



Weekly Briefing

**Serbia Social briefing:
Survey of Society in Serbia in 2017
IIPE**

China-CEE Institute

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State of society in the Republic of Serbia has been characterized by three public debates which provoked the most attention by the media and civil society at large. These problems encouraged various reactions by the government which sometimes helped to appease the situation, but sometimes failed to bring any relief:

1) Escalation of domestic violence, especially towards women:

In the middle of the year, two successive murders propelled into forefront of media and public attention the problem of domestic violence. Two perpetrators were husbands and two victims their respective spouses. Murders were brutal and one even happened in the premises of the local Centre for social care which was supposed to supervise these particular family relations. Both victims had repeatedly reported violence before their deaths, but the institutions remained inactive concerning these reports. Both murders happened in the same week of the month of July, just as the new Law on the prevention of domestic violence, adopted at the end of year 2016 by the Serbian National Assembly, entered into force.

The new Law introduces two new crimes in positive criminal legislation – sexual molestation and stalking. In procedural terms it provides for emergency measures against abusers which include the possibility of urgent seclusion of the abuser from the common dwelling with the victim, or the prohibition of abuser's access to the victim. These measures can be applied after the report of violence with the expiry period of 48 hours, and possible prolongation up until 30 days. Furthermore, the new Law introduces disciplinary liability for judicial magistrates that breach the short and urgent time limits for judicial procedures against abusers, as well as delictual liability for police officers, other state organs, and even citizens who do not report abusers.

The provisions of this new Law still need to be applied fully in practice by the police, prosecutors, judges and social institutions. However, some of the problems with domestic violence are deeply rooted in the mentality of these

institutions and are not susceptible to change that easily. According to the NGO “Autonomous women center”, which deals directly with victims of violence, the problems lie in the suspicion towards reports on violence made by women, the denial of violence degree, justifications of violence perpetrators, and other stereotypes of traditional Serbian society which influence civil servants that deal with this matter. Some reports also indicate that the escalation of domestic violence has coincided with the erosion of social services. This erosion is a consequence of the continual cuts in budget for the institutions of social care since 2013, which caused large numbers of quality personnel from these institutions to lose their jobs. Therefore, the remaining personnel are burdened additionally and what is worse, they are acting without proper motivation due to lower salaries. The results are the lack of solidarity and team work, inadequate managerial qualities, insufficient development of services on the local level, insufficient investment in the training of existing personnel.

Statistics show that this problem is acute. According to the research conducted by the Agency for gender equality in the Republic of Serbia from 2010, 54.2 % of women interviewed were victims of domestic violence, however only 37 % of these victims have reported this violence. According to the Republican Centre for Social Care the number of cases of domestic violence has risen in the period of 2006-2012 by 300 percent.

2) Social strife and strikes in large manufacturing companies

At one moment during 2017, over 3000 workers in four well established and large industrial firms happened to be on strike (“Fiat Chrysler automobiles” in Kragujevac, “Gorenje” in Valjevo, “Goša” in Smederevska Palanka and MBA "Ratko Mitrović" – low construction in Belgrade).

Fiat Chrysler corporation and the Republic of Serbia formed the company “Fiat Chrysler automobiles” in 2008. Fiat accepted to build and operate an automobile manufacturing company with a future capacity for production of 300.000 automobiles yearly, production of several models – at least one middle class and one upper class, and a proportionate rise in employment. However, the

capacity has so far reached just around 90.000 pieces yearly, with only one, not exceptionally successful, model, and rate of employment has actually gone down. The Republic of Serbia accepted to invest an unknown amount of money as subsidies for production and social program. Unknown since large parts of the treaty are kept hidden from public scrutiny. Serbia also accepted to build a fast road connection from the plant to the Corridor 10 and adequate railway transport from the plant to the Corridor 10. Any failure to fulfill these obligations would be a basis for unilateral severance of the treaty. The financial part of the agreement is seemingly fulfilled, but the infrastructural one not quiet, time limits were breached and some 5km of road connection still has to be built.

The treaty on mutual investment expires in September 2018 and the strike certainly did not bode well for the continuation of its operation. Striker demands were concerned with the reorganization of production, since currently a single worker has to cover on average 1,2 workplaces. They also requested reimbursements for travel costs to and from the workplace, payment of previously agreed upon yearly bonuses and, as the most important, rise in salaries which would equalize average factory salary with the country average. Prime minister Ana Brnabić intervened in the dispute between strikers and the management and through her intermediation two parties reached an agreement. Workers agreed on a yearly rise of salaries in accord with the yearly rate of inflation and they renounced their right to strike in the new collective agreement signed for a period of three years. This last provision is illegal under the Serbian constitution and the Law on work, since right to strike is an inalienable human right.

In the factory of railway carriages “Goša”, strike went on for more than 150 days, starting from March 28, until late September, when workers agreed to continue with work. Strikes were provoked by the unpaid salaries and social benefits for more than three years of work, by the owner, Slovakian company “ŽOS Trnava”. Strike was radicalized when one worker committed suicide in the factory circle due to poverty. Some of the strikers started a hunger strike. At

one moment then prime minister, now the president, Aleksandar Vučić, intervened to calm down the strikers who started to block a regional road and international railway Belgrade-Thessaloniki. Company finally went bankrupt on 16th November, thus marking the end of more than 80 years of prestigious company which provided work and sustenance for a region in Serbia which is inhabited by 50.000 people.

3) Problems with media freedom and professionalism

During October, President of the European Federation of Journalists has declared for radio “Free Europe” that Serbia is currently the worst example of infringement of media freedoms in the Balkans. Similar argument was supported by reports of various relevant international organizations – Council of Europe, International Research & Exchanges Board, Reporters without Borders, Freedom House and so on. Media freedoms are extremely important as an indicator of Serbia’s progress in the negotiations with the European Union and are scrutinized by relevant EU observers. Minister for European Integration in the Serbian government has commented that the regular yearly report on that progress adopted in the European Parliament has mentioned not the lack of freedoms for media, but the need to improve culture and professionalism in the media. The report also commented that the situation in Serbia is not the worst, it might be even considered better than some others in the region of Western Balkans, however, expectations on this field are higher for Serbia than those other countries because of the candidate status.

That there exist some differences in the perception of media problems between the government and media representatives was obvious from the process of adoption of the national media strategy in the Working group of Ministry of culture and information. Due to the unbalanced representation in the working group (4 media representatives and six governmental), all the media representatives have left the group. Although the Minister has promptly stated that this would not preclude the continuation of work on the strategy, it seems that the group is no longer able to finish the work in the democratic and

transparent manner since it no longer represents the interests of those actors whose activities it purports to regulate.

The situation is further aggravated by lingering accusations from media professional organizations that some of their colleagues were mistreated by the security personnel during this year's inauguration of president Vučić. So far, the public prosecutor's office has not found the grounds for action in this case, stating that the security reaction was in accordance with law and good practice, thus discarding the motion to bring criminal charges against the personnel by these media organizations.