



Weekly Briefing

Serbia social briefing:
Serbian Society and Education System Response to Covid 19
IIPE


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Serbian Society and Education System Response to Covid 19

Abstract

This analysis is divided in four parts. Short introduction describes general framework for the understanding of situation in which education system adaptation to epidemic of Covid-19 occurs. Second part describes challenges for society, in particular to children their parents and other caretakers. Third chapter is divided in three subunits and describes previous and institutional responses and mechanisms adopted in order to tackle the crisis. In final part of the text author concludes that Serbia adopted quick and efficient measures, but that system of total distance learning has many negative challenges.

Introduction

Serbian government took measures in May to end most of the limitations imposed in March this year in order to combat the pandemic caused by novel strain of corona virus. Serbia is stepping gradually in life as it knew it before the outbreak of Covid 19, and proclamation of pandemic. This ‘return to normalcy’ occurs in election year with several consequences of the state of emergency lifted on 6 May 2020. One of it is situation in which schools and Universities are still close to regular attendance and education is organised on-line. This temporary solution seems to be the test *in vivo* for potentially prolonged praxis in case of the often announced second wave of virus. Education together with organised religion, public health and security is one of essential pillars on any society. How Serbia education system reacted to the measures taken in state of emergency and how society adapts to this change?

Parents and students

Distance learning itself is a challenge for family and for society and when it encompasses society at large it becomes pressure for all. While school is a melting plot for a society and local community, important for acquiring skills in social communication with peers and with authorities outside family prolonged distance learning does not provide it. Some parents due to their jobs are forced to leave their kids unattended for a major part of a day, and this may have negative impact on their dedication to school commitments. There is a number of kids that due

to strict observance and fear of their parents where in long isolation which negatively affects psychological behaviour even of adults.

Some parents who work online have shared attention because of the kids and this may diminish their focus on work or may lead to more leaves because of the extra time needed for kids.

On the other hand many parents developed even stronger neighbourly relations, solidarity in exchanging information and counselling, spending more time together with their kids in public parks immediately after the measures have been alleviated.

While university students and most of those attending high schools are mostly autonomous in performing tasks given in the system of distance learning, parents of small children, mostly mothers are transformed in part time teachers together with their work obligations. There are 517826 pupils in Serbia enrolled in school year 2019/2020. They attend 3286 schools. Thus, the burden of online schooling fell on many parents. Part of them which was able or already had distance online job was more flexible with helping and monitoring kids with their teaching load. Those whose physical presence at work was needed because of measures regarding elderly could not rely neither to grandparents nor to kindergarten or school.

Education system

Ministry of education, science and technological development of the Republic of Serbia quickly reacted after the proclamation of the state of emergency and two days after started with on-line classes (since 17 March) coupled with tasks sent online by school teachers.

We will first present the steps taken by the Ministry in order to organise the education in elementary and high schools and later try to analyse possible results. Institutional response in education was swift, and extensive.

Existing mechanism before the outbreak

With adoption of the Law on the Foundations of Education System and the Law on Higher Education a Unique Education Information System (UISE) was formed. It has four registers: 1) register of institutions; 2) register of employees 3) register of children, students and adults; and 4) register of accredited study programs. This system maintains records in schools, in which pupils have assigned Unique Education Number (UEN). UEN serves as a unique identifier for

each child, student, and adult in education system, officially in order to provide anonymization of data on children, students, and adults.

Another purpose of the UEN is to assure data for the calculation of statistical indicators that will be used for the evaluation of the education system. In 2018, e-diary was developed and it was part of the measures that enabled quick adaptation of Serbian education system in distance learning mode. E-diary provides records on educational work at the school, as well as records of students' success and conduct. This measure was presented by the Government as beneficial also to parents as it allows them constant insight into the success and conduct of their children, and introduces more transparency and less need to go to school to get information. By 2019 e-diary was introduced in all schools in the Republic of Serbia.

Measures taken

In close cooperation with Office for technical backup and hosting system for learning management Moodle was installed and named *Moja škola* (My school). It is open source software widely used in Serbia and abroad for education. Department for digitalisation at the Ministry controls the system. Many teachers employed in elementary and high schools organises material for this distance learning system.

Initially classes have been registered in one school. Yet, after director of the school contracted the virus, Government of Serbia with the help of UNICEF purchased software *Camtasia* for recording classes in schools. With equipment provided within the German Development Cooperation project “Dialogue on Employment Creation, Initiative and Dual Education” (DECIDE), two studios were prepared for classes for distance dual education.

Platform for online classes mojaskola.gov.rs (<https://mojaskola.rtsplaneta.rs>) provides lessons televised every day on two channels of national TV. Thus, both children with and without access to computers can follow the classes. Yet, there is no substitution for computers when it comes to school tasks that children need to perform for the class teachers in order to have grades. Therefore there are free applications also for mobile phones and tablets.

Microsoft offered free usage of Office 365 platform during the pandemic and promised its free usage even after lifting the state of emergency in order to organise distance lessons and group calls. U.S. company also organised free on-line seminars for teachers. This information was provided to staff of each school. Microsoft and their local partner Informatika prepared instructions for teachers at <https://rasprednastave.gov.rs/alati-uputstva.php>.

Zoom app for online meetings used in some schools in Serbia is supported through free internet by MTS Telecom and Telenor mobile networks. Beside zoom, Ministry made cooperation also with Viber app.

Local hardware company **Comtrade** donated platform *My classroom TeslaEDU* for online teaching and for testing of students of final year of elementary school organised from 22 to 24 April. Platform is free for teachers and students during the crisis. Together with Ministry it set up Call center open 12 hours a day.

Students of eighth-final year of elementary school who did not had access to online classes got internet and devices (mobile phones and tablets) from Huawei (100 tablets), Comtrade (300 mobile phones), Telecom 800 internet cards and 800 mobile phones, VIP 800 internet cards and 400 mobile phones and Telenor the same as VIP.

Even before the outbreak of the epidemic, parents were able to use the model at <https://moj.esdnevnik.rs/>) in order to be informed about the grades of their children.

Although the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development informed higher education institutions that they can start with practical and laboratory exercises, as of May, 15, 2020. the classes and lectures are expected to continue in the online format.

Conclusion

Adaptation of education system to pandemic in Serbia poses different challenges for schooling system and society at large. Serbian Ministry of education and the whole system of education achieved significant results in organising distance learning in collaboration with local and international companies like Telecom, VIP, Telenor, Comtrade, Huawei, Microsoft and others.

Online tools and platforms like UISE, some of which were developed before the epidemic, were adopted or developed swiftly and efficiently. Yet, in practice UISE, and other measures adopted before and during the outbreak of Covid-19 epidemic may be used for monitoring and tracking peoples since their early childhood and storing data on each citizen which can be misused by those controlling the data. Dangers for this kind of 'surveillance' are in eventual total control of population from the cradle to the grave.

This is one of potential dangers of the organisation of distance learning. Many challenges arise from prolonged social isolation, like added pressure on parents or other children caretakers

to share their work time with watching kids and helping them with new type of school tasks. School is one of the most important institutions for the constitution of modern society, for developing different skills required to become responsible and accomplished persons in adult age.

Serbia managed to organise the system and it is important that education return to normalcy as this situation tends to have significantly more negative than positive impacts.