



# Weekly Briefing

**Serbia Social briefing:**  
**Social Developments in Serbia**  
**IIPE**


## China-CEE Institute

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Society in Serbia in the period of last two months was preoccupied with health issues. Contagious disease epidemic and large scale illegal treatment of dangerous wastes raised considerable disturbance in the society and caused various responses by experts and officials.

*1) Escalation of the smallpox epidemic*

Smallpox epidemic has continued to grow in the last month of 2017 and took its first casualties just as the country was preparing for winter holidays. The number of diseased persons continued to rise steadily in January and finally provoked the reaction by the highest state officials.

The first case of variola minor was registered already in October. From then on, epidemic spread in various communities in Southern Serbia (Surdulica, Bujanovac, Preševo Vranje, Bosilegrad, Trgovište, Vladičin Han, Pirot, Leskovac, Niš). At the beginning of December it continued its geographical route to the north of the country, appearing in the Danube administrative region with a first registered case in the city of Smederevska Palanka. The disease also spread to Kosovo region, Sandžak, and even some places in not so densely populated region of Eastern Serbia (Bor). Just before Christmas it appeared in Belgrade. Finally, in January it occurred in six cases in Novi Sad, capital of Vojvodina. So far 1.485 persons were affected by the disease, three of them have died. According to the data of the Institute for public health, 34 percent of diseased were hospitalized and around ten percent came down with pneumonia. Smallpox is known for its tendency to attack otherwise perfectly healthy persons, and can lead to serious health complications and sometimes death. Hospitals in diseased regions introduced emergency measures, while local authorities formed special headquarters for the monitoring of the epidemic. Later on, a Plan on activities for the elimination of smallpox was adopted for the whole territory of Serbia. The Ministry of Health even started a program of vaccination for medical workers born between 1971 and 1989 that were previously

unvaccinated or just partially vaccinated. The MMR vaccine for this purpose was obtained through a donation of the World Health Organization.

The cause of disease was inadequate vaccination or the absence of it. Over 90 percent of blighted persons were unvaccinated or partially vaccinated. The mostly affected categories of persons were children under age of 5 and adults over age of 30. The case of children is clear, available data show precisely who is and who is not vaccinated. As for adults, there exist some dilemmas whether they have received the vaccine against smallpox. The obligatory vaccine against smallpox was introduced in Serbian health system back in 1971, and in 1991 it was substituted by the globally accepted MMR vaccine which protects from three types of contagious diseases, including smallpox. Children are treated by this vaccine twice – at the age of 12-15 months and just before they start primary school. However, due to economic sanctions in the last decade of XX century, supply of MMR vaccines was highly irregular, which might also be a cause of the present epidemic. Under the new Regulation on vaccination which entered into force in December 2017, every citizen can receive the vaccine until the age of 18, with expenses paid by the state fund for health insurance. According to an immunologist from Children's University Clinic in Belgrade, the risk of death from smallpox is 1 for every 1000 diseased, thus the three deaths in Serbia from 1485 diseased are over that average.

The reaction by the expert community upon all these incidents was to sign a public Declaration for the support of vaccination. Among the signatories were directors of pharmaceutical, dentist, biochemical and other health related professional organizations, but also deans of medical faculties, president of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and the relevant governmental ministers. It was noted by the signatories that their intention is to send a clear and united message to the citizens on the importance of vaccination as a scientifically proven and most efficient measure for prevention of contagious diseases. State secretary in the Ministry of Health has said that due to unfounded and untrue information disseminated on social networks against vaccination, health experts

must lead a public campaign to persuade parents on the advantages of immunization as the prevention against smallpox and similar diseases. One of the most damaging delusions spread by these circles in the last few decades is the association of MMR vaccine with autism. However, epidemiologists in Serbia claim that these two phenomena have nothing in common, they just happen to occur at the same time, since in the second or third year of child's life parents can notify first signs of autism and thus relate that to vaccination, although experts can otherwise diagnose autism well before the first birthday.

Strangely enough, Serbia proved to be prone to the activities of anti-vaccination movement although it has a long and successful history of vaccination. Serbia introduced a vaccine against Variola Vera back in 1839 already, and this disease was eradicated in 1980. President of Serbian medical society expressed feelings of shame for the recognition that Serbia confronts itself with such a disease in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Of course, the vaccine cannot provide an absolute protection from disease, but it is perceived that a 95 percent reach of vaccination among children population is enough to create collective immunity as the most efficient eliminator of disease.

## *2) Dangerous wastes affairs*

Two instances of illegal storage of dangerous wastes raised the debate about the policy on the treatment of these dangerous substances in Serbia.

Firstly, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December, Ministry of the environment announced that it prevented an environmental disaster in the small town of Obrenovac, close to Belgrade, when it found 25 tons of waste that contained dangerous and cancerous chemical compounds. These types of compounds cannot be stored before previous treatment because of their toxic and cancerous properties. The waste was of industrial origin but no information is yet available on where did it come from. The citizens were advised not to use water from local well before the water samples pass the analysis in the City institute for public health. The additional risk from pollution was present because of the location of waste, found close to the water factory which supplies whole Belgrade with potable

water. The person accused for the illegal storage was arrested and put into confinement for 30 days. The penalty for this type of criminal offence in Serbia can lead to 5 years in prison plus the pecuniary sentence.

Secondly, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, more than 1,500 tons of toxic waste was found in the premises of the former factory of the Novi Sad Chemical Industry, which previously went bankrupt. Minister for environment stated that this case represents a crime against people and state and should be treated as such. The loaner of the premises where the waste was found was apprehended by the police. According to the Regional secretariat for environment, this person had the permit for storing of dangerous waste and regular documentation for just 32 tons of such waste.

Because of suspicions related to possible pollution of watercourses from this source, Minister for environment ordered the enhanced control of local ground waters, wells and canals that flow into Danube. So far the authorities have claimed that the sources of potable water were not endangered. The Minister stated that the bankrupted industry, which is in the process of privatization, was an adequate space for storage of dangerous waste since the perpetrators did not fear the control of state organs there.

The incriminated waste was sent for the analysis to the Institute for labor protection where the relevant chemical investigations are currently under way. Further investigations of ground waters and wells were announced by local authorities. So far it is still not clear how much illegally stored waste was really discovered and where did it come from. The investigation is conducted in cooperation with the Security Information agency and Public Prosecutor's office. The reservoirs of toxic waste were hidden underground in three compartments. The majority of waste originated from the oil and liquid fuel refinement processes, and the treatment of such waste is a very expensive process that can be approved only by the state ministry for environment.

These two instances provoked the debate on Serbian policy and legislation concerning treatment of dangerous wastes. According to relevant domestic legal

regulations, which were previously accorded with EU legislation, this type of waste must be treated by the authorized facility for the treatment of dangerous waste. However, in Serbia such a facility does not exist, thus the producers of waste have to export it into European Union, that is, to the states which have the necessary facilities. The costs of such operation are between 1,000 and 3,000 euros per ton, therefore lot of owners are tempted to pay much less money to some domestic subjects, willing to store it illegally for a few hundred euros per ton.

In Serbia, more than 2000 registered facilities generate yearly approximately 80.000 tons of dangerous waste. After 2020, the export of dangerous waste into EU will be banned. Besides this waste, currently generated in the production processes, Serbia, according to the Chamber of Commerce of Serbia, has more than 300,000 tons of historical waste generated inside large companies that went bankrupt. Although talks about the national center for treatment of wastes have started back in 2001, Serbia today still lacks such a facility. One of the additional future problems for Serbia in this respect is that the Chapter 27 of the EU accession negotiations with Serbia specifically provides for such a facility, therefore this might prove an obstacle for Serbia's entry into EU. The Chamber of Commerce insists that foreign investors interested in investments in Serbia must be checked for their procedures concerning the treatment of possibly dangerous waste, which was not the case so far in every situation.

It seems that there exists a discrepancy between legislation which was promptly accorded with sophisticated EU rules, and the implementation of that same legislation, which is marred by lack of public support and insufficient administrative capacities. For example, the Regional secretariat for environmental protection in Vojvodina lacks the adequate capacity for dealing with these kinds of crime since it employs only 12 inspectors. According to the Chief of secretariat, this means that they can conduct only six controls during a month, but they also lack the funding and necessary equipment. Furthermore,

the Chamber of Commerce indicates the Serbian public opinion in general is not supportive of the existence of authorized facilities for treatment of dangerous wastes, since citizens share a common fear of having such objects in the vicinity of their homes. Unfortunately, this means that citizens ultimately pay a much heavier price when illegal storage activities such as these occur.