



Weekly Briefing

**Serbia social briefing:
Demand for transparency and accuracy
IIPE**

China-CEE Institute

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Demand for transparency and accuracy

Abstract

Since COVID-19 outbreak in March, Serbs has widened their scope of interest from sports and politics to corona virus and its outcomes and consequences. This topic has started to be exploited in numerous ways that even caused serious arguing. Firstly, that was the issue of origin of the corona virus, then measures that were recommended and finally even the data about the infected and passed away people.

COVID-19 in numbers: BIRN report

Since the first case of infected person in March was noted, Serbian authorities started to record all relevant data. After three months, according to official data 14564 cases were confirmed out of 401240 tested, while the number of death cases reached 277, making the death rate of 1.90%.

But, public started to have certain doubts regarding those data. Reason for suspicious were more and more rumors and full and half information spreading among people, mainly on social networking platforms. People that were writing their post were either patients or medical workers who had insight in Serbian hospitals. The issue of the accuracy of the coronavirus death toll has been controversial around the world as well because different countries sometimes use different reporting methods. Some countries decided to report only about cases of people who died from the virus itself and not infected people who died from other conditions.

Such rumors attracted attention of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) who decided to carry out the research. First step was to demand full data from “Batut Institute” (public health Institute) that is entitled to handle all COVID-19 information and manages official data system. On June 16, the Batut Institute finally sent BIRN data which was identical to that already published on the official COVID-19 website, and which stated that 244 people died from COVID-19 from March 19 to June 1. BIRN also tried to contact Serbia’s health minister, the prime minister’s office, several expert members of the national Crisis Staff and many of the directors of Serbia’s clinical centres, but they either did not answer BIRN’s calls or declined to respond to questions.

BIRN several times tried to get the additional answers from the Batut Institute's director, Verica Jovanovic, but she declined to answer questions by telephone and in person.

BIRN presented its findings in form of report on June 22nd, 2020.

In its report BIRN covered period between March 19th and June 1st while data were examined from Serbian state's COVID-19 information system. BIRN conducted a detailed analysis of the data from the information system, focusing on the patients who died whose COVID-19 test results were marked as positive. BIRN's findings stated that, in given period, a total of 632 people who had tested positive for the coronavirus died in Serbia, which is more than twice as many as the officially announced. Official number was 244 deaths in that period.

Problematic also was the number of infected people. For period from June 17th to June 20th data showed at least 300 persons per day comparing to officially announced figures of maximum of 97 new cases in a single day during that period.

Insight in data led to conclusion that there are big differences in reporting from different hospitals and medical centers. For example, the biggest difference was observed in the Clinical Centre in Nis where 77 patients died of the virus. From the other hand, BIRN found that number to be significantly higher - even 243 people, whose COVID-19 test results were positive, died.

Belgrade data also showed differences. In the "Dragisa Misovic" Clinical Centre, Belgrade, the number of people who died who had previously tested positive for COVID-19 was 94 compared to state announced 39 deaths.

In several other clinical centres in Belgrade, there were also significant discrepancies in the mortality figures. A total of 32 people who had tested positive for COVID-19 were officially reported to have died at the Zemun Clinical Centre, while the system contains data on 88 deaths.

Official data for Belgrade's Zvezdara Clinical Centre stated that 14 COVID-19 patients died at, but, according to BIRN, system recorded a total of 59 deaths. At the Clinical Centre of Serbia, officially, 33 people died, but the state's COVID-19 database shows that there were 50 deaths of infected patients.

Similar discrepancies were recognized in other hospitals in Serbia, too. There also were disparities between the number of patients officially reported to have died of the virus and the death toll of infected patients, although those differences in the figures were not so drastic. In the case of 29 patients, the hospital in which they died has not been stated.

Public reactions

As expected, Serbian officials reacted in negative notion. Serbian president, Aleksandar Vucic, had especially strident tone. He said that presented data were not authentic and such shouldn't be taken seriously. On the other hand, some members of the Crisis Staff did not deny the information contained in it but said they had not seen the database and tried to blame the difference in numbers on methodology.

Public reacted noisily towards BIRN's report especially because of the Government of Serbia's decision to hold elections in June in spite of obvious increase in infections that, in other words meant, that Government put its own narrow political interests above the interest of its citizens.

Blustery reactions of the citizens were provoked due to the fact that informing at regular press conferences held by the national Crisis Staff ended on May 6th when the state of emergency was lifted, and the public and the media were told to obtain the latest information through the official COVID-19 website, which should publish data from the state's information system.

BIRN's report implied that citizens were not properly informed and that the state's information system has been misused. That is why Crisis Staff faced with accusations to be corrupted and, not only ordinary people, but medical personnel as well started petition for their resignation. The demand comes after questions were raised over whether the statistics on infections and deaths announced to the public in June were artificially reduced because of the governing Serbian Progressive Party's desire to hold and win elections in July. This initiative soon became widely accepted, gathered more than 1000 doctors and other medical personnel in action "United Against Covid-19".

They called on the government in an open letter to replace the state-level Crisis Staff, which has been leading the country's highly-criticized efforts to combat the spread of the coronavirus, because Serbia is now in the midst of a "public health disaster" caused by officials' mistakes.

They explained that "the complete easing of anti-epidemic measures in the pre-election period (rallies, matches, tournaments, celebrations, etc.) led to a loss of control over the epidemiological situation". Therefore, undersigned called for an independent investigation to seek for full information about the true scale of infections and deaths. Such investigation as its final finding will prove if there was any intentionally concealed. If that turn to be the case,

“those responsible who knowingly and intentionally participated in (concealing the real figures) should be held responsible professionally and in any other way”.

The letter was concluded saying that “our human and professional reaction to the reality that medical workers encounter every day in their work has led to this initiative”.

Atmosphere of mistrust and dissatisfaction with government’s handling the pandemic as well the Aleksandar Vucic’s announcement that lockdown measures could be reintroduced after official infection figures spiked in the aftermath of the elections has led to protest across Serbia. People wanted to send clear message to the authorities that they are aware that Government played a kind of game in order to have elections. Unfortunately, it seems that the price of that game was not well calculated.

Conclusion

Likewise other countries, corona virus raised many issues in Serbian society, too. More than ever became clear that people are aware of their right to search for truth whenever they became suspicious with official data. In spite of not so rosy Serbian media scene, still there is a way to be informed and to raise additional questions.