Civic Initiatives Acting as Resilience Actors for Older People during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Case Study Cluj-Napoca, Romania (2020–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how informal civic initiatives emerged as resilience actors within the ecosystem of social services for older people in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2025). Drawing on longitudinal qualitative research using constructivist Grounded Theory across two phases of data collection (2022 and 2025–2026), the study identifies six civic initiatives that emerged spontaneously during the pandemic and analyses their operational profiles, collaborative relationships with formal institutions, and post-pandemic trajectories. The findings reveal a typology of civic resilience actors differentiated by mobilisation logic, functional role, and capacity for sustained engagement beyond the crisis. A key conceptual contribution is the distinction between active resilience—sustained, institutionalised capacity—and latent resilience—dormant civic capacity that remains available for future mobilisation but is not systematically maintained. The authors conclude that the effectiveness of the local pandemic response in Cluj-Napoca was shaped by dense pre-existing civic networks and accumulated relational capital, highlighting the importance of civic infrastructure for social service resilience and future crisis preparedness.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic confronted social service systems across Europe with demands that exceeded their designed capacity within a matter of days. Formal institutions — local governments, social assistance directorates, non-governmental organisations — were forced to improvise, to collaborate across

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boundaries that had rarely been crossed before, and to mobilise resources from unexpected sources (Carroll et al. 2025; Boin and van Eeten 2013). In this context, informal civic initiatives — groups of citizens, volunteers, and community organisations acting outside established institutional frameworks — emerged as significant contributors to the pandemic response in many localities.

Cluj-Napoca, Romania's second largest city and one of its most developed in terms of civil society infrastructure, offers a particularly instructive case. Within the first weeks of Romania's state of emergency (declared on 16 March 2020), at least six distinct informal civic initiatives emerged in the city, providing food delivery, medical support, logistics, emergency response, and digital inclusion to older residents. These initiatives operated alongside — and in active collaboration with — formal public institutions and non-governmental organisations, filling gaps that formal systems could not cover at the required speed and scale.

The existing literature on civic resilience and collaborative governance has focused primarily on formal civil society organisations (Ansell and Gash 2008; Provan and Kenis 2008) or on collective impact models designed for stable institutional environments (Kania and Kramer 2011). Less attention has been paid to the spontaneous emergence of informal civic actors in crisis conditions, their mechanisms of collaboration with formal institutions, and — crucially — what happens to these actors after the crisis ends. This longitudinal dimension remains underdeveloped: most pandemic-related research captures the acute crisis phase without following the trajectories of actors over subsequent years (Carroll et al. 2025).

This article addresses these gaps through a longitudinal qualitative study of six informal civic initiatives in Cluj-Napoca, analysed through constructivist Grounded Theory across two data collection phases spanning 2020 to 2025. Two interrelated questions guide this research. First: how did informal civic initiatives function as resilience actors in the social services ecosystem for older people during the COVID-19 pandemic? Second: what factors explain the divergent trajectories of these initiatives in the post-pandemic period (2022-2025)?

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework on civic resilience and collaborative governance. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 presents the empirical findings. Section

5 discusses the findings and their theoretical implications. Section 6 concludes with implications for policy and practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Crisis and Informal Civic Action

Informal civic initiatives occupy a theoretically distinct position within this framework. They are neither formal organisations with legal standing, employment contracts, and institutional mandates, nor spontaneous individual acts of volunteering. They are groups of people who organise around a shared purpose, develop a division of labour, and coordinate action over time without necessarily acquiring formal legal status — achieving, in Ostrom's (1990) terms, the kind of self-organised governance that formal systems are unable to produce at the required speed. Informal civic groups can develop effective coordination mechanisms in conditions where formal systems are insufficient, drawing on social capital, shared norms, and trust rather than on legal authority or financial incentives.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, informal civic initiatives in Cluj-Napoca illustrate a specific variant of this phenomenon: the rapid activation of latent civic capacity in response to a sudden social emergency. The speed of this activation — several initiatives emerged within 24 to 72 hours of the declaration of the state of emergency — suggests that the capacity to respond was not created by the crisis, but was already present in the form of pre-existing relationships, skills, and organisational experience that the crisis brought into active use.

2.2 Active, Latent and Preparedness-Oriented Resilience

Resilience, in organisational and institutional contexts, refers to the capacity to absorb disruption, adapt flexibly to changing conditions, and reorganise so as to recover and maintain essential functions (Walker et al. 2004; Boin and van Eeten 2013). This definition encompasses three distinct dimensions: absorption (continuing to function under stress), adaptation (adjusting structures and practices in response to new demands), and recovery (restoring effective functioning after disruption). While resilience has often been conceptualised at the level of individuals, it equally applies to organisations

and institutions: the capacity of a social service system to absorb a pandemic-scale shock, adapt its service delivery modalities, and recover its core functions is a form of institutional resilience that cannot be reduced to the aggregate of individual coping capacities (Boin and van Eeten 2013).

A central conceptual contribution of this article is the distinction between three forms of civic resilience identified during the COVID-19 period in the civic sector of the city of Cluj, Romania. Active resilience refers to capacity that is institutionalised, visible, and regularly maintained — organisations with ongoing mandates, regular activity, and established partnerships with formal institutions. Latent resilience refers to capacity that is dormant between crises: civic skills, relationships, and organisational experience that exist but are not currently mobilised for crisis response purposes (Linder 2019).

This distinction is consequential for policy. Systems that invest only in active resilience — maintaining formal emergency response structures — may be caught off-guard by crises that exceed their designed capacity. Systems with rich latent resilience — dense civic ecosystems where people know each other, have collaborated before, and have accumulated relevant skills — can draw on informal reserves. But activating latent resilience requires specific conditions, and maintaining it requires deliberate investment even in non-crisis periods.

For our research, a third concept extends this framework. Building on Wildavsky's (1988) foundational argument that effective risk management requires not anticipation alone but the accumulation of generalisable resources and organisational capacity that can be mobilised when the unexpected occurs, we propose the concept of preparedness-oriented resilience: latent resilience that has been systematically mapped, documented, and made available for rapid activation. The argument developed in this article is that the post-pandemic policy challenge is not to freeze the forms of civic engagement that emerged during the crisis, but to invest in the infrastructure that makes future activations faster and more equitable.

2.3 Collaborative Governance in Crisis Conditions

The literature on collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash 2008; Bryson, Crosby, and Stone 2006) has identified several conditions under which cross-sector collaboration succeeds: prior relationships and trust between actors, a

clear and shared purpose, complementary rather than competitive roles, and at least one actor capable of providing coordination without commanding. The COVID-19 response in Cluj-Napoca illustrates all four conditions — but with an important qualification.

In stable conditions, collaborative governance typically develops through deliberate design: actors negotiate agreements, establish protocols, and build relationships over time. In crisis conditions, there is no time for this design process. What the Cluj-Napoca case shows is that effective crisis collaboration draws on pre-existing collaborative infrastructure — relationships, trust, and shared experience accumulated in prior collaborative projects — rather than creating new infrastructure under pressure. The implication is that investing in civic relationships during non-crisis periods is a form of crisis preparedness, even when it is not framed as such.

The Collective Impact model (Kania and Kramer 2011) provides a useful analytical lens for one of the civic initiatives studied here. Its five conditions — a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone support organisation — were met not through deliberate design but through the activation of pre-existing relational infrastructure, suggesting that collective impact can emerge organically when civic density is sufficiently high.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014) within a longitudinal qualitative design spanning 2018 to 2025. Constructivist Grounded Theory was chosen because the research question is inherently processual and requires analytic tools capable of generating theory inductively from data, remaining open to unexpected patterns rather than testing pre-specified hypotheses.

Two formal phases of data collection were conducted: Phase I in 2022 and Phase II in 2025–2026. This temporal structure allows comparison of the crisis period (2020–2022) with the post-pandemic consolidation period (2023–2025) — a significant methodological contribution relative to cross-sectional pandemic research. The research was approved by the *Ethics Commission of*

Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work (Decision no. 227/26.03.2026). This approval covers the active data collection phase (Phase II, 2025-2026) and the systematic analytical work underpinning the study. The broader longitudinal research project began in October 2019 with the first author's doctoral enrolment; initial field observation, documentary data collection, and informal conversations took place from 2020 onwards as part of the doctoral process, subject to periodic supervisory committee review. A first draft of the thesis was produced in 2022 and reviewed by the supervisory committee. Following the formal ethics approval in March 2026, the first author conducted systematic GT memoing — a structured process of returning to and reconceptualising the accumulated material through a constructivist Grounded Theory lens — alongside Phase II data collection (six semi-structured interviews, 2025-2026). This sequence reflects standard practice in longitudinal qualitative research, where formal ethical protocols govern the active interview phase and the analytical reconceptualisation of earlier material is undertaken as an integral part of the same research project. Written informed consent was obtained from all Phase II participants prior to interview.

3.2 Data Sources

Phase I (2022) drew on four types of data: informal conversations with representatives of organisations involved in the pandemic response; direct observation of civic campaigns and coordination meetings, facilitated by the researcher's professional background in community development; primary institutional documents including annual reports, internal reports, and official communications; and verified public sources including local press coverage and the online platforms of civic initiatives.

Phase II (2025–2026) consisted of six semi-structured interviews conducted with key actors in the social services ecosystem: a representative of *the Prefect's Office of Cluj County* responsible for inter-sectoral pandemic coordination; the coordinator of *the Social and Medical Assistance Directorate (DASM) of Cluj-Napoca municipality*; the coordinators of three non-governmental organisations providing services for older people (home meal delivery, home care, and socialisation services respectively); and the coordinator of a civic initiative with ongoing community medical activity.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, audio-recorded with written informed consent, and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes.

Table 1. *Structured overview of the data sources and research participants across both phases of the study.*

Code	Phase	Actor type	Data type	Role in study
PUB-01	ET II (2026)	Public institution	Interview	Prefect's Office of Cluj County — inter-sectoral pandemic coordination
PUB-02	ET II (2026)	Public institution	Interview	DASM Cluj-Napoca — municipal social services coordination
ONG-01	ET II (2025)	NGO	Interview	Home meal delivery services for older people
ONG-02	ET II (2025)	NGO	Interview	Home care services for older people
ONG-03	ET II (2026)	NGO	Interview	Socialisation and digital inclusion services
IC-03	ET II (2026)	Civic initiative	Interview	SuperMed — community medicine initiative
IC-01	ET I (2022)	Civic initiative	Doc. + observation	Un Singur Cluj / One Cluj Together
IC-02	ET I (2022)	Civic initiative	Doc. + observation	Va ajutam din Cluj / We Help in Cluj
IC-04	ET I (2022)	Civic initiative	Documentary	Beard Brothers Cluj
IC-05	ET I (2022)	Civic initiative	Documentary	CERT Transilvania
IC-06	ET I (2022)	Civic initiative	Documentary	Rescue 4&4
DOC-01	ET I (2022)	Institutional doc.	Primary document	Annual Report — Prefect's Office Cluj County, 2020
DOC-02	ET I (2022)	Institutional doc.	Primary document	Internal DASM activity report, 2020
DOC-03	ET I (2022)	Media + platforms	Verified public	Local press coverage + civic initiative online platforms

Note: ET I = Phase I (2022); ET II = Phase II (2025-2026). Documentary sources for IC-04, IC-05, IC-06 derive primarily from DOC-01.

For three of the six civic initiatives studied, data derives primarily from institutional documents. This reflects a structural feature of informal civic actors: in the absence of permanent legal structures, there are no formal channels through which to contact them years after their most active period. *The Annual Report of the Prefect's Office of Cluj County (2020)* provides the primary documentary source for these initiatives, nominating them explicitly as partners of the County Emergency Situation Committee.

3.3 Analysis

Data analysis followed the Grounded Theory coding sequence: initial coding of raw data; focused coding to identify the most significant and frequent categories; axial coding to explore relationships between categories; and theoretical integration to develop explanatory frameworks. Analytical rigour was maintained through triangulation of data sources across the two phases, constant comparison between data collected in different periods and from different actors, and transparent documentation of analytical reasoning.

Table 2. *Analytical categories generated through the GT coding process, illustrating the organisation of codes and their empirical grounding*

Category family	Key codes	Primary empirical grounding
Inter-institutional collaboration	Pre-existing networks activated in crisis; Daily informal coordination (C_COL_02); Partial formalisation of informal actors (C_COL_04)	Interviews PUB-01, PUB-02; DOC-01
Crisis as catalyst	Activation of latent civic capital (C_MOB_01); Speed differential formal vs. informal response	All ET I sources; Interviews PUB-01, PUB-02
Actor profiles and typology	Intersectoral platform; Community volunteer network; Specialised formation; Community transition	DOC-01; Interviews IC-03, ONG-01-03
Post-crisis trajectories	Active-latent-active; Latent continuous; Latent dormant (C_REZ_05); Full institutionalisation; Reversibility of emergency collaborations (C_REV_01)	Interviews PUB-02, IC-03; ET I + ET II comparison
Structural barriers	Absence of civic capacity registry; Digital exclusion of older beneficiaries; Funding gap (C_REZ_04)	Interviews ONG-01-03, PUB-02
Institutional memory	Knowledge transfer across crises; Knowledge loss through staff turnover	Interview PUB-01; ET I + ET II comparison

3.4 Limitations

Several limitations of this study warrant explicit acknowledgement. First, the sample is restricted to one municipality — Cluj-Napoca — characterised by a comparatively developed civic infrastructure and a relatively dense ecosystem of civil society organisations. The findings should not be

generalised to smaller municipalities or rural areas, where pre-existing civic capital is typically thinner and the conditions for rapid activation of informal capacity may not obtain. Analytical generalisation (Lincoln and Guba 1985) rather than statistical generalisation is the appropriate frame for interpreting these results.

Second, the sample size and composition require methodological clarification. Classic Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) prescribes iterative theoretical sampling to saturation, where data collection is driven by emerging categories until no new conceptual content appears. The present study adopts constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014), which is more flexible regarding sampling procedures and explicitly accommodates longitudinal designs, documentary sources, and access-constrained fieldwork (Charmaz 2014, pp. 192-200). Three of the six civic initiatives could not be contacted through formal channels years after the pandemic — a structural feature of informal actors without permanent legal presence — and were therefore represented through primary institutional documents and triangulated with interview data from formal actors who collaborated directly with them. Theoretical saturation was pursued at the level of analytical categories rather than participant numbers: the six core categories (inter-institutional collaboration, crisis as catalyst, actor profiles, post-crisis trajectories, structural barriers, and institutional memory) reached internal consistency through constant comparison across both phases and across the full range of data sources. Fourteen data sources across two phases, combining interviews, observations, institutional documents, and verified public sources, constitute the analytical foundation of the study.

Third, the first author's prior professional involvement in community development in Cluj-Napoca, which facilitated access to Phase I data (2022), introduces a potential confirmation bias risk. This risk was mitigated through systematic GT memoing, constant comparison across sources and phases, and the involvement of the second author as an external analytical check throughout the research process.

Fourth, all data were collected from organisational representatives and institutional actors. Beneficiary perspectives — how older people themselves experienced the services provided by civic initiatives — are absent from the dataset and represent an important complementary dimension for future research.

4. Findings

4.1 Six Civic Initiatives: Emergence and Operational Profiles

Between March and April 2020, six informal civic initiatives emerged in Cluj-Napoca in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their collective contribution is summarised in an official document that confirms their institutional recognition: *the Annual Report of the Prefect's Office of Cluj County (2020)* states that "*multiple support actions for the population were organised and coordinated by voluntary associations, which played a considerable role in this period: Platforma Un Singur Cluj, Vă ajutăm din Cluj, Beard Brothers, CERT Transilvania, Rescue 4&4 are just some of the names under which hundreds of volunteers contributed to combating the effects of the pandemic.*"

The analysis reveals three distinct operational profiles among the six initiatives:

a. The intersectoral solidarity platform. The initiative *One Cluj Together (Un Singur Cluj)* was launched on 30 March 2020 by a coalition that brought together the organisers of Cluj-Napoca's major cultural festivals — *Electric Castle, TIFF, Untold, Jazz in the Park,* and *Street Food Festival* — alongside *Cluj City Hall, Cluj County Council,* and the *Prefect's Office*. This combination of private cultural capital and public institutional authority gave the initiative both fundraising reach and operational legitimacy. Within approximately 60 days, the initiative mobilised the equivalent of approximately €191,500 through solidarity tickets, with over 100 local organisations participating as partners.

The governance model of *One Cluj Together* mirrors what the Collective Impact literature describes as effective cross-sector collaboration (Kania and Kramer 2011): a clear shared agenda, daily communication among partners, mutually reinforcing activities where each partner contributed their specific capacity, and a coordination function provided by *the Prefect's Office* as a neutral backbone. Crucially, however, this structure was not designed in advance. It emerged from pre-existing relationships among actors who had collaborated on community projects over many years. The crisis activated what was already there.

b. The community volunteer network. The civic initiative *We Help in Cluj (Vă ajutăm din Cluj)* was launched on 16 March 2020 — the same day Romania introduced Scenario 3 COVID-19 restrictions — by four

established civil society organisations. Unlike *One Cluj Together*, which mobilised financial capital through institutional collaborative networks, We Help in Cluj mobilised human capital through community proximity. It recruited 450 registered members, of whom 92 were active volunteers, delivering 537 aid packages to 345 beneficiaries and donating 14,500 items of personal protective equipment. The collaboration between *We Help in Cluj* and the public service *of the Social and Medical Assistance Directorate (DASM) of Cluj-Napoca* illustrates one of the most consequential public-civic complementarities documented in this study. DASM assessed the need and directed the citizen toward the volunteer network, which provided rapid delivery capacity. As the DASM coordinator described it: "*We identified the needs, and depending on the needs identified, we knew who to direct them to*" *(DASM coordinator, interview, 2026)*. Neither actor could have achieved the same result alone: DASM had the assessment capacity and the access to beneficiary data, while the volunteer network had the flexibility and the workforce to respond at scale and speed. According to the interviewed respondents, the collaborative initiative of *We Help in Cluj* had triggered the latent resilience of the public service *of the Social and Medical Assistance Directorate*, and during the COVID-19 crisis it allowed help to reach the older beneficiaries of the public service. This collaboration operated informally — with no previous protocol or formal agreement — yet it functioned daily because the actors trusted each other and shared a clear goal.

c. Brothers Cluj, CERT Transilvania, and Rescue 4&4 — are documented in *the Prefect's Office Annual Report* as contributors to the pandemic response, each with a distinct functional specialisation. Beard Brothers Cluj focused on generalised community support. *CERT Transilvania* brought qualified emergency volunteer response, rapidly integrated into formal emergency coordination protocols. *Rescue 4&4* specialised in transporting vulnerable people — a critical gap in a context where older people without mobility could not access services independently. These three initiatives operated primarily as functional extensions of formal emergency structures rather than as independent intersectoral platforms, a distinction that shapes their post-pandemic trajectories.

4.2 How Collaboration Worked: The Role of Pre-Existing Relationships

The most consistent finding across all six initiatives is that their rapid and effective collaboration with formal institutions was not the product of improvisation under pressure. It was the product of pre-existing relationships that the crisis activated.

The representative of the Prefect's Office described this dynamic directly: "*We didn't create a new structure. We activated what existed. The people already knew each other*" *(Prefect's Office representative, interview, 2026).* This observation is analytically important: the resources that made the pandemic response work — mutual knowledge, trust, shared experience — had been accumulated over years of civic activity. The crisis created the urgency; it did not create the resources themselves.

A second enabling mechanism was the legitimising role played by *the Prefect's Office.* By including civic initiatives in official coordination meetings, nominating them in formal documents, and recognising their volunteers through official registration, *the Prefect's Office* gave informal actors a degree of institutional standing without requiring full formalisation. This partial formalisation allowed civic initiatives to access information and coordination that would otherwise have been unavailable to informal groups, while preserving the flexibility and speed that made them valuable in the first place.

4.3 Post-Pandemic Trajectories: Active and Latent Resilience

The six initiatives show markedly different trajectories in the years following the acute crisis phase, and these differences follow a clear structural logic.

One Cluj Together has demonstrated active-to-latent-to-active resilience: the coalition maintained a dormant infrastructure after 2020 and was reactivated in 2022 for the Ukrainian refugee crisis, mobilising resources through the same mechanisms used in 2020. The DASM coordinator confirmed: "*One Cluj Together reactivated — and the mechanism worked the same way*" *(DASM coordinator, interview, 2026).* This trajectory is explained by the permanence of the founding organisations: cultural festival organisers and public institutions that continued to exist and maintain their relationships after the crisis.

SuperMed has shown the most complete institutionalisation: from an informal pandemic initiative, it transitioned into an ongoing community

medicine service with a permanent location and stable team — the conversion of latent civic capacity into active capacity, and the rarest post-crisis outcome.

We Help in Cluj and its founding organisations remain active in their domains, with the potential for future reactivation, but without maintaining specific pandemic-era coordination infrastructure.

Beard Brothers, CERT Transilvania, and Rescue 4&4 present the analytically most important trajectory: after active and recognised contribution to the pandemic response, they returned to civic invisibility. They are not gone — their members still exist, retain their skills, and would presumably be available for mobilisation in a future crisis. But there is no mechanism to find them, no registry that records what they did, no way for a future coordinator to activate them.

The DASM coordinator's retrospective assessment is telling: "*It was normal that once the need no longer existed, they would stop. Our collaboration continued with those with whom we already collaborated before — on specific services*" *(DASM coordinator, interview, 2026).* This statement describes a structural feature of informal civic actors: participation in crisis response is conditional on the crisis itself, and formal institutions tend to maintain relationships with pre-existing partners rather than institutionalising new ones formed during the emergency.

5. Discussion

5.1 A Typology of Civic Resilience Actors

The findings support a typology of informal civic resilience actors based on two dimensions: the breadth of their coordination function and the sustainability of their post-crisis presence.

Intersectoral platforms (such as *One Cluj Together*) are constituted by multiple permanent organisations from different sectors. Their latent resilience persists through the ongoing existence of founding members, and their reactivation capacity is comparatively high. Civic network activations (such as *We Help in Cluj*) are constituted by established civil society organisations leveraging pre-existing networks and can maintain latent resilience through those organisations, though they are more vulnerable to gradual dissolution as the specific initiative fades from view. Specialised

volunteer formations (such as *CERT Transilvania* and *Rescue 4&4*) are most effective during the crisis phase and most at risk of returning to complete invisibility afterward. Community initiatives transitioning into services (such as *SuperMed*) represent the rarest and most sustainable trajectory, where latent capacity is converted into active, permanent community provision.

5.2 The Asymmetry Between Crisis and Post-Crisis Dynamics

A central finding of this study is the asymmetry between crisis-phase and post-crisis dynamics. During the crisis, informal civic actors were rapidly recognised, incorporated into formal coordination structures, and publicly acknowledged. After the crisis, formal institutions largely returned to pre-crisis partnership patterns, maintaining relationships with actors they already knew rather than institutionalising the new partnerships formed during the emergency.

This asymmetry has a structural explanation. Formal institutions operate through mandates, protocols, and procurement requirements. During the crisis, these requirements were waived in the interest of speed. After the crisis, they reasserted themselves — not through bad faith, but because formal institutions are not designed to maintain informal relationships without a formal basis. Civic actors who contributed to the crisis response face a structural disadvantage in the post-crisis period: the very informality that made them effective in the crisis makes them difficult to incorporate into normal institutional processes.

5.3 Preparedness-Oriented Resilience as a Policy Goal

The post-pandemic trajectories documented in this study suggest a practical and achievable policy goal: transforming latent resilience into preparedness-oriented resilience. Latent resilience is available but invisible — it exists in informal networks and undocumented skills. Preparedness-oriented resilience is latent resilience that has been systematically mapped and made available for activation.

A municipal registry of civic organisations with crisis experience — recording competencies, contact persons, and activation conditions — would be sufficient to achieve this transformation for actors equivalent to *CERT Transilvania, Rescue 4&4,* and *Beard Brothers in Cluj-Napoca*. The cost is modest: a periodic survey of civil society organisations, maintainable by existing

municipal structures such as *the Social and Medical Assistance Directorate or the Prefect's Office.* The benefit is significant: reduced mobilisation time and broader civic engagement in future crises.

This recommendation does not require that informal organisations become formal, that volunteers be employed, or that civic initiatives be integrated into formal procurement processes. It requires only that someone asks them who they are, what they can do, and how to find them — and writes down the answer.

6. Conclusions

This article has examined how six informal civic initiatives emerged and operated as resilience actors in the social services ecosystem for older people in Cluj-Napoca during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Three contributions to the literature emerge from the findings.

First, the analysis provides longitudinal empirical evidence — spanning 2020 to 2025 — of the post-crisis trajectories of informal civic actors, a dimension largely absent from the pandemic research literature. The trajectories documented here follow a structural logic rooted in the degree of institutionalisation achieved during the crisis and the availability of ongoing mandate post-crisis.

Second, the data empirically grounds the distinction between active and latent resilience, and the policy concept of preparedness-oriented resilience — a framework that goes beyond the binary of public institutions (visible but slow and rigid) and civic actions characterised by spontaneous volunteerism (fast and flexible but unpredictable and unsustainable).

The presented case study enlarges the Central and Eastern European perspective to the literature on institutional response to the COVID-19 crisis, dominated by Western European and North American cases. The Cluj-Napoca case illustrates both the specific strengths of the local civic ecosystem — its diversity and accumulated relational capital — and the structural constraints common to post-socialist institutional contexts, including underfunded social services, limited formalisation of civic partnerships, and the absence of systematic civic capacity mapping.

The central practical implication of the study is straightforward: the most important crisis preparedness investment is not in crisis-specific protocols, but in the ongoing civic relationships and community institutions that make rapid activation of latent capacity possible. And the most important post-crisis investment is in mapping and maintaining what was discovered during the emergency, so that the next crisis does not have to start from scratch.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The research was approved by *the Ethics Commission of Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work (Decision no. 227/26.03.2026).* Written informed consent was obtained from all interview participants prior to data collection.

Data Availability Statement

Interview data are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality agreements. Primary institutional documents cited in this article are publicly accessible.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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