



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Montenegro social briefing:**  
**The social effects of the Corona virus in Montenegro**  
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## **The social effects of the Corona virus in Montenegro**

*Since the occurrence of the first case of COVID - 19 infection in Montenegro in mid - March, numerous measures have been taken to protect citizens and the economy. However, the Corona virus pandemic is not only a matter of reaction of political institutions and competent health care institutions and professionals. It is something that tangents to each individual, and therefore responsibility is shared. Therefore, the question is what the pandemic revealed in Montenegro, but it is also a significant question what social consequences can be expected? In any case, a pandemic is something that has engulfed every domain of social life in Montenegro.*

### **The situation so far - the effectiveness of the measures adopted or...?**

It seems that the competent institutions have responded promptly in Montenegro when it comes to responding to the prevention of imports and combating epidemics within national borders. Initially, the question was whether the late occurrence of the first cases was the result of good preparedness and timely measures taken by the National Coordination Team for Infectious Diseases, or whether it was due to the unwillingness of the system, which perhaps delayed the announcement of the presence of the virus in Montenegro? However, the events and statistics from April confirmed that last suspicious is not true. The fact is that, (with experience of other countries), Montenegrin institutions responded in a timely manner and in a balanced manner adopting measures in different areas (health, business, movement, traffic, etc.). It seems that measures contributed to the much milder direct consequences of the spread of the virus. Based on statistics on the number of infected and died in the countries of the region, the mortality rate from the Corona virus is the lowest in Montenegro, as confirmed by the Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) for Europe, stating that the reason is timely measures. Namely, the mortality rate (in relation to the number of those infected) at mid-April in Montenegro amounted to only 1.63%, which is a significantly better indicator than in all countries of the region (some of which have a mortality rate of over 5%). Also, an indicator of the number of infected people per million<sup>1</sup> population can serve as a confirmation. This indicator for Montenegro amounted to 487 in the aforementioned period, which is again significantly better than many countries in Europe and the region. These indicators may also

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<sup>1</sup> According to the World Health Organization methodology, the number of infected people is expressed per million population for better comparison.

give a false picture if a small number of tests were performed. But, by that parameter (number of people tested per million inhabitants) Montenegro is just behind Slovenia (when it comes to countries in the region). This information indicates that the measures adopted are timely and well balanced. Still, something that perhaps no data takes into account is the degree of openness of the country, which may raise the same question - is a really good epidemiological situation solely the result of government measures? This could certainly be the idea for the whole research project, not only for Montenegro, but for numerous countries.

### **Corona has revealed some of the positives and negatives of Montenegrin society**

The Corona revived community and solidarity, but also demonstrated the flaws of Montenegrin society. Most of the citizens of Montenegro, in addition to solidarity and togetherness (which has not been a characteristic of the Montenegrin society accustomed to divisions in recent years), has shown a high level of awareness and responsibility. The solidarity is confirmed through numerous voluntary activities and initiatives, donations from Montenegrin citizens, companies, but also from the diaspora. It is also interesting that Montenegrin citizens (at least the vast majority) are more disciplined than expected to accept the measures and prohibitions imposed. It is difficult to talk about the environmental consequences without concrete facts, but one of them is that Pljevlja, as one of the most polluted cities in the world, got clean air due to the stop of various economic activities.

Unfortunately, the situation caused by the spread of the virus has (in addition to its negative impact on health) witnessed some other negative examples. This is not so much about the non-observance of measures from the rare individuals, as it is about the abuse of the situation itself. In addition to the fact that the price of medical equipment (disinfectants and masks) has increased dramatically, it is worth mentioning that in April a list of persons suffering from the Corona virus was released to the public. These lists<sup>2</sup> were made public by the misuse of the Public Health Institute's Information System by the person who had access. The list was not leaked from the security services or by hacking into the communications system. Although this act has been condemned, it has shown that in these conditions fear or other psychological factors play a significant role among individuals. These acts certainly violate basic human rights. Also, just before and during the initial days of the spread of the virus, a variety of fake

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<sup>2</sup> The list contained data on 62 infected persons from Podgorica with their names and ID number.

news - popularly known as "infodemic" - spread in Montenegro. And these are some of the few dark spots in Montenegro in the "age" of the Corona.

In addition, when it seemed that religious issues would not be on the agenda, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro again provoked a public appearance because this institution obeyed on pronounced measures at the state level (such as ban on gathering, etc.). It seems really unnecessary at this point. However, such a gesture seems to be merely a deliberate reaction with the intention of keeping a public presence interrupted by a virus pandemic.

### **Corona and the living standard of the Montenegrin population**

What is certain is that the Corona virus pandemic will have significant consequences after its completion. First of all, these consequences will be reflected in the living standards of citizens of all countries, including Montenegrins. For, the burden of citizens is multiplied when a person, in addition to caring for health, has to think about how to feed the family, and when the employer has to think how to provide wages for employees. With this in mind, but also with the aim to be accountable, the government has adopted a series of measures aimed at maintaining a standard of living that will be shaken by the effects of the pandemic. In order to ensure transparency and a participatory approach, the measures were discussed with social partners, representatives of parliamentary clubs in Parliament, and with a number of economic experts and analysts. In addition to helping the economy, which should indirectly affect employment conservation, some of these measures are directly related to living standards, with various wage subsidies in April and May. Most of the subsidies are in the amount of 100% of the minimum wage and 100% of taxes and contributions to the minimum wage for each registered employee in various sectors (for closed industries and tourism sector). In addition, subsidies of 70% of the minimum gross wage will be directed to employees on paid leave and to employees in quarantine or isolation, while subsidies of 50% of the minimum wage are foreseen for vulnerable industries. In addition, six-month subsidies are also foreseen for new employment for entrepreneurs, micro, small and medium-sized companies. In addition, the main Energetic state company doubled the amount for subsidies for electricity bills to socially disadvantaged households during the duration of the measures. Measures to preserve the standard of living also include numerous one-off benefits to various social categories and vulnerable groups of Montenegrin society. Therefore, the Support Program covers six types of subsidies and it covers over 100,000 employees in Montenegro and several thousand entrepreneurs, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. The issue of scope is not

questionable. But, whether the targeting of users is good and the measures themselves are well formulated remains to be seen. It should be borne in mind that there are a large number of social protection beneficiaries in Montenegro, including pensioners, but also that a large number of employees are prevented from working through initial measures. In any case, the standard of living must be tailored to the needs of the people most in need. The coming period will answer the question of whether this program is truly a stabilization program, which serves to preserve those jobs that existed in February 2020 (before the outbreak of the epidemic).

However, the situation caused by Corona has also shown that the politicization of the situation is occurring, as some of the political parties tries to gain political points in the election year through a sensitive issue of living standards. This is primarily attempted through proposals to further increase the salaries of healthcare workers (although an increase for this year has already been agreed at the end of last year and the pay for employees in the health sector will be 15% higher during April). There were also proposals that the government should bear the full burden of all wages for all those who are incapacitated by adopted measures. Of course, these proposals go without a significant cost calculation, and without considering the real possibilities of the state. This points to the politicization of a difficult social situation.

The social effects caused by the Corona virus are undoubtedly huge, and their true face and scope will be clearer over the coming months. The current situation is difficult, but Montenegro seems to have the strength to respond to the challenge.