be built in crisis preparedness, with contingency plans in place, both for their internal organizations and daily operations and community and their work with respective target groups. Contingency plans should be accompanied by informed and trained staff on crisis management. As the crises showed, local CSOs must be internally prepared and trained to adapt to changing conditions in order for them to continue providing services and reach their full scope of work even in times of crisis. Therefore, it is essential to create capacity-building programs on internal organizational development in times of crisis.

The Government must actively include CSOs in a formalized manner, in issues regarding crisis management at the local and central level. For example, by a civil society focal point can be assigned in the municipalities to bridge the distance between CSOs and local governments, not only during a crisis but also in non-crisis situations. The National Civil Society Committee can be reinvigorated with a special section on crisis management and be more present in local communities with information on disaster prevention by reaching out through local media and in-person activities. There is also a need for enhanced and meaningful involvement and participation of CSOs in national civil emergency structures.

Coordination and networking capacities of CSOs, both internally and sectorally, need to be improved. The existing networks established through different projects can serve for scaling up sectoral coordination.

The donor community should support developing a volunteer resource and

coordination platform with meet and match opportunities, timetables, locations, and needs of target groups with CSOs, public institutions, business, media, and others to mobilize volunteers.

Cross-sectoral cooperation, especially with media, business, and local authorities, to respond to local needs appropriately and in a timely way is necessarily focusing on community engagement and literacy programs to strengthen awareness and knowledge regarding crisis management and response.

Watchdog CSOs can be more active in signaling fallbacks of democracy and building a human-rights approach to disaster management: transparency of funds and donations; accountability of Government actions; human rights; media freedoms; anti-corruption, and others.

Support for fact-checking and investigative journalism and presenting in-depth narratives through which the citizens understand the processes and relations and not only deliver the bare facts.

Sub-granting (core) support to professional and independent outlets struggling to sustain their operation due to a crisis or establishing a pool of funds to provide institutional support to media and journalists and media organizations with quality journalism.

Provision of support for specific content production (under-represented topics, interactive topics with visual and multimedia elements, engaging issues, audience participation, watchdog).

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

AMA	Audio-visual Media Authority
AMSHC	Agency for the Support of Civil Society in Albania
CoE	Council of Europe
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
IPH	Institute of Public Health
MP	Member of Parliament
MoHSP	Ministry of Health and Social Protection
MFE	Ministry of Finance and Economy
NPO	Non-For-Profit Organisation
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PDNA	Post Disaster Needs Assessment
PM	Prime Minister
SCR	State Commission for Reconstruction
SEE	South East Europe
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
US	United States
USA	United States of America
WB	World Bank
WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy
WHO	World Health Organisation

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

An active and participatory civil society is crucial for Albania in successfully fronting the European accession process, implementing significant reforms, addressing current concerns about the level and quality of democracy, overcoming hardship, and strengthening resilience in light of recent crises: the November 2019 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic. The European Commission Annual Report 2020 on Albania echoes once again that “*an empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system and should be recognized and treated as such by the state institutions.*”<sup>1</sup> With the opening of Albania’s accession negotiations in spring 2020, there is a clear need for closer cooperation and coordination between government and civil society.

In Albania, both subsequent crises, the earthquake of November 26, 2019, and the COVID-19 pandemic, show that no sector can solve significant societal, economic, and health challenges alone. It requires engagement in partnerships and collaborative frameworks across civil society actors, the media, public institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders. This collaboration is also crucial in light of the proliferation of ICTs and the online social networks and media which have opened up spaces to new configurations of actors, leading to significant growth of online civil society activity and enabling influential and rapidly mobilizable networks to be built across geographical, social, and physical divides within Albania, the region and beyond. Thus, it is crucial to explore the current role of CSOs in the management of two major crises in Albania, namely the earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The role of the media in the time of crisis is also significant. Albanian media have gone through critical transformations responding to socio-cultural, political, and economic changes in the country and the proliferation of information and communication technologies and global media trends. In terms of media, the COVID-19 crisis seems to have intensified the existing challenges of media in Albania.<sup>2</sup> This situation is worsened by a combination of other factors such as limited quality and professionalism of journalism, symbiotic relations between

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1 European Commission, Annual Report 2020, Albania, p. 14 available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf) (Accessed October 22, 2020).

2 Sittig, H., & Fabjanić, D., “State of Emergency: Corona, the Media and new Rules in South East Europe”, Country Reports, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2020, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/medien-europa/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/state-of-emergency-corona-the-media-and-new-rules-in-south-east-europe> (Accessed October 4, 2020).



media, politics, and business, a low level of trust in public institutions, low media literacy, and lack of financial sustainability that drive media to bend to sensationalism, business, and political interests.<sup>3</sup> In this context, it is thus paramount to thoroughly assess CSOs' and the media's role in the management of two unprecedented crises in Albania and provide recommendations on how to improve their role further.

This study's overall objective is to conduct an in-depth analysis of CSOs' and the media's engagement in the management of both recent crises in Albania by carefully assessing the role of CSOs and the media during the devastating earthquake of November 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific objectives of this study are:

- ▶ To conduct an in-depth analysis of CSOs and the media's role during the devastating earthquake of November 2019.
- ▶ To conduct an in-depth analysis of the role of CSOs and media during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ▶ To draw conclusions and recommendations to improve further the engagement of CSOs and media in such unusual events.

This study applies a qualitative research design approach with a robust analytical and explanatory framework. The qualitative research design allows for in-depth and thorough explorations of the topic through a systematic qualitative methodology application. The interpretation of the research findings based on data collection and analysis will fill in the gap concerning the current situation and provide insights for their future development. Therefore, the critical feature of the research is its uniqueness and in-depth exploration of the particular research objectives, in contrast to the quantitative approach that seeks to generalize the findings and confirm cause and effect relations. The methodology is elaborated in the following section of the research report.

Subsequently, the report is structured in three main parts: the conceptual framework, case studies analysis, and conclusions and recommendations.

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<sup>3</sup> Bino, B. & Marko, D. (2020) Assessment of media developments in Albania and Western Balkans and donor funding in time of COVID-19, in light of the project Supporting Greater Media Independence in Western Balkans.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The research proceeded in three main steps or phases: In the first phase, the research design and methodology were finalized by drawing on the literature review and consulting with the WFD team. This phase served to design all research instruments such as guidelines for in-depth interviews, focus groups, content analysis of media, compile sample lists, and list of secondary resources. The second phase was fieldwork, carried out in September and October 2020, whereby primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups with media and civil society. A validation workshop was organised in October 2020, followed by the final phase of data analysis and interpretation and a write-up of the final research report, including comments received during the presentation of findings in the validation workshop.

This research adheres to a code of conduct and ethical regulations of qualitative research. Interviewees were approached via a formal email/telephone conversation or face to face to gain their informed consent on participating in the research project. A consent form was prepared and provided to interviewees, explaining the project's aim and how the data would be used and published. Confidentiality of data gathered is guaranteed to interviewees, and codes are used for quotes in the text referring to "interviewee from the civil society" and "interviewee from the media." For the face-to-face interviews, researchers adhered to the restrictions and protocols in place against spreading COVID-19.

This study uses triangulation: data is validated through the use of in-depth interviews, focus groups and a validation workshop, and a content analysis of media outlets. This primary data is supported by a survey of literature and secondary resources through desk research.

A total of 13 persons have been interviewed: 6 from the civil society sector and 7 from the media sector. All are individuals with relevant experience in the field and suitable knowledge on the subject matter.

**Table 1: In-depth interviews sample**

Sector	Profile	Total
Civil society	Founder	2
	Director	3
	Programme Director	1
Media	Journalist	3
	Director of Newsroom	1
	Executive Producer	1
	Executive Director	1
	Media independent association	1

The following tables present the sample per each sector, detailing the organisation's name, type, area of activity, the person interviewed, and their role both in civil society and in media. The interviews were conducted in person either online or face to face and last approximately 30 – 45 minutes. The questions for the in-depth interviews were organized into two main groups, each covering the earthquake and COVID-19. The interviewees included individuals working in civil society in cities other than Tirana, such as in Durrës, Fier, Kruja, and Lezha. In addition, two local media outlets were included – one from Durrës, the epicentre of the earthquake, and one from Shkodra, primarily affected by the pandemic.

**Table 2: Sample of interviewees from civil society sector**

#	CSO	Type of CSO
1	NPF/Help for Children	Service Delivery NPO/Works with marginalised communities/branches in Fieri, Lezha and Kruja
2	Partners Albania	National NPO/well established/manages Resource Centre for Civil Society
3	World Vision Albania	International / local branch/works with youth/ children/families in need/Lezha/Durrës
4	Më mirë së bashku	Online/offline support and relief provision for COVID-19/network
5	Qendra e Zhvillimit të Shoqërisë Civile (CSDC)	Local NPO in Durrës
6	Youth in Charge	Local Grassroot Youth led NPO (operating in Lezha District)

**Table 3: Sample of interviewees in the media sector**

1	Reporter.al	BIRN online publication / analysis / investigation
2	Faktoje.al	Media / NPO/Factchecker / FactoMeter
3	Durrësilajm	Local online media / Durres
4	Star News TV	Local TV / Shkodra
5	RTSH	National Public Broadcast
6	TV Channel	National
7	Union of Albanian Journalists	Independent journalists' association

Content analysis is a research technique for the systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. Content analysis provides insights into the overall trends and patterns of media portrayal of crisis and main actors such as the Government. For the content analysis, the following sub-research questions are formulated based on the objectives of this assignment:

**CAQ1 - Regarding the volume and the frequency of the news flows:**

- ▶ Were there intensive news waves (media-hypes), triggered by (which) key events?
- ▶ How many articles?
- ▶ What is the main topic?

**CAQ2 – Regarding meaning and framing**

- ▶ What was the main message (frame) in the media about the earthquake / pandemic during the successive stages?
- ▶ What was the share of alarming, reassuring or neutral statements in the news during the earthquake / pandemic?
- ▶ Who had the largest share in coverage: the Government, PM, IPH, MoHSP or the expert sources? And which sources were dominant?

These are then detailed even more based on operational definition and codes for CA. The aim here is not simply to understand the media coverage of the earthquake and pandemic, but through the coverage, to better explore the role of the media and interactions with other actors in crisis management. The unit of analysis is any article that deals with earthquake / COVID-19 during the monitoring periods (as explained below).

**Table 4: Operational definition for content analysis**

Operational definition and key words for earthquake	Operational definition and key words for COVID-19 pandemic
1. Earthquake	1. COVID-19
2. Relief and emergency	2. Coronavirus
3. Post-disaster recovery	3. Epidemic/ Pandemic
4. Earthquake victims and families	4. Contact tracing
5. Earthquake impact: social, economic, political	5. Tampon / number of infected / victims / recovered
6. Reconstruction	6. Awareness on COVID-19
7. Funding and donors conference	7. Rumours / misconceptions / conspiracy theory / disinformation / fake / made-up
8. Other: International support: EU, Greece, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Israel	8. State of emergency and restrictive measures
	9. Relief measures and support
	10. Punishment
	11. Quarantine and self-isolation
	12. Funding and resources
	13. Impact on economy, education, society
	14. Other countries news: China, Italy, US, EU
	15. Commentary and opinion
	16. Readers/viewers/followers reactions and participation

The content analysis included three time periods:

1. 26 November - 31 December 2019, which is immediately after the earthquake.
2. 15- 20 February 2020, which relates to the donor conference.
3. 11 March - 23 June 2020, which relates to the COVID-19 state of emergency in Albania.

In the sample, four TV channels are included, two newspapers and four online media outlets combining a diversity of media – news media, general media, highly professional media, instant news media, economic media, investigative and critical media, and public service media.

**Table 5: Content analysis sample (number of articles)**

		Earthquake		COVID-19
		26 November - 31 December 2019	15- 20 February 2020	11 March - 23 June 2020
<b>No. TV Channels</b>				
1	ABC News	256	47	630
2	A2CNN	204	30	532
3	RTSH	300	40	650
4	Top Channel	310	45	600
<b>No. Newspaper</b>				
1	shqiptarja.com	78	14	320
2	Panorama	89	15	310
<b>No. Online Portals</b>				
1	Balkanweb	125	20	700
2	Exit.al	34	5	200
3	Reporter.al	17	1	178
4	Monitor.al	20	2	120

Nine civil society representatives and experts participated in the focus group discussions on the role of civil society in times of crisis as shown below.

**Table 6: Civil society focus group participants**

No	Participant	Profile	Organisation
1	Abi Dodbiba	Knowledge Systems Expert	Freelance
2	Armanda Kodra Hysa	Antropologue	Freelance
3	Albiona Mucoimaj	Social Worker and Activist	EcoVolis
4	Silva Arapi	Digital Rights Activist	CVDR Steering Group
5	Besjana Hysa	Project Manager	Albanian Institute of Science
6	Alba Brojka	Project Officer	European Endowment for Democracy
7	Edlira Pajuni	Director	Albcontact Centre Durrës
8	Irena Laska	Director	Palliative Care Centre Korça
9	Redion Qirjazi	Researcher	IDM Albania

Five media experts and journalists participated in the focus group on the role of media in time of crisis as shown below.

**Table 7: Media focus group participants**

No	Participant	Profile	Organisation
1	Celik Rruplli	Media Analyst	Europe House
2	Erbllin Vukaj	Journalist	Euronews Albania
3	Ivana Dervishi	Digital Section Programme Director	Euronews Albania
4	Florenc Stafa	Journalist	Freelance
5	Vladimir Thano	Journalist	TVSH

The focus groups and validation workshop were organized online and prior approval from participants was obtained regarding the recording of discussions.

**Table 8: Validation workshop sample**

Participant	Profile	Organisation
Ardi Hoti	Director of Information	StarNews TV
Indrit Yzeiraj	Activist	Aleanca per Mbrojtjen e Teatrit
Erisa Lame	Programme Manager	SDC
Vasilika Laci	Programme Manager	UK Embassy
Megi Recic	Programme Manager	Civil Rights Defenders
Nevila Xhindi	Professor	CCIS
Robert Gajda	The Commissioner for Protection Against Discrimination	Commissioner for Protection Against Discrimination
Erjona Canaj	Commissioner in Ombudsman Office	Ombudsman
Mariola Qesaraku	Programme Manager	FES
Bledar Taho	Director	IRCA
Shpresa Spahiu	Director	NPF
Blerina Balla	Programme Manager	UK Embassy
Sokol Haxhiu	Country Representative	WFD
Orjada Tare	Programme Manager	WFD
Erida Curraj	Programme Manager	+Erasmus

The selected approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the role of civil society and media in crisis, but a quantitative analysis of media coverage of earthquake and pandemic could have provided opportunities to generalise the findings. Follow up studies should consider combining qualitative and quantitative methods when exploring the role of media specifically during crisis.



### 3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CSOs AND MEDIA IN TIME OF CRISES

This chapter outlines the key insights from a literature review and secondary resources regarding the role of CSOs and the media during crises.

#### 3.1 CSOs AND CRISES: FROM EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

CSOs play an essential role in crisis and disaster management, especially in emergency response, relief, and post-recovery phases. Crises such as major earthquakes, pandemics, or other disasters tend to expose and exacerbate issues such as entrenched and structural inequalities, discrimination, limited or complete lack of access to health, education, and social services, the vulnerability of various groups in society, the fragility of the private sector, corruption of public officials, gender-based domestic violence and others. CSOs work on the frontline of many of these issues by providing essential services, advocating policy changes, building capacity and empowerment, and awareness-raising. As such, their role is crucial, yet not without challenges.

Various civil society organizations have played an active role in the management of disasters for a long time. These interventions of CSOs can be grouped as follows.

##### ***Box 1: Key functions of CSOs in disaster management***

- ▶ Mobilizing volunteers for rescue work
- ▶ Assessing damage at the local level
- ▶ Mobilizing funds for relief
- ▶ Providing support and relief
- ▶ Mobilizing and channeling funds for rehabilitation
- ▶ Reaching direct communities and those in need
- ▶ Filling the gaps left by the state authorities
- ▶ Coordinating with other civil society actors
- ▶ Participating in the reconstruction process: consultation, monitoring, and evaluation
- ▶ Working in advocacy and awareness-raising

\*Source: Authors based on literature review

It has been widely acknowledged that the unique competencies of CSOs operating at the grassroots level are that they can respond to local people's priorities and build on local capacities in times of crisis. CSOs are also more flexible and relatively free from bureaucratic structures and systems. They are often able to address the needs of the most vulnerable more efficiently. <sup>4</sup>Compared with state actors, CSOs are well-positioned to adopt inclusive, participatory, and consensual approaches in crisis management, disaster planning, and resilience building.<sup>5</sup>

For instance, CIVICUS, a global alliance of civil society organizations, says that, in addition to the work it does on pressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and climate change, civil society also finds itself at the frontlines of response when it comes to humanitarian emergencies, including those caused by conflicts and disasters.<sup>6</sup>

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2030,<sup>7</sup> a leading global framework, recognizes the potential role of CSOs in emergency response and relief and their critical role in disaster risk reduction worldwide.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, starting from the traditional approach of response and relief, the emphasis has gradually shifted to disaster risk reduction, recognizing the significance of and need for community-based risk reduction by establishing links to the policy-forming actors. CSOs, however, face particular challenges in resources in terms of human, financial, and technical issues.

The Global Network of Civil Society Organizations for Disaster Reduction identifies six core roles of CSOs concerning disaster risk reduction, as presented below.

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4 UNISDR. (2006). NGOs & disaster risk reduction: A preliminary review of initiatives and progress made. Geneva: UN, available at [https://www.unisdr.org/2008/partner-netw/NPOs/meeting1-october-2006/NGOs\\_and\\_DRR\\_Background\\_Paper.pdf](https://www.unisdr.org/2008/partner-netw/NPOs/meeting1-october-2006/NGOs_and_DRR_Background_Paper.pdf) (Accessed October 4, 2020).

5 Ibid.

6 "2015 State of Civil Society Report – Civil society at the forefront of emergency response but faces dire threats and funding crisis", (2015). Available at <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/media-releases/2384-civil-society-at-forefront-of-emergency-response-but-faces-dire-threats-and-funding-crisis-says-new-report> (Accessed August 20, 2020).

7 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2030, available at <https://www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/what-sendai-framework> (Accessed August 23, 2020).

8 van Wessel, M., Naz, F. & Sahoo, S. (2020). "Complementarities in CSO Collaborations: How Working with Diversity Produces Advantages." *Voluntas*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00227-4> Accessed August 23, 2020).

### **Box 2: Role of CSOs in disaster risk reduction**

1. **Implementer** - Delivering local level action in partnership with the state and other groups.
2. **Capacity Builder** - Strengthening capabilities at the local level
3. **Knowledge Broker** - Identifying, developing, and sharing knowledge, expertise, and innovative practices.
4. **Connector** - Building bridges across different groups and scales to strengthen local-level engagement
5. **Monitor** - Ensuring greater accountability through monitoring and reporting local level progress.
6. **Advocate** - Mobilising and standing up for the needs and priorities of marginalised people.

\*Source: Global Network of Civil Society Organizations for Disaster Reduction

The role of CSOs in such a framework is broader and deeper than emergency response and humanitarian assistance. It involves the promotion of inclusive baseline risk assessment, disaster education, awareness-raising of risk through various communication channels and digital media, generation and gathering of gender-sensitive data, local capacity building, strengthening coordination with other actors, promotion of private-sector responsibility in disaster reduction, working with local government and other actors such as media, and provision of services and capacity building.

Besides, CSOs are of paramount importance in ensuring the respect of human rights and liberties in a time of disasters. In some cases, governments use disasters to further crack down on independent voices. The adoption of emergency laws expands the government's power and that of other state actors, and often this is coupled with the censorship, arrest, and intimidation of journalists, healthcare workers, and other individuals for criticising their response. CSOs are fundamental in building a rights-based approach to disaster management, holding the government accountable, and voicing social groups.

## **3.2 MEDIA IN TIME OF CRISES**

Communication is a crucial element in times of crisis, such as major earthquakes and pandemics and other disasters. However, because these are out-of-the-ordinary events, standard principles and communication practices cannot be easily applied. These are situations are marked by high levels of uncertainty, and the public expects information and reassuring messages communicated via media, be it mainstream or online. Thus, media are essential to give voices to experts to explain the threat and the situation and authorities to provide information on how to respond to such threats of disaster situations. Establishing a balance between expert and lay discourse and between scientists and public authorities is challenging for media professionals, yet essential.

Communication from the media is assumed to be fraught with the possibility of exaggeration, misunderstanding, rearrangement, and backlash. According to critics, the media tend to reduce and simplify, exaggerate and sensationalize and therefore, whenever science (such as that on seismology/epidemiology/public health) enters the media sphere, nuance and precision are reportedly lost. A backdrop for these difficulties is the media's tendency to highlight dramatic events.

**Box 3: Stages of risk communication**

1. *Get the numbers right;*
2. *Tell key segments of the public what the numbers mean;*
3. *Explain what the numbers mean;*
4. *Show the public they have accepted similar risks before;*
5. *Explain how the benefits of the risks outweigh the costs;*
6. *Treat the public with respect;*
7. *Make public partners in being risk communicators;*
8. *Do all the above.*

Source: Sheppard, 2012

In addition to the embedded constraints in the media

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#### **Box 4: COVID-19 and challenges of science-based advice in US and other countries**

Data dashboards in Singapore, South Korea, and New Zealand offer comprehensive and regularly updated, fast, and precise windows into how the Coronavirus is spreading. The availability of high-quality and reliable data supports policy actors in decision-making, and at the same time helps citizens reduce risks and determine how to go about daily life in the time of the pandemic. Moreover, these data dashboards provide researchers with a wealth of data to research and develop science and evidence-based advice for decision-makers. By contrast, critics argue that *“the United States offers vanishingly few details on how the disease is spreading, even as people increasingly socialize and travel, and authorities reopen schools and businesses.”*<sup>\*</sup> They point out that the United States has a Coronavirus data crisis due to political meddling, disorganization, and years of neglect of public-health data management.<sup>\*\*</sup> In addition to that, public trust in the federal government has hovered at near-record lows as the United States struggles with a pandemic and an economic recession. Distrust in government is hindering the surveillance of the spread of Covid-19 and the uptake of its vaccines when made available.

Another concern related to the diminished authority of science-based advice is that scientists and experts have become victims of smear campaigns by media and politicians if their advice runs counter to specific interests or political ideology. During the COVID-19 pandemic, things are rapidly changing, and government, scientists, experts, and media are acting against an enemy about which much remains unknown. The media spotlight is so intense that scientific figures worldwide — Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance in the U.K., Didier Raoult in France, Anthony Fauci in the U.S. have become household names.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> However, there are divergences even within scientists regarding data and evidence about COVID-19. For instance, David King, a former chief scientific adviser to Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, has set up an alternative group of experts to cast their judgment on the available evidence and provide a fresh stream of interpretation and advice vis-à-vis the official one provided in the U.K. This is also happening in Germany and other countries. This divergence means politicians, businesses, and especially media commentators, can draw from whichever piece of science they prefer. Consequently, there is confusion, leading to public disorientation and distrust which makes it easier for conspiracy and misinformation to spread.

<sup>\*</sup> Maxmen, A., (2020) “Why the United States is having a coronavirus data crisis”, available at <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02478-z> (Accessed October 4, 2020).

<sup>\*\*</sup> “Americans’ Views of Government: Low Trust, but Some Positive Performance Ratings”, (2020). Pew Research Center, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/14/americans-views-of-government-low-trust-but-some-positive-performance-ratings/> (Accessed October 4, 2020).

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Black, R., (2020). “Scientists get a politics lesson from COVID-19”, Politico, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-what-covid-19-scientists-can-learn-from-their-climate-change-colleagues/> (Accessed October 1, 2020).

The media's role in risk communication is discussed in McLean and Power (2014), whose paper emphasizes two main findings: first, 'there was a need to develop shared definitions of trust and articulation of common goals,' and second, that 'building a stock of goodwill before a disaster and both sides how to contribute to the common goal.'<sup>9</sup> Journalism watchdog organizations have also published significant research on disaster reporting and the role of media, such as the Pew Research Centre's Journalism Project.<sup>10</sup> These reports highlight the importance of scientific journalism and journalists' education on reporting disasters such as earthquakes and pandemics.

With the development of digital media, social media, and citizen journalism, and with an increased role of the public in media thanks to advanced ICTs, there is a transformation evidenced in the environment of scientific journalism in recent years. Some studies have pointed out the dramatic shifts of science reporters' functions and practices due to extensive changes in the economy, the organizational processes, and professional disciplines in journalism. They are shifting from merely transmitting information into operating in a more socio-cultural context, becoming critics, reporting the process of science rather than just facts and findings, and adopting 'dialogical' journalism in collaboration with their audiences.<sup>11</sup> Media often adopt the frames their sources have to offer, including public authorities, scientists, experts, and the public, but in covering news about disasters and dealing with sources, journalists also adapt and develop frames. Framing, which is defined as the outcome of negotiation processes between the media and their sources,<sup>12</sup> is a significant pillar in how media covers a major disaster and delineates its role in the crisis.

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9 McLean, H., & Power, MR., (2014). When minutes count: Tension and trust in the relationship between emergency managers and the media. *Journalism*. 15(3):307-325.

10 "Reporting Katrina" (2015). Pew Research Center, available at <https://www.journalism.org/2005/09/11/reporting-katrina/> (Accessed September 8, 2020).

11 Fahy, D., & Nisbet, MC., (2011) "The science journalist online: Shifting roles and emerging practices." *Journalism* 12(7): 778–793.

12 Vasterman, PLM., & Ruigrok, N., (2013) "Pandemic alarm in the Dutch media: Media coverage of the 2009 influenza A (H1N1) pandemic and the role of the expert sources", *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 28, Issue 4., 436-453.

### ***Box 5: Examples of media coverage and role in disasters***

Media coverage on epidemics can be quite alarming. Coverage of avian flu and SARS was often sensationalist, focusing on worst-case scenarios and full of emotionally charged language (Berry et al., 2007; Dudo et al., 2007; Washer, 2004).

Studies on the A/H1N1 pandemic and the media, however, show mixed results. A Brazilian TV news program study shows that it contributed to 'a scenario of panic' (Da Silva Medeiros and Massarani, 2010).

An analysis of British newspapers concluded that there was little evidence of the media 'over-hyping' the pandemic (Hilton and Hunt, 2010). Whereas the overall tone was neutral and not 'alarmist,' the media did pay a lot of attention to the flu.

This is confirmed by a study of Australian TV news on the epidemic: coverage was in general 'non-alarmist,' but 63.4% of all television news statements related to the severity of A/H1N1, created the impression of a severe threat (Fogarty et al., 2011). On the other hand, an analysis of newspaper coverage of swine flu in Australia showed that the 'deadly swine flu' narrative prevailed with a combination of alarming and reassuring messages (Holland and Blood, 2010).

Developments in media coverage can be linked to the disaster's successive stages, such as occurs in a pandemic. Previous research on Ebola, SARS, and avian flu defined three stages in the coverage of a new virus, each with a different discourse: 'sounding the alarm,' 'mixed messages,' and 'hot crisis and containment.'<sup>13</sup> The daily news generally contains regular flows of current affairs. However, these disasters trigger vast and fast developing news waves in which all media participate, which are known as media-hypes and are based on a self-referential and interactive media momentum creating reinforcing feedback loops in the news production.<sup>14</sup> The media system is highly self-referential: media tend to follow other media, thereby nourishing the news wave. This is reinforced by the interaction with and response to social actors. One specific frame often becomes dominant in the coverage because the media tend to look for frame-confirming information and sources.<sup>15</sup> How a disaster is thus communicated and framed by the media during a media-hype is highly relevant because this media coverage

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13 Vasterman, PLM., & Ruigrok, N., (2013) "Pandemic alarm in the Dutch media: Media coverage of the 2009 influenza A (H1N1) pandemic and the role of the expert sources", *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 28, Issue 4., 436-453.

14 *Ibid.* p. 440.

15 Vasterman, PLM, Yzermans, JC, Dirkzwager, AJE (2005) "The role of the media and media hypes in the aftermath of disasters." *Epidemiologic Reviews*, Vol. 27: 107-114.

creates, reproduces, or magnifies risks and perceptions about risks. Media-hypes may also put pressure on the government to take steps in order to handle the alleged threat.

**Box 6: The media struggle in the case of Nepal: Earthquake of April 25, 2015**

A study on media coverage of the magnitude 7.8 earthquake that hit Nepal on April 25th, 2015, shows that media, particularly community radio and social media, were instrumental in keeping people informed and connected. Initially, the local media struggled to react to the earthquake because tremors are typical in Nepal, and the disaster's extent was unclear. In the areas hit most hard by the earthquake, local media suffered damage and could not report the event. Also, Nepalese media outlets categorise disasters as current affairs, without specific accountability for disaster reporting. The study identifies that the media's principal focus was on the disasters' response phase and the human-interest aspect.

Furthermore, the disaster's immediate aftermath resulted in confusion within the media and a lack of coordination with the government. Even though Nepal is a pioneer in community radio in South Asia, it lacks necessary disaster preparedness and mitigation protocols. There was limited reporting that encouraged the development of any disaster-resilient infrastructure in Nepal. Social media proved vital in ensuring communication and raising awareness and solidarity, especially with foreign reporters informing international media and the public via Facebook and Twitter.

\*Poudel, Bharat Raj, FitzGerald, Gerry, Clark, Michele J., Mehta, Amisha, & Poudyal Chhetri, Meen B. (2014) How does Nepal Television (NTV) frame natural disasters? A qualitative content analysis of news scripts using news frames and PPRR cycle. In 5th International Disaster and Risk Conference (IDRC 2014), 2014-08-24 - 2014-08-28.

\*\*\*How the media struggled in Nepal's earthquake rescue," available at <https://theconversation.com/how-the-media-struggled-in-nepals-earthquake-rescue-40970> (Accessed October 17, 2020).

The role of the Internet and social media alongside that of mainstream press outlets cannot be underestimated, as international mechanisms of surveillance regulated by the WHO are now opened to receive alerts from these new media, alongside communication issued from official channels.<sup>16</sup> A 2020 study on COVID-19 and media argues that “the overabundance of data and knowledge is one of the information society’s characteristics. Power no longer resides in having access to information, but in managing it. Indeed, the arrival of the Internet and social media has undeniably facilitated the circulation and outreach of information, opening up the possibilities users have to access, interact (with), and produce content.<sup>17</sup> Social media distrust affects the dissemination of disaster information as it entails shifts in media perception and participation and changes in the way individuals and organizations make sense of information in critical situations. Social media and online sites have also become the primary platforms for disseminating false and misleading information since they allow rapid and large-scale sharing and

<sup>16</sup> Dry, S. (2010). “New rules for health? Epidemics and the International Health Regulations”. In: Dry, S, Leach, M (eds) *Epidemics: Science, Governance, and Social Justice*. London: Earthscan, pp. 23–42.

<sup>17</sup> Pulido, C., Villarejo-Carballido, B., Redondo-Sama, G., Gomes, A. (2020). “COVID-19 infodemic: More retweets for science-based information on coronavirus than for false information”, *International Sociology*, Vol. 35(4), pp. 377-392.



lack the traditional mechanisms of quality control and 'gate-keeping.'<sup>18</sup> The increases of false information are fostering the denial of scientific evidence and could potentially be a threat to democracy and citizens.<sup>19</sup> The dissemination of such content has been demonstrated to foster cynicism, apathy, and extremism, possibly misleading decisions affecting public policy and people's lives.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Box 7: COVID-19 and Twitter**

Systematic research on the role of media and COVID-19 is still emerging. A few rapid assessments have been conducted, but there is still much room for further research. For instance, a recent study\* provides new insights into how false information and evidence-based information around the COVID-19 emergency circulated on Twitter in the early phase of the pandemic breakout. The study finds that false information was more likely to be tweeted, but less likely to be retweeted than science-based evidence or fact-checking tweets. The findings of the current study are more aligned with research on the Ebola outbreak in 2014\*\*, which shows that after the emergency declaration, accurate information circulated more than false information. However, further research is needed in this regard. The internet and Web 2.0. have democratized how citizens access, produce, and interact with content. However, it is not merely an issue of having access to scientific knowledge, but also about critically assessing information and sorting out valid content from falsehood. In this vein, preventive educational programs that provide citizens with the necessary skills to access evidence-based information and scientific knowledge and reject falsehood are needed. These programs may include training to debunk false information through scientific literacy and media literacy, which can be enhanced in family training, life-long learning, schools, universities, and civil grassroots movements. Further research is needed to measure the impact of current initiatives and to design suitable interventions.

\*Pulido, C., Villarejo-Carballido, B., Redondo-Sama, G., Gomes, A. (2020). "COVID-19 infodemic: More retweets for science-based information on coronavirus than for false information", *International Sociology*, Vol. 35(4), pp. 377-392.  
\*\* Fung IC-H, Fu K-W, Chan C-H et al. (2016) Social media's initial reaction to information and misinformation on Ebola, August 2014: Facts and rumors. *Public Health Reports* 131(3): 461-473.

The World Health Organization (WHO) refers to this problem in the context of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a social media 'infodemic' that is, "an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it."<sup>21</sup> The COVID-19 outbreak, in particular, has highlighted the necessity for the development of a comprehensive social media communication strategy to enhance and support crisis response. Misinformation, scaremongering, or trivialization of a crisis event can present challenges to government authorities

18 Mirbabaie, M., Bunker, D., Stieglitz, S., Marx, J., & Ehnis, C., (2020). "Social media in times of crisis: Learning from Hurricane Harvey for the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic response", *Journal of Information Technology*, Vol. 35, Issue 3, 195-213.

19 Pulido, C., Villarejo-Carballido, B., Redondo-Sama, G., Gomes, A., (2020). "COVID-19 infodemic: More retweets for science-based information on coronavirus than for false information", *International Sociology*, Vol. 35(4), pp. 377-392.

20 Lazer, DMJ, Baum, MA, Benkler, Y, et al. (2018). "The science of fake news," *science*,359(6380): 1094-1096.

21 "Immunizing the public against misinformation," World Health Organisation, Available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/immunizing-the-public-against-misinformation> (Accessed October 4, 2020).

as they develop their crisis communication strategy. In this context, the circulation of false information on the COVID-19 outbreak is growing fast.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it includes, among others, references to pretended cures, such as rinsing one's mouth with salty water, eating organo, or even drinking bleach.<sup>23</sup>

However, social media is still vital in disaster communication and trust between media, authorities, and the public. A framework on the role of social media in disaster management<sup>24</sup> can be summarised according to the following table.

**Table 9: Role of social media in disaster management**

<b>Disaster stage</b>	<b>Stage of disaster management</b>	<b>Role of Social Media</b>	<b>Implication in Practice</b>
<b>Pre-Disaster</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>	Incorporation of risk reduction activities and preventive activities	<b>Risk Reduction</b>
<b>Pre-Disaster</b>	<b>Preparedness</b>	Provide disaster warnings and implement crisis communication activities Signal and detect disasters	<b>Risk Reduction Early Warning</b>
<b>Disaster</b>	<b>Response</b>	Deliver and analyse news coverage of the disaster Provide and receive disaster response information Send and receive requests for help or assistance (Re)connect community members	<b>Information Dissemination</b>
<b>Post-Disaster</b>	<b>Recovery</b>	Collect donations, encourage volunteerism, and develop awareness of an event Provide and receive information about (and discuss) recovery, and rebuilding	<b>Community Empowerment</b>

22 Chakravorti B (2020). As coronavirus spreads, so do fake news. Bloomberg Opinion, February 5. Available at [www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-02-05/as-coronavirus-spreads-so-does-fake-news](http://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-02-05/as-coronavirus-spreads-so-does-fake-news) (Accessed September 8, 2020).

23 Mirbabaie, M., Bunker, D., Stieglitz, S., Marx, J., & Ehnis, C., (2020). "Social media in times of crisis: Learning from Hurricane Harvey for the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic response", *Journal of Information Technology*, Vol. 35, Issue 3, 195-213.

24 Mueez, A., Mardiana, O., & Rosliza, A.M., (2019). "Role of social media in disaster management," *International Journal of Public Health and Clinical Sciences*, Vol.6, No.2, 1-23.

This framework proved that social media plays a multifunctional role in all phases of disaster management, particularly in mass communication and information sharing. The spectrum of social media channels allowing information to be disseminated and shared without barriers effectively bypasses problems with bureaucracy, especially during disasters. Using digital technology to enhance disaster management and promote community resilience were aligned with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction plan, promoting real-time access to reliable data and using information and communications technology innovations to enhance measurement tools, collection, analysis, and dissemination of data. Thus, this adopted framework provides stakeholders with the opportunity to develop and utilize social media's full potential as a data collection, development, and dissemination platform in all the phases of disaster management. Given the ongoing and rapid evolution of social media, adjustments to the framework can be made as necessary in the future.

The media gain prominence in involving the different actors during disasters, boosting relief and support to the victims, and generating trust among those affected. It means that the media is the most critical mitigation tool available to the authorities during a disaster. The media's action creates public perceptions about the risks of the event. In this sense, the media's role in disasters cannot be understood merely as a tool to communicate and describe what happened and keep the public informed. Media is one of the most critical vehicles for distributing information on certain risks and dangers to people, and is used extensively during the various stages of a disaster. Media should also contribute to individual and community preparedness, help identify potential threats, enable communities to tap into local potential and experiences to adapt to crises, disasters, and other challenges, and provide a forum for community planning on post-disaster reconstruction.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is necessary to include the media in developing local and national disaster prevention plans and help in risk reduction, and not merely during response efforts.

The Artificial Intelligence & Emerging Media Research Group at Boston University is carrying out a research study regarding media coverage of COVID-19. It compares how media worldwide frames coronavirus news by using machine learning to analyse evolving news trends in countries hard-hit by the pandemic: China, South Korea, the United States, and the United Kingdom.<sup>26</sup> Their algorithm has confirmed that at the start of the outbreak, between January and early March 2020, global media attention was primarily focused on the virus's spread in China. Initially, news stories in these countries were framed around scientific research, frontline healthcare workers, and the domestic and global outbreaks. Nevertheless, soon after, the media's focus in all four countries shifts to domestic

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25 Reis, Clóvis, Mattedi, Marcos, & Barrios, Yanet Reimondo. (2017). Media and disasters: an overview of international scientific production from 1996 to 2016. *Intercom: Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação*, 40(2), 77-92.

26 Colarossi, J., (2020). "Comparing How Media around the World Frames Coronavirus News", available at <http://www.bu.edu/articles/2020/comparing-how-media-around-the-world-frames-coronavirus-news/>. (Accessed October 2, 2020).

and international economic consequences and financial fallout—a topic that has remained a major focus in most of the countries analysed in this study. Their data has also revealed that news stories about taking personal preventive actions, like social distancing and adhering to stay-at-home orders, have consistently been a topical focus of news outlets in the US.<sup>27</sup> This trend can be explained by the American culture that values individual freedom, combined with a decentralized government, possibly making mandatory preventive actions harder to implement.<sup>28</sup> However, examining the correlation between the news coverage of COVID-19 and the actual confirmed cases and deaths is still in process, and the expected results will shed light on the role the news media played in this global pandemic.

#### **Box 8: News consumption and COVID-19 in UK**

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford has collected data\* through a series of surveys on how people navigate news and information during the Coronavirus pandemic. The study finds that most of the public continues to rely on news media for information about the Coronavirus. BBC News (both offline and online), ITV (primarily offline), and The Guardian (primarily online) are the three most widely used brands. Nevertheless, both news use, trust in news, and the overall perception of whether the news media help people understand and respond to the crisis have declined significantly since the early stages of the crisis. Furthermore, a third (35%) say that they think that the Coronavirus situation in the UK has been made worse by how the news media has covered it, despite numerous examples of crucial investigative reporting by individual news organisations and despite previous research demonstrating that people who follow the news know significantly more about the disease. There has been a significant decline in terms of trust since the early stages of the crisis. The percentage of people who rate news organisations as relatively trustworthy sources of information about COVID-19 has declined from a clear majority (57%) in April to less than half (45%) in August. The UK government's drop in trust has been even more pronounced, declining from 67% in April to 44% in August. It is important to note that the double-digit declines in trust in news and especially in the UK government and politicians is far greater than the slight erosion of trust in information about COVID-19 from other sources, whether highly and widely trusted sources like the NHS and scientists, doctors, and experts, or much less trusted sources like ordinary people.\*\*

\*Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Nielsen R. K. 2020a, *News Media Broadly Trusted, Views of UK Government Response to COVID-19 Highly Polarised*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

\*\*Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Nielsen, R. K. 2020b, *Trust in UK Government and News Media COVID-19 Information down, Concerns over Misinformation from Government and Politicians Up*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Media organisations and human rights activists claim that China's COVID-19

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27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

countermeasures include restricting press freedom and employing propaganda tools to shut down alternative narratives regarding the pandemic. When the Coronavirus outbreak began, short media freedom was observed with many critical articles about the Chinese government response to COVID-19 being published. However, the Chinese Government immediately started to exert censorship tools, such as forcing outlets to take down articles, imposing the state's narrative of China's success in combatting the virus, putting independent journalists in forced quarantine, and even imprisoning citizens journalists. For instance, three Beijing-based activists, who operated a webpage to collect censored Covid-19 articles and social media posts, were detained, and two citizen journalists were forcibly disappeared in Wuhan in February 2020 for reporting independently on the pandemic. Human Rights Watch and others have reacted, demanding that the Chinese Government immediately and unconditionally release five activists and citizen journalists for publicly reporting on the Covid-19 outbreak.<sup>29</sup>

Also, throughout the pandemic, information on COVID-19 has been tightly controlled on Chinese social media. A study finds that the themes of censored content include how the virus is contained in China, international diplomacy, and ongoing tensions between the U.S. and China and the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths, as well as references to personal protective equipment supplies and medical facilities.<sup>30</sup> State propaganda and controlled media acting as a mouthpiece of the government hinder disease prevention and awareness.

The media coverage of COVID-19 is not without its drawbacks, even in democratic societies that enjoy press freedom. Some media coverage of COVID-19 has been particularly harmful by labelling the health scare as the "Chinese virus pandemonium," inherently tying COVID-19 to race.<sup>31</sup> Key world leaders have also parroted such sensationalism, including US President Donald Trump who called COVID-19 the "Chinese virus."<sup>32</sup> A recent study finds that this discriminatory labelling has resulted in violent attacks on Chinese international travellers and students. The misleading and discriminatory media reports may affect ethnically Chinese residents or travellers' mental well-being during the global COVID-19 pandemic. This case points to the importance of the media's accountability and its reporting, particularly in times of crisis. More balanced and accurate coverage is needed. Future research should investigate the impact of media coverage on the health and well-being of citizens.

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29 "China: Free Covid-19 Activists, 'Citizen Journalists'", Human Rights Watch, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/27/china-free-covid-19-activists-citizen-journalists> Accessed October 1, 2020).

30 "Censored contagion in a time of information control on Chinese social media during COVID-19", available at <https://citizenlab.ca/2020/08/censored-contagion-ii-a-timeline-of-information-control-on-chinese-social-media-during-covid-19/> (Accessed October 1, 2020).

31 Yi Zheng, Edmund Goh & Jun Wen (2020) The effects of misleading media reports about COVID-19 on Chinese tourists' mental health: a perspective article, *Anatolia*, 31:2, 337-340, DOI: [10.1080/13032917.2020.1747208](https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2020.1747208)

32 Ibid.

### **Box 9: Online News Media Framing of COVID-19 Pandemic**

Utilizing content analysis, framing, and consecutive day sampling, this study focused on examining the media coverage of the initial two months of the COVID-19 Pandemic by four international news media organizations, namely: the BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera, and the People's Daily (p.1). The study finds that the initial two months' key themes were Sinophobia, crime, geopolitics, international relations, misinformation, and fake news. The use of alarmist tones was also very prevalent initially, with words such as "deadly disease," "scary," and "high fatality rate" being commonly used by the news media organizations. The international news media organizations toned down the pessimistic and othering tone of China's disease and the Chinese people in February. A more neutral tone in coverage was employed. More appeals to cautionary measures, the political leaders calling for cooperation in dealing with the pandemic, and the news media's reliance on the WHO for directions were observed. The results of this study indicate that more needs to be done to stop the repetition of themes and narratives that relate to discrimination and stigmatization of those infected or affected by disease outbreaks.

\*Mutua, S. N., & Ong'ong' a, D. O. (2020). Online News Media Framing of COVID-19 Pandemic: Probing the Initial Phases of the Disease Outbreak in International Media. *European Journal of Interactive Multimedia and Education*, 1(2), e02006. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ejimed/8402>

By analysing the media coverage and framing of the Ebola crisis in the UK in 2014-15, Pieri (2019) identifies some lessons that might be useful in other pandemic scenarios: First, the role of traditional media coverage continues to matter and needs to be scrutinised more closely, given that the emergence and reproduction of certain topics is likely to directly affect the understanding of the risk at hand, both in public debates and in policy ones.<sup>33</sup> Media framings of crisis might vary from crisis to crisis and shift even throughout the course of the same crisis. It is thus essential to scrutinise media framings and their role in the preparedness planning that precedes a future pandemic event, responses and involvement.

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33 Pieri, E., (2019). "Media Framing and the Threat of Global Pandemics: The Ebola Crisis in UK Media and Policy Response", *Sociological Research Online*, Vol. 24(1) 73– 92, p. 92.

## 4 CONTEXT AND RECENT MAJOR CRISES IN ALBANIA

Over the past year, Albania has faced a series of emergencies, initially with the devastating earthquake of November 26, 2019, followed by the outbreak of COVID-19 and the country's lockdown on March 12, 2020. This chapter briefly presents an overview of the earthquake of November 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania. Subsequently, it does a pen portrait of the civil society sector and Albania's media landscape, setting the background for the case studies.

### 4.1 EARTHQUAKE OF NOVEMBER 2019

In November 2019, Albania was hit by a high magnitude earthquake, which took a toll on physical infrastructure, economic activity, and human lives. The earthquake of November 26<sup>th</sup> was the most potent shock at such scale the country had experienced since 1979. It caused extensive damage in 11 municipalities, including the two most populous, urbanized and developed municipalities (Tirana and Durrës). The worst affected municipalities were: Shijak, Durrës, Kruja, Tirana, Kamza, Kavaja, Kurbin, and Lezha. Following the severe consequences, the Council of Minister adopted the decision 750, date 27.11.2019, on the 'State of Natural Disaster in the county of Durrës and Tirana.'<sup>34</sup> Many humanitarian and volunteer groups reacted to the situation, and the international community offered support and donations.<sup>35</sup>

#### ***Box 10: November earthquake damage***

As a result of the disaster, 202,291 people were affected in the country: 47,263 directly, and 155,029 indirectly. The earthquake caused 51 fatalities and injured at least 913 people. Moreover, up to 17,000, people were displaced due to the loss of their homes.

*PDNA Report, UNDP 2020<sup>36</sup>*

<sup>34</sup> The COVID-19 Crisis in Albania, OECD Report, available at <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Albania.pdf> (Accessed October 4, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Albania Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), (2020), available at [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/albania\\_post-disaster\\_recovery\\_a\\_v9.0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/albania_post-disaster_recovery_a_v9.0.pdf) (Accessed October 4, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the Government set up the National Reconstruction Committee. Although unofficial, this Committee was supposed to be the bridge between the privately collected funds to help those affected by the earthquake and those who needed help. Key fundraisers such as Elvis Naçi, Arbër Hajdari, Marin Mema, commercial banks, or business representatives that have provided emergency relief to help those affected by the November 26 earthquake were part of the Committee.<sup>37</sup> The aim was for all committee members to agree on a course of action to use the funds raised for the residents of the earthquake areas. Transparency for future investments, mainly in housing, was supposed to be ensured, but further investigation is needed to assess the Committee's functioning and transparency. The Government then established a State Reconstruction Commission, as a public body competent for reconstructions, and a Minister of State was appointed to oversee the reconstruction.<sup>38</sup>

The Government of Albania, the European Union, the United Nations, and the World Bank jointly prepared a Post-Disaster Needs Assessment report released on February 5, 2020 to mobilize the donor community. The report reveals that the disaster's total impact in the 11 affected municipalities amounts to over €980 million, and nearly €1.08 billion would be needed for recovery across all sectors. Most of the recorded damages are in the housing sector, followed by the productive sector (such as business and tourism, agriculture, and cultural heritage) and the education sector.<sup>39</sup>

The international donors' conference, "Together for Albania," organized by the European Union, took place on February 17<sup>th</sup> in Brussels to support the reconstruction efforts. About 100 delegations from the European Union, its Member States, and partners, including international organisations and civil society gathered in Brussels, and €1.15 billion was pledged.<sup>40</sup> This sum exceeds the total recovery bill of €1.08 billion assessed through the PDNA.<sup>41</sup>

Transparency and accountability remain critical issues for the reconstruction process. To guide the reconstruction of the housing sector, the Government of Albania, the Council of Europe Development Bank, the European Investment Bank, the European Commission, and the World Bank have endorsed a set of critical

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37 National Reconstruction Committee related news articles available at <https://rindertimi.gov.al/> (Accessed October 4, 2020).

38 State Reconstruction Commission related news articles available at <https://rindertimi.gov.al/> (Accessed October 4, 2020).

39 "EU and international donors pledge €1.15 billion for reconstruction after the earthquake in Albania" European Commission, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_249](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_249) (Accessed October 4, 2020).

40 "EU and international donors pledge €1.15 billion for reconstruction after the earthquake in Albania" European Commission, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_249](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_249) (Accessed October 4, 2020).

41 Albania Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), (2020), available at [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/albania\\_post-disaster\\_recovery\\_a\\_v9.0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/albania_post-disaster_recovery_a_v9.0.pdf) (Accessed October 4, 2020).



principles through a Statement of Intent.<sup>42</sup> These principles provide parameters for financing mechanisms to ensure precise, efficient, participatory, and transparent reconstruction, allowing accountability and coordination for the channelled funds and improved construction quality control.<sup>43</sup>

#### **Box 11: Reconstruction principles**

These principles include transparency, accountability, consistency, clarity, efficiency, participation, equity, resiliency, and sustainability.

**Transparency:** Monitoring progress indicators, timelines, and flows of all funds must be published online regularly.

**Accountability:** A clear communication strategy and a grievance redress mechanism must be integral to program design. Potential negative social and environmental impacts of demolition, new construction, and/or new settlement plans must be proactively managed.

**Participatory:** The national housing reconstruction program must be owner-driven, with sufficient participation and consultation mechanisms.

The actual implementation remains to be assessed in due course. To address concerns and issues of transparency, the United States are providing USD 5.5 million in assistance to establish the U.S. – Albanian Transparency Academy (USATA). USATA will contribute towards increasing the transparency and integrity of government, public and private institutions, and support the justice reform.<sup>44</sup>

In this context, the active role of media and CSOs is crucial in holding the government accountable by monitoring and scrutinizing progress and voicing the concerns of citizens affected by the earthquake and enabling and supporting them to be part of the consultation process. Nonetheless, so far, this natural disaster revealed a tremendous sense of solidarity and highlighted this facet of volunteering so characteristic of Albanians<sup>45</sup>. CSOs were engaged actively in the relief efforts by providing goods in a coordinated way and offering psychological support services and recreational activities for children, women, and the elderly.<sup>46</sup>

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42 "International Aid for earthquake reconstruction comes with terms of engagement," available at <https://exit.al/en/2020/02/19/international-aid-for-earthquake-reconstruction-comes-with-terms-of-engagement/> (Accessed September 4, 2020).

43 "EU and international donors pledge €1.15 billion for reconstruction after the earthquake in Albania" European Commission, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_249](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_249) (Accessed October 4, 2020).

44 As per the US Embassy's post in its Facebook Page on June 4, 2020. No other public information found till October, 2020.

45 "View on Philanthropy: Tragedy of November 26, 2019, Partners Albania Report, available at <http://partnersalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/October-December-2019.pdf> (Accessed October 4, 2020).

46 Ibid.

## 4.2 COVID-19 PANDEMIC

While still recovering from the earthquake, with many families left homeless and buildings assessed as non-functional, Albania faced another emergency at the beginning of 2020, this time the COVID-19 outbreak, which as of March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>47</sup>. The Albanian government reacted to the situation by imposing strict curfew measures and put the entire country on lockdown. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, the Council of Ministers declared the 'State of Natural Disaster' via decision 243 with a duration of 30 days.<sup>48</sup> With a majority of votes, the Parliament deferred until June 23 the 'State of Natural Disaster' (Decision 18/2020).<sup>49</sup> Earlier, a temporary committee of experts for Covid-19 infection was set up on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, reporting to the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, chaired by the Deputy Minister and 11 other members, doctors, public health officials, and heads of relevant agencies.

In early May, the country started to open slowly. The government put into action a deconfinement process to open the economy step by step, including reopening touristic activities under health and safety protocols and completely removing the curfew. In the second week of June, the number of new cases started increasing rapidly, putting the deconfinement process into question. The number of cases in Albania grew consistently with the arrival of summer tourists and slow deconfinement measures.<sup>50</sup> The government stressed that a return to lockdown is not an option now and urged citizens, businesses, and other institutions to respect physical distancing and other necessary measures.

To alleviate the situation the government installed a series of measures<sup>51</sup>:

- ▶ Welfare benefits and other support to individuals, including sick pay, cash transfers, housing relief.
- ▶ Protection for vulnerable people in households at risk of abuse.
- ▶ Financial support/guarantees for businesses.
- ▶ Home education support.

The government has provided financial support to the amount of ALL 12.9 billion.<sup>52</sup> Full details are available at 7.1 Annex 1 – Progress of Relief Packages of the Government of Albania to address issues caused by COVID-19.

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47 "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic", WHO, available at <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19#:~:text=WHO%20announced%20COVID%2D19,on%2011%20March%202020>. (Accessed on September 20, 2020).

48 Decision 243, available at <https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/VKM-nr.-243-date-24.3.2020.docx..pdf>. (Accessed on September 20, 2020).

49 Decision 18/2020 available at <https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/VKM-nr.-243-date-24.3.2020.docx.pdf>. (Accessed on September 20, 2020).

50 The COVID-19 Crisis in Albania, OECD Report, available at <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Albania.pdf>. (Accessed October 4, 2020).

51 UN Albania COVID-19 Socio Economic Recovery and Response Plan, July 10, 2020, available at [https://www.al.undp.org/content/albania/en/home/library/crisis\\_prevention\\_and\\_recovery/un-albania-covid-19-socio-economic-recovery---response-plan.html](https://www.al.undp.org/content/albania/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/un-albania-covid-19-socio-economic-recovery---response-plan.html). (Accessed October 4, 2020).

52 Ministry of Finance and Economy, 19 October 2020, available at <http://financa.gov.al/raporte-per-covid-19/>. (Accessed October 19, 2020)

### **Box 12: Government support for education**

Albania has developed a range of televised courses for primary and secondary students on national TV channels. Distance learning was also available via online platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, and organized at the school level. However, teachers primarily used WhatsApp groups for teaching. Online lectures continued until the end of May.

The school year started on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 2020, following three scenarios depending on the school. Pupils are going back to school and i) following all classes physically, ii) alternating between one week of physical classes and one week of online classes or finally, if the situation worsens, iii) they will have online classes only. Additionally, the Ministry of Health shared instructions approved by the Technical Committee of Experts, to be followed during the school year, such as the obligation to wear masks for pupils in middle school or high school and other safety measures. However, higher education institutions are to start the new academic year online.

\* The COVID-19 Crisis in Albania, OECD Report, available at <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Albania.pdf> (Accessed October 4, 2020).

In the fall of 2019, the projected GDP growth for 2020 in Albania was 3.4%, while in April 2020, the GDP growth was projected to be -5% due to multiple crises.<sup>53</sup> Hence, the coronavirus pandemic is expected to produce a notable recession of the economy, heavily relying on trade with and investments from the EU, particularly Italy. Within the domestic market, SMEs, manufacturing, and tourism sectors will be among the most affected. Unemployment may rise again, and labour market conditions may further deteriorate, given that a substantial share of the workforce lives abroad (around 30% of the population). Amidst the crisis, the European Commission decided to open accession negotiations with Albania. However, during these months, many criticisms arose concerning the respect of human rights and the rule of law's functioning. Almost all activities were transferred online, especially in the CSO sector.

### **4.3 CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA IN ALBANIA**

A robust Civil Society and free media form a crucial part of modern democratic systems. This study considers civil society organizations in terms of NPOs, think tanks, associations, and foundations operating in Albania. The second component of the study is media, including broadcast media, print, and online media, all at local and national levels.

The study focuses on Albania and the CSO and media response to the earth-

<sup>53</sup> The COVID-19 Crisis in Albania, OECD Report, available at <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Albania.pdf> (Accessed October 4, 2020).

quake of November 2019 and the current global COVID-19 pandemic. In both cases, the government has used the right to declare the 'State of Natural Disaster.' Following the UN guidelines, disaster is defined as a severe disruption of a community's or society's functioning, causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses that exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope.<sup>54</sup> Concerning the disaster cycle, *prevention and preparedness are pre-event elements, response (rescue and relief) occurs immediately after the event, and reconstruction and rehabilitation occur in the long-term recovery process after the event.*<sup>55</sup> Here the role of the CSO is relevant. In Albania, most of the CSOs were active and involved in the 'response' phase of both the earthquake and COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently, there is no official CSO registry in Albania. According to the Tirana First Court of Instance, at the end of 2019, 11,739 CSOs registered in Albania, with 313 new CSOs registered in 2019.<sup>56</sup> However, the number of CSOs registered by the tax authorities, which provides a better estimate of the number of active CSOs, is only 4,503, as officially closing down a CSO involves a lengthy and costly process.<sup>57</sup> However, the National Agency for the Protection of Civil Society offers an overview based on CSOs' self-declaration. The data are disaggregated at the county level, shown in Tab 10.

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54 UN Disaster Risk Reduction Terminology, available at <https://www.undrr.org/publication/2009-unisdr-terminology-disaster-risk-reduction> (Accessed on September 30, 2020).

55 Rajib, S., & Oikawa, Y. (2014). Education for Sustainable Development and Disaster Risk Reduction, e-book Springer, p. 9.

56 "Matrix on enabling environment for civil society development report" (2019), Partners Albania, available at <https://resourcecentre.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Matrix-on-Enabling-Environment-for-Civil-Society-Development-Report-2019.pdf> (Accessed on September 30, 2020).

57 2018 Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index, available at <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource-CSOs-2018-report-europe-eurasia.pdf> (Accessed on September 30, 2020).

**Table 10: Data on self-declared CSOs on AMSHC website**

County	Number of CSOs
Shkodra	33
Kukës	12
Lezha	9
Dibra	10
Tiranë	432
Elbasan	26
Fier	13
Korçë	38
Berat	9
Durrës	16
Vlorë	34
Gjirokastër	15
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>647</b>

Source: AMSHC<sup>58</sup>

Civil society organizations' role in crises is observed as a gap filler when the government fails to provide timely services. After the earthquake in November, CSOs in Albania adapted their activity to the post-earthquake situation and needs. They designed action plans and fundraising campaigns that aimed, on the one hand, to provide services to the target groups respectively, such as children, women, people with disabilities, youth, and, on the other, to respond to the needs of different groups resulting from the consequences of the earthquake such as psychosocial services for family members, and after-school services for children who have school breaks.<sup>59</sup>

In the current case of COVID-19 'Civil society actors in many countries, democratic and non-democratic alike, are rising to the pandemic challenge in myriad small and large ways. They fill in gaps left by governments to provide essential services, spread information about the virus, and protect marginalized groups. In some places, they partner with businesses and public authorities to support local communities strapped for economic relief.'<sup>60</sup>

58 Registered CSOs in Albania, available at <http://www.amshc.gov.al/web/off/> (accessed August 24, 2020, website last updated on October 24, 2019).

59 Albania Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), (2020), available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_post-disaster\\_recovery\\_report\\_b\\_v1.7.1.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_post-disaster_recovery_report_b_v1.7.1.pdf), p. 87. (Accessed August 24, 2020).

60 "Civil society and coronavirus dynamism despite disruption" Report available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/21/civil-society-and-coronavirus-dynamism-despite-disruption-pub-81592> (Accessed August 24, 2020).

Additionally, more politically active and integrated communities can better present their demands and extract resources from authorities.<sup>61</sup> Disasters create contexts in which power relations and arrangements can be more clearly perceived and confronted, which transforms political consciousness, shapes individual actions, and strengthens or dissolves institutional power arrangements.<sup>62</sup> The role of Civil Society is also essential for bridging and increasing citizens' trust in government measures. One of the lessons learned from SARS has been that "*civil society can play an important role in ensuring that crisis response is targeted to the most vulnerable and sustained through the recovery phase*"<sup>63</sup> The 'Post Disaster Recovery Needs Assessment recommends the same for CSOs in Albania. As the report states, "*it is central that local actors – including local governments, the private sector, NGOs, community-based organizations, and representatives of vulnerable groups – take part in the recovery process.*"<sup>64</sup>

However, according to a recent study, a mission drift of CSOs is noticed due to limited sustainability with limited impact in actual social, political, and economic transformation in Albania. The civil society sector has expanded in the number of CSOs outside Tirana over the past five years. Nonetheless, this has not resulted in the consolidation of a vibrant and genuine civil society.<sup>65</sup> There is also a large centre vs. periphery gap when it comes to the capacities of CSOs and their engagement with decision-makers. The weak connection with communities and limited representation of their concerns and interests limit the potential of CSOs to act as democratic intermediaries, conveying the needs and interests of social groups to decision making in public institutions. Also, without strategic coalition building, networking, and coordination among CSOs, their impact on political, economic, and social life is limited.<sup>66</sup>

When it comes to Albanian media, it has gone through significant transformations responding to socio-cultural, political, and economic changes in the country and the proliferation of information and communication technologies and global media trends. Currently in Albania, there is one public national broadcast TV and Radio, called RTSH. Following the data published on the National Authority of Audio-Visual Media (AMA), currently, there are five (5) national and forty-six (46) local or regional private TV Channels.<sup>67</sup>

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61 Aldrich, S.P., (2008) Site Fights: Divisive Facilities and Civil Society in Japan and the West, Purdue University, p. 6.

62 Oliver-Smith, A., (1996). "Anthropological Research on Hazards and Disasters," Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol. 25, 303 -325.

63 "Civil society has a crucial role to play in response to the coronavirus pandemic," available at <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/civil-society-has-crucial-role-play-response-coronavirus-pandemic> (Accessed October 2, 2020).

64 Albania Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), (2020), available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_post-disaster\\_recovery\\_report\\_b\\_v1.7.1.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_post-disaster_recovery_report_b_v1.7.1.pdf), p. 107, (Accessed August 24, 2020).

65 Bino, B., & Qirjazi, R., Dafa, A., (2020) "CSOs Participation in Decision Making in Albania," Institute for Democracy and Mediation, supported by Westminster Foundation for Development, available at <https://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CSO-Participation-in-Decision-Making-in-Albania.pdf> (Accessed August 24, 2020).

66 Ibid.

67 Albanian Audio-visual Media Authority, available at <http://ama.gov.al/subjekte-audiovizive/> (Accessed August 24, 2020).

It is difficult to assess the exact panorama in the country regarding print and on-line media, as no detailed data exists. The number of newspapers and magazines published all over the country is estimated at above 200. There are no official and certified data on the circulation and sales of newspapers in Albania. The Albanian Media Institute counted 22 daily publishing newspapers as of 2017. Print media are not obliged to publish their circulation and sales.<sup>68</sup>

**Table 11: Media landscape in figures**

TYPE OF MEDIA	NUMBER
<b>AUDIO-VISUAL</b>	
▶ Public	▶ 1 (RTSH)
▶ Private	▶ 51
▶ National	▶ 6
▶ Local	▶ 46
<b>Print media</b>	
▶ Public	Estimated 200 but no statistics at the disaggregated level available
▶ Private	
▶ National	
▶ Local	

Source: AMA and KAS Media Programme

Both the earthquake and COVID-19 fulfil the news criteria, while the tendency is to report bias on worst-case scenarios. On the other hand, during a crisis (be it pandemic or earthquake), authorities and scientific experts play essential roles as news sources. The experts have access to scientific knowledge while the authorities are in charge of public policy. During the earthquake, but especially the lockdown, control over the news media reported by official governmental sources were observed, accompanied by doctors and civil engineers occupying most media space dedicated to interviews.

Albania's media freedom during 2020 decreased, leaving the country ranking 84<sup>th</sup> in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, having dropped two positions lower than in 2019 (then ranked 82<sup>nd</sup>).<sup>69</sup> In the Council of Europe's Platform to promote journalists' protection and safety, Albania has recorded 15 media freedom active

68 Media outlets in Albania, available at <https://www.kas.de/en/web/balkanmedia/media-outlets> (Accessed August 24, 2020).

69 Albania Report, Media Freedom, (2020). Reporters without Borders, available at <https://rsf.org/en/albania> (Accessed August 24, 2020).

alerts with only five resolved, within five years (2015-2020).<sup>70</sup> As experts say, 'the pandemic provided an opportunity for propaganda to Prime Minister Edi Rama, who took the lead on communication with a constant presence on social media and online broadcaster ERTV. It is reported that, only in the first month of lockdown, the Prime Minister published 407 Facebook posts (13/day) and 47 hours of videos, thus creating Albania's first experience of governance via social media'<sup>71</sup>.

**Box 13: Anti-defamation package and attempts to regulate online media**

The 'online media law', otherwise known as the anti-defamation package, includes amendments of 30 articles of the current Audio-visual Media Law, particularly regarding the competencies of the Audio-visual Media Authority (AMA) and 4 articles of the law on "electronic communications" (AKEP). It was approved by in Parliament in December 2019 despite being widely opposed by the EU, CoE, OSCE, journalists, local and international media organizations and MEPs. The President returned the law to Parliament for reconsideration in January 2020 on the basis that it violates freedom of expression. At the end of January, the Government withdrew from re-voting the initiative and stated that it will await the opinion of the Venice Commission.

In its opinion published in June, the Commission states that granting extended powers to the AMA violates media freedom. They also said that online media should have a fair process from any administrative decision before the court and sanctions should be in proportion. The commission stated that "it is necessary to ensure that legal and judicial measures are effective in combating defamation and hate speech." In conclusion, the Venice Commission supported the idea of "functioning with self-regulation and respect for the online media accountability system."

The EC Annual Report on Albania also noted that the amendments fall short of international standards and principles of media freedom and raise concerns about increased censorship and self-censorship, and about possible setbacks on freedom of expression in the country (p.31). It stresses that "Albania must ensure that European standards of freedom of expression and media are upheld" (p.31). As of October 2020, the draft media law is being revised in light of the opinion of the Venice Commission and representatives from the government have publicly committed to follow up on the guidance of the Venice Commission opinion. With the support of the Council of Europe and the European Union, the Albanian Media Council has initiated the Alliance for Ethical Media in February of 2020, aiming to become a functioning mechanism for self-regulation. Media associations in Albania, CSOs working in the media field, experts and international media organisations have continuously argued for the need to consolidate self-regulation mechanisms, particularly for online media.

70 Media Freedom, Council of Europe, available at [https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/all-alerts?p\\_p\\_id=sojdashboard\\_WAR\\_coesoportlet&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&p\\_p\\_col\\_id=column-4&p\\_p\\_col\\_count=1&sojdashboard\\_WAR\\_coesoportlet\\_keywords=&sojdashboard\\_WAR\\_coesoportlet\\_selectedStringFilters=resolution.activealerts.year.2015.year.2017.-year.2019.year.2016.year.2018.year.2020&sojdashboard\\_WAR\\_coesoportlet\\_selectedCategories=11709474](https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/all-alerts?p_p_id=sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_col_id=column-4&p_p_col_count=1&sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet_keywords=&sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet_selectedStringFilters=resolution.activealerts.year.2015.year.2017.-year.2019.year.2016.year.2018.year.2020&sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet_selectedCategories=11709474) (Accessed August 24, 2020).

71 Madhi, G., (2020) "Albanian public information becomes a casualty of COVID-19", Observatore Balcanico, available at <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Albania/Albania-public-information-becomes-a-casualty-of-COVID-19-202724> (Accessed August 24, 2020).



"Albanian Alliance for Ethical Media Establishes Self-Regulation Mechanisms", available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/tirana/-/albanian-alliance-for-ethical-media-establishes-self-regulation-mechanisms> (Accessed September 30, 2020).  
 "Albania - Opinion on draft amendments to the Law n°97/2013 on the Audiovisual Media Service, adopted by the Venice Commission on 19 June by written procedure replacing the 123rd Plenary Session", Venice Commission, available at <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?opinion=980&year=all> (Accessed September 30, 2020).  
 "Albanian Government plans to enact highly disputed law attempting to control online media", SafeJournalista Network in Western Balkans, available at <https://safejournalists.net/portfolios/albanian-government-plans-to-enact-highly-disputed-law-attempting-to-control-online-media/> (Accessed September 30, 2020).  
 European Commission, Annual Report 2020, Albania, p. 14 available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf) (Accessed October 22, 2020).  
 "Media Law Potential Obstacle to Albania's EU Path, Conditions Need to Be Met before First Intergovernmental Conference", EXIT, available at <https://exit.al/en/2020/08/11/media-law-potential-obstacle-to-albanias-eu-path-conditions-need-to-be-met-before-first-intergovernmental-conference/> (Accessed September 30, 2020).

In addition to media freedom, the COVID-19 crisis intensifies the existing media challenges in Albania. Print media are currently suffering the most from the limitations. During March and April 2020, there was a total freeze of the printing press, and all newspapers and magazines were published only online. TV shows were also cancelled due to the new rules that do not allow more than two people in a room, making live or recorded productions impossible. Reporting from the field is becoming even more difficult. There is a lack of know-how and transparent procedures for journalists to report during the pandemic and protect themselves and the people they work with and meet when covering Covid-19. Advertising as well has declined, and journalists complain of receiving half their salaries or none at all. The online media seems to do better in this regard, but it is difficult to estimate because it is highly unregulated.<sup>72</sup>

A recent report by Thomson Foundation reveals that in the case of Albania, there are limited funds available for CSOs, media organizations, media platforms, informal groups, networks working in the domain of freedom of expression, media, and related areas. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, some funds were provided, particularly regarding building capacities for investigative journalism and fighting disinformation and fake news. However, there is a lack of reliable, systematic, transparent, and periodic data on financial support and donations for the media outlets, media organizations, and related organizations in Albania. The support is mostly project-oriented, and there is limited institutional and structural (core) funding, thus hindering the sustainability of interventions.

#### 4.4 CSOS AND MEDIA IN THE LAW ON CIVIL PROTECTION

The July 2019 Law on Civil Protection<sup>73</sup> aims to reduce the risk of disaster and provide civil protections to ensure the protection of humans, living things, property, and the cultural and environmental heritage, through the strengthening of the

72 Bino, B., (2020) "Media caught between two fires in time of coronavirus," available at <https://exit.al/en/2020/05/10/caught-between-two-fires-albanian-media-in-time-of-coronavirus/> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

73 Law on Civil Protection, available at <https://www.parlament.al/Files/Akte/20190724173027liqi%20nr.%2045.%20dt.%2018.7.2019.pdf> Accessed October 21, 2020).

civil protection system.

The Law has provisions that touch upon the role of both media and civil society during a civil emergency, mainly in relation to collaboration with public institutions. It acknowledges that [article 8] collaboration of institutions at both the local and central level with the private sector, associations and CSOs, and citizens, can contribute to the reduction of disaster risk. It is the duty of the National Agency for Civil Protection to enter into agreement with non-profit organizations or other subjects, domestic or foreign, pertaining to civil protection. The law recognises the right of associations and civil society organizations to be informed on disasters, conduct studies on issues pertaining to disaster risk reduction and civil protection, present results of research to institutions, both at the local and central level, and other structures on risk reduction. Finally, the law recognizes the right of associations and other CSOs to voluntarily participate in the implementation of measures and activities for disaster risk reduction, as well as coping with disasters, after the approval of the responsible authority.

Article 49 of the Law concerns public information, and point 5 provides that Public and Private radio and television subjects, national or local, are obliged to collaborate with state institutions, as well as with CSOs to use electronic communications in overcoming disasters by providing satellite and terrestrial communication tools, broadcasting news on disasters, or by stopping their normal programming and broadcasting important messages on civil protection. Furthermore, point 8 of the same article emphasises that the media and other public information organs are obliged to refer to public sources for news regarding numbers of victims, lists of names, or the predictions of the probability of other events occurring, avoiding both the broadcasting of sensitive information, and the creation of panic among the public.

The 2016 Law on Preventing and Fighting Infections and Infectious Diseases<sup>74</sup> provides that health structures are obliged, among other responsibilities, to collaborate with media organizations and non-profit organizations to promote the improvement of healthy and sanitary conditions of family and community environments as well as raising awareness for increasing the overall health knowledge of the population.

Consequently, it appears clear that the relevant institutions, both central and local that are in charge of driving crisis management processes are charged to cooperate with CSOs and media organizations. UNDP in Albania and Co-Plan are developing a local disaster risk reduction plan in the Municipality of Lezha<sup>75</sup>, which

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74 The 2016 Law on Preventing and Fighting Infections and Infectious Diseases, available at <https://www.parlament.al/Files/Integrimi/ligj-nr.-15-dt.-10.3.2016-1.pdf> (Accessed October 21, 2020).

75 Preparation of the Local Disaster Risk Reduction Plan for the Municipality of Lezha, available at [https://www.al.undp.org/content/albania/en/home/library/environment\\_energy/preparation-of-the-local-disaster-risk-reduction-plan-for-the-mu.html](https://www.al.undp.org/content/albania/en/home/library/environment_energy/preparation-of-the-local-disaster-risk-reduction-plan-for-the-mu.html) (Accessed October 30, 2020).

foresees the inclusion of representatives of civil society in the Commission for Civil Protection. The project will also serve the development of a methodological and practical model to be used for other municipalities.

## **5 - CASE STUDIES AND ANALYSIS**

This section analyses CSOs and the media's role in the recent devastating earthquake and outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania. The sections are structured in the same way, starting with civil society's role and continuing with the role of media. Then in the following section – Conclusions – some lines of comparison are drawn where possible.

### **5.1 CSOS AND MEDIA DURING DEVASTATING EARTHQUAKE OF NOVEMBER 2019**

The civil society's role in response and recovery of the earthquake crisis is elaborated below, based on the data from in-depth interviews and an exploration of secondary resources.

#### **5.1.1 CIVIL SOCIETY FILLING IN THE GAPS: RESPONSE AND RECOVERY THROUGH SOLIDARITY AND RESILIENCE**

The devastating earthquake of November 26, 2019 caused extensive damage in education and health infrastructure, housing, tourism, business, cultural heritage, social protection, and families and communities' well-being in the 11 municipalities most affected. The earthquake's impact on the country's macro-economic and human development placed the Government, both at the national and local level, in the epicentre of an aberrant crisis, one for which it had minimal preparedness. The National Civil Protection Structures at the central level within the Ministry of Defence demonstrated critical constraints in managing the crisis with a lack of equipment and other resources. Furthermore, the local Government demonstrated limited readiness to deal with the emergency, regarding resources and competences. Municipalities had no emergency plans in place nor adequate structures and resources.<sup>76</sup>

The earthquake simply made even more visible that the relevant structures responsible for social care services at the municipal level are understaffed and lack resources while Needs Assessment and Referral Units and financial mechanisms to address the needs for social care services have not been set up yet.<sup>77</sup> Services provided through the non-public sector, mainly financed by international CSOs and charities, have attempted to fill social services provision gaps. Precisely

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76 Albania Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), (2020), available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_post-disaster\\_recovery\\_report\\_b\\_v1.7.1.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_post-disaster_recovery_report_b_v1.7.1.pdf). p. 107, (Accessed August 24, 2020).

77 Ibid

these organisations and Albanian CSOs were among the first to respond to the crisis. While the public authorities were struggling to manage the disaster in its initial emergency phase, civil society actors, such as NPOs, think tanks, grass-roots organizations, informal groups, activities, volunteers, and others responded swiftly and adequately to attend to the needs of the affected families and communities by providing aid and relief.

One journalist noted in early December that *“the real heroes of this catastrophic event are those volunteers who have given their time, energy, money, love, and every ounce of humanity they possess to pick up the pieces.”*<sup>78</sup> Civil society organizations managed to provide direct emergency relief to the damaged communities, such as food and other supplies, blankets and shelters, organizing activities for children affected by the earthquake, school materials, toys, and other supplies. A representative from the civil society sector that works with Roma and Egyptian communities in Kruja and Lezha, pointed out that *“we [CSOs] showed excellent capacities for crisis management by being agile and flexible and all the while adhering to our mission and attending to the needs of the most vulnerable during the crisis”*.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, the recent Freedom House Report on Albania emphasizes that CSOs proved highly organized and efficient in engaging volunteers and offering relief to citizens affected by the devastating earthquake that hit the counties of Durrës, Tirana, and Lezhë on November 26.<sup>80</sup>

The following Box highlights some of the examples of the concrete response provided by CSOs immediately after the earthquake. This is not an exhaustive list.

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78 Taylor, A. December 2020, available at <https://exit.al/en/2019/12/02/the-heroes-of-the-albanian-earthquake-are-civil-society/> (Accessed September 28, 2020).

79 Interview with civil society representative, September 2020.

80 Vurmo, Gj., (2020). Freedom House Report: Albania, available at [https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2020#footnote23\\_j9qsf3f](https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2020#footnote23_j9qsf3f) (Accessed September 28, 2020).

#### **Box 14: Civil society responses to earthquake - Examples**

- ▶ **Alliance for the Protection of the National Theatre**  
The Alliance for the Protection of the National Theatre comes to mind as one of the leading providers of humanitarian aid over the last few days. A team of some 200 volunteers have worked around the clock, collecting, sorting, and distributing 40 tonnes of aid, donated by 9000 donors. But more than that, with the money they have received from kind donors they will start to build temporary shelters for those whose homes are too damaged for them to return to. They will place the structures near their damaged properties, allowing people to continue some semblance of normality in their lives, without having to leave the place where they live.
  
- ▶ **Help for Children Foundation and Leave No One Behind Programme**  
240 families affected by the earthquake of November 2019 were supported in the emergency response with packages of supplies. 100 families were supported in Lezha, 78 in Fushë-Krujë and 78 families in Tirana.
  
- ▶ **Psychological support**  
About 260 psychologists were able to be mobilised through the “Order of the Psychologist” and distributed to different CSOs working in the affected areas. An additional 274 social workers and psychologists (534 in total) and over 300 volunteers were engaged through the CSOs
  
- ▶ **Child-friendly spaces**  
From the first hours after the earthquake, World Vision Albania responded to the most urgent needs (in food and clothing) of the affected population in Thumanë, Durrës, Kurbin, Lezhë, and Kamëz. In coordination with the central and local government, World Vision opened the first 2 Child-Friendly Spaces within the Thumana and Durrës camps and then in Shengjin and Kamëz.

The Philanthropy Report of 2019 for Albania, based on daily monitoring of donations, campaigns, and events published in various media outlets, social media, websites of public and non-public institutions during 2019, confirms a mass mobilization that recorded an impressive amount of donations following the earthquake. Numerous campaigns have been carried out through Facebook and crowdfunding platforms such as GoFundMe, JustGiving, Go Get Funding, Giving Balkans, Fundly, and others. The Albanian Diaspora initiated over 89% of the donation campaigns.<sup>81</sup>

Foreign governments are ranked as the biggest contributor for donations so far, but the people through their various efforts, especially through crowdfunding platforms, have contributed too.<sup>82</sup> According to the data compiled by Giving Balkans, the majority of the raised funds went directly to the Albanian Government, but to a number of non-profits as well. However, there's also almost EUR 11,000,000 that

<sup>81</sup> “View on Philanthropy: Tragedy of November 26, 2019, Partners Albania Report, available at <http://partnersalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/October-December-2019.pdf> (Accessed October 4, 2020).

<sup>82</sup> “Albania Earthquake 2019: How People, Companies and Governments Have Helped So Far”, available at <https://givingbalkans.org/content/earthquake-albania-2019-donations> (Addressed October 18, 2020).

went directly to families, final beneficiaries and unknown entities.<sup>83</sup>

**Table 12: Recipients of donations**

Albanian Government	€ 1,954,783,600.00
Firdeus Foundation	€ 8,729,600.00
Unknown	€ 8,797,600.00
Fundjave Ndryshe Foundation	€ 4,717,800.00
Specific families	€ 2,128,000.00
Albania Earthquake Relief Fund	€ 1,968,200.00
Albanian Red Crosss - IFRC	€ 1,510,300.00
Albanian Roots Association	€ 1,425,800.00
World Vision Albania	€ 1,000,000.00
Caritas Albania	€ 750,000.00
joq.al	€ 158,800.00
Civil Emergency Structures Albania	€ 11,400.00

\*Source: Giving Balkans, 2020.<sup>84</sup>

### *Solidarity and support from Kosovo*

Albania received financial support from many governments, donors and international financial institutions, despite funds raised through people's donations and diaspora. The most of financial support was secured especially through the conference 'Together for Albania'. Kosovo pledged 200 000 EUR in form of grants to the Albanian Government.<sup>85</sup> Despite the official pledge, activists and citizens in Kosovo mobilized in-kind donations, such as food and clothing and delivered to most affected areas in Albania.<sup>86</sup> Another act of solidarity includes hosting Albanian families in Kosovo and offering shelter for the affected. According to media articles, *420 Albanian citizens were reported to have entered Kosovo, on 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2019.*<sup>87</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Together for Albania, Pledge Statement [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pledge\\_statement\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pledge_statement_final_0.pdf). (Accessed 21st October 2020).

<sup>86</sup> News available at <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/30295125.html>. (Accessed 21st October 2020).

<sup>87</sup> News available at <https://abcnews.al/kosova-hap-dyert-per-shqiptaret-e-prekur-nga-termeti/>. (Accessed 21st October 2020).

### *Lack of active involvement of CSOs operating in the digitalization and innovation sector*

Although the digitalization and innovation sector in Albania is developing at a steady and fast pace, there was noticed a lack of active involvement of CSOs or non-formal groups operating in the digitalization and innovation sector. The unexpectedness of the crisis, as well as the impact on the whole population, including those engaged in the sector, might have been main reasons of this lack of engagement.

Two main engagements were noticed during the period:

- ▶ Students of the Department of Geography, at the Faculty of History and Philology, at the University of Tirana, created an online map for damage self-declaration<sup>88</sup>. The landing page of the platform stated that data would be made available to the Emergency Headquarters. However, no further explanation was done on how the collected data was used.
- ▶ An online project on Humanitarian Street Maps, coordinated by Open Street Map Albania, a group of open street map contributors in the country, mapped buildings and residential land use area to “support local organizations and helpers”<sup>89</sup>, as stated on the project’s page on Humanitarian Open Street Map website. There is no information on how and if the data provided by the project was used.

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<sup>88</sup> Maptionnaire. 2020. Raporto Situatën. [online] Available at: <<https://app.maptionnaire.com/en/7503/>> [Accessed 1 November 2020].

<sup>89</sup> “HOT Tasking Manager”. 2020. HOT Tasking Manager. <https://tasks.hotosm.org/projects/7382#description>.

## Resource mobilization

On the side of the donors, there were not any 'emergency funds' allocated via calls for applications, however applications targeting earthquake related issues were accepted within existing programme calls. In addition, re-orientation of NPO's attention and initiatives towards the impact of the earthquake and development of crisis management measures and protocols, awareness raising campaigns and risk reduction responses were encouraged. Due to lack of financial and human resources, the post-recovery phase remained challenge for CSOs in Albania.

During the crisis management caused by the earthquake of November 2019, CSOs mobilized resources to support and fill the gap. Responses to the crises can be categorized based on the type of CSO and their support. The patterns of action with regard to earthquake include a fast response and reaction to support in the most affected areas. In terms of financial support, local and national CSOs managed to use their resources, networks and citizens solidarity to mobilize volunteers but also fundraising. The following figure represents a classification of prominent examples of CSOs and their contribution to crisis response.

**Figure 1: Type of CSOs' response in the earthquake crisis**

Support given from local and grassroots organizations	Support from humanitarian organizations	Support from national and international organizations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Mobilization of volunteers inside camps</li><li>•Information dissemination on needs from field</li><li>•Food and clothing collection and distribution (the biggest actor in collection and distribution from citizens donations, has been the Alliance for Theatre)</li><li>•Psychological support to most affected, especially children.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Fundraising through different channels (ex. Fundjave Ndryshe, Firdeus Foundation)</li><li>•Charity (ex. Fundjave Ndryshe, Firdeus Foundation)</li><li>•Food and clothing</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Liasing with information and dissemination</li><li>•Mobilization of staff and volunteers to donate</li><li>•Reconstruction aid programmes (ex. World Vision ALbania-Branch in Durrës)</li><li>•Support to children (Terre des Hommes, World Vision, Save the Children)</li></ul>

CSOs themselves faced challenges in providing aid, relief, and then recovery support to communities. Grassroots organisations, in particular, lack financial and human resources. CSOs generally lack competences and knowledge on how to manage a crisis. As one representative from civil society argued, *"we did not know how to provide help, we had no information on the impact of the earthquake. There were no safety measures, no record-keeping"*. However, it was



*“our flexibility, solidarity, and resilience that prevailed.”*<sup>90</sup> In the future, it is crucial to support CSOs on crisis response and management, how to coordinate with other stakeholders and how to contribute to disaster risk reduction. Moreover, it is essential to *“develop a database that provides GIS information regarding affected people in disasters and to have a fund for field volunteers and the creation of groups of volunteers for civil emergencies.”*<sup>91</sup> Volunteer management and coordination are paramount in aid and relief as well as recovery during disasters and local government must play a key role in this coordination. In this light, another civil society actor stressed the need to *“prepare local authorities for disaster risk reduction and crisis management and seriously consider having emergency plans and budget to spare”*.<sup>92</sup>

#### **Box 15: Coordination and the case of Reconstruction Committee**

##### **National Reconstruction Committee**

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2019, the Prime Minister of Albania introduced a National Committee on Reconstruction as a non-official body that would serve as a bridge to direct privately collected funds towards those affected by the earthquake. At the first meeting of the Committee (info retrieved from different news outlets) participated several CSOs/Foundation leaders and philanthropists, such as Arber Hajdari from Fundjave Ndryshe, Elvis Naci from Firdeus Foundation, or Marin Mema, a journalist. Other non-government participants in the meeting included engineers, the business community, chambers of commerce, construction associations, and others. CSO representatives called for high transparency during the reconstruction process.

During the meeting, the PM called for government funds and privately raised funds to serve the reconstruction process. However, influential organizations, such as Fundjave Ndryshe, or individuals that conducted substantial fundraising, e.g., Marin Mema, continued with private reconstruction efforts.

During the 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Committee, the PM proposed that Ilir Hoxholli of the Firdeus Foundation be a representative of charity organizations, as the Secretary of the Committee, to ensure representation and direct participation in the coordination process, and transparency.

A fourth meeting of the Committee was held in February of 2020, with the active participation of civil society organizations directly involved with fundraising and building/reconstruction.

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90 Interview with civil society representative, September 2020.

91 Interview with civil society representative, September 2020.

92 Interview with civil society representative, September 2020.

## State Commission for Reconstruction

The State Commission for Reconstruction is a state authority responsible for coping with the consequences of natural and other disasters. It was convened in December of 2019. Decision no. 878, dated 24.12.2019, "On the composition, organization, activity, and rules of functioning of the State Commission for Reconstruction," chapter II, point 2 states: "In the meetings of the State Commission for Reconstruction, and at the request of the chairman, participants without voting rights include: representatives of different public bodies, the business community, experts/professionals on civil protection and disaster risk reduction, as well as representatives of civil society, or NPO leaders, whose object of activity is civil protection and humanitarian aid."

It would appear that the National Reconstruction Committee was institutionalized as the State Commission for Reconstruction. How the SCR included CSOs would need further investigation. In the same way, further investigation is needed regarding the interaction of the SCR with the media.

In the recovery phase, the Government and civil society coordinated their efforts in providing psychological support services and recreational activities for children, women, and the elderly at various accommodation centres. CSO adapted their activities to the post-earthquake situation and needs, while providing specific services to targeted groups: children, women, people with disabilities, and youth. Those activities included psychosocial services, after-school activities for children, and in-kind donations.<sup>93</sup> The engaged teams reported weekly and coordinated with the MOHSP, discussing needs, and planning the interventions and work areas to ensure better coverage with services and avoid service overlaps. Special attention was given to displaced persons, persons with chronic diseases, children, and people with disabilities.<sup>94</sup> Mobilized personnel did not receive overtime compensation, however. Monitoring of expenditures and transparency from the side of CSOs is limited and only sporadic.

The latest initiative launched by the US Embassy in Tirana foresees the creation of the Albanian American Transparency Academy (USATA), with a dedicated fund of 5.5 million USD. The academy will support the Government of Albania in increasing transparency with regard to earthquake reconstruction funds as well.<sup>95</sup>

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93 Albania Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), (2020), available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_post-disaster\\_recovery\\_report\\_b\\_v1.7.1.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_post-disaster_recovery_report_b_v1.7.1.pdf), p. 107, (Accessed August 24, 2020).

94 Albania Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), (2020), available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_post-disaster\\_recovery\\_report\\_b\\_v1.7.1.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_post-disaster_recovery_report_b_v1.7.1.pdf), p. 107, (Accessed August 24, 2020).

95 News available at <https://euronews.al/al/aktualitet/2020/06/04/shba-5-5-milione-dollare-shqiperise-per-ngritjen-e-akademie-se-transparences>, (Accessed 21st October, 2020).

***Box 16: Example of CSO's monitoring of earthquake crisis management***

In Durres, the Civil Society Development Center (CSDC), one of the most active local actors, with the support of the ReLoad program of the UNDP is working on building an online platform of communication between citizens and municipalities. One of the main components is the citizens' monitoring of reconstruction expenses by the municipality.

The EC Annual Report on Albania (2020) highlights the role of civil society during the post-earthquake emergency in November 2019 that provided rapid first response, reaching out to most vulnerable and remote citizens, supporting and complementing state interventions.<sup>96</sup> However the report also notices the lack of progress regarding the civil society enabling environment in Albania and particularly on the scope and follow up mechanisms of the law on public consultations to ensure transparency and public participation in decision-making. CSOs will continue to face such challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

International organizations recommend further enhancing and promoting partnerships and joint efforts between authorities at the municipal and central levels, the private sector, financial service providers, workers and employer organizations, civil society organizations, and international agencies. Such cross-sectoral cooperation would prove highly indispensable also during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>96</sup> European Commission, Annual Report 2020, Albania, p. 14 available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf) (Accessed October 22, 2020), p. 14.

**Table 13: Key features of civil society role in the earthquake crisis**

Achievements	Challenges
<p>1. CSOs, both at local and national levels, mobilized their resources to provide emergency support.</p>	<p>1. Based on respondents' perceptions, the sector's response was generally helpful in terms of the earthquake. However, the lack of coordination was the main downfall. There have been several cases demonstrating the lack of coordination and delivery of donations when only one destination was served, while other affected areas were left unserved.</p>
<p>2. CSOs provided direct support from fundraising among members and donations. They served as liaison points of information between affected households and those providing food and other necessities.</p>	<p>2. Dealing with personal fear amidst field work was a challenge.</p>
<p>3. The internal work and usual working practices of CSOs generally were not affected directly, and the response from the sector was immediate.</p>	<p>3. The CSOs' contacts and network were the communication channel for coordination with almost none of the local municipalities' updates. Local NPOs state that 'empty municipal offices' were the main problem.</p>
<p>4. Most organizations managed to raise donations in terms of food and clothing, with national ones mainly working in the humanitarian field, also providing financial aid for reconstruction.</p>	<p>4. Time management and swift response on the collection and delivery of donations.</p>
<p>5. Most importantly, psychological help through volunteers, especially in camps, was relevant for those affected citizens.</p>	<p>5. Identification of cases in need of support and coordination with other actors to provide with the necessary assistance / service.</p>

### 5.1.2 MEDIA'S ROLE IN THE EARTHQUAKE CRISIS

The earthquake of November 26, 2020, and the crisis that followed triggered a media-hype with intensive news waves covering the event and its impact. The content analysis shows that the number of articles around the earthquake is large and continued to dominate the headlines for the following six weeks. In the initial phase, the earthquake became a separate and principal news story for most me-

dia outlets. By the end of December 2020, news related to the earthquake was then nested within existing categories, depending on the topic covered: social, economic, or political news. The earthquake's media coverage is linked to the successive stages of the disaster: the earthquake strike and rescue; aid and relief; recovery and impact. The most prominent frames used to structure the news were: human interest and safety, damages and consequences, attribution of responsibility, solidarity and mobilisation, reconstruction and international support.

The analysis shows that the media did a commendable job right after the earthquake struck with an overall mobilization of media immediately after the major shock in the early morning of November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The media was engaged in reporting correct information from the most affected places, and transmission, wherever possible, of personal stories and the tragic consequences of the earthquake. This human-interest framing is coupled with the narrative or theme of tragedy and fatalities. On the positive side, the media capitalised on this momentum, which assisted in agenda setting. Usually, the public relations and communication staff of government institutions and politicians influence the agenda-setting, but in the first phase of the earthquake disaster, the media took control of the situation. Importantly, a critical approach and analysis were present in the reporting from these media.

Table 14: Media coverage of earthquake

Disaster stage	Frame	Themes / Narratives	Participation of citizens in media content	Type of coverage
Earthquake strike and rescue missions (Week 1)	Human interest and safety Damages and consequences	Tragedy and personal stories of victims and families Fatalities due to an unprecedented natural disaster Devastating damages and severe economic consequences; calls for aid and assistance Provision of helpful information on affected areas Giving voice to experts and engineers to provide reassuring messages to citizens for safety	Direct presence through quotations and testimonials Live input Citizens created content	Main news Headlines
Aid and relief (Week 1 - 4)	Human interest and safety Attribution of responsibility Solidarity and Mobilisation	Tragedy and personal stories of victims and families Devastating damages and severe economic consequences; calls for aid and assistance Pointing fingers: Responsibility for the disasters Experts' assessment of causes and consequences of the disaster Solidarity, donations and provision of assistance and aid	Direct presence through statements and testimonials Live input Citizen-created content	Main news Headlines
Recovery and impact (After week 4)	Attribution of responsibility Damages and consequences Reconstruction and international support	Critical assessment of the situation: causes, impact and consequences Government relief measures Reconstruction plans Mobilisation of international support Solidarity and gratefulness	Limited presence Governmental officials and politicians resume central stage Experts remain present	Fewer Headlines Social News Economic News Political News

Another positive trend that continued even during the recovery and impact phase was the prominence of experts and engineers in the media. The media provided ample space for them to explain the phenomenon, reassure citizens, and counter misinformation and panic-spreading content. An essential narrative was the analysis of the causes of the magnitude of damages, which was carried out publicly by experts and not only by opinion-makers and media commentators. It is worth mentioning that initially, the media played an essential role in reporting abusive cases, and most importantly, it served as a platform to report about community needs. The provision of helpful information and calls for aid and assistance were also observed.

The main concern regarding the role of media in the aftermath of the earthquake of November 2019 is related to the investigation of consequences or responsible parties. The initial assessment and news stories attributed responsibility for the disaster, but there were no systematic follow-ups on this theme. The media also lacked a follow-up on the reconstruction process's progress, what was not done, or what was poorly done by the government. In this regard, the primary news covered the visits of Prime Minister Rama to a handful of reconstructed houses or families that were provided with provisional housing. What is more, there was no media initiative to monitor the reconstruction process, given the expensive reconstruction projects funded both by taxpayers and donors' money. As one of the interviewees pointed out: *"there is no more digging on what is currently happening with the donations, funds from donors, and governmental reconstruction efforts."*<sup>97</sup>

Another primary concern is related to the lack of access to information. One interviewee stressed that *"if institutions were more open to say things, the work of the media would be more qualitative."*<sup>98</sup> Although experts were given an important role, the focus still remained on opinion makers and media commentators. After the relief phase, where reporters were the primary providers of information, public relations offices took the central role and they shifted the attention towards extraordinary and spectacular items, such as accommodation in 5-star hotels.<sup>99</sup> The misuse of headlines to attract attention was particularly relevant during the earthquake in the online media. The media faced challenges in fulfilling its mission during the earthquake, which are primarily linked to issues of safety and well-being of journalists and media professionals. Ethical issues still remain in the media coverage of the disaster, the tragedy and its consequences. Journalists and media professionals need further support and training on how to deal with crises, how to report crises and manage content production in times of crisis, and how to counter fake news and disinformation.

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97 Interview with a media representative, September 2020.

98 Interview with a media representative, September 2020.

99 Interview with a media representative, September 2020.

During the November 2019 earthquake, fake news<sup>100</sup> bloomed and began looming in the Albanian public opinion. A photograph of a 7.2-magnitude earthquake expected in the Adriatic Sea on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2019 first appeared on little-known and new online portals and continued to spread through social media.<sup>101</sup> Fake news, using the manipulation of images, as is the case of a Facebook announcement by the Minister of Education at the time, Besa Shahini, contributed to the deception of the Albanian public.<sup>102</sup> Private businesses were targets of fake news as well. A photograph published by an online portal claimed that a central hotel was severely damaged by the earthquake collected a large following. A claim retorted by the Hotel administration also claimed that it would undertake necessary legal steps to settle this matter.<sup>103</sup> WhatsApp has turned out to be another platform through which fake news spreads. In the form of audio messages recorded on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, a person warns someone in Durres that according to military people/persons, those who live in the upper stories of buildings should evacuate as another earthquake during the night might cause severe damage.<sup>104</sup> An investigation showed that state police demanded the prosecution of a dozen citizens over - most of them journalists and media executives - on charges of spreading panic after the earthquake.<sup>105</sup>

The EC Annual Report on Albania (2020) echoes the concerns raised by organisations dealing with freedom of expression about the government's actions towards media following the 26<sup>th</sup> of November earthquake. The report highlights the shutdown of online portals and the arrest of individuals on the grounds of generating and spreading public panic in the emergency situation of the post-earthquake period. The regulatory Authority for Electronic and Postal Communications (AKEP) closed down some web portals broadly perceived as critical to the government. A 25-year-old was arrested for four days by the counter-terrorism police directorate after sharing an article from a foreign media source about a possible explosion of natural gas depots during earthquake aftershocks and requesting authorities for an urgent assessment.<sup>106</sup>

The following table presents the role played by social media during the crisis of the earthquake in Albania, based on the model offered in the *Conceptual framework: CSOs and media in time of crises*.

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100 Fake news regarding earthquake was particularly alarming after the earthquake of September 21, 2020, when the online portal syri.net reported that another earthquake would hit Albania and called out for persons to leave their home. This news was also reported by Shekulli newspaper. 12 media staff of both outlets were under investigation with the charge of spreading panic.

101 "Again fake news about the earthquake", available at <https://www.newsbomb.al/serish-fake-news-kriminal-per-termetin-kujdes-mos-i-besoni-187456> (Accessed September 20, 2020).

102 "Besa Shahini post", available at <https://www.facebook.com/shahinibesa/photos/a.1991075787816191/2431034423820323/?type=3> (Accessed September 20, 2020).

103 News article available at <https://dosja.al/reagon-maritim-plaza-tirana-godina-ska-asnje-dentim-po-ndermarrim-hapaligjore-per-fake-news/> (Accessed September 20, 2020).

104 News article available at <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/nje-audio-ne-italisht-shperthen-panikun-ne-durres-por-eshte-false> (Accessed September 20, 2020).

105 Emiri, G., available at <https://www.reporter.al/shperdarje-paniku-policia-perndoqi-gazetaret-pas-termetit-dhe-covid-19/> (Accessed September 26, 2020).

106 European Commission, Annual Report 2020, Albania, p. 14 available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf) (Accessed October 22, 2020), p.32.



**Table 15: Role of social media in the crisis management of earthquake**

Disaster stage	Stage of disaster management	Role of social media	Implications
Pre-disaster	Mitigation	<p>Lack of noticeable risk reduction activities and preventive measures in the social media landscape.</p> <p>Even though other earthquakes struck Albania earlier in 2019, there was no noticeable community resilience building up in the social media before the earthquake of November 26, 2020. Social media served to enable members of a community to establish communication networks during and after the earthquake.</p>	Limited efforts for disaster risk reduction
Pre-disaster	Preparedness	<p>There were no specific communication crisis strategies before November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and no particular attention paid to scientific information and evidence concerning the earthquakes in Albania, despite the country being considered to have a high seismic activity.</p> <p>Earthquakes are an unpredictable natural phenomenon, but there is still room for preparedness, particularly by public authorities. Social media has not been used before the November's earthquake by the government and relevant authorities to communicate to the public how to prepare, engage citizens in preparedness activities, and share preparedness information regarding earthquakes. For instance, guidelines for teachers on how to react in the case of an earthquake should be in place.</p>	Limited efforts for disaster risk reduction. No early warning

Disaster stage	Stage of disaster management	Role of social media	Implications
Disaster	Response	<p>Social media was vital in the delivery of news coverage of the disastrous earthquake. Posts, reposting, and resharing of analysis, comments, warnings, and other content were massive. Panic-inducing comments, posts, and false content were also present, although not dominant.</p> <p>Social media also served to counteract the information gap provided by authorities using alternative information sources. However, this proved to have its drawbacks in terms of the quality and reliability of the information.</p> <p>Social media was also used to call for help, raise awareness, raise funds, gather volunteers, organise, and coordinate assistance and support.</p> <p>Social media was also used to denounce abuse and mismanagement, even when professional journalists did cover it.</p> <p>Social media served the public authorities such as the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Ministry of Finances and Economy to amplify the messages and official information, thus acting faster than mainstream media.</p>	<p>Information Dissemination</p> <p>Panic spreading and falsehood were present</p> <p>Overlapping information shared between citizens, organisations, and journalists' reports of an earthquake on social media certainly increased the understanding of the phenomenon and provided a better magnitude of the disaster impact.</p>
Post-disaster	Recovery	<p>In this phase, social media, with Facebook dominating, was widely utilised to raise donations, encourage volunteerism, and develop awareness campaigns. Social media also served to amplify messages about reconnecting families and communities and restoring community life and business activities.</p>	<p>Information Dissemination</p>

The following table presents the key features of the role of the media in the crisis following the devastating earthquake of November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

**Table 16: Key features of media role -The devastating earthquake of November 26, 2019**

Achievements	Challenges
1. Information, mobilisation, and human-interest	1. Limited media follow up and investigation of earthquake's consequences or responsible parties
2. The 'power' of experts, engineers, and scientists	2. Media access to public information was limited.
3. Watchdog role	3. Fake news and disinformation

## 5.2 CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 outbreak found Albania still dealing with the aftermath of the devastating November earthquake. Many municipalities were still coping with the consequences of the earthquake, the reconstruction was still in its initial phase, and Albania's economy had not yet recovered from the impact of the earthquake. Therefore, COVID-19 posed not only an unprecedented public health crisis in Albania but strained the capabilities and resources of authorities to deal with this global pandemic emergency. COVID-19 has affected all aspects of life, from education to economics and politics. It has ravaged countries and has had enormous, far-reaching global implications. This section zooms into the role of civil society and media during the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania, covering primarily the period of the state of emergency from March to June 2020.

### 5.2.1 CIVIL SOCIETY AND COVID-19

Civil society actors in Albania are facing many uncertainties and challenges during the COVID-19 crisis. Initially, CSOs had to adapt their operations and working practices to the lockdown and remote working. At the same time, civil society actors had to respond to the emergency and still meet their objectives, project timelines, and other security issues for their staff. Also, CSOs struggle with funding and limited support from donors and the state. Many CSOs were providing services, and some of them continued to do so even during the emergency crisis. Some CSOs were still providing services (educational and recreational activities, social and psychological support, assistance with application for housing grants

and other related procedures) in the post-recovery situation of the earthquake, thus finding themselves in a twofold crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis posed severe challenges to CSOs in terms of available funding, the continuation of operations, the implementation of their projects, and their working practices and human resource management. Following the interviews and focus group, the main trait observed is the fact that the first action CSOs took were related to addressing their own internal challenges. The main one highlighted by many has been a '*lack of information and lack of capacities to adapt to online work*'<sup>107</sup> The financial stretch was the most significant challenge as the state of emergency affected the organizations' sustainability. They were faced with financial difficulties to cover salaries and regular administrative costs, putting in danger the continuity of the organizations' work and existence. However, CSOs managed to obtain more flexibility from donors, and some received institutional support.<sup>108</sup>

Also, CSOs moved their work online by using different platforms to communicate and cooperate with their partners, target groups/beneficiaries, and keep working on their regular projects' activities and objectives. Third, CSOs found innovative and alternative ways of providing services and support to communities in need and their target groups despite the lockdown and other restrictive measures. For example, the network "Better Together"<sup>109</sup> provided an online platform for donations, mobilizing help, providing information, and giving access to support and assistance. The platform is created through the collaboration of several civil society organizations, and change actors. Many of them were also involved in providing relief during the 2019 earthquake. The virtual platform, run through Facebook, operated as a marketplace where demand for support and supply for support would match, with the main aim of bridging the gap between the two<sup>110</sup>. This form of self-organization constitutes a qualitative leap compared to the scattered support noticed during the earthquake aftermath. National CSOs with more experience have taken initiatives to research and map the impact, especially of COVID-19 on the CSOs sector, such as Partners Albania for Change and Development.

In contrast to the situation during the earthquake, during the pandemic CSOs have not been included in the nationally-coordinated crisis responses, and even less in the consultations or decision-making processes and crisis bodies. During focus groups and validation workshops, this claim was confirmed as one partic-

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107 Interviews with CSO representatives

108 "Support NPO Sector Adaptability to Covid-19 Emergency", available at [http://partnersalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Support\\_NPO\\_Sector\\_Adaptability\\_to\\_Covid-19\\_Emergency\\_Assessment\\_Report.pdf](http://partnersalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Support_NPO_Sector_Adaptability_to_Covid-19_Emergency_Assessment_Report.pdf) (Accessed October 1, 2020).

109 "Më mire së bashku" [Better Together], is an independent platform created by a group of professionals and representatives of civil society organizations to provide support and facilitate communication during the COVID-19 period. It is set up on the social media, available here <https://www.facebook.com/Me-Mire-Se-Bashku-103455144629539> (Accessed October 17, 2020).

110 "Better Together virtual platform against social impact of COVID-19", available at <https://www.reporter.al/me-mire-se-bashku-platforma-virtuale-kunder-pasojave-sociale-te-covid-19/> (Accessed October 18, 2020).

ipant stated that *'Consultations were non-existent, especially regarding CSOs and groups working with people with disabilities. Disability has not been taken into consideration for consultations during pandemics.'*<sup>111</sup> Notwithstanding, CSOs have contributed significantly to filling the gaps and responding to citizens' increased needs, especially to the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. Even without acknowledgment or economic support measures by governments, CSOs have proved they can be a relevant and irreplaceable partner to the state in such unprecedented times.<sup>112</sup>

One of the vulnerabilities that COVID-19 emphasized globally has been the threat of domestic violence and, especially violence against women. *The UN has described the worldwide increase in domestic abuse as a "shadow pandemic" alongside Covid-19, with an estimate of a 20% increase in cases.*<sup>113</sup> Such trend has also been present in Albania. Based on this trend, CSOs worked closely with this target group and were also supported by UN Women. According to the latest report from EAW project of UN Women, *'Twelve CSOs that provide direct services to women survivors of DV Durres and Elbasan were supported with 1100 sets of protective equipment. This is essential for the CSO service providers to continue offering services to women in need, including accommodation in shelters respecting some of the main requirements of the MHSP's Protocol on the management and functioning of shelters during the COVID-19 pandemic.'*<sup>114</sup> Reports by CSOs and observers indicate that vulnerable groups have been particularly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, especially in remote areas.<sup>115</sup> As in the earthquake crisis, during the pandemic many CSOs have shifted their attention towards service provision and humanitarian aid for the most vulnerable communities.<sup>116</sup> However, as one participant in the validation workshop pointed out *"CSOs cannot replace the state and cannot act as a parallel government"*.<sup>117</sup>

Based on the responses of interviewed actors and focus groups, with regard to relief support offered by CSOs during lock down months, they can be classified as follows.

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111 Participant input during validation workshop, October 2020.

112 "The State of CSOs, their Involvement in the Crisis Response& State and Donor Support", available at <http://www.balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/78-6-Balkan-Civil-Society-in-the-COVID-19-Crisis-Part-II.pdf> (Accessed October 1, 2020).

113 "Coronavirus: Domestic violence 'increases globally during lockdown'", available at BBC News <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-53014211> (Accessed October 30, 2020).

114 "Response to COVID-19 in Albania", available at <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20albania/attachments/publications/2020/06/un%20p%20e%20vawia%20response%20to%20covid-19.pdf?1a=en&vs=1654> (Accessed October 30, 2020).

115 European Commission, Annual Report 2020, Albania, p. 14 available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf) (Accessed October 22, 2020). p.35.

116 Participant in the validation workshop, October 2020.

117 Ibid.

**Figure 2: CSOs' responses during COVID-19**

Support given from local and grassroots organizations	Support from humanitarian organizations	Support from national and international organizations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness raising</li> <li>• Information dissemination</li> <li>• Mask delivery to community (ex. Youth in Charge Lezha)</li> <li>• Psychological support online (Better Together)</li> <li>• Online meetings with community, mainly within the scope of ongoing donor funded projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Charity (ex. Fundjave Ndryshe, Firdesu Foundation)</li> <li>• Funds and inkind donations to marginalized groups. (World Vision has also offered support with agricultural tools to families in rural areas)</li> <li>• Support online and in field (World Vision Albania)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness raising</li> <li>• Research and studies (Partners Albania, FES)</li> <li>• Online networking events</li> <li>• Dissemination of information of needs from communities</li> <li>• QUick assesement and analysis (IDM)</li> </ul>

Building on this last point, the third trait was also the turning point when a CSO engaged in online activism with ongoing webinars, online campaigns in social media and online networking events. This increased the level of online activism, with CSOs trying to reach their target groups and beneficiaries through online means of communication. One example of a CSO based in Lezha states that *“With regard to COVID-19, we adapted our project initiatives online. In order to give positive messages to young people, we launched the platform ‘How to’, consisting of a series of online inspirational stories of successful young people”*.<sup>118</sup> Experienced humanitarian organizations, such as World Vision Albania also introduced direct aid programmes. *“We provided support for families with food packages or cash assistance, whereas cash was mainly applied for rural areas. We also focused on rural households’ economic empowerment through the provision of agricultural tools”*.<sup>119</sup>

Of particular value were the services provided by NPOs working in the health sector, which continued to provide services to sick persons with chronic illnesses or in palliative care who could not otherwise receive such service. Representative from the Palliative Care Centre in Korça pointed out the challenging conditions in which their medical and other staff worked during the COVID-19 crisis: *“We continued to provide services to patients with cancer in terminal phases in their home by taking all the necessary protective measures against COVID-19. In addition to that we noticed an increase in demand for our health services to various groups, given that hospitals were dealing only with emergencies and in some cases, people were scared to go to hospitals”*.<sup>120</sup> Another representative pointed out the online counselling for chronic disease patients: *“We have engaged fam-*

118 Interview with CSO representative, September 2020.

119 Interview with CSO representative, September 2020.

120 Participant in the focus group with civil society, October 2020.

ily doctors and organized small group Zoom calls with chronic disease patients and providing them with advice on COVID-19, their medication and measures to take".<sup>121</sup> These NPOs harnessed the digital tools to initiate social innovative projects and strengthen their ties with their communities and target groups.

#### **Box 17: Online support platforms during COVID-19**

**Better Together** <https://www.facebook.com/Me-Mire-Se-Bash-ku-103455144629539/>

**ALO 116 111 National Child Helpline** <https://www.alo116.al/>

**You are not alone** <http://www.nukjevetem.al>

**Order of Psychologists of Albania** <https://www.urdhriipsikologut.al/covid-19/>

**Online Legal Service** <https://juristonline.al/rreth-nismes-2/>, with the support of OSFA

Many CSOs have continued their activities in the scope of the response to the COVID-19 crisis by providing services and direct products to the target groups they serve, including young people, women, individuals with special needs, the Roma community, people living in rural areas, social enterprises, local communities, and others. In the COVID-19 Action Plan for Albania for the prevention, preparation, and response against COVID-19, one of the measures planned is the "preparation of CSOs to help in the process of social services provided for the population," and CSOs are included as one of the actors responsible for the implementation of this measure, but no support is foreseen for them.<sup>122</sup>

Regarding decision-making on the COVID-19 response, the Albanian government took a series of steps to prepare for the crises.<sup>123</sup> However, initially measures were centralized and introduced by the Prime Minister through his social media account and ERTV channel. The government issued normative acts to amend legislation to enforce COVID-19 restriction measures by circumventing the decision-making process through the Parliament and restricting court proceedings to only urgent cases.<sup>124</sup> CSOs were not included in any consultations or crisis bodies.

CSOs are not included in the economic support measures undertaken by the government. In terms of public funding, the Agency for Civil Society Support, since 17.03.2020, has suspended the application deadline of the Open Calls for

121 Focus group participants, NPO in Durrës.

122 "COVID-19 Action Plan for Albania", Ministry of Health and Social Protection, available at [https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Covid\\_AL-spreads.pdf](https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Covid_AL-spreads.pdf) (Accessed October 12, 2020).

"The State of CSOs, their Involvement in the Crisis Response & State and Donor Support", available at <http://www.balkanicsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/78-6-Balkan-Civil-Society-in-the-COVID-19-Crisis-Part-II.pdf> (Accessed October 1, 2020).

123 Normative acts, available here <https://coronavirus.al/akte-ligjore/> (Accessed October 1, 2020).

124 Qirjazi, R., & Dafa, A., (2020). "COVID-19 in Albania: democratic governance put to the test", available at <https://idmalbania.org/tales-of-region-albania/> (Accessed October 17, 2020)

Proposals until a second notification. In addition, there is no concrete action to support CSOs in this crisis so far. While there has been flexibility from most donors on the rescheduling of activities, changes on the methodology, or shifting in planned activities, institutional support (personnel salaries and administrative costs) during lockdown remained an unaddressed issue by donors.<sup>125</sup>

The main source of financing is ongoing donor-funded projects or, in the case of foundations, their charity funds. Some funding to address COVID-19 challenges was provided later on. There were some direct responses from donors. For example, within the project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, implemented by a consortium of three organizations (the Open Society Foundation for Albania, Co-PLAN, and Partners Albania), LevizAlbania launched a call for a rapid reaction on how to respond to the situation created by COVID-19.

**Box 18: Example of dedicated funding to address COVID-19 crisis**

'Fast Reaction-Reagim i Shpejte'-Call for Applications, was a dedicated call to COVID19, addressing all CSOs with regard to local democracy initiatives, in times of pandemic. [https://www.levizalbania.al/images/LEVIZALBANIA\\_UDH%C3%8BZUES\\_I\\_THIRRJES\\_REAGIMI\\_I\\_SHPEJTE\\_COVID19.pdf](https://www.levizalbania.al/images/LEVIZALBANIA_UDH%C3%8BZUES_I_THIRRJES_REAGIMI_I_SHPEJTE_COVID19.pdf)

Leviz Albania has incorporated the topic of COVID19 and local democracy, in its 'Strategic Grants' schema ([http://www.levizalbania.al/media/files/2020/09/09/Udh%C3%A-Bzuesi\\_i\\_Thirrjes\\_p%C3%ABr\\_Aplikime\\_-\\_Grante\\_Strategjike.pdf](http://www.levizalbania.al/media/files/2020/09/09/Udh%C3%A-Bzuesi_i_Thirrjes_p%C3%ABr_Aplikime_-_Grante_Strategjike.pdf))

In terms of civic freedoms during the pandemic, it is noticed that civic activism continues with CSOs and other societal actors mobilizing both online and offline. However, violations of protest rights have been documented, and the overly broad and strict measures of the Government are limiting human rights in Albania and in the region.<sup>126</sup> Also, in the areas affected by the earthquake as well, online activism and information mediation has been important. *"We have shared information with local business actors, or active mediators with the community in Durres. One emerging issue during COVID-19 is the fact that local authorities almost froze services which are not related to earthquake reconstruction. Almost all local administration capacities are focused on revising earthquake cases and files"*,<sup>127</sup> - stated one of the interviews from the local community of Durres.

In this light, the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the fragility of Albanian democratic

<sup>125</sup> 'The State of CSOs, their Involvement in the Crisis Response & State and Donor Support', available at <http://www.balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/78-6-Balkan-Civil-Society-in-the-COVID-19-Crisis-Part-II.pdf> (Accessed October 1, 2020).

<sup>126</sup> 'Civic freedoms and COVID-19 pandemic', available at <https://monitor.civics.org/COVID-19Oct2020/> (Accessed October 1, 2020).

<sup>127</sup> Interview with CSO representative, September 2020.



processes and the system of checks and balances remains in a precarious situation. Even before the state of emergency was in place, limiting freedoms, the deadlocked political processes, a weakened legislature and the absence of the Constitutional and High Courts, has resulted in a largely unchecked Executive branch.<sup>128</sup> The Freedom House Report 2020 for Albania notes that “National Democratic Governance rating declined in Albania from 3.50 to 3.25 due a series of crises affecting Albania’s governing institutions, including the *en bloc* resignation of the parliamentary opposition, an impeachment procedure against the president, and clashes between the courts and the parliament”.<sup>129</sup> The pandemic has been instrumentalized by the Government further to expand its executive powers amidst the ongoing political crisis. Normative acts and expedited legislative processes have become the Government’s *modus operandi* to amend legislation. As a result, civil society actors have been antagonized from the decision-making process with no effective consultation process during the pandemic. In their latest report on Civil Society and COVID-19 in the Western Balkans the “Think for Europe Network”<sup>130</sup> highlights the attempts of CSOs in Albania to curtail the disproportionately empowered role of the executive, with almost no success. Two examples are relevant here:

- ▶ The government ignored an open letter of Albanian CSOs criticizing the Penal Code amendments – which aimed to punish the quarantine-breaking restrictions with up to 15 years in prison– as disproportionate and an affront to human dignity. The anti-quarantine provisions during the state of emergency due to COVID-19, included in the Penal Code enabled the police to arrest a few civil society activists protesting in Skanderbeg square.
- ▶ While the country was still in a state of emergency due to COVID-19, on 17 May, the National Theatre was demolished. A few actors and activists, who had occupied the building to prevent its demolition, were forcefully removed and arrested by the police. Throughout the day, the protests continued, and the police beatings of peaceful protesters were common. Following the demolition, civil society groups, activists, citizens and young people protested against the demolition of the theatre building and the use of police violence. In particular, the Alliance for the Protection of the Theatre, formed in opposition to the government decision to demolish the building, organised rallies in several cities to collect signatures for a petition to re-construct the National Theatre to its original design. The alliance filed criminal charges against the Mayor of Tirana.<sup>131</sup>

The amendment of the Law on the Prevention of Infectious Diseases through a normative act and the approval of the Penal Code amendments through an

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128 Dyrmishi, Arjan. (2020) Chapter on Albania, “Democracy and the state of emergency”, available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/16286.pdf> Accessed October 17, 2020). p. 6.

129 Vurmo, Gjergji (2020). “Nations in Transit: Albania 2020”, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2020> (Accessed October 23, 2020).

130 “The Western Balkan and COVID-19: Effects on Rule of Law, Good Governance and Civil Society”, available at <https://www.thinkforeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Western-Balkans-and-the-COVID-19-Effects-on-good-governance-rule-of-law-and-civil-society.pdf> (Accessed October 1, 2020).

131 Dyrmishi, Arjan. (2020) Chapter on Albania, “Democracy and the state of emergency”, available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/16286.pdf> Accessed October 17, 2020). p. 7.

expedited parliamentary proceeding suggest that the Albanian government has exploited the conditions of the pandemic and the ongoing institutional and constitutional crisis to further expand executive power. Normative acts and expedited legislative processes have become the government's *modus operandi* to amend legislation with ministerial or prime ministerial statements going first to the media and only later to the Parliament. The Freedom House Special Report on Democracy under Lockdown, notes that Albania was ruled with an 'iron fist'<sup>132</sup>, emphasising that one of the biggest challenges for democracy in Albania was the bypassing of any democratic process and the fact that the government governed with decrees that changed daily.<sup>133</sup> The same report notes that gatherings and protests were not allowed and there were cases when people were investigated for their Facebook posts. Also, there were problems with access to information and with the transparency and accountability of the government to the citizens and the media.<sup>134</sup>

Furthermore, others have argued that the government used the pandemic as an excuse to award emergency contracts to so-called oligarchs close to the government, and to strengthen its position by stoking up fear and exaggerating the threat from the virus to appear to be the Saviour of the People in the "war against the invisible enemy" which has been the dominant narrative held by the government.<sup>135</sup> These actions have effectively alienated Albanian civil society from the decision-making process by circumventing the public consultation process.<sup>136</sup> The impact of COVID-19 on the role of civil society in democratic processes and the deterioration of democracy in Albania in 2019, point to a rise of authoritarianism and a dysfunctional system of mechanisms to check and balance government powers.<sup>137</sup>

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132 Taylor, A., (2020), "Albanian Government 'Ruled with an Iron Fist' During COVID-19", available at <https://exit.al/en/2020/10/03/albanian-government-ruled-with-an-iron-fist-during-covid-19/> (Accessed October 30, 2020).

133 Freedom House, 2020, Democracy under Lockdown, available at <https://exit.al/en/2020/10/03/albanian-government-ruled-with-an-iron-fist-during-covid-19/> (Accessed October 30, 2020).

134 *ibid.*

135 Reporter.al Article as quoted in Dyrmishi, Arjan. (2020) Chapter on Albania, "Democracy and the state of emergency", available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/16286.pdf> Accessed October 17, 2020).

136 Qirjazi, R., & Dafa, Al., (2020), "COVID-19 in Albania: democratic governance put to the test", available at <https://idmalbania.org/tales-of-region-albania/> (Accessed October 17, 2020).

137 Vurmo, Gjergji (2020). "Nations in Transit: Albania 2020", available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2020> (Accessed October 23, 2020).

**Table 17: Key features of civil society role in the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania**

Achievements	Challenges
<p>1. The sector, although with difficulties, managed to shift most of their work online and adapt to 'home office mode.'</p>	<p>1. Local CSOs have fewer opportunities to get online tools, and, in the beginning, it was challenging internally in terms of a lack of tech-savvy skills.</p>
<p>2. The projects continued online, and donors, on the whole, have accepted financial amendments. CSOs have used alternative ways of operation and reaching out to target groups and stakeholders by making use of the possibilities offered by digital tools.</p>	<p>2. The impact of projects was not as predicted since some of the target groups could not be reached and did not have the same level of impact, such as physical or field operations. This is mostly observed for local and small CSOs operating mainly on donor-funded projects, although they managed to mobilize volunteers to assist their community (online support or masks distribution).</p>
<p>3. CSOs provided support at home, in communities and online and undertook new initiatives to provide health care services to chronic disease patients, in palliative care and others (example Palliative Care Centre).</p>	<p>3. In areas also affected by the earthquake (Durrës and Lezha), COVID-19 was covered by CSOs with direct aid. Municipal Councils still have reconstruction on their agendas, and other sectors are left aside.</p>
<p>4. Humanitarian organizations provided emergency support and are also implementing post-recovery programs (examples: Partners Albania-empowering local CSOs and WVA-financial aid and psychological aid with children).</p>	<p>4. Lack of single emergency management and information office to provide accurate information and be the primary source of information coordinating, checking, and providing accurate information and data.</p>
<p>5. Various forms of activism are noticed, particularly surrounding the demolition of the National Theatre building.</p>	<p>5. Limited role of CSOs in holding governmental powers accountable.</p>

### 5.2.2 MEDIA AND COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis comes alongside the existing series of crises in Albania, including the socio-economic crisis caused by the earthquake of 26<sup>th</sup>, November 2019, general economic crisis, high unemployment rates, and a deep institutional and political crisis inherited from the previous year. In this sense, the situation

created by the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated the political crisis with threats to human rights and freedoms, media freedom, and independence, and adds the prospect of an even bigger economic crisis. The Albanian Government gave notice of a derogation from the obligations under certain articles of the Convention for the Protection of Human and Fundamental Freedoms during the state of emergency.<sup>138</sup> It then withdrew the derogations when the state of the emergency ceased to exist on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020.<sup>139</sup>

### **Box 19: Challenges to media freedom during COVID-19**

Challenges under COVID-19 crisis in terms of freedom and security:

- ▶ Health and security risks posed to journalists and media staff when reporting from the field. Limited know-how, infrastructure and procedures on how to report, protect oneself, protect others and follow ethical guidelines in times of a pandemic.
- ▶ A climate of insecurity, intimidation and pressures to journalists continues with a clear trend of decline in media freedom.
- ▶ Shrinking space of critical and independent media.

Challenges under COVID-19 crisis in terms of operations of media:

- ▶ Increasing need for accurate and reliable information from the media.
- ▶ The government and the Prime Minister as the only source of information, and in some instances, producers of fake news themselves.
- ▶ Fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories continue to spread with limited debunking and verification.

Challenges under COVID-19 crisis in terms of the financial situation of media:

- ▶ Decline in advertising, which means decline in revenue, given that advertising is a major revenue stream
- ▶ Danger to financial sustainability particularly for small media due to a decline in revenue and difficulties in running 'business as usual'
- ▶ Newspapers go out of print editions and move only to online versions.

Challenges under COVID-19 crisis in terms of demand side:

- ▶ Need for accurate and reliable information and expertise
- ▶ Better quality of online journalism
- ▶ More transparency and accountability

\*\*Thomson Foundation assessment on media and COVID-19 in Albania and Western Balkans.

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138 European Commission, Annual Report Albania, 2020, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf) (Accessed October 17, 2020).

139 Notification to Council of Europe, available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/005/declarations> (Accessed October 17, 2020).

The media is being undermined by the Government and, in particular, by Prime Minister Rama, who uses his personal media channels (ERTV) and social media platforms (foremost Facebook) to communicate directly to the public on decisions and measures taken. On the very first day of lockdown, he urged the Albanian people to stay home, to respect measures of personal hygiene and physical distancing, and added: "protect yourself from the media."<sup>140</sup> This adds to his denigrating the media by calling them "trash bins." Media and human rights organisations have criticized the government for monopolizing information.

Print media have suffered the most from the limitations of COVID-19: during March and April 2020, there was a total freeze of the printing press, and all newspapers and magazines were published only online. TV shows were also being cancelled due to the new rules which did not allow more than two people in a room at a time, making live or recorded productions impossible.<sup>141</sup> Reporting from the field had become even more complicated, and there was a lack of know-how and clear procedures for journalists on how to report during the pandemic and protect themselves and the people they worked with and met while covering Covid-19.<sup>142</sup> Journalists complained of receiving half their salaries or none at all. The online media seemed to do better in this regard, but it is difficult to estimate, given that it is highly unregulated.

#### ***Box 20: Examples of media awareness raising campaigns***

**UNDP + A2 CNN** - Keep your distance It's nothing personal (Campaign)

**Top Channel, Hipokrati** - Social Awareness

**EuroNews Albania** - Awareness through video messages of journalists, news anchors and speakers

Accurate and reliable information was even more critical during the lockdown imposed by the COVID-19 crisis, and the media was expected to play a crucial role. However, the independent media was weakened in Albania due to persistent pressure from the government, personal attacks from the Prime Minister, and an overall decline in democracy.<sup>143</sup> Albania is not immune to fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. Concerning the pandemic, an ample flow of fake

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140 Bino, B., (2020) "Media caught between two fires in time of coronavirus," available at <https://exit.al/en/2020/05/10/caught-between-two-fires-albanian-media-in-time-of-coronavirus/> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

141 Ibid.

142 Reporter.al, 2020 – <https://www.reporter.al/kriza-e-koronavirusit-trondit-edhe-industrine-e-medias-ne-shqiperi/> (Accessed August 20, 2020).

143 For example, see Rüttershoff, T., (2020). "Albania: Autocratic Measures in the Shadows of Corona", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, available at <https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/albania-autocratic-measures-in-the-shadows-of-corona> (Accessed October 17, 2020).

Qirjazi, R., & Dafa, A.I., (2020). "COVID-19 in Albania: democratic governance put to the test", available at <https://idmalbania.org/tales-of-region-albania/> (Accessed October 17, 2020).

news and disinformation regarded the cures and remedies that could protect one from COVID. During February in Albania, a WhatsApp audio emerged pronouncing that there were more than 12 cases registered in a week and advising citizens to avoid populated places and contact, etc<sup>144</sup>. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection refuted the news. Several health protocols have also circulated on WhatsApp, in English and Albanian.

#### **Box 21: Prime Minister and fake news**

Not even Prime Minister Rama has managed to avoid fake news and disinformation with regard to COVID-19. The first case recorded was the deliberate sharing of a video with policemen using violence on the streets, with captions referring to Spain. It was later claimed by the opposition party that the video represents anti-government protesters in Algeria. (<https://abcnews.al/rama-fake-news-me-videon-nga-spanja-pd-po-perhap-panik-per-covid-19/>)

Cases of disinformation from PM Rama continued with the sharing of fake facts about numbers of recorded deaths in Sweden, stating that 'Sweden has the highest number of deaths per 1 million people', while based on Worldmeters, as of the 1st of June, Sweden recorded only 3353/1 million inhabitants, lower than other European countries, including Belgium and Ireland' (<https://faktoje.al/te-pavertetat-e-kryeministrit-rama-ne-komunikimin-per-vijimin-e-fazes-ii-te-hapjes-si-pasoje-e-covid-19/>)

Other 'less panic-provoking' statements have been shared as fake news on the social media profile of the Prime Minister, such as the historic facts about the origin of quarantine (<https://www.faktor.al/2020/04/13/rama-perseri-shperndan-fake-news-tani-per-karantinen/>).

While COVID-19 created several travel restrictions for Albanian citizens, the case of Albanian-Greek border control delays also became part of fake news shared on social media, with Prime Minister posting a picture of Greek-Bulgarian border. (<https://faktoje.al/kryeministri-edi-rama-bie-serisht-ne-kurthin-e-dezinformimit/>)

Most fake facts shared by the prime minister have been checked by Faktoje.AI, which is a fact checking NGO in Albania, a welcome development in the media landscape.

Prime Minister Rama apologised for having shared the video with the wrong message on it. He stated that the fake news was produced unintentionally and that he confirmed later that images were those of Algeria, instead of Spain during COVID-19.

Resource: <https://www.reporter.al/kryeministri-edi-rama-kerkon-ndjese-pasi-kapet-duke-prodhuar-fake-news/>

144 Article available at [https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/koronavirusi-ministria-e-shendetesise-mos-i-konsideroni-informacionet-ne-ruge-jo-zrytare-nuk-ka-asnje-rast-ne-shqiperi?read\\_more](https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/koronavirusi-ministria-e-shendetesise-mos-i-konsideroni-informacionet-ne-ruge-jo-zrytare-nuk-ka-asnje-rast-ne-shqiperi?read_more) (Accessed October 2, 2020).

Social media represented a key platform for the spread of disinformation. In the first months of the pandemic, disinformation on COVID-19 was rampant, especially on Facebook.<sup>145</sup> Some of the disinformation content related to the EU, which was supposedly not ready to handle the coronavirus crisis or to help its member states. The dissemination of fake cures for the coronavirus has also been observed. It has been claimed that COVID-19 can be treated with garlic or alcohol, and a rumour has circulated that a vaccine for the disease has already been found. Another narrative was that of a coronavirus treatment being linked to the use of bleach or pure alcohol.<sup>146</sup> A recent report by Reporter finds that *“fake news and disinformation about COVID-19 went viral and spread on social media, generating more engagement than posts of the country’s largest television and newspapers.”*<sup>147</sup>

A major narrative was the denial of COVID-19 and the conspiracy theory of it being used as an experiment on people. Others were related particularly to the vaccine against COVID-19, which is considered as an instrument to control citizens through inserting a chip in their body.<sup>148</sup> One report quoting media experts raises the concern that many media outlets, although aware of the dangers of COVID-19, have consciously echoed and disseminated this fake news with bombastic headlines, to generate attention and clicks.<sup>149</sup> In the Albanian media landscape, Coronavirus become a perfect online media clickbait because it related directly to the anxieties and fears of the audiences. Most of the disinformation is translated from foreign sources, but some is also produced in Albania.<sup>150</sup> Often disinformation and fake news were fuelled by the contradictory and confusing information provided by public authorities.<sup>151</sup>

All of this adds to the feelings of insecurity, prejudices, and anxiety about the present and future situation. With the excuse to fight the ‘invisible enemy’ of the state of emergency because of COVID-19, the Albanian Government has followed a hard-line approach against fake news and disinformation about the coronavirus, which has led to a crackdown on independent media. The Government has imposed itself as the only source of information, which is also directly communicated by the Prime Min-

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145 Preci, Z., (2020). “Albania”, in “The Shrinking Space for Media Freedom in Southeast Europe”, CDC and KAS, 2020.

146 Hasanaliqaj, I. “Lajmet e rreme që qarkulluan më shumë për COVID-19” The Fake News that Circulated the Most about COVID-19]. Fakteje.al, April 2, 2020.

147 Likmeta, B., (2020). “How the fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania went viral”, available at <https://www.reporter.al/si-u-bene-virale-lajmet-e-rreme-per-pandemine-e-covid-19-ne-shqiperi/> (Accessed October 22, 2020).

148 “The Suspicious Virus:Conspiracies and COVID19in the Balkans”, available at <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Conspiracies-and-COVID19-in-the-Balkan-English-2.pdf> (Accessed December 22, 2020).

149 Likmeta, B., (2020). “How the fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania went viral”, available at <https://www.reporter.al/si-u-bene-virale-lajmet-e-rreme-per-pandemine-e-covid-19-ne-shqiperi/> (Accessed October 22, 2020).

150 The case of Sazan Guri claiming that funeral companies were paying cash for families to declare their lost one as COVID-19 patients.

151 Likmeta, B., (2020). “How the fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania went viral”, available at <https://www.reporter.al/si-u-bene-virale-lajmet-e-rreme-per-pandemine-e-covid-19-ne-shqiperi/> (Accessed October 22, 2020).

ister.<sup>152</sup> This contributes to erosion of social trust in institutions and media.<sup>153</sup> Mass media had no means of monitoring or verifying the truth about the scope of the health consequences of the pandemic beyond the official figures that were provided.<sup>154</sup> No substantial investigations on the government response to the crisis and its institutional and technical capacities have been conducted.<sup>155</sup> However, after the demolition of the National Theatre, more criticism and activism, both online and offline, can be noticed with attitudes towards the Government changing.<sup>156</sup>

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152 Examples of Prime Minister Edi Rama communicating via ERTV, through Facebook text status or video the decisions of the government addressing the situation in March and April ranging from the shopping timetable for citizens to relief measures for business. See Maksimović, S., (2020). "Western Balkans media during COVID-19: Reporting on corruption became even harder", available at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/05/08/western-balkans-media-during-covid-19-reporting-on-corruption-became-even-harder/> (Accessed October 17, 2020).

Ibid. p.

153 Vrutgman, L., & Bino, B., (2020). Trust in Governance Opinion Poll 2019. Tirana: IDM, available at [UNDP Albania](https://undp.org/albania).

154 Preci, Z., (2020). "Albania", in "The Shrinking Space for Media Freedom in Southeast Europe", CDC and KAS, 2020.

155 Qirjazi, R., & Dafa, A., (2020). "COVID-19 in Albania: democratic governance put to the test", available at <https://idmalbania.org/tales-of-region-albania/> (Accessed October 17, 2020).

156 Participant in focus group discussions.



**Table 18: Media coverage of COVID-19 pandemic**

Disaster stage	Frame	Themes / Narratives	Participation of citizens in media content	Type of coverage	
<b>COVID-19 outbreak (March 2020)</b>	Fear of the 'invisible enemy'	Seriousness of the virus	Limited direct presence through quotation and testimonials	Main news Headlines Special edition	
	Human interest	Government role and unity in dealing with the crisis			
	Public health and safety	Human stories of infected persons	Limited Live input from citizens due to social distancing		
	Government as saviour	Provision of initial helpful information regarding measures			
	Awareness raising	Giving voice to public health experts, Government officials and doctors	Citizens created content, particularly on online media		
<b>Lock down (April – Mid May 2020)</b>	Fear of the 'invisible enemy'	Seriousness of the virus	Limited direct presence through quotation and testimonials		Main news Headlines Special edition
	Human interest	Human stories of infected persons and focus on fatality / stories from Italy			
	Fatality and unpredictable future	Political clashes on the governmental actions	Limited Live input from citizens due to social distancing		
	Impact	Giving voice to public health experts, Government officials and doctors, opposition			
	Awareness raising	Solidarity, donations and provision of assistance and aid	Citizens created content, particularly on online media		
	Criticism of Government's Actions				
<b>Opening up and the end of the state of natural disaster (Mid May – 23 June 2020)</b>	Impact and recovery	Critical assessment of the situation: causes, impact and consequences	Limited presence		Fewer Headlines Social News Economic News Political News
	Awareness raising	Government relief measures	Governmental officials and politicians resume central stage		
	Criticism of Government's Actions	Plans during the summer			
	Human interest	Giving voice to public health experts, Government officials and doctors, opposition	Experts remain present		

Media coverage of COVID-19 was alarming and sensationalist, focusing on worst-case scenarios and full of emotionally charged language such as: deadly virus, invisible enemy, the future is in jeopardy. The initial over-hyping was accompanied by alarming frames and later on, a more neutral tone was observed, focusing more on provision of information. During the pandemic, limited cases of media as watchdog were observed.

**Table 19: Role of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Disaster stage	Stage of disaster management	Role of social media	Implications
Pre-disaster	Mitigation	<p>Lack of noticeable risk reduction activities and preventive measures in the social media landscape.</p> <p>Even though media covered the outbreak in China and then in Europe, particularly in Italy, there is no noticeable community resilience building in the social media before mid March 2020.</p>	Limited efforts for disaster risk reduction
Pre-disaster	Preparedness	<p>There were no specific communication crisis strategies before March 2020, and no particular attention was paid to scientific information and evidence concerning epidemics or pandemics.</p> <p>Social media has not been used before the COVID-19 outbreak by the government and relevant authorities to communicate to the public on how to prepare, engage citizens in preparedness activities, and share preparedness information regarding epidemics/pandemics.</p>	Limited efforts for disaster risk reduction. No early warning

Disaster stage	Stage of disaster management	Role of social media	Implications
Disaster	Response	<p>ocial media was vital in the delivery of news coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak. Posts, reposting, and re-sharing of analysis, comments, warnings, and other content were massive. Panic-inducing comments, posts, and false content were also present with fake news becoming viral.</p> <p>Social media also served to counteract the information gap provided by authorities using alternative information sources. However, this proved to have its drawbacks in terms of the quality and reliability of the information.</p> <p>Social media was also used by CSOs to raise awareness, coordinate, and provide support to various groups.</p> <p>Social media was also used to denounce abuse and mismanagement, even when professional journalists did not cover it.</p> <p>Social media served the public authorities such as the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Ministry of Finances and Economy to amplify the messages and official information, thus acting faster than mainstream media.</p>	<p>Information Dissemination</p> <p>Panic spreading and falsehood were present</p>
Post-disaster	Recovery	<p>In this phase, social media, where Facebook dominated, was widely utilised to develop awareness campaigns. Social media also served to amplify messages about public health safety, social and physical distancing.</p>	<p>Information Dissemination</p>

The Freedom House Special Report on democracy under lockdown notes that independent media have often been stifled during the pandemic, making accountability difficult and hampering the dissemination of vital information. It notes that countries ranked as partly-free (as Albania is) experienced restrictions on the news media as part of the response to the coronavirus outbreak.<sup>157</sup> Various reports<sup>158</sup> note an increase in the personalization of power in Albania, a trend already in place before the crisis. The COVID-19 crisis provided Prime Minister Rama with the opportunity to assume a more significant political and institutional role personally.<sup>159</sup> A recent study by the Center for the Study of Democracy on the impact of COVID-19 on media in South East Europe confirms that “*the Coronavirus crisis has exposed long-standing governance deficits, limited the effectiveness of the policy responses and was exploited for the introduction of measures restricting fundamental freedoms*”.<sup>160</sup>

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157 Freedom House, 2020, Democracy under Lockdown, available at <https://exit.al/en/2020/10/03/albanian-government-ruled-with-an-iron-fist-during-covid-19/> (Accessed October 30, 2020).

158 Dyrmishi, A., (2020). “Albania”, pp. 4-8, in “Democracy and the state of emergency: Responses to Coronavirus crisis in the Western Balkans, Croatia, Slovenia – Report One”, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/16119.pdf> (Accessed October 15, 2020).

159 *ibid*, p.7.

160 Filipova, R., (2020) (Ed.) “The Shrinking Space for Media Freedom in Southeast Europe”, Center for Study of Democracy and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, available at <https://csd.bg/publications/publication/the-shrinking-space-for-media-freedom-in-southeast-europe/> (Accessed October 21, 2020).

**Table 20: Key features of media role in the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania**

Achievements	Challenges
<p>1. Crucial role of media as a critical information provider amidst fear and lack of information. The media provided very relevant information with awareness-raising campaigns and ample space for experts, doctors, and public health officials.</p> <p>2. Continuous field reports, especially from hospitals, showed deficiencies in crisis management, which the public had no other way of knowing, considering the lack of information from Governmental sources.</p>	<p>1. Lack of access to information: The isolation, lack of transparency, monopolisation of information, contradictory and confusing information.</p> <p>2. Politicization of the Albanian media continued. During the first weeks of the pandemic, there was a general positive tone towards the Government and less watchdog functions were performed. However, as the pandemic became the 'new normal', media resumed their usual framing nuances along political or other lines. Some recently established media and some online portals remain professional.</p>
<p>3. Social media played a vital role in communication, psychological well-being, community resilience, calls for help, collecting of donations, and exposing abuse.</p> <p>4. Media harnessed advanced technology and managed to combine professional reporting with citizen-created content. Programming was adapted to lockdown measures through the use of online platforms.</p>	<p>3. Disinformation and fake news surrounding COVID-19 were present in social media, in particular.</p> <p>4. The interests of several media (the main ones) are closely connected to power and business, the latter one in health. An example would be the promotion on television the liberalization of molecular/serological testing in private laboratories, which in turn constitutes a great cost for taxpayers.</p>

## 6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents concluding remarks and recommendations on the role of civil society and media in time of crisis by specifying them per each disaster phase: pre-disaster – mitigation and preparedness; disaster – response; post-disaster – recovery. Key recommendation per each stakeholder are also presented.

### 6.1 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since November 2019, Albania has been suffering the effects of two consecutive significant crises – that of a devastating 6.4 magnitude earthquake and the global COVID-19 pandemic. The two successive crises have undoubtedly highlighted existing problems and presented new challenges, while at the same time revealing the major achievements and resilience capabilities of the Albanian society. Crises affect economic and social development, as well as the quality of democracy.

During both crises, CSOs and media's primary concerns relate to a lack of organization, coordination and response capacities of institutions, and a lack of transparency and access to information.

Civil society organizations during both crises proved to be instrumental in relief provision towards the affected population. It can be noted that the type of crisis affected the behaviour of CSOs and delivered different impacts on them. CSOs experienced an evolution and innovation in terms of self-organization, learning from one crisis to inform the response to the other, creating platforms to match needs and help, and employing, although driven by the lockdown and physical distancing necessities to some extent, digital tools to provide support, especially for psychological needs. During both crises, civil society organizations self-mobilized to respond to the immediate needs of affected populations in the case of the earthquake and community in need in the Pandemic case by providing food and sanitation packages, conducting fundraising, and providing much needed psychological support. The different nature of the crisis raises other challenges for CSOs. Although experiencing personal fears in fieldwork during the earthquake crisis, CSOs continued working or redirecting work towards answering the needs that arose from the crisis. During the COVID-19 crisis, CSOs had to adapt their operations to an online modus operandi, with local CSOs experiencing challenges in accessing digital tools and skills. The COVID-19 crisis, being also a prolonged one, affected the impact of the crisis. CSOs experienced the same type of

challenges during both crises regarding coordination with local institutions.

The Albanian media has played a crucial role in providing timely information on the situation, raising human interest, mobilizing funds, and conducting awareness-raising campaigns. The earthquake crisis reporting saw the rise of experts, engineers, and scientists in television studios and interviews. The media attempted to perform its watchdog role. Again, it should be noted that the different type of crisis also affects the role/performance of the media. The effects of the November 2019 earthquake were quite visible, clearly affecting people and allowing the media to have direct contact with the event. In contrast, the COVID-19 crisis plays out behind closed doors, thus inhibiting media's access to those directly affected. A major issue noticed during both crises relates to the access to public information and institutions' transparency. It should be noted that the crises emphasized, in an even greater way, existing issues of transparency and trust. The crises also highlighted matters related to funding and journalism skills, especially relevant for local media.

The nature of a crisis drives the type of impact. Crises accentuate already existing issues, such as transparency and access to information. Fake news and disinformation thrive in a crisis and are reinforced by politicized media outlets and unskilled journalists.

## **6.2 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.2.1 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY'S ROLE IN CRISES**

#### **▶ Pre-disaster: Mitigation & Preparedness**

The earthquake and COVID-19, taken as case studies in this research, showed that CSOs in Albania have been adept at mobilizing resources and volunteers within the crisis response phase. However, as most interviewed said, both situations were unexpected, and the sector was not prepared for such crises. Except for professional humanitarian organizations who have worked in the field for several years, such as Terre des Hommes, World Vision, Save the Children, and Caritas, other local and national CSOs were unprepared.

Therefore, it is essential for the Civil Society Organizations and Donor community to:

- Build the capacities of CSOs in Albania in crisis preparedness, with contingency plans in place, both for their internal organization, daily operations, and community and their work with respective target groups. Contingency plans should be accompanied by trained staff informed on crisis management. As the crises showed, local CSOs must be internally prepared and trained to adapt to changing conditions in order for them to continue providing services and reaching their scope of work even in times of crisis. Therefore, it is important to create capacity-building

- programs on internal organizational development in times of crisis.
- Empower local CSOs with equipment and know-how, especially in modern technology. With regard to COVID-19, the vulnerability of local and small CSOs was shown by their inability to adapt to online work, either due to lack of skills or lack of infrastructure. Therefore, support is needed in this regard with staff training, knowledge sharing as well as hardware and software.
- Include online statutory meetings as eligible within CSO statutes. This recommendation addresses CSOs who have not foreseen online statutory meetings in their statutes, especially CSOs operating on a membership basis.
- Put safety protocols in place, not only for internal purposes, but also concerning community engagement and fieldwork. It is important to have well-established safety protocols and update them accordingly, both for internal daily operations, as well as while working with communities directly.
- Build capacities for better community engagement is also a crucial recommendation addressing CSOs and donors.

On the side of central and local government:

- Actively include CSOs, in a formalized manner, in issues pertaining to crisis management at the local and central level.
- Assign a civil society focal point in the municipalities to bridge the distance between CSOs and local governments, not only during crisis, but in non-crisis situations as well.
- Reinvigorate the National Civil Society Committee with a special section on crisis management. Be more present in local communities with information on disaster prevention by reaching out through local media and in-person activities.

### ► **Disaster: Response**

Although disaster response is the phase where CSOs were engaged the most and filled the gap of public services, there have been lessons learned and recommendations that can be made for the future, deriving from interviews and focus groups:

#### **Civil Society Organizations:**

- Coordination and networking capacities of CSOs, both internally and sectorally, need to be improved. The existing networks established through different projects can serve for scaling up sectoral coordination.



### **Central Government:**

- There is a need for enhanced and meaningful involvement and participation of CSOs in national civil emergency structures.
- Clear and open communication during crisis.
- Enhanced transparency and access to public information.

### **Donor Community:**

- Development of a volunteer resource and coordination platform with meet-and-match opportunities, timetables, locations, and needs of target groups, with CSOs, public institutions, business, media, and others to mobilize volunteers.

### **Media and Businesses:**

- Cross-sectoral cooperation, especially with media, business, and local authorities, responds to local needs appropriately and timely.
- Local media and CSOs collaboration for community engagement and literacy programs on strengthening awareness and knowledge regarding crisis management and response.

### **► Post-disaster: Recovery**

During this post-crisis phase, the presence of CSOs has been less active than in the response phase. Mobilisation of financial and in-kind donations was quick, however, most of the recommendations for this phase focus on:

### **Civil Society Organizations:**

- Being more active in their watchdog function, doing advocacy monitoring through building a human-rights approach to disaster management, seeking transparency of funds and donations, holding the Government accountable for its actions, and working towards greater human rights, media freedoms, anti-corruption initiatives, and others.
- Strengthening the tracking of transparency and accountability in funds expenditure by local and central Government.

### **Donor Community:**

- Supporting and enabling CSOs to be more actively involved in disaster education, risk awareness-raising through various communication channels and digital media, generation and gathering of data, and impact analysis.
- Building upon successful projects and cases to promote private-sector responsibility in disaster reduction through cooperation with CSOs.

- Capitalizing on experiences and further boost cooperation within existing networks and the sector itself. A synergy between established practices and projects and new approved ones from several donor programs is necessary to build on experience, while also making use of existing practices in place. This synergy and follow-up also addresses the sustainability of donor-funded projects and can improve the CSOs donor-dependency issue.

#### **Local and Central Government:**

- Further enhancing and promoting partnerships and joint efforts for recovery and addressing the crisis impact between authorities at the municipal and central levels, the private sector, financial service providers, workers and employer organizations, civil society organizations, and international agencies.

### 6.2.2 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN CRISIS

#### **► Pre-disaster: Mitigation & Preparedness**

Communication is a crucial element in times of crisis. Media is an intermediary of the trust between the public and authorities, and thus missioned to maintain a balance between holding authorities accountable and providing accurate information to the public.

- Development of capacity-building programs for media professionals and journalism students through formal and informal learning on reporting during and after the crisis.
- Introduction of or updating journalism studies curricula at the university level; development of professional certification programs through blended learning for media professionals and journalists to specialize in crisis reporting and management.
- Provision of incentives for journalists specializing in crisis reporting and management.
- Development of joint projects at the regional level or EU level on the exchange of best practices between media organizations, CSOs, and universities on media's role in mitigation and preparedness, reporting crisis, and management.
- Collaboration between media, media associations, and CSOs, academia, and other educational institutions and relevant public authorities offers capacity building/training/awareness-raising opportunities among various target groups on countering fake news and disinformation through media and data literacy programs.
- Proving media space to awareness-raising campaigns on risk reduction and preparedness.
- Development of science programs in the media, educating various target groups on the necessary information about natural phenomena.

### ▶ **Disaster: Response**

- Support media organizations and media professionals to address security concerns during crisis reporting.
- Provide protective supplies to people working in media who will continue to report from the field (pandemic, public health, climate changes, air pollution, and other related phenomena).
- Collaboration between various actors and advocacy campaigns to ensure labor rights and decent working conditions for journalists.
- Sub-granting (core) support to professional and independent outlets that are struggling to sustain their operation due to a crisis or establishing a pool of funds to provide institutional support to media and journalists and media organizations with quality journalism.
- Provision of support for specific content production (under-represented topics, interactive topics with visual and multimedia elements, engaging topics, audience participation, watchdog).

### ▶ **Post-disaster: Recovery**

- Support for fact-checking and investigative journalism and presenting in-depth narratives through which the citizens understand the processes and relations and not only deliver the bare facts.
- Permanent education in collaboration with media associations, CSOs using different tools for the online distribution and knowledge dissemination (e-learning, blended-learning approach)
- Creation of a platform that will connect credible sources of information with citizens' priority areas, providing the possibility for interaction with the audience and contributing to the mutual building of trust (through expert support, technical support, creation and adaption of online tools, etc.).

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**ANNEX 2 – PROGRESS OF RELIEF PACKAGES OF THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBANIA  
TO ADDRESS ISSUES CAUSED BY COVID-19**

As of 19.10.2020, Progressive Update on the Progress of Packages from the Ministry of Finance and Economy (in ALL)

Package 1	No. of Requests	No. of Businesses	No. of Citizens	No. of Businesses	No. of Citizens	Paid Funds
Package 1 – War Salary Installment I	39,378	39,063	65,680	38,971		
Package I – War Salary Installment II				38,921	65,395	1,700,270,000
Package I – War Salary Installment III				38,784	65,062	1,691,612,000
Package 1 – Doubling of Unemployment Payment Installment I	Automated Procedure	Max 3100	Procedurë e Automatizuar	2,257	58,682,000	
Package 1 – Doubling of Unemployment Payment Installment II		Max 3100		2,349	61,074,000	
Package 1 – Doubling of Unemployment Payment Installment		Max 3100		1,921	49,946,000	
Package 1 – Doubling of Economic Aid Installment I		62,960		58,531	276,654,675	
Package 1 – Doubling of Economic Aid Installment II		62,840		58,097	278,993,987	
Package 1 – Doubling of Economic Aid Installment III		10,504		41,430	198,610,840	
Summary	39,378	39,063	211,284	38,971	126,327	6,019,389,502

Package 2	Nr. i Kërkesave	Nr. i Bizneseve	Nr. i Qytetarëve	Nr. i Bizneseve	Nr. i Qytetarëve	Fondi i Paguar
Package 2 – Measure 1	1207	834	9434	820	9,434	377,360,000
Package 2 – Measure 2	15064	10506	65655	10,471	65,656	2,626,240,000
Package 2 – Measure 3	33094	31756	68360	31,726	68,357	2,734,280,000
Package 2 – Measure 4	1199	1014	4927	1,006	4,927	197,080,000
Package 2 – Measure for oil company employees	3	2	721	2	721	28,840,000
Package 2 – Complaints	4451	3734	23761	3,527	23,717	948,680,000
Summary	55,018	47,846	172,858	47,552	172,812	6,912,480,000
<b>Total Disbursed Fund</b>					<b>299,139</b>	<b>12,931,869,502</b>

Source: Ministry of Finance and Economy, 19 October 2020, available at <http://financa.gov.al/raporte-per-covid-19/> (Accessed October 19, 2020)

## ANNEX 3 – EXAMPLES OF CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES TO COVID-19

### ▶ **Better Together/‘Më Mirë së Bashku’**

The platform is created through the collaboration of several civil society organizations, and change actors. Many of them were also involved in providing relief during the 2019 earthquake. The virtual platform, ran through Facebook, operated as a marketplace where demand for support and supply for support would match, with the main aim of bridging the gap between the two

### ▶ **World Vision Albania and Kosovo**

WVA&K continued working with communities and also conducted a needs assessment. It provided support for families with food packages or CASH assistance, whereas cash was mainly applied for rural areas. WVA&K also focused on rural households’ economic empowerment through the provision of agricultural tools

### ▶ **Terre des Hommes**

During March - April 2020, Terre des homes Albania undertook a situational analysis regarding the impact of pandemics and quarantine on families in need in Albania. This assessment sheds light on the new realities created by the COVID-19 virus and highlights how the situation of pandemic and quarantine is affecting vulnerable children, young people, and parents, including the feelings, experiences, or problems created. 779 participants were part of this assessment, respectively coming from 8 cities of Albania: Tirana, Durrës, Elbasan, Korca, Fier, Shkodra, Kukës, and Lezha.

### ▶ **Save the Children**

About 90 families, of children / youth with disabilities, in the regions of Kukës, Durrës and Vlora were supported with financial assistance to provide basic needs, and hygienic-sanitary packages needed to follow the protection measures during the pandemic. The three community centers for Children with Disabilities, set up and supported by Save the Children, in the three respective municipalities, provide free services for children / young people and their families

▶ **Partners Albania for Change and Development**

PA continued its efforts to support CSOs through the National CSO Resource Center through several online activities, monitoring of the situation as well as providing free services to civil society groups. The worked towards ensuring free use of online platforms for civil society groups to support their work and provide training on the use of such platforms.

PA facilitated the mobilization of volunteers and fundraising efforts.

▶ **STEPS Center**

Online psychological help during lockdown months with three psychologists available upon request, respecting anonymity and professional ethics online.

▶ **IDM Albania**

IDM continued its think tank activities and watchdog role on democracy in Albania, through the regional blogging initiative “Tales from the Region” on the experience of Western Balkan countries with the COVID-19 Pandemic, published between 24 June 2020 and 6 July 2020. The initiative is coordinated by Res Publica (North Macedonia), in partnership with the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (Albania), Analiziraj.ba (BiH), KIM Radio (Kosovo), Sbunker (Kosovo) the civic initiative “Ne Davimo Beograd” (Serbia) and PCNEN (Montenegro).

▶ **Qendresa Qytetare/ Citizens’ Resistance**

An NGO working on higher education advocacy campaign in Albania, continued its monitoring activities with regard to the situation of COVID19 and higher education in Albania. In May 2020 they initiated the students’ petition to cancel dormitory fees for spring semester, due to CIVID, addressed to Municipality of Tirana and signed by 332 students.

**Western Balkans  
Democracy Initiative**



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