

Special Edition

Political Trends & Dynamics

The COVID-19 Pandemic in Southeast Europe:
Experiences on the Ground

POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

A FES DIALOGUE SOUTHEAST EUROPE PROJECT

Peace and stability initiatives represent a decades-long cornerstone of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's work in southeastern Europe. Recent events have only reaffirmed the centrality of Southeast European stability within the broader continental security paradigm. Both democratization and socio-economic justice are intrinsic aspects of a larger progressive peace policy in the region, but so too are consistent threat assessments and efforts to prevent conflict before it erupts. Dialogue SOE aims to broaden the discourse on peace and stability in southeastern Europe and to counter the securitization of prevalent narratives by providing regular analysis that involves a comprehensive understanding of human security, including structural sources of conflict. The briefings cover fourteen countries in southeastern Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries and Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED

- **Civic Mobilizations in Southeast Europe** 
February / March 2017
- **Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans** 
April / Mai 2017
- **NATO in Southeast Europe** 
June / July 2017
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- **Deficient Welfare States in Southeast Europe** 
Volume 1/2020



EDITORIAL

The global COVID-19 pandemic will long be remembered as an inflection point in personal life as well as in global politics and history. While the full scope and depth of the crisis – in terms of public health but also economics and social politics in its entirety – cannot yet be fully predicted, its costs will be doubtlessly severe. But the world is being re-made, we know that much.

by
Jasmin Mujanović
Alida Vračić
Ioannis Armakolas

That anxiety is reflected in this special of our *Political Trends and Dynamics* newsletter. We felt it was crucial to elevate voices from the communities whose individual struggles are being obscured by sweeping narratives of a global phenomenon. As such, we have reached out to activists and lawyers, doctors and union organizers, to paint a portrait of individual regions grappling with the pandemic. There are wide disparities in these accounts, and neat, overarching conclusions are difficult to extract. But these stories matter, and they will matter for the emerging struggles for social justice and equality that will grip the region post-pandemic.

And yet as Italy and Spain still grapple with massive daily death tolls, the states of the Western Balkans and greater southeastern Europe appear to be weathering the storm remarkably well. At least in terms of the overall number of deaths. But, as many of our authors note, the pandemic has put tremendous stress on the already under-resourced health care services of the region, as well as their likewise weak macro-economic regimes.

As such, arguably the defining feature of how Western Balkan states have responded to the crisis has been through their appeal for greater foreign assistance: from both the EU but also emerging regional powers like China, Russia, and Turkey. Unsurprisingly, the solicitation and acquisition of these aid shipments has followed familiar partisan lines in the region, most strikingly in the case of Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić. Mr. Vučić's acrid criticisms of the EU's posture towards the region stood in sharp contrast to his mawkish praise for China.

In this sense, as many of the contributions in this special edition of our newsletter note, the COVID-19 pandemic in the region has exacerbated existing governance patterns in the region, rather than created new realities. Take for instance the restrictions on movement and even communication in the region, the increasingly pervasive anti-migrant sentiment (now reframed in the context of public health), or even the dire effects on labour rights – the last of which is a major feature of several texts in this edition. Concerns with declining democratic standards, media freedom, and xenophobia are well established themes in regional politics – now newly ascendant thanks to this cataclysmic global crisis. It was also interesting to note how many of our correspondents – particularly women – talked about the new reality of unpaid domestic labour and the difficulties of feeding their families, and caring for (and in some cases home schooling) children, some while working more than ever from home.

Even so, as governments all over the world look to »re-open« their economies – in whatever limited sense of the term – local analysts and citizens worry about the lasting legacies of the pandemic on their societies. While the exacerbation of preexisting (or underlying) dynamics in the region may be down to the pandemic, it is unlikely that the retreat of the virus will mean a likewise quick return to »normal« in a broader socio-political dimension. In this sense, COVID-19's political, economic, and social side effects may prove to be still more severe than the disease itself.

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CIVIL LIBERTIES AND GOVERNANCE

SEREN SELVIN KORKMAZ



Seren Selvin Korkmaz is the co-founder and Executive Director of IstanPol Institute, an Istanbul-based independent think-tank. She is also an alumni of the New Ways, New Processes Programme of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Turkey.

COVID-19 came at a moment when most scholars often quote Gramsci's famous phrase: »the old is dying and the new cannot be born.« On the one hand we have rising inequalities and the precarization of work, on the other hand rising autocratization and right-wing populism around the world had already begun to push the masses to seek a more just world. As we have observed so far and predicted for the future, COVID-19 exacerbates these existing inequalities. Many people continue to go work in unsafe conditions or have lost their jobs because of the measures. Autocrats have begun to use the crisis to increase their control over society and to suppress opposition. Hence, COVID-19 as a global health crisis quickly turned into a political, social, and economic crisis and changed the rhythm of everyday life.

History tells us that a transformation is inevitable after such a big crisis. However, it is important to underline that the direction of the transformation will be determined by the capability of politicians and the demands of society. For instance, Roosevelt's 'New Deal' after the Great Depression ensured a strong governmental role in the economy to stabilize the economy and provide jobs and relief for those who were suffering after crisis. In Europe however, the unemployed masses have raised the flag of fascism given the lack of progressive policies.

Thus in the current crisis there is room for authoritarian and for progressive ideas – for populists and social democrats.

This process may produce two different scenarios for populists. First, it is apparent that during the crisis, authoritarian populists in power use the advantage of society's desire for protection and security to increase their executive power, harass the opposition, and control public discussion. For instance, in Hungary, a set of measures was announced that mean that Viktor Orbán can rule by decree for an indefinite period. In Turkey, the government is busy with obstructing opposition parties from setting up solidarity campaigns. However, in the long run populists in rule may lose power since it is very difficult to deal with the burden of this global crisis without suggesting structural welfare programs. Second, right-wing populism in the opposition could benefit from the crisis by strengthening their nationalist arguments and putting the responsibility for the crisis to the current incumbents.

However, if the parties on the left and center develop convincing alternative political solutions to the social and economic problems exacerbated by the pandemic, they will overcome the unrealistic policies of right-wing

CIVIL LIBERTIES AND GOVERNANCE



populism. After the pandemic, people will demand a better health system, and those who lose their jobs or subsistence will demand economic justice. This may create a space to call for a welfare state and a rethinking of social democratic policy suggestions. Social democrats have the potential to grow in popularity by focusing on basic promises and bringing class back into politics by embracing the demand of precariat.

Victor Hugo said that »nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.« Now, the time has come for rethinking and revitalizing social democracy by mobilizing the precariat, a burgeoning new class, under the social democrat principles of equality, liberty, and solidarity.



CIVIL LIBERTIES AND GOVERNANCE

AYSUDA KÖLEMAN



Aysuda Kölemen is a comparative political scientist at Bard College Berlin, Germany.

I talk to my parents daily, much more often than I did before. They live in Turkey and the government ordered all people under 20 and above 60 to shelter in place, so they have been confined to their homes for weeks now. The only other person they see these days is the doorman who does their shopping, unless you count video conferencing. They are safe from the virus, but unable to leave home even to take a short stroll. There is no lockdown for those between 20 and 60. Blue collar workers continue to work in crowded workplaces or face unemployment while white collar workers mostly work from home. Lockdown is for the economically privileged.

The Turkish government demands my trust, but a lifetime of betrayals of trust are etched deep into my memory and distrusting the government is second nature to me. I worry for the health personnel on the frontlines, for the at-risk workers, for the unemployed, and for the refugees. A friend I have not seen in years is collecting donations to buy PPE for health personnel at state hospitals, defying a government ban on donations. We are on our own, she exasperatedly says, we have to take care of each other. The central government bans municipalities controlled by opposition parties from handing out care packages. They prevent citizens from making donations to local governments, but they ask people to donate money to the central government. Municipalities should not be challenging state authority, they insist. Are municipalities not state institutions? Violent criminals are released from prisons because of the pandemic but journalists or politicians are not. The government continues bids for large construction projects while hospitals lack resources. Every evening citizens have to endure the indignity of listening to press conferences that try to put a positive spin on the daily death tally. They never see us eye to eye, rather insisting that things will be fine soon. That's the worst part. It's not the truth that scares me the most, it's the lack of transparency, not knowing the truth. I am grateful to the doctors, nurses, cleaners in hospitals who are working tirelessly, selflessly and somehow manage to prevent the situation from getting worse. I put my trust in them. We will take care of each other.

I live in Germany. I half-expect Merkel to tell us that everything will be fine, that she is in charge, and that they are in control, but she is apologetic about the undemocratic nature of the lockdown measures. There is no positive spin, no false hope, no bragging about how well Germany responded to the crisis. Her voice is calm and resolute, yet her words reveal her distress. She wants us to turn to institutions and experts for information. I realize that she trusts us to handle the truth. I don't know how things will turn out, but I know I am not being lied to and at this moment, that is something onto which I can hold.



RAZVAN GAE

Q: *After years of chronic under financing, the health care system is in now the front line in fighting the pandemic. How did the pandemic affect the Romanian health care system?*

A: Obviously in a negative way, emphasizing even further already existing deficiencies such as a lack of digitalization of the system, a lack of viable protocols, shortage of medical personnel, especially nurses and health-care assistants, and a deficit in sanitary materials for unforeseen situations, in particular suitable personal protective equipment (PPE).

Q: *The government has increased the funding for the health care system and came up with series of emergency measures. How do you assess the government's response to the crisis when it comes to health care system? Did the government take the right measures, provide enough support and financing?*

A: I see lack of professionalism due to the lack of professionals in the Ministry of Health. Unfortunately, the government did not take the correct measures, or implement new specific protocols at a national level. Although financially the government has supplemented with funds to fight against the coronavirus, this came too late, the equipment and protective materials are now much more expensive, and most importantly they are much harder to obtain. Although the WHO warned since January that there was a possibility that the coronavirus epidemic in China would transform into a worldwide pandemic, no one from the Ministry of Health did anything until March.

Q: *Thousands of Romanian medical doctors and health care professional have left the country and are working now in Western European Countries, such as the UK, Germany or France. Has the emigration of health professionals to Western European countries affected the capacity of your country's health system to deal with the COVID crisis?*

A: Obviously the answer is yes. Translated into practice, it means major staff shortage in the UPU (Emergency Receiving Unit) and ATI (Anesthesia and Intensive Care) area, but also in many other medical departments and especially of well-trained nurses, healthcare assistants, and support auxiliary staff.

Q: *In the last weeks, several medical doctors refused to continue their work and resigned because of the failure to provide adequate protection and equipment for the medical staff. How do you assess the working conditions and protection at the workplace in Romanian hospitals?*



Razvan Gae is the Vice President of the Romanian Trade Union Federation SANITAS, an organization of health and social care workers. He is also VP of the European Public Services Unions Standing Committee on Health and Social Services. Razvan Gae is a Licensed Principal Medical Assistant.



HEALTH

A: Unfortunately, the doctors who resigned considered that this gesture was made in order to respect the Hippocratic oath, not wishing to endanger the lives of patients due to the lack of protective equipment, which transforms us, health professionals, into biological bombs. As mentioned above, the level of protection has been and is unfortunately still insufficient, especially in the context of the current crisis. The protection protocols I considered to be totally inadequate for the present scenario.

Q: *Do you see any opportunities connected to this situation, do you think health care will become a priority for our governments in the future after we all have seen that public health is crucial for the functioning of our societies?*

A: I am convinced that with the end of the crisis, if Romania is led by this government or a right-wing or center-right government, health will not be a priority, not even on paper. Unfortunately, health financing has never been a priority for any government since 1990, and as evidence of my convictions, there are European-level statistics that make it very clear that Romania is the last country in the European Union in terms of GDP percentage allocated towards health, being only 5.4 % of its GDP in 2019, compared to the EU average which is close to 9.6 %, or even France with 11.5 %, a model that the former minister of health Costache wanted to implement in Romania.

Q: *As a trade union leader, you know that solidarity is a crucial aspect in fighting for our rights and for a better society. Still, in the last 30 years individualism was an important pillar around upon which we built our society. Do you think this crisis will reinforce the solidarity or rather the opposite?*

A: Speaking only for myself, I will say that unfortunately, this crisis will have almost no effect in terms of what solidarity means as an attribute of unions. The fact that we have five trade union confederations that have failed to merge, although there have been attempts, and the existence of many fragmented branch unions, tells me that trade unionism in Romania is tributary as you said, to the individualism of some leaders (and cultivated in 30 years of false democracy) who do not understand that union power lies in the number of members within a union and not in the number of unions.



DELILA HASANBEGOVIĆ

It is no surprise that women too often bear the brunt of any crisis, and there is no exception in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its current and forthcoming crises. Every crisis takes place on the back of workers, especially in the fields of *trade and services*, and their rights are often limited, denied, and endangered. The COVID-19 situation has additionally intensified and highlighted existing class differences and gender inequalities.

Some global estimates say that after the end of this crisis, around 200 million people will lose their jobs,¹ with companies laying off workers whom they pay miserably anyway. We see COVID-19 becoming a weapon against workers in poorer countries, refugees and migrants, poorly paid workers, miners, persons suffering domestic violence and other vulnerable populations wherein one group gains power and privilege through the exploitation and oppression of those who are the true engine of society.

Retail workers – Are the *pandemic's heroes* and *system's engines* adequately protected?

One of those engines that never goes out and helps us all to survive this pandemic are merchants and supermarket workers. They work all the time, even when the more privileged work less, work in the comfort of their homes, or do not work at all. They expose themselves daily, risking their health, all the while not receiving any benefits or an adequate salary for their efforts to maintain food supplies and sustain the system of supply and demand.

In conversation with the president of B&H Trade and Service Workers Union, Ms. Mersiha Beširović commented that the union has demanded health and economic protection measures, including disinfectants, face masks, gloves, financial rewards, tax exemptions and contributions for employers, provided they retain and pay all their workers, and increased wages for those working on the front line. For a majority of these proposals, there was no support from the government. She stated: »Workers doing their jobs in these times don't need experts or political platforms. They need understanding and empathy from the government, their employers, and customers who are also an important factor that make this sit-



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¹ Šobajjić, Vladimir (10.4.2020), *Maske su pale! Marketing u doba pandemije*. Mašina – proizvodnja društvene kritike, dostupno na: <http://www.masina.rs/?p=13064>



LABOUR

uation even more difficult for the workers, the heroes of this pandemic».² She said the situation is getting better, but much slower and more lethargically than necessary.

»It's incomprehensible, for example, that employers still haven't properly compensated their workers who brought out tens of tons of flour with their own hands for the citizens to buy. Those workers had their eyes capillaries break from the weight of the cargo, open wounds on their hands from disinfectants, headaches from breathing through masks that they've been using for days, etc. Meanwhile, their employers, who in half a month made as much as a six-month worker income, cannot give up their *part of the cake* and thank those women«, continues Ms. Beširović. To make the situation worse, the Union has information about companies that order women workers to, for the sake of »improving« the sales of goods, sell goods directly to households. This inhumane task needlessly exposes women workers to various people, unaware of their infection status.

A supermarket worker's perspective – *There is no discipline*

And what do the workers say? They have the basic stuff – protective masks, gloves, and disinfectants only for themselves, but not for customers. A salesperson from a Sarajevo *Amko* supermarket said: »No order or control is obeyed in terms of how many customers can be in the supermarket at the same time. It shouldn't be more than three persons, but they let in more. There is no discipline. During the first days of the crisis, women workers self-organised, locked the doors and let only three buyers in, but then the director found out and we received an e-mail saying we shouldn't be doing that, that we should let ›our loyal customers in and warn them to keep a 1.5 metre distance‹ from each other. We work from 8 A.M. to 6:30 P.M. one day, after that we have a day off. This is quite tiring for me, bearing in mind my private life and family. Before the coronavirus situation, we had worked every day – one day in the morning shift (from 7:15 A.M.) and the next day the afternoon shift (from 2:20 P.M.)«.

According to this worker's statements, they received no stimulus, but haven't been denied their usual income either (though this has happened before), the conditions are the same as in regular times. »We are the only supermarket where the cashier cannot sit on a chair (we do not have them)«.

2 Hasanbegović, Delila (6.4.2020), *Intervju Mersiha Beširović: Velika je razlika između prava radnica u javnom i privatnom sektoru!*. Inicijativa Građanke za ustavne promjene, dostupno na: <https://gradjankezaustavnepromjene.wordpress.com/2020/04/06/intervju-mersiha-besirovic-velika-je-razlika-izmedu-prava-radnica-u-javnom-i-privatnom-sektoru/>



Where are women in the retail sector and trade unions?

The private sector in BiH does not provide women with the labour rights they deserve, and the situation is far worse than in public sector. Some call today's work in the private sector *modern slavery*. It is a terrain where the prevailing rule is »as the boss says,« despite the existing labour legislation. »Women workers are scared, financially dependent on low wages, mentally and emotionally numb and robotic. Members of BiH Trade and Service Workers Union are lonely in the struggle for labour rights in these sectors. There are no allies in other unions, so we search for allies in the media and, lately, in the NGO sector that is also in need of rule of law and labour rights,« says Ms. Beširović.

There are few women in the unions, not because they do not want to be there, but, as Ms. Beširović states, because it requires a great sacrifice and has a very high price for family, health, but also self-esteem. One other issue is that majority of private sector employers do not want social dialogue and do not recognize unions as partners.

Good news or further stagnation?

Of course, there are examples of employers who take good care of their workers, especially in times of crisis, and not all employers are the same. Thanks to the Trade and Service Workers Union's previous activities and appeals towards employers in the BiH trade sector – to financially reward workers for all the efforts they made in order for the basic grocery supply chain to keep functioning – March 2020 salaries got higher. This is positive news and reward for workers who, besides all dangers they had been exposed to on a daily basis, were at their work posts, smiling, of service for BiH citizens.

Also, BiH Independent Unions' Alliance is doing its best to support and protect workers in these times. Among other activities, they published a brochure named »Basic labour rights in times of the pandemic«³ that contains basic information on rights of workers in relation to their employers.

However, in parallel, miners from Zenica are suffering salary reductions, despite harsh working conditions, and are forced to suspend work out of protest. The contradictions are many, the practice is not harmonized and, as it always turns out, the workers, especially women, bear the brunt. Indeed, the only thing that shows that a different world is possible are the everyday workers' struggles and mutual solidarity, domestic as well as international. Let's hope for its best examples in Bosnia and Herzegovina!

3 Available here: <https://www.sssbih.com/brosura-osnovna-radnicka-prava-za-vrijeme-pandemije/>

> LABOUR



Branimir Ilijanić works for IKEA Croatia for almost six years. He and his colleagues established a union branch of the Commercial Trade Union of Croatia in the spring of 2015. He is a full-time union representative, and he also works as a council representative for IKEA Croatia, as well as on the Health and Safety Board. The union branch has grown in recent years. At this moment, IKEA Croatia has a total of around 600 workers in one store located on the outskirts of Zagreb county, and six pick up points in Pula, Rijeka, Zadar, Split, Dubrovnik, and Osijek.

BRANIMIR ILIJANIĆ

Q: How is the COVID pandemic affecting your industry/area of expertise?

A: Croatian commerce was hit heavily by the pandemic of COVID-19, especially as most non-essential stores are closed and only selling online. As a result, IKEA has been hit hard by this pandemic, though we are trying to quickly transfer most of our business online. Now the situation is »good« and we are achieving most of our business targets related to online business.

The first days of the pandemic at IKEA Croatia were a bit confusing, mainly because our management board is actually located in Belgrade, Serbia, where most decisions for the entire IKEA South East Europe region (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, and Ukraine) are made. After the first wave of shock and confusion, IKEA very quickly brought about the first measures needed to save the workplaces and income for all workers no matter what type of contract they have, or its impact on profit. When the Croatian government later announced economic help and measures, it was easier to make this decision and was a kind of a relief to business operations.

Q: What do you think of your government's response to the crisis, especially regarding your field of work/industry?

A: Personally, I think that the government's economic measures came two weeks too late, but better late than never. In the epidemiological sense, I think that Croatia is a good example of handling things right. I think there needs to be another wave of economic help for individuals/citizens however, not just companies. Certainly, banks need to be one the biggest contributors to help bring relief to the market and society in general (for example: a moratorium on loan repayment until the end of the calendar year for citizens).

Unions have been communicating on a daily basis with members and monitoring the government's relief measures for the state economy. For unions, it is important to have an inside look at this measure so that they can notify authorities in case of misuse.

Q: How does the pandemic (and the response to the pandemic) affect your daily life?

A: If you ask me, the only thing that has significantly changed is that my radius of movement is now located in the 55 m² of my house, I am engaging in less travel, more team meetings, and to be honest, more online



work. And I prefer more physical contact, so this social distancing is really hard for me.

Q: Is the government doing enough to protect underprivileged or marginalised groups?

A: To be honest, Croatia as a state is very confusing and corrupt, but I have a feeling that now that the situation is really serious and dangerous, we as society show that we jump in to help to the most underprivileged and marginalised groups. Maybe I'm not well informed, but I don't see that problem in our society at the moment. That doesn't mean that later when all this is over, we will not see injustices towards certain groups in society.

Q: Do you see any opportunities connected to this situation?

A: I see lot of opportunities. For society as a whole, this is a perfect moment to restart or reboot for all of us, maybe to reprioritize our needs and create a better society for all, and not only for a small group of people. In a business sense, there should also be a way of rebooting and adapting to the future of work, moving the focus to online business and in that way creating more free time for workers.

Q: How do you think the crisis will affect solidarity – within your country and across borders?

A: In between ordinary people there is empathy and solidarity, but on the level of politicians and governments, that is a big IF. If I look from my perspective as a union representative with 120 members in the union branch, and that all of them need to be updated on what IKEA is doing, I can have at least empathy for those who are now leading the country. It is not an easy job and after all this passes they going to be judged by the public at the next elections.

Q: Has the EU's handling of the crisis influenced your attitude towards European integration?

A: Nothing has changed regarding my attitude towards the EU. I am a strong believer in the EU and Croatia is too small a country to live in self isolation. There's going to be always imperfections, but the EU is a better choice than separating ourselves inside closed borders. And since we are part of EU, there are many EU funds which can help us to support our economy and fight against COVID-19.



LABOUR

SABINA LEBEN



Sabina Leben is a young worker, mother and a trade union activist from Slovenia.

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, I have worked from home. My everyday rhythm has collapsed and the amount of stress has increased. I work full time and since the crisis, I have also become a tutor, teacher, and motivator for my child. I am happy that I only have to care for one child.

Working from home has both positive and negative sides. I get full pay, so I don't have financial worries, but I am under a lot of pressure. My son is full of energy and I want to start the day with his school work. In that time I can't do much of my work, so I wait until the evening when everybody is asleep and I can have some quiet time for work. While working into the late night hours, I don't get enough sleep and have trouble waking up in the mornings. The day just doesn't have enough hours for me. The problem is not just home schooling and working. I also have to make precise time planning for each day. I have to plan my weekly shopping and plan our meals in advance. Fortunately, my family lives in a house with a garden, but I have the horrible feeling that I am locked at my own house.

I have not seen my grandma who lives in a nursing home for 2 months now. My mother is part of the at-risk group, so I haven't seen her since this started either. She lives about 50 kilometres away and since the government put out a decree not to cross municipal borders, I don't want to risk a 400 € fine for violating that decree. Fortunately, I can see my mother and friends via video calls.

I don't trust my government. They have announced some absurd relaxations of measurements. People can play golf and tennis, because of the distance between players, but I can't go visit my mother, or sit in a park. The focal points of the virus at this moment in Slovenia are nursing homes. And I do agree with some measures and restrictions enacted to prevent the virus from spreading. But in our country, the government has gone too far.

The positive side of this pandemic is the increase of solidarity. People are volunteering and helping the elderly. They go to the market and bring them what they need. University students are tutoring primary school children over the internet. In every Facebook group there are some posts and recipes for baking delicious bread. What I am afraid of is that once life returns to normal, the solidarity will disappear too.

But I do hope that I am wrong, because the »normal« we know is gone.



MARIO RELJANOVIC

The introduction of a state of emergency to protect the population from the COVID-19 pandemic has created major problems for most employers and workers. Pursuant to the Government Decree, work in education and scientific institutions is carried out from home, and teaching, consultations, and other activities are carried out remotely via online meetings and electronic communication. After the initial difficulties, all activities that were suitable for this method of work were transferred to work-from-home mode. However, it is certain that this mode of operation sometimes requires far more time and energy and that modern communication technology cannot always replace conventional working methods.

It should also be noted that the labour law system is not designed for such circumstances and that many classic labour law instruments cannot be used without necessary corrections. The government seems not to have appropriately addressed these issues, so most employers are left to improvise on their own, which also entails a great deal of autonomy in deciding upon the restrictions of workers' rights. This has led to several waves of collective layoffs, some of which are quite certainly not carried out in accordance with legal norms. Also, there is a lack of state control over the implementation of worker protection measures, which leads to significant endangerment of workers during transportation to and from work, as well as in the work process itself. The government continues to reiterate that it is unable to issue orders to private employers, which of course is not true and is an incentive for employers to engage in unlawful conduct. These developments have led to workers' protests. The worker's protest at the Jura factory resulted in a reaction from the Labor Inspectorate, as well as in the arrest and prosecution of one of the workers. Meanwhile, no employers were held responsible for their non-compliance in safety measures or for endangering the health and life of workers.

Finally, it is safe to say that government measures adopted thus far to help with economic recovery have significant shortcomings. Some of these measures will be implemented very late and have a common focus on employers while attention to worker's needs is severely lacking. Any benefits from these measures for workers is minimal and will in most cases be indirect. There is no long-term plan to assist workers, citizens who have lost their jobs, or socially disadvantaged and vulnerable parts of the population.



Mario Reljanovic is a Doctor of Law. His main areas of interest are in labor and social law, anti-discrimination law and legal informatics. He works as a researcher at the Institute for Comparative Law in Belgrade.

LABOUR

KRISTINA AMPEVA



Kristina Ampeva is president of the Citizens Association of Textile, Leather, and Shoe Workers »Glasen Tekstiles« from Shtip, North Macedonia.

Q: *What are the immediate effects of the Corona Pandemic in the Macedonian textile sector?*

A: We have been seeing the effects of the coronavirus since the day the government announced its first measures – closing educational institutions. Pressure on workers started the very next day, especially on workers covered by the interim measures which relieved them of their work duties (pregnant women, the chronically ill, parents, especially mothers of children under 10 years of age).

What is yet to follow is even worse. More workers are to be fired, because 90 % of the Macedonian textile sector deals in CMT (cut, make, trim) production, contracted by foreign companies who normally place orders regularly, but now they too are affected by the same isolation measures in countries where citizens' last concerns are what to wear and which fashion trends to follow.

My knowledge obtained through informal interviews with a small number of employers we had contact and some level of cooperation with, is that the crisis is yet to spread, orders for the coming season have been cancelled, and as I indicated, the Macedonian textile sector depends on orders from abroad. Presently, textile plants and factories are finalizing the orders that remain to be sent, and many of them are sewing masks and uniforms, again to be sent abroad. In the past weeks we were approached by many employees, not just from the textile industry but also from other private sector branches, so the current situation is that employers are getting rid of exactly of those workers who have been temporarily relieved by these government measures because they are the weak link for which employers would have to pay minimum wage and they do not even work.

Let us not generalise, but only a fraction of companies and employers take this situation seriously, as well as the role they have towards diligent employees who have been sent home not by their own fault, but by a force which is greater than any other profit, a force which has put the entire world to a halt, including large multinational companies. Even if there are to be dismissals, the reasons for this are not provided for by our legislation, as a pandemic was never foreseen, so we have to seek new ways to protect workers in a situation like this. By ›protected‹ first of all I mean health insurance, the right to remuneration – so to help them endure these difficult months of crisis.



As an activist, I am appalled by several employers who have been seeking ways to invent evidence of violations by workers, or have forged signatures of employees, handed consensual terminations of employment, without thinking for a second that such type of notices, under our social care laws, will bring no right to remuneration, no temporary unemployment assistance, no health care, and no state assistance to their former workers. In these circumstances, no financial aid is available for workers considered to be ›at fault‹ – despite our being a purported welfare state.

Q: *Are the jobs at risk or can the production of medical masks and protective clothing prevent people from being fired?*

A: Literally all jobs which cannot be done from home are exposed to risk, and given the rather strict measures which the state has imposed on us for handling the pandemic, the first affected by the measures were hotels and restaurants, fitness centres, and similar establishments. Initially there were no restrictions for the textile and shoemaking companies, apart from some recommendations, so that their operation would proceed and for this economic activity not to suffer. And at that point we realised that the textile sector, in fact, other than its dependence on CMT production and low wage levels in the sector, has one even bigger anomaly, and that is the lack of any business plan, although the textile industry in our country has a long history.

Instead of the textile associations and employers getting together at the very outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe and preparing themselves to take over the European market for sewing protective equipment, we even lacked the material to secure masks for a small town of 30,000 residents, not even enough for the first responders (healthcare workers, army, police, fire-fighters). There was no proper planning or strategy to seize the momentum of existing dominance of the textile industry in the country and to help our own country at first, but also to win a market across all of Europe with the idea of alleviating the effects of the crisis and preserving jobs, precisely because we rely on CMT production. Presently, there are several companies sewing protective equipment for abroad but their number is small and insignificant, and this has only happened now, after most countries have started reducing their measures and are getting ready to resume life back to normal.

Q: *Are the health and safety standards regarding the spread of Coronavirus respected by most employers and employees? (And what is the response of the institutions in the event that these standards are violated?)*

»I don't remember ever signing a document, nor would I ever sign a consensual termination of employment, when I am aware that this would not entitle me to any remuneration or any health insurance«.

Testimony of textile worker from Skopje



LABOUR

»Our employer called us, us with children younger than ten who are relieved from work with a note from the kindergarten confirming this fact, and threatened to fire us unless we return to work. I really have nobody to look after my child, kindergartens are closed, and my husband is away. I cannot just leave the child unattended«.

Testimony of textile worker from Shtip

A: From the very first day we have been following closely literally all the measures, decisions, sessions, bans and restrictions, orders and recommendations made by the government and ministries. We are trying to maintain communication with all the relevant organisations and trade unions in order to share information and be of assistance to workers, regardless of the branch they represent.

As a local civil society organisation, we have established good cooperation with the Mayor of Municipality of Shtip, the regional branch offices of the labour and health and safety inspectorates, and the employment agency, all with the objective of reducing the damage caused by dismissals, ensuring a safe work environment with due respect of all regulations and safe transport of employees to the workplace. Thanks to such timely coordination, we have managed to prevent the contagion from spreading in the sewing plants and to isolate individual cases in case they emerge in order to prevent major damage that might cause a production stoppage in the whole company and an increase in infections. The inspectorate has had timely reactions to our verbal complaints and they immediately result into warnings issued to transporters and companies. Same with dismissals, we react to the responsible inspectorate, so in several cases notices of dismissal have been annulled due to breach of provisions of labour law, which I must say, is happening for the first time. The same with the employers, at least part of them are aware of the risk of the virus and are taking and implementing a great many of the recommendations related to the safe distance keeping, protective equipment, disinfection etc.

Unfortunately I cannot state that the same is happening in other towns as well. We heard two towns with infected workers in companies, but the relevant authorities took no measures to contain the virus, and as a result they have now implemented special and more rigid measures. However, in spite of that, in the name of profit and close relations with employers, people turn a blind eye, and measures are not taken to protect workers who still work in large halls of 200 or even 300 people. This shows how ill prepared and unprofessional people are when it comes to people's health, which surely affects the public health of the entire city.

It would have been much simpler if our recommendations for use of the annual leave for 2019 and 2020 were taken seriously, which is regulated by our labour law with the objective of reacting quickly and handling the virus effectively. What this period also lacks is social dialogue with trade unions and civil society organisations at the central level. We see that measures are taken for the protection of the economy, provisions of the law and bylaws are interpreted as per the needs of the business sector, and meanwhile workers' rights suffer and are violated.

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ROBERT KASUMOVIĆ

Although most of the population is slowly getting used to measures of restricted movement and isolation, the situation within the Roma community in Serbia is alarming. Numerous existential problems that characterize these communities even in times of regular status have now culminated.

No measure of the government of the Republic of Serbia is directed towards supporting the poorest sections of society, Roma people, and Roma living in substandard settlements, 589 of which are in Serbia. As many as 30 % of Roma settlements do not have a water supply network, and as many as 65 % do not have any sewage infrastructure. In these conditions, people are not able to adhere to the most basic hygiene measures normally, not to mention in times of emergency. A big problem is the fact that these settlements are often overpopulated, houses are close together, and many people are confined together to a small space. This is a big problem, which affects the rate of infection.

However, the most serious problem of the Roma community is the fact that a large part of it has been left without any income during the state of emergency. Roma people, and women in particular, from substandard settlements are mainly involved in the collection of secondary raw materials. If they represent the backbone of the recycling industry to which they provide as much as 75 % of raw materials, they are still not recognized as a part of it. Private companies that make up Serbia's recycling industry in no way recognize secondary raw material collectors, so they do their jobs in the legally invisible sector, selling raw materials they collect at extremely low prices. This puts them in a very difficult position, and most of them live on the brink of existence even during times of no emergency.

These facts indicate that Roma who are collecting secondary raw materials have not been able to afford and provide essential supplies such as food for their families to be able to stay in isolation during a state of emergency. In order to generate this kind of income, secondary raw material collectors are forced to leave their homes and continue their regular work. However, the ban on movement after 5 PM on weekdays and the complete ban on movement on weekends, significantly reduces the time they can spend working. Moreover, because of the reduction of movement across cities, the amount of recyclable waste has also decreased, virtually leaving secondary raw material collectors without any revenue throughout the duration of the state of emergency.

All the facts listed above indicate that Roma and Roma women in particular, are at the mercy of all problems rising from the introduction of a state



Robert Kasumović is an activist of the Roma Forum of Serbia and a member of the editorial board of the internet portal »Mašina«.



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of emergency without any concrete assistance from the state or international institutions. Their problems have not yet been recognized as existential, though community conditions were doubtlessly severe even before the state of emergency.

If the state does not recognize the problems facing the Roma community during the state of emergency, it is almost certain that this part of the population will be excluded from any plans of assistance to the general population after the state of emergency ends. The only hope which remains is that solidarity within the Roma community itself will once again help the Roma people survive.

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LEFTERIS PAPAGIANNAKIS

The COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly changing our lives by transforming the socioeconomic and political environment. The new reality will demand a lot of adjustments and compromises by all actors.

The measures taken to fight the virus are sometimes extreme, affecting basic human rights and liberties in the name of the protection of public health. And although this protection should concern everyone, there are groups of people who are left out, mainly vulnerable groups.

The Greek government's campaign is called »We Stay Home« and involves movement restrictions and in house confinement. Since the beginning, it became apparent that the Stay Home policy did not apply to everyone. Vulnerable groups of people such as the homeless are de facto excluded due to the lack of appropriate accommodation. There are very few available places for them in very few municipalities. Fortunately, even with some significant delay and especially in Athens, significant resources and means have been mobilised to cover the increased needs of homeless people. Apparently these facilities will remain available even after the end of the pandemic as part of a permanent social response mechanism. This does not mean that there are still many issues that need to be addressed to respond to the housing crisis.

We knew that people who are victims of social exclusion would suffer, but another form of digital exclusion emerged because people with no access to the internet are left out from parts of daily and professional life. Digitalisation has not been advancing very quickly in Greece in recent years and the pandemic has catalyzed the process. And though this is extremely useful for the country, not everyone can be part of it for a variety of reasons. The government needs to find solutions so no one is left out. The costs of internet connection are quite high in Greece and acquiring the appropriate hardware can be a luxury for a number of households after the severe financial crisis.

This reality is obliging us to rethink policies and measures in order to safeguard social cohesion and give everyone the chance to feel included and protected.

In the post COVID-19 world, promoting and defending social cohesion will be the main challenge for both society and the political system. The recognition of the importance of public policies and systems, with public health systems being the most important, gives us a great opportunity to reshape politics towards a socially equal and just society.



Lefteris Papagiannakis is the General Secretary of the Hellenic League of Human Rights and member of the Board of the Greek Forum for Refugees. Since November 2019 he has been the Head of Advocacy for SolidarityNow, a Greek NGO.



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ALEKSANDRA JOVANOVIĆ



Aleksandra Jovanović is an economic empowerment and human rights expert with experience in project management, and expertise in the eradication of poverty, the promotion and protection of women, children, minority and property rights and strengthening partner's abilities and institution's capacities.

Q: *How is the COVID pandemic affecting your industry/area of expertise?*

A: Civil society organizations, now more than ever, should stand up for those in need demonstrating integrity, professionalism, and respect for diversity. They must advocate for the most vulnerable and marginalized groups by supporting and empowering others to work together on issues of shared interest and concern and become more active change makers who will catalyze peace and trust-building efforts in our community.

Q: *What do you think of your government's response to the crisis, especially regarding your field of work / industry?*

A: I believe the government is doing the best they can considering the current circumstances and daily challenges including, a serious lack of capacities, funds, and in some fields, a lack of competencies and/or collaboration.

Q: *How does the pandemic (and the response to the pandemic) affect your daily life?*

A: I am still confused as to whether I feel my rights are being violated due to a lack of transparency and/or limited access to information while our health is being compromised, or if I feel proud, blessed, or even privileged by the support I enjoy from my family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, first line healthcare providers, and the increased regional solidarity we witness on a daily bases. The crisis has reminded me to appreciate my time and others' even more and to remain committed to my personal and professional responsibilities while staying at home during lockdown.

Q: *Do you trust your government to make the right decisions to deal with the crisis?*

A: I strongly believe that today more than ever, it is not important whether we go right or left, East or West, as long as we are all committed to respect, support and empower each other, and all move forward together towards more sustainable and peaceful future for all people.

Q: *Is the government doing enough to protect underprivileged or marginalized groups?*

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A: The government must do more to ensure equal access to public services, information, educational and employment opportunities to minority communities and underprivileged or marginalized groups.

Q: *Do you see any opportunities connected to this situation?*

A: Raised public awareness might be a good lesson for all of us to focus more on conflict prevention, starting with the promotion and protection of children rights, followed by personal and professional development towards our responsibilities and contributions with respect to social economic reforms.

Q: *What is your sense of borders in this crisis?*

A: The global pandemic affects us all in a very similar way and helps us understand what the most important things are in life. This has positively influenced our responsibility and accountability with respect to global concerns and interests.

Q: *Has the emigration of health professionals to Western European countries affected the capacity of your country's health system to deal with the COVID crisis?*

A: The lack of employment opportunities and infrastructure, among other things, led to the emigration of health professionals to Western Europe, which has certainly affected our country's health system's ability to deal with the COVID crisis.

Q: *How do you think the crisis will affect solidarity within your country and across borders?*

A: This crisis has helped us understand that we all share similar interests, concerns and responsibilities towards a better tomorrow.

Q: *Has the EU's handling of the crisis influenced your attitude towards European integration?*

A: I believe in people and the democratic values of EU, but what currently concerns me the most is a lack of transparency and collaboration among member states with respect to crisis response.



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FLORINA DULI-SEFAJ



Florina Duli-Sefaj is a development professional and a human rights activist with over thirty years of experience in governance, social justice, international development, emergency management, civil society development, the promotion and protection of vulnerable populations, and policy management and governance.

Q: *How is the COVID pandemic affecting your industry/area of expertise?*

A: The organization I represent currently works a lot on the protection of children. Our focus are children at high and medium risk of abuse, neglect, trafficking. My team and I exert a lot of effort to ensure that the children are provided with all the adequate services that they are eligible for, and that the rights of the most vulnerable are adequately protected by supporting the government and society in building effective child protection systems, designed to protect children, and more importantly, prevent all forms of child abuse. The COVID-19 pandemic has limited our interactions with our partners, which is needed to design new policies in order to continue building this system of child protection in Kosovo.

Q: *What do you think of your government's response to the crisis, especially regarding your field of work/industry?*

A: The current government response to the crisis has been very commendable. However, due to the governance legacy of the past and high levels of corruption, the current government has inherited a very weak health system which lacks equipment, supplies, trained epidemiologists, and other key personnel making it unable to adequately respond to the emergency should the infection rates rise.

The pandemic has also shifted the attention of the government from the policy processes that were in the pipeline and ongoing, for which we had aligned support. Although they are more responsive to external requests and cooperation, they naturally have focused their attention on the emergency, which made us place a lot of our activities and support on hold.

Q: *How does the pandemic (and the response to the pandemic) affect your daily life?*

A: There are three aspects of the pandemic which impact my daily life. Shifting my habit of moving around the office and the city for numerous meetings per day to working from home has had its emotional impact. Being restrained from visiting family, colleagues, and friends has made me very gloomy but understanding. Working from home and spending a lot of time in front of my laptop, chairing or participating in online meetings, writing reports or reviewing different documents, has limited my movement, giving me very little time for physical exercise. It has also demonstrated that by focusing on work only, we had only paid

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lip service to the life work balance, while it took quite a bit of time for the family to adjust to our continuous presence around each other.

Q: *Do you trust your government to make the right decisions to deal with the crisis?*

A: For the first time after 20 years since the war in Kosovo, I felt as if I could believe in the intentions of the current government. However, I also believe that the political drama which is happening in Kosovo in the time of this global emergency, is unnecessary. If the caretaker government is sent home, this will greatly affect the trust levels and the morals of the citizens of Kosovo in these difficult times.

Q: *Is the government doing enough to protect underprivileged or marginalized groups?*

A: The government at both the local and federal level has designed and is implementing measures to support those who are under-served. While the central government is facing greater challenges to get approvals for their designed measures and economic package, the local level along with CSOs are managing well. The worst impact on the vulnerable remains to be seen once the pandemic is over, with great damage done to the job market.

Q: *Do you see any opportunities connected to this situation?*

A: An opportunity for individuals that comes first to mind is the time they can spend with their families. For employers, the obvious opportunity is the realization that working from home, for which there were great reservations in Kosovo, can be effective and can represent cost effectiveness. For policy makers and the government, they have the opportunity to realize the great potential of Information and communications technology (ICT). Kosovo government had spent a lot of money on ICT projects, but they suffered greatly from non-enthusiasm, neglect, and non-maintenance.

Q: *What is your sense of borders in this crisis?*

A: As a Kosovar, being unable to travel beyond the 4 neighboring countries without visas, the concept of borders is very strong. However, we hope that the isolation has given the rest of Europe a sense of what isolation feels like, which can allow them to empathise more with people



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in Kosovo. Hopefully, the pandemic is not going to serve the right's extreme agendas that call for greater isolation into nation states vs globalization proponents.

Q: *Has the emigration of health professionals to Western European countries affected the capacity of your country's health system to deal with the COVID crisis?*

A: The lack of employment opportunities in the country has led to the emigration of health professionals not only from Kosovo but from the entire Western Balkans region, to Western Europe. However, the shortage is not yet felt in Kosovo as the government and the public have done a great job in controlling the curve and in preventing overwhelming the health system.

Q: *What needs to happen during COVID-19 and afterwards in order for a better society to be built?*

A: I believe that the pandemic should have demonstrated the equal vulnerability of the relativity of life altogether. Whether you are rich or poor, a politician or a dissident, a celebrity or a home service provider, you are almost equally affected by the virus. We depend on our health system, but mostly on our own immune systems. In these times money loses its influence and meaning. I hope this realization will serve towards the building of more equal societies, which will focus more on the equal distribution and redistribution of wealth and income.

Q: *How do you think the crisis will affect solidarity – within your country and across borders?*

A: Usually crisis bring people together and prompts a sense of solidarity. I have witnessed a large number of initiatives designed by individuals to help those less fortunate and more vulnerable. I hope this energy will be sustained after the pandemic.

Q: *Has the EU's handling of the crisis influenced your attitude towards European integration?*

A: The crisis has caught both the EU and the member states unprepared for the pandemic. While expectations of the EU were quite low, their performance has been surprising in a positive sense.

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DEYAN KOLEV

The COVID-19 crisis reveals and sharpens social inequalities in all areas. The Roma minority, who is subject to discrimination and multiple inequalities, is on the front line in this regard all over Europe.

The governmental requirements for social distance, i.e. the prohibition on leaving homes, inevitably lead to a serious increase of unemployment rates in Bulgaria. Roma are even more vulnerable because many of them relied on seasonal work or work without an employment contract. Some of the large Roma neighbourhoods where coronavirus cases have been found, were even blocked by the police. This leads to an additional increase in unemployment, since working Roma are not allowed to leave their neighbourhood. This measure also strengthens already existing anti-Roma sentiments and increases them in Bulgarian society. In the coming months, rising unemployment will inevitably lead to higher unemployment among the less educated and ethnic minorities.

Extreme poverty leads to hunger, not only among the poorest and most marginalized families in the country, but also among many families who had managed to overcome poverty and hunger before the crisis. Presently there are starving families in almost all of the Roma neighbourhoods and their numbers are increasing. Government institutions have taken steps to provide food packages. Due to bureaucratic hurdles however, these measures cannot reach the most marginalized families. In any case, those do not represent a sustainable solution to the problem. In many places, richer Roma who work abroad support the poorest families and relatives by sending money home.

Since mid-March, all Bulgarian schools have switched to remote education. That is certainly a step towards the modernization of Bulgarian education, but at the same time there is a real threat of further widening the serious disparities between different types of schools. The main obstacles are the lack of decent internet connectivity for many families, and especially the lack of appropriate devices such as tablets, laptops, and smartphones. It is estimated that between 5 and 10 percent of students in Bulgaria do not have such devices. Another survey conducted by the Amalipe Center in 200 schools, which have a high percentage of Roma students, indicated that more than a quarter of pupils do not have such devices. The Ministry of Education has found a solution to the problem of poor families' internet connectivity by allowing schools to pay for it. However, there is still no systematic solution to the problem of the lack of appropriate devices and schools must rely on donation campaigns.



Deyan Kolev is Chairman of the Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance »Amalipe«. He was Deputy Chairman of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (2008–2009). He is the author of several books, as well as numerous other publications on the history and culture of the Roma, pedagogy, and philosophy.



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In the longer term, the return of many Roma from Western Europe will bring new challenges to their children's school enrollment, employment, and parental income. Over the past decade, the migration and employment of many Bulgarian Roma in Western Europe has been a major contributor to reducing poverty and social tensions in Roma neighbourhoods. This is most likely going to change in the coming months.



DANIJELA LJUBAS

I am a teacher in the primary school system and the current coronavirus crisis in Croatia is affecting my work a great deal. Due to the corona crisis, the way we work has changed rapidly. We moved from the lively, dynamic atmosphere in classroom to the digital methods of teaching, without any preparation or education.

I had to reorganize myself, create new ways and methods of work, and change my routine, which caused a lot of stress at the beginning. It was stressful not only for the teachers but for the parents and children, as well.

Distance learning and teaching in Croatia is led by the Ministry of Science and Education. Like most of my colleagues, I am dissatisfied with the support that we get from the ministry, mainly because experts in the ministry lack real experience working with students in the classroom. Most of the support I get is from my colleagues, who are other teachers sharing their ideas, experience, and methods.

This situation has also definitely affected my private life, above all because it has slowed it down – which I consider is very good and necessary. It was a little more stressful at the beginning until I discovered a new routine and now I feel more comfortable. In fact, I use all of my free time to get to know myself.

I trust the people who are currently managing the situation in the Civil Crisis Headquarters because they radiate authenticity and security. On the other hand, I do not trust the government. Still, I hope that this crisis will bring on a national level increase of domestic production, though I doubt that it is in the government's interest.

What I have seen happening every day is people showing more solidarity and care for others, and I consider this is to be one of the positive things that this global crisis is bringing to light.



Danijela Ljubas is a primary school teacher in Croatia.



EDUCATION

ALEXANDRU MANDA

SABINA SPATARIU



Alexandru Manda works as an advocacy coordinator at the Romanian Academic Society and is a second year law student at the University of Bucharest. He has six years of experience in project management in education. Alexandru was the founding member of the first School Student's Association in Romania and its president for three years from 2015 to 2018.



Sabina Spataru is a 17 year old youth leader from Romania. As president of the Constanta School Student's Association, she fights for student rights and interests, showing that learners can be vectors of change in education. Sabina is a student at the Arts College of Constanta, studying painting.

The COVID-19 pandemic truly represents a challenge for educational systems worldwide. According to UNESCO, 9 out of 10 students worldwide are affected and schools have been closed in 191 states. This is the case in Romania, and the outdated structure of our educational system and resistance to change only serves to aggravate the situation.

For three weeks, the authorities' speeches have not provided any meaningful details about the current situation, leaving the door open for fake news to spread among the overall population, including worried parents, teachers, and pupils. One of the most pressing concerns discussed was the issue of national exams, particularly those for university admissions. Some of the questions brought up during the public discussion were about the dates of the exams, and whether the standards were to remain the same, given that students cannot be reasonably expected to maintain the same high standard of preparation as they usually do.

Though the delay in answers irritated the general public, it has been announced that the exams will be revised, so that the knowledge required by students will only be the part of the curriculum that they have been taught in schools up until they were closed. As such, the pupils will not be expected to know the lessons taught while doing online classes.

But this damaging solution is the expression of the state of helplessness. Instead of universalizing access to online education by assuring electronic devices and mobile data for those in dire financial straits, the Ministry of Education suspended the school year and postponed classes until after the crisis, also recommending online learning when possible. Thus they have not solved the problem, but instead increased already existing inequities, particularly for students from rural areas who cannot afford devices or internet access. Those who can not afford electronic devices will end up being deprived of education.

In Romania, 2 out of 5 children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. For these children, school is their only contact with the outside world besides their family context, and their only chance to get out of poverty and have a better future. Now, they are forgotten by the authorities and with every day of being disconnected from their education, are one step closer to dropping out of school.



TEA JARC

The spread of COVID-19 had caused deep concerns in Slovenia. Such concerns relate to the repercussions of the lives of thousands of people, as well as on economic activities, employment, and the social dimension and resilience of the entire European Union. It is essential that Europe and all of its member states shoulder their responsibility and show support by taking all necessary measures to stop and contain the spread of the virus, and to manage the health and economic effects of this unprecedented pandemic.

Unfortunately, not all of the measures countries developed and started implementing are appropriate. In Slovenia, the new government has not been very inclusive in developing new legislation, rejecting consultation with social partners or respecting social dialogue. Although it is going to allocate more than 3 billion euros as an »intervention fund«, it is becoming clear as policies are being developed, that this will not be sufficient to protect all workers. And it is mostly young and precarious workers who are completely forgotten and left behind in this crisis.

The pandemic has revealed yet again, the precarious situation young people face in the labour market. Measures taken and implemented by countries often forget young people who might have been working in the platform economy, or through students' jobs, internships, or apprenticeships. Due to their temporary, short-term contracts, many young workers have been easily laid-off and because of their atypical, non-standard forms of employment, they do not have access to social protection or financial reimbursement for their loss of income.

Unfortunately, predictions for the future are also not good. It is foreseen that youth unemployment will rise again, as will precariousness and low-quality jobs. The previous economic crisis and the current one show that young people are affected disproportionately. We cannot allow this to continue.

We should all learn some lessons from the current situation and use this opportunity to change the systems in an inclusive, social and environmentally friendly manner.

In my opinion, it is clear we need the following:

- A universal social protection system for young people regardless of the type or length of working contract or working arrangement in the case of atypical work.



Tea Jarc is president of Mladi Plus, a trade union of pupils, students, young unemployed and young precarious workers in Slovenia.

 YOUTH

- Profound reflection about the economic and production system. We should explore alternative indicators that put sustainability and the social well-being of people at the centre of that debate, especially as we are now witnessing daily how unfair and dysfunctional our system is.
- Strong public investments to protect jobs and allow the creation of quality jobs. The previous financial crisis followed by austerity measures left our strategic services weakened and less able to cope with the unprecedented situation. Austerity and cuts in public services must stop and we should invest in people and their well-being instead of in banks.

Unfortunately, the Slovenian government, led by an extreme-right party, is far from agreeing with those ambitions. Rather than seeing a people-oriented approach, we are witnessing autocratic decisions being taken »in the name of the virus«, a hijack of our democracy, the spread of fear-based policy, shady businesses with medical equipment orders, and the persecution of any critical thinking of their governance. This gives me little hope for the future. More than the virus, I am afraid of losing democratic and social processes. And fighting to get them back will take longer than combating the virus.



ANISA GJINI

As of 9th March 2020, Albania started to gradually enter a lockdown phase, and now, more than one month later, people are wondering how long is this going to last.

Young people, more than any other group, fear for their future, have no savings, and are probably the most vulnerable category in the upcoming economic crisis. Students are wondering what economy they will graduate into, if they will be able to find a job, let alone begin thinking about achieving their dreams. Many recent graduates who were employed or self-employed are now facing immediate unemployment, or living with the constant fear of the »we are closing down« notice. Some of them are finding innovative and creative ways to maintain their jobs, while others are just trying to keep their spirits up.

Personally, I am a young woman, a worker, and a lecturer, caught in the midst of this worldwide crisis, and each of these characteristics seems to require an approach which is as different as it is similar.

When it comes to being a young person, I too, have the same fears as anyone else. I might think of myself as more resilient when it comes to facing COVID-19, but nevertheless, I wonder about the future. When it comes to being an employee, I face a working system that was unprepared to go immediately online. Depending on the field of work, or the area where one lives, this issue has been more or less impactful, but for sure it has not been easy for anyone. As a lecturer, as well as a student for my whole life, I am facing for the first time schools shutting down and being told that everything will now be functioning online. It has been a struggle for all the parties involved, but it has been particularly hard for those that without an internet connection or access to a smartphone or laptop, making it very challenging for them to manage studying or working in this suddenly virtual world.

All these changes differ depending on the workplace. All working processes have changed and adapted to online work, including downloading and managing different software for every job and every course. However, one thing remains the same: we are all finding ways and trying our best to make it work.

With this »technological revolution« happening, I believe that many jobs will be reappraised and society as a whole is going to learn something from this new approach. Let's try to see this pandemic as an opportunity to learn, grow and become closer to one another, to work for a better future and economy, not only for youth, but for each other. When all this is over, let's ask »what lesson did you learn?«



Anisa Gjini is a Coordination Officer in a German corporation, and a lecturer at the Polytechnic University of Tirana. For many years she has been working with various organizations on youth issues in Albania.

GERON KAMBERI



Geron Kamberi is an Associate Researcher who has worked for different Albanian think-tanks on the area of EU integration and social research. During the last three years he has worked as the Executive Director of the National Agency for Scientific Research and Innovation (NASRI). Mr. Kamberi holds an MA Degree in European Politics from the Sussex European Institute and brings extensive experience from the international NGO sector working on policy issues, analytical work and project management.

The outbreak of COVID-19 proves, among other things, the need for more evidence based policy making. It has been challenging to increase public understanding and public trust in science in the situation. Academic bodies and think tanks have a role to synthesize the knowledge behind policy questions. We must consider the integration of science and policy as more of a two-way process than a unidirectional one.

As the impacts of the global pandemic continue to spread, young people are also worried about their health and economic security, as well as that of their families. Many have had to build an at-home routine to stay positive, and rethink their futures, as many challenges lie ahead. A big challenge in small countries like Albania is motivating young people to build trust in the future and overcome the difficulties of the present, related to the free flow of ideas, labour, and capital.

ICT and social networks will be very important in filling the gap that can create a lack of social contact as a result of this situation. For a small economy like Albania, which is still based on traditional economic activities such as agriculture, trade, and services, market pressures to move from a brick to click economy can provide an opportunity for young people where they can orient their vocational training. Education will remain the main weapon for young people in Albania to face the new situation, which has already radically changed their lifestyle. The school and the university are considered the most vibrant social micro-environments of modern society, and the transition to online schooling can offer a new perspective on how they will achieve social interaction. In that framework, it should be noted that the continuous effort to reduce the digital divide across the country and increase digital competences and skills will shape many of the education and development policies that even a small country like Albania will need in order to adapt to the near future.



AMIR PURIĆ

For two years, sections of the public in Bosnia and Herzegovina has demanded the closure of borders, a restriction of movement, and the introduction of curfew as solutions to the migrant crisis. In mid-March, over the span of seven days, these practices became a reality. Restrictive measures were adopted to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and targeted not only migrants, but all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Those who sought to restrict the freedom of movement of others now found themselves without that freedom.

The Una-Sana Canton has carried the highest burden of the migrant crisis over the past two years, given that refugees attempt to reach the EU through this part of Bosnia and Herzegovina which borders Croatia. After the COVID-19 outbreak, certain restrictions to human rights, which were already established as regular procedures in the treatment of migrants, were also applied to residents of the Canton.

Four days after the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared a state of emergency, the police stopped buses entering the Una-Sana Canton and passengers from Sarajevo were prohibited from moving further. These citizens, travelling from Sarajevo (or from abroad via the Sarajevo airport) to their homes, now joined the ranks of migrants who were ›removed‹ from buses by police in an effort to stop them from entering the Canton. Where should the Bosnian citizens go now? Some of them who came from abroad had been instructed to self-isolate, and presumably could reach their destination by car, taxi or on foot, but not by bus, for which they purchased a ticket.

This meaningless practice has been applied to migrants since October 2018, and only resulted in migrants walking for a hundred kilometres before eventually reaching Bihać, a border town in the Canton. Now the practice was being used on citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which threatened their health because they were forced to share a small space with others for several hours, contrary to health recommendations. Similarly, this practice has pushed migrants into health risks on a daily basis. For example, in Ključ they were forced to leave the bus and walked for hours in the rain, snow, or heat and alongside car traffic, in order to reach Bihać.

The state borders were closed soon after and tents erected at border crossings, where citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina were to stay upon their return from abroad until they received a government decision on their self-isolation. After spending only one or two days in tents, which had similar conditions – but still not as bad – as the migrant tent settlements of Vučjak



Amir Purić is a journalist and activist from Velika Kladuša, Bosnia and Herzegovina. He worked as a professional journalist for eight years before becoming a political activist in the local initiative »Kladuša je naša« and Naša Stranka. In 2019 he received the Srđan Aleksić Special Plaque for continuous coverage of marginalized groups and the development of socially responsible journalism.



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(Bihać) or Trnovi (Velika Kladuša), the citizens revolted. They even set fire to several tents at the Velika Kladuša border crossing. When asked how they spend their time, one of the ›imprisoned‹ citizens in the tents replied: *People have nothing to do, they get drunk. We are all getting drunk here.*¹

Regardless of the pandemic, work is underway to build a migrant housing settlement in the Una-Sana Canton – a tent settlement called Lipa. The federal and cantonal authorities, with the approval of the EU, are not giving up on seeing collective accommodation as the main solution to migrant accommodation, despite the COVID-19 pandemic revealing another shortcoming of such a solution. How is social distancing possible in such, often overcrowded, places?

A twist of fate led to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina experiencing firsthand what life is like when you are denied basic human freedoms, yet it is unlikely these new circumstances will evoke massive solidarity towards migrants. Indeed, they face an even more difficult position than before. Some of them are held in collective centres where it is impossible to maintain social distance, while others are on the streets and at risk of losing food and clothing aid provided by activists, because gatherings of individuals are prohibited during the state of emergency. In addition, some supermarkets near the Bira camp (Bihać) and Miral (Velika Kladuša) have banned migrants from entering their stores during the pandemic.

The situation we are suddenly facing has confirmed that human rights are inalienable and belong to everyone, and thus by protecting the rights of others we protect our own rights. It has also shown that a society is only as powerful as it is willing to protect its weakest members. Rarely has this been so clearly outlined in reality as it has in the Una-Sana Canton over the last month. I believe that as a society we will be ready to move towards healing only when we realize that migrants are a part of our society. I also believe we are far from that realization at this moment.

¹ <https://www.radiovkladusa.ba/tuzna-slika-na-gp-maljevac-velika-kladusa/>



NEVA DANAJA PIRC

Like most millennials, normally I don't follow the national news due to my distrust of the mass media and its manipulative force. Not possessing a television helps me avoid it, although there are occasional exceptions.

The coronavirus was one such exception. It changed my lifestyle as well as the lives of others, quickly turning us into socially distanced, national media consumers. To prevent the virus from spreading, safety is now priority number one.

Consequently, the question that many of us are asking: will the question of safety return to a low priority for right-wing politicians? Or will it remain a political priority, but normalize a police state and justify it with the tragedy of all the coronavirus victims?

These thoughts lead me to the question of refugees in Slovenia and the EU. As a legal representative of underage asylum seekers, I see that the topic of integration has been barely addressed since the corona crisis began. The question of safety somehow works hand in hand with the EU's border control politics to keep migrants away. Also, many national project grants for migrant and refugee integration were simply nullified. Some NGO's working with or on the topic of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are in the process of ending project operations and firing their staff due to a lack of funding. It seems to me that the media essentially focuses on COVID-19 emergency stories, new safety measures, stories of how Slovenians cope with the crisis, and mention migration only when pointing out illegal border crossings and the virus threat they bring along.

At the same time, solidarity has become a part of popular terminology. Indeed, many people unselfishly offered help and most of my fellow-citizens are wisely respecting safety measures. Both are done in solidarity and necessity. Naturally, people can identify themselves more intensely with coronavirus victims than with refugees. However, our government and media seem to throw aside the importance of refugees and other critical social and global problems, dedicating their solidarity actions completely to Slovenians for Slovenians, as a nation. Borders seem to be closed mentally as much as they are physically.

Underage asylum seekers are children traumatized by war and by the long painful journey behind them. I believe the Global North should be morally obliged to focus on their well-being. I hope the COVID-19 crisis will not completely overthrow questions of integration and intercultural dialogue, which are in my opinion of great importance. Migration will not stop and



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societies will get more and more culturally diverse. Unfortunately, what I see is a neglect of these topics and questions and I fear it might stay like this for a long time.

I hope this solidarity we are seeing will keep going and spreading around, and unlike the virus, heal lives instead!



ANGELIKI DIMITRIADI

Greece has been hailed in the international media for its success in flattening the curve of COVID-19. The »stay at home« order issued in early March successfully kept the number of infections low. A similar order was issued for the hotspots on the islands as well as the camps and accommodation facilities (e.g. hotels, apartments) on the mainland. However, 42,000 asylum seekers are stranded on the islands as a result of the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016. Most reside in tents and sleep in the surrounding fields of the Reception and Identification Centres, with little to no access at times to running water and hygienic conditions. Social distancing is one of the many luxuries they cannot enjoy. An outbreak would be impossible to contain with dramatic repercussions for the asylum seekers and the locals. Despite repeated calls, transfers have yet to take place to the mainland, where another 50,000 reside in organised facilities run by international organisations and camps with varied reception conditions. Three of these facilities have already recorded cases of COVID-19 (Kranidi, Malakasa, Ritsona). Not enough has been done to protect the most vulnerable, except imposing quarantines.

COVID-19 is only one element in an already problematic reception and asylum system. Asylum seekers are made vulnerable in Greece first and foremost through the absence of reception facilities. The pandemic is merely exacerbating an already problematic situation. The Greek Asylum Service has suspended operations, in the context of social distancing to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The already large backlog of asylum applications (more than 60,000) is increasing as is the uncertainty of asylum seekers who remain stranded and/or quarantined on the islands and mainland with no insight on what the future holds.

In the summer of 2019, Greece adopted a hard-line stance on immigration. An ethnocentric discourse that presented asylum seekers as migrants, with the latter acquiring a negative connotation gained momentum throughout 2019. Events in Evros in February 2020, weeks before the pandemic broke out in Greece, exacerbated matters. The image put forth a country under threat by migrant groups, and facilitated the rise of vigilant groups at the border and on the islands. Attacks took place against migrants, NGOs, and humanitarian workers and journalists. The restrictions imposed during the shutdown have eased tensions temporarily, but the discontent remains over the presence of migrants on the islands, the absence of European solidarity and over the failure of the EU Turkey Statement. The pandemic, thus, unfolds in an already fragile context. The challenge for Greece is dual; to provide adequate health care and improve hygienic and reception conditions to those on the islands



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and mainland, and to prevent anti-immigrant sentiments from fostering further. As the impact of COVID-19 unfolds, migrants and asylum seekers remain the most vulnerable in a country increasingly intolerant of their presence.



BORKA RUDIĆ

At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bosnian media and journalists did not behave differently from media in the rest of the world. Professional and independent media proved their worth both in normal circumstances and complete uncertainty, while other media, which is close to the ruling political and national elites, reaffirmed patriotic journalism with the aim of defending the »state« against the coronavirus and all other »enemies«. They peddled misinformation, political spin, stories of a world conspiracy related to COVID-19, spread panic, hate speech against infected people, and more. However, in just 45 days of the crisis, at least five important lessons for the Bosnian journalistic community have become clear – whether they are put in practice or rejected is another question.

Information and Education for Citizens: Replacing the usual political journalism focused on the daily protocol of public officials, prime-time media space was ceded to provide information and educational content about the health situation. The media published statements by competent experts and doctors, reassuring the frightened population. Overnight, televisions have become psychological counseling centers or schools for the youngest, with a focus on how ordinary people can deal with the complicated health system and the crisis. Just a month earlier, civic journalism that centered on the experience of the ordinary citizen was unthinkable in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Questions against Prepared Responses: The worldwide practice of limiting the number of journalists at crisis staff press conferences for safety reasons has transformed into a political press trap and a barrier to free access to public information. Without the physical presence of journalists engaging in direct dialogue with officials, and now sending their questions via e-mail instead, press conferences, have become a means of political manipulation, to the detriment of journalism. In addition to public protests by the BiH Journalists Association and media experts, the journalist community has tacitly accepted the imposed restrictions and shameful responses coming from politicians. If journalists accept the idea that it is not their role to ask questions, politicians will endeavor to turn journalists into their own spokespeople and the media into a means of merely conveying official news.

Censorship as a Tool: By physically removing journalists from press conferences, local authorities have opened up space for all kinds of withholding and manipulation of information. The biased selection of which questions to answer was the first step, followed by the denial of information regarding the deaths of several persons infected with the virus, and the complete



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disregard of media questions regarding the procurement of medical supplies, coronavirus tests, or ordinary questions about persons who violate curfew. Public officials have used COVID-19 to institutionalize censorship.

Punishing Public Criticism: The pandemic has allowed officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina to attempt to ban another important journalistic task: the criticism of public officials and their practices. The Crisis Staff in Republika Srpska first issued a legal decree stating that authorities should consider punishment for spreading misinformation and panic in the media and on social networks. They were followed by the Municipality of Stari Grad Sarajevo, with a similar decision and increased »scrutiny« over public opinion and commentary. To date there have been 12 police investigations and misdemeanor proceedings. Even a cursory analysis clearly shows that this aims to punish political dissent and targets those who criticize the authorities, not the fight against disinformation.

By public pressure and reactions from journalist associations, the media, and civil society, the authorities in Republika Srpska withdrew their decision. We are still waiting for the reaction of the Municipality of Stari Grad Sarajevo. This brings us to the last lesson learned: media freedoms are under threat at all times – journalists must defend them by all legitimate means, and even more strongly uphold their principles in times of crisis.



NIKOLAY DRAGANOV

Crises such as the current COVID-19 pandemic confront societies with a number of new and unknown challenges that we must address for the first time. But apart from being confronted with unfamiliar shocks, crises do something else – they often exacerbate and lay bare the problems that already exist in our societies.

Will it be the underfunded healthcare system and the lack of sufficient medical staff and facilities? Or the lack of social infrastructure and care for the elderly and sick? We knew about these problems in many countries before the crisis, but now they have turned out to be even worse than previously thought.

In a country which, according to Reporters Without Borders, ranks 111th on the freedom of speech ranking, the current crisis exacerbates this problem as well. It is disturbing when a leading MP stated during the most watched political TV show that »we can even sacrifice the freedom of speech« in the current situation.

In recent years in Bulgaria, we have already made many sacrifices in this direction. The vast majority of the media (as well as wealth in general, in the country with the largest economic inequality in the EU) is concentrated on the ownership of several people. Our society rarely responds with the necessary force towards attacks against freedom of speech and the increasingly deteriorating media environment. Politicians regularly threaten journalists, but with the exception of some limited reactions in the guild, such actions remain without any consequences.

Being an independent journalist and defending freedom of expression in Bulgaria has long been difficult. Not only because you are at risk of being directly threatened without anyone protecting you, but mostly for financial reasons. The mediapoint does not allow many of us to have true independence and freedom. Nowadays, journalistic independence is impossible without financial independence.

In this regard, the current crisis has led to alarming cases in some of the media in Bulgaria. Journalists who were known for their straightforwardness and high standards fell victim to »financial cuts«. But the profile of journalists who were sent on vacation, for apparently financial reasons, raises serious suspicions. »The emergency should not be used to expel journalists,« the Association of European Journalists in Bulgaria said on the occasion. »The inevitable question is whether the unprecedented global situation and the measures taken in our country do not turn out to be a comfortable



Nikolay Draganov is a Bulgarian sociologist and left-wing journalist for a number of media. He is also a co-producer of the documentary series »The Invisible People« about massive poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria. He is one of the editors at Baricada.org, the leading left independent media in Bulgaria and member of Solidarna Bulgaria, a left non-party organization.



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smokescreen for attacks, intimidation or direct deprivation of the work of established professionals,« the Union of Bulgarian Journalists also commented.

The concerns of the two largest journalistic organizations here have every reason. What better time to close the mouth of someone under financial pretext and at a time when there is no legal way to organize a protest?

As part of the civic association Solidarity Bulgaria, we tried to organize a car rally in front of the government building. We respect health measures and have proposed an option that does not violate them in any way. However, the protest was firmly rejected, and the authorities threatened us with huge fines and even imprisonment if we violated the current emergency legislation. Also, the courts are not working, so our appeal will be considered only after the end of the state of emergency. We just wanted to tell our government that more and better measures of compensation are needed for those affected by the crisis. But we did not succeed, and with a few small exceptions, this act did not gain media attention. Surprise?

Times are difficult, and society is functioning in an emergency and an unprecedented situation. But freedom of speech should never fall victim. Quite the opposite – now we need to hear the voice and pain of each one of us and get out of this situation together.



NOLIAN LOLE

M.B. is a tour guide in the city of Shkodra. Throughout the tourist season you may find him all over the country, showing Albania to German tourists. If you follow him on his social media accounts, you probably know that he is sharing amazing sights of Albania and promoting them to his global followers. M. has not worked for more than a month. I talked to him a few days ago, when he called me to congratulate me on the release of the docufilm, »The Albanian coast – the beautiful secret of Europe,« on German television. He knew I was the local producer of this film and congratulated me – »This came at the right time, it is the best advertisement for our tourism, but we aren't lucky, the border is closed.« The film was truly the best advertisement, and it even broke viewership records with an audience of 600,000.

But M. risks staying without a job until September, and maybe even longer. All trips and reservations until June have been canceled. The losses for him and for the entire tourist chain of the country are large. It starts with the agencies and affects the guides, drivers, bus agencies, rental car companies, restaurants, museums, churches, which profit from generous donations, or even social centers. Tourists can be interested in such things and they donate gifts of different kinds, either when they are here or even when they leave, through generous bank transactions. We are a small and poor country and each of these opportunities matters. Until the borders are opened again, M. will continue to promote our wonders through social media. But it will be a while until he starts working again.

The global pandemic has thankfully not hit Albania very badly in terms of health, but the longer this pandemic lasts, the bigger the damage to our fragile economy. The tourism sector has taken the most damage. The numbers show this clear as day, and it is also not that easy for this sector to get back on its feet. Tourism is the engine of our economy if it works properly. Undoubtedly, the state plays a leading role in every aspect in Albania, and especially after this crisis, it will be the one that sets the tone for every activity, but in relation to tourism, it would be better in many cases to remain in the role of guides, rather than taking over the brakes of the operation.

The official statistics of INSTAT regarding tourism in the country from 2014–2018 are encouraging. They showed that Albania is preferred by tourists over Kosovo. About 25 % of foreign citizens come during the month of August. 4 out of 10 foreign citizens who have entered our country during the period 2014–2018 came for holidays. About 8 out of 10 foreign citizens enter Albania by land. More than 17,000 rooms and 38,000 beds were available to tourists in 2018. In Albania there are on average 5 hotels per 100 km².



Nolian Lole has been practicing journalism in Albania for almost 20 years. He has worked for several different television programmes such as Koha Tv, Tring, Vizion Plus and Albanian Public Television. He currently runs the information channel RTSH 24, part of the RTSH television package. He has collaborated with a large number of international media portals such as Stern Magazine and the German televisions NDR, ARD and ZDF.



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These figures also hide the immediate solutions or the golden opportunities for the recovery of this sector.

The main task of the Albanian government is to open its border with Kosovo, at least until June, and maybe even with North Macedonia. Following this opening, also important is the preparing of a campaign to promote tourism to Albania in these two countries, for the months of July and August and maybe September. We must forget about any foreign citizens coming from the West, firstly due to cancelled flights, but also because of closed borders.

Tour operators have to develop packages tailored to clients from Kosovo and North Macedonia, let's call them patriotic packages, and sell as many of them as possible. The more we sell the more likely it is to save the moribund tourist season.

INSTAT researches shows that the inflows of foreign citizens in 2018 increased by 15.8% more than in 2017, while the expenditures of foreign tourists (non-residents) in our country have increased 12.5%. In 2018 the outflows of Albanian citizens have increased 4.4% more than in 2017, while the expenditures of Albanian citizens residing abroad have increased by 17.3%, compared to a year ago.

To save the tourist season this year, the government will have to block the departure of Albanians abroad for tourist purposes. This year, for solidarity, patriotism or pragmatism, holidays should be spent in Albania. Local operators should adapt this year only to local tourists. Indeed, most tourists who come to Albania are from Kosovo, North Macedonia, Greece, Montenegro, and Italy. If we focus on attracting tourists from Kosovo, North Macedonia, Greece, and Montenegro, we'll have 60% of our tourist season covered – and need to fill the rest with local tourists. That is very possible.

The state can contribute in this direction because, in addition to cash assistance to which all operators aim, sometimes a smart move can have more effect than any other assistance. Free tickets to archaeological parks, museums, and other attractions in the country would be a great incentive for every visitor, tourist, or even the residents of Tirana, to leave the house and travel. The trip will translate into money, consumption and lubrication of the country's tourist mechanism. We should also pay attention to car trips, because most people who visit Albania travel with their own cars. The state should prepare facilities for everyone who wants to enter Albania and wants to spend their holidays here.

The data we have shows that there is potential to make up for the tourist season which we today consider lost. Of course, foreigners who manage to come are welcome, anyone else who does not succeed, must rest

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assured that the opportunity to come to Albania isn't lost by any means. Let all these tourists be given potential vouchers, or a coupon with value, a well-known practice in the world of tourism. With previously negotiated deadlines, they would be an added value a year later. The world has these mechanisms, we just have to use them. Every opportunity must be considered and used and we must not lack the imagination and courage to try because we must not forget that we are lost anyway, so if we try something new, and the results are successful, then it will be a great victory!



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SRDAN KOSOVIĆ



Srdan Kosović is the editor-in-chief of Montenegrin daily newspaper Vijesti. Kosović spent his entire professional career with Vijesti and became the editor-in-chief at the age of thirty. He is recognized as a human rights advocate and is known for his political columns.

Reporting on the coronavirus pandemic is like reporting on a never-ending breaking news story. It starts off with a bang that you have to be skeptical of, then after you do your fact-checking and realize how big it really is, you start applying everything you have on it. That is, until you realize it is not going to be over soon, that this emergency is going to last and there is no one that can give you a proper, reliable answer to that question. So, at that moment a newsroom is put to test – how can we sprint in a marathon?

In Montenegro, we have already had a months-long crisis. Since December of 2019, there has been controversy surrounding the law on religious freedom, which escalated with the adoption of the law, which triggered daily protests all over the country. Initially, there were even minor clashes with the police and then it transformed into an unprecedented situation – huge protests twice a week in almost every city in Montenegro. It was put to a stop only with the pandemic and a ban on public gatherings, but what it means for citizens and journalists is that we simply transitioned from one crisis to another, both of which had elements belonging to uncharted territory.

So, how did the pandemic affect the journalistic landscape in Montenegro and the organization of newsrooms? There was a meme that perfectly describes how the pandemic triggered a digital transformation, but it was not led by the CEO or CTO, but COVID-19. Digital transformation meant a shift in terms of organizing, communicating, and tools preferences for journalistic work. Working remotely and staying efficient required all of that.

In terms of the media landscape, it meant an almost complete shift from a deeply three way polarized scene (pro-government propaganda, anti-government propaganda, and independent media) to a very aligned reporting in the first weeks of the crisis even with reduced capacities and financial constraints due to the draining of the advertising market. It showed that there is a lot of capacity in the media, but it is the editorial decisions and guidance that will decide whether journalistic work will transform into propaganda or journalism that serves the public interest. Journalists have shown personal bravery working on the field and have fought against disinformation campaigns that were going wild. Major differences started to appear when the authorities showed their authoritarian stripes and only one part of the media kept asking the questions about stories the government did not want to expound on.

Like every crisis, it brings out the best and the worst out of people. Protecting the public interest means to asking uncomfortable questions in uncomfortable times.



IVAN BLAŽEVIĆ

Due to the worldwide impact of the coronavirus, the tourism industry in Croatia is suffering a great crisis. The tourism sector in Croatia employs more than 150,000 workers during its high season, which means one out of ten workers work in the tourism sector. More than 20 percent of the GDP in Croatia comes from tourism.

When it comes to worker's rights, it all depends on the type of contract they have. There are four different types of contracts: workers with permanent contracts, seasonal workers under the »permanent seasonal worker measure«, seasonal workers with a student contract, or other temporary employment contracts and foreign workers. For all the workers who do not have a permanent job in tourism, the future will definitely be more uncertain.

Around 95 % of hotels in Croatia are closed at the moment and the tourist season is on hold. Since the tourism sector plays an important role in the Croatian economy, the government has adopted economic measures to prevent the impact of the COVID crisis on the entire sector. However, the measures that the government brought about will not bring job security, which was one of the main reasons for the measures. Employers who are effected by COVID-19 will get around 530 EURO per employee for the next three months. This amount is just about a minimum wage in Croatia.

In my opinion, there was a lack of social dialogue on the national level. The government included proposals from employers to save the economy but accepted very few union proposals. What we were lacking on the national level is government regulation of employers in order to ensure that job security measures were actually enacted.

When it comes to my situation, from the beginning of the Corona crisis, all the employees of the hotel company that I work for were sent home to be »on hold«. Due to the good collective agreement in my company, they told us that all employees will get full salaries for the next two months, paid by the employer. What will come after that, no one knows yet.

This situation is of course affecting my personal life, too. I am already using my annual leave, like most of my colleagues. I am not used to be not working and staying at home and I am also worried about what will happen, how long this crisis will last, how long my savings will last, what will happen after we go back to work, etc.



Ivan Blažević is a chef in the tourism industry for over 15 years.



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The Civil Protection Headquarters of Croatia have done a good job preventing the spread of the coronavirus. Their decisions resulted in low infection and death rates of COVID-19 in Croatia.

In 2013, Croatia joined the European Union and many workers and families left the country, seeking better jobs and lives in the EU. Many health care workers also emigrated. During the last 20 years, both the healthcare and public sectors in Croatia have experienced privatization, bad working conditions, and low wages. This crisis has demonstrated the value and importance of the public health sector. I do hope that this crisis will bring us together again into a better society. I do hope that the value and paradigm of social Europe will be addressed in future political decisions on the EU level.



SRDAN KOSOVIĆ

»By the end of February we were met with tour cancellations for this season, which we have been preparing over the last year. If a drastic change doesn't occur soon, the 2020 season of tourism will be completely lost.«

These are the words of Filipa Čadenović, one of the owners of Montenegro Travel Club¹, a tourist agency offering tours and other related services on in Montenegro and its neighbouring countries. The agency generally works with local organizations, firms, and individuals who offer a variety of activities for tourists including local sightseeing tours, mountaineering and camping tours, visits to rural areas and households, family-owned wineries, honey farms, and other activities such as rafting, kayaking, boating, and more.

Q: How has the coronavirus pandemic affected your work?

A: Considering the fact that the sectors most affected by the pandemic are the tourism and catering sectors, Montenegro Travel Club is no exception. Our business depends on tourists and guests coming from abroad who have cancelled their itineraries with Montenegro Travel Club at the end of February, which we have been working on since last year. Moreover, because of the situation is still developing, we have not received a single request from interested folks about potential holiday bookings for the next season. This is not surprising considering the fact that we do not know at this very moment in time when the pandemic will be under control and stable, when borders will be reopened, and under what terms and conditions. As much as I would like to be optimistic, I am also aware of the fact that this season was supposed to begin in March and if the situation does not undergo sudden and drastic changes, for which the chances are quite low, we as a tourist agency have lost our tourist season this year. Aside from that, we are faced with a number of challenges, which we must face as a business if we plan to survive until the next season. First and foremost, I am referring to the fact that we must issue salaries and take care of other needs of the agency,

Q: Did the government's measures help to support you?

A: Considering that the package of measures relevant to us is still under discussion, I unfortunately do not have an answer to this question. Not long ago, the Montenegrin Tourism Association (CTU) recommended tourist agencies to be considered as closed, rather than businesses



Srdan Kosović is the editor-in-chief of Montenegrin daily newspaper *Vijesti*. Kosović spent his entire professional career with *Vijesti* and became the editor-in-chief at the age of thirty. He is recognized as a human rights advocate and is known for his political columns.

1
www.montravelclub.com



TOURISM

at risk, which was the initial definition. I believe that the government needed to classify them as such so that the measures would be more favorable. Namely, most of the companies which are classified as closed will begin to create profit in the moment that the ban for working is lifted. However, businesses such as tourist agencies, hotels, and others in the tourism sector will depend on international travel conditions, air transport and cruise arrivals even after receiving the government's permission to continue their work. It's important to keep in mind that guests coming from all over the world will not be prepared to take the risk of paying for tourist packages and immediately travelling once the borders are reopened, especially those who are coming from countries where the pandemic has not yet been contained.

Q: How has the pandemic affected your daily life and do you believe that the correct decisions were made?

A: Regarding my daily schedule, I spend most of my time at home. I entertain myself by reading, watching movies, creating new tourist packages and adapting those packages to various online booking platforms, writing blogs about Montenegro, and editing photos for social media. We're a tourist agency, so working from home is not a foreign concept, but the problem is when there is no work to do, which is the issue we are facing with the coronavirus pandemic. When it comes to preventative measures announced by the Institute for Public Health which we are bound to respect, I think we can serve as example in the region. I just hope that in this moment as restrictions begin to ease, we will be especially responsible for the sake of ourselves and others.

Q: Do you see an opportunity in this situation?

A: As for tourism, as I mentioned before, the pandemic has hit the industry especially hard and it is up to every government and business owner to try and deal with the situation in the best possible way. I hope that this will be the case with Montenegro. The only advantage of our agency is the fact that we focus on appealing to small groups and individuals, so it is natural to expect that once the borders do reopen, they will be the first to come to us again. Moreover, a relatively small number of people who we've had so far and who we will work to keep, may make Montenegro a more attractive destination to tourists than other countries who have been affected by the pandemic to a greater extent.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Publisher: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe

Kupreška 20, 71 000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Photos: Copyright by the authors

Design / Realization: pertext, Berlin

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