



Weekly Briefing

Montenegro social briefing:

The "Corona" virus becomes a major topic - a dangerous social problem replaced by a more dangerous one

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The year 2020 appears to be destined to bring "black swans" to the citizens of Montenegro - unexpected events that will completely shake society and become a major topic in all households, institutions and in general, in the heads of all citizens. These are events that not only become the main topic and capture the thoughts of the people, but also lead to other social effects, such as increasing solidarity, unity, or even the opposite, confrontation. These were unexpected religious protests at the beginning of the year over the new Law on Freedom of Religion. And as much as the religious leaders who organized these protests (with the unequivocal support of institutions from another country - Serbia) called for unity, these events seem to have led more to the divisions and intolerance between the citizens of Montenegro. Unexpectedly, these protests gained mass as time went on, and began to present the most important topic among citizens. Somehow, other social issues such as corruption or poverty have been sidelined. In addition, the Montenegrin government has been under tremendous pressure over such developments, and relations with neighboring Serbia have been tightened.

And just as it seemed that every day there were increasing pressures and challenges when it came to solving this problem, the religious leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church got a bigger enemy than the Montenegrin government which passed the controversial law. The reason again was an unexpected event that is a much more dangerous problem for Montenegrin society than the growing religious protests. Of course, this is a pandemic of the new COVID-19 virus more known as "Corona" virus. It seems that this virus will stop what the Montenegrin government has been striving for - religious protests. But it brought fear and brought it back to just one social topic. In addition, it also appears to have a number of other negative consequences - from negative economic growth, the discovery of the real capacities and capabilities of the health sector (which is being criticized), the possible deepening of social problems such as poverty, the potentially catastrophic effects on population mortality, etc. But it may also bring greater solidarity in Montenegrin society.

Even all the media, (like through some silent agreement), turned exclusively to this topic. Even those media that left most of their media space to criticize the authorities on various grounds! Obviously, this switch of focus was right, as in February information from various

parts of the world about the dangers and difficulties facing countries in the fight against the new virus began to arrive. However, the competent institutions, and above all the Institute of Public Health of Montenegro, stressed in February that there was no space for panic after a new “Corona” virus appeared in China, spreading to other countries. The Institute for Public Health of Montenegro, in cooperation with international partners, monitored the situation and, based on newly obtained data, carried out a periodic risk assessment of the import and spread of the disease in Montenegro. However, this month the level of risk has risen from low to high, which means that it is almost certain that the new virus will not bypass Montenegro. It will be a real test for all institutions, but also for citizens and their self-awareness and their level of responsibility.

It is also certain that the new situation will stop religious gatherings in squares and streets throughout Montenegro. At the end of the month, the government announced that if the new virus appeared in Montenegro, there would be closed schools, kindergartens, banned religious gatherings, canceled sport events and all other mass gatherings. A National Coordination Team for Infectious Diseases was formed. This body has also launched talks on banning religious protests due to the “Corona” virus. However, this body did not directly mention lithium, but cited a law that prohibited mass gatherings in such cases. The question is what will be the answer to the Metropolitanate of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. However, regardless of the announced continuation of religious protests, it is expected that this religious community will also act responsibly and that if the proposed measures by the above mentioned Coordination Body are adopted, all gatherings will be (at least temporarily) suspended. In this way, the blade of religious protests would certainly be at least slightly dampened. However, it is the responsibility of each individual to protect all citizens and society as a whole. Also, the virus that is potentially threatening the Montenegrin society will, without doubt, lead to social unity that has been significantly shaken. However, it points to something else. Montenegrin citizens easily move from the confrontation zone to the solidarity zone, and vice versa. This also indicates something else - it reveals the significant power of the country's media (electronic in particular), which obviously have a significant impact, but also a manipulative capacity. However, the question is the degree of respect for the ethical principles of individual media.

If such power and influence on a Montenegrin citizen already exists in forming his / her opinion, then that power should certainly be aimed at upholding the unique spirit of the people, solidarity, morality, ethics, altruism, but also promoting the principles of freedom. And it

should not be forgotten that freedom also means responsibility! Responsibility of the individual towards himself, but also towards others. In that spirit and in that tone, the development of self-awareness of Montenegrin citizens should be moving. Everyone, not only the media, but also all state institutions can help. Especially institutions who can represent a real example with their responsible attitude towards Montenegrin citizens in this situation. It is precisely those institutions that have so far been accused of malpractice towards citizens, either through irrational spending of budget funds, or through proven or suspected corrupt practices within those institutions. The situation in which the entire society is threatened by the invisible enemy - the epidemic of the new virus - is a real opportunity to show that these institutions are at the service of all citizens of Montenegro.

In doing so, these institutions would also regain some of the lost confidence among citizens. And the first steps seem to be just about restoring confidence. Because, based on the findings of the National Coordination Team, the Institute for Public Health proposed in February the first measures aimed at preventing the import of new virus into Montenegro. These measures relate to the temporary ban on travel of passengers from Montenegro to the north of the Italy, that is, to areas affected by the epidemic of infectious disease caused by the new “Corona” virus. Also, entry of travelers to Montenegro from those destinations is banned.

However, it should be understood that efficient prevention and protection is not just related to the behavior or decisions of the health system institutions, which are undoubtedly expected to show a high degree of responsibility and organization in this situation (especially given the very limited resources). It is related to the line ministries, political parties, public and private institutions, civil society organizations, etc. And finally, contribution to abovementioned goal could be done by all the patriots, to whom Montenegro is the homeland and which is in their hearts. Such responsible behavior would contribute to positive social consequences of collective emotions, through higher national identification and solidarity.¹ The virus epidemic is dangerous, but less dangerous than violence epidemic, or non-solidarity epidemic.

Also, one of the questions that arises is how events in the world, but also in Montenegro, regarding the “Corona” virus, will affect the social status of citizens and their standard of living. This cannot be assessed in February, since there are still no significant measures in Montenegro

¹ Something on this topic is discussed by various historians, sociologists and other scientists such as Hobsbawm, Durkheim, Beyer, etc.

to combat the epidemic, and there are no confirmed cases of this new virus. But, if happens what is expected to be, if the virus does not bypass Montenegro, how will it affect employment, the possibility of receiving regular wages, social security benefits and, consequently, the living standards of citizens? This is still unknown, but it is clear that even if the epidemic does not spread in Montenegro, global events will certainly affect a small opened country such as Montenegro. However, at the moment it seems that the problem of poverty or the degree of poverty in the country is at least slightly less important, compared with the health of Montenegrin citizens.

Thus, the COVID-19 virus is a "black swan" that can potentially cause the consequences of incomprehensible proportions throughout the world, including Montenegrin society. These consequences are not only those that are visible or material (the destruction of human health and the economy of society by reducing production, consumption, etc.), but also those invisible, social, such as awakened, solidarity, unity, compassion, emotion, that is, awakened humanity, and everything that contemporary civilized man is based on, and which makes him / her responsible for future generations.