
2020 Overview: The impact of Covid on IJAS and its members

1. The situation in Serbia since the pandemic in terms of labour rights and media freedom;

Although freedom of expression may be restricted, if the restriction is necessary to protect public health, among other things, then this must be done in a manner adequate to a democratic society, without interfering into the substance of the guaranteed right to timely and truthful information. During the state of emergency¹, a number of regulations were adopted that limited a certain number of fundamental rights which had a direct impact on the work of journalists, including restrictions on movement, a ban on attending events important for timely and truthful information to citizens, and other government actions which affected the inability of journalists to do their job professionally. Although some of the harmful provisions were later repealed, the fact that they were in direct conflict with the Constitution and relevant laws imposes the need for careful consideration of the consequences they had when it comes to the work of journalists and the quality of the information in general. This is all the more so because the availability of information important for the health of citizens is hindered even after lifting the emergency situation. Also, in the observed period, an increase in incidents was noticed to the detriment of journalists in relation to the time that preceded the state of emergency, but also in relation to the same observed period last year. When it comes to the safety of journalists, there has been an increase in incidents to the detriment of journalists in relation to the period preceding the state of emergency, but also in relation to the same period last year (March - April, 2019).

In the period from the introduction of the state of emergency on March 15 to May 6, a total of 47 cases of incidents against journalists were recorded. Among them, 32 cases of pressure and 15 cases of various forms of attacks on journalists. Out of the 15 attacks, there were two (2) threats to life, two (2) detentions as a form of physical threat to journalists, seven (7) verbal threats, two (2) physical attacks on journalists and two (2) attacks on property. As a special form of pressure, hitherto unnoticed in Serbia, we also mention the paid campaign on various Google services against a female journalist, due to critical reporting during the state of emergency.

At the same time, the Republic Public Prosecutor's Office, according to its latest "Notice on the stages of cases and actions of public prosecutor's offices in connection with criminal acts committed to the detriment of journalists in connection with their safety in the period from January 1, 2020 as of June 30, 2020" informed the members of the Permanent working group on safety that the competent prosecutor's offices have started processing in *only one case* in which there is a suspicion of committing a crime to the detriment of journalists, which includes a period of the state of emergency.

In the period before the introduction of the state of emergency, in twice the time period (100 days), 12 attacks and 11 pressures were recorded, and during the state of emergency, in only 47 days, the attack rate increased by 70 percent and pressures by almost 150 percent. The number of attacks and pressures on journalists continuing in the same manner and numbers of incident against journalists until 1st December is 168 (27 physical attacks, 47 threats, ten attacks on property, 87 pressures) according the data recorded by Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia. The number of physical attacks and attacks on property is more than doubled because of the protests which took place in July in many cities in Serbia when more than 25 journalists were attacked or their property was destroyed or an attempt was made to confiscate the equipment.

¹ In Serbia state of emergency lasted from March 15 until May 6, 2020.

At the beginning of April 2020, the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia conducted a survey among its members, which aimed to determine what journalists need to do their job smoothly during a pandemic, as well as to reveal the biggest obstacles in their work during the state of emergency.

228 journalists from all over Serbia took part in the online survey. Almost 58% of survey participants said they needed gloves, masks and disinfectants, while 33.9% expressed the need for the ensured safety of digital communications (33.9%) legal aid and support (28.4%) and psychological support (8.7%).

At the same time, the biggest problem for performing journalistic work during the state of emergency was the fact that institutions for providing relevant information were closed. Almost two thirds of the respondents chose such an answer. This is followed by the lack of a sufficient number of work permits during the prohibition of movement (37.6%) and abuse of powers by the authorities (23.3%).

The trend of non-delivery of information continued even after lifting the state of emergency. A large number of journalists complained about the lack of action by institutions on the basis of requests for free access to information of public importance in connection with the questions asked about the situation in health centers throughout Serbia.

Economic and social conditions continue to be a significant problem for the journalistic community. Union organizing is weak, salaries are low and some journalists work for minimum wage and even illegally which is especially visible in smaller communities. They are often engaged part-time and have to work in several newsrooms to make a living. When it comes to labor rights, we do not have precise information on whether they were more endangered than in previous years. There were no major layings-off except in the provincial Public media service, where a total of 88 workers dismissed because their contracts were not extended. Workers whose contracts were not extended were otherwise employed under precarious contracts, ie through an agency for hiring workers. And then it was easy to terminate the contracts with them. This happened because the Government of Serbia, due to the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus, reduced the subsidies to the Public media service of Serbia and the public media service of Vojvodina. There were no layoffs in the Public media service of Serbia.

N.B. IJAS is currently conducting a survey on the labor rights of journalists, and in the next two months we will have more precise data on the state of labor rights of media professionals during the pandemic.

2. The impact on the IJAS in terms of operational capacity, evolution of the membership, resources, etc;

During the state of emergency, we work remotely, but from May we work in offices but have working shifts just in case that some of us get sick. The work of the association during the state of emergency was very intensive because journalists were enabled to do their job properly. The institutions get more closed than usual, and journalists seek our help. We write letters to the institutions trying to explain to them why it is so important to share info with journalists etc. When it comes to the legal advice, we provided more than 100 advice just in two months of the state of emergency. Until the end of November, that number is more than 200. We translated and provided instructions for safe reporting during the pandemic some targeted journalists, but others targeted editors and managers. The goal was to remind the media owners that they should make efforts to increase the safety of its staff since, due to the nature of their work, because they are directly exposed and at risk. Protective gear – masks, disinfectant etc. – were secured through cooperation with the different organizations (national and international). Besides the protective gear, we provided press vests for media professionals because they were target of many attacks during the protests in July so, we thought that wearing the press vests could help them in doing their job more safely.

When it comes to the paid membership, we noted decreases in this year. The number of new members increased this year due to the need for media workers to have professional protection during the time of crisis. Still, there were fewer fees paid; the reason might be lower finances in the time of the pandemic.

Total number of members in 2019	3870
Total number of members 2020 until 31 st October	3954
Total numbers of paid membership fees in 2019	957
Total numbers of paid membership fees in 2020 until 31 st October	530
Total number of new members in 2019	68
Total number of new members in 2020 until 31 st October	84

Our internal capacities are stretched because the amount of work is larger during this crisis. The requests and expectations of our members are more significant, and the situation in the field of media freedom is worse than it was, so employees have to work after hours because we don't have the resources to hire new people. This is not a problem at the moment that we cannot overcome, but it can become a problem for a longer period of time, it can lead to burnout of employees in the association.

3. The immediate/long-term challenges and how your organisation is planning to address them (work plan);

- Reduced ability to communicate directly with members in person - we hope that from the spring we will be able to implement a plan to visit several cities in Serbia and present to journalists and other media professionals our work and the benefits they have if they are members of our association. Also, we are developing a new website of our association that will be adapted to new technological challenges and the needs of our membership.
- The impaired mental health of journalists due to poor working conditions described above - providing psychological support services for membership and training of employees in the secretariat (first responders training).
- Providing protective equipment for journalists - we have already provided funds for the purchase of protective masks. Still, we will have to distribute it by regular post because it is not possible to visit the newsroom at this time.
- Advocating for changes in the relevant legislative framework for media and journalists - our association is recognized as a relevant actor in the field of media freedoms, and the State includes us in working groups to change legislation, but we need to provide legal expertise to provide quality feedback in these working groups. We have some funds provided for this, but we will have to do our best to provide more.
- Threats in the online space and challenges posed by artificial intelligence - we applied for a project that should provide training of trainers for our employees to transfer this knowledge to our members, and for production of an online resource centre that would be available to all who have such knowledge find necessary. Some of our employees are already attending training in this area to be as ready as possible for the challenges that lie ahead, and if we get a project, to know in which direction it is best to go.

4. Your recommendations to the EFJ/EU institutions to contribute to improve journalists' labour rights in your country.

- To monitor the situation in Western Balkans countries and react as you already do;
- to help our associations to reach EU institutions and promote our reports regarding media freedom in our countries;
- to include our feedback about media freedom when EU institution prepare EU country reports for the Western Balkans countries;
- to advocate for providing institutional support/grants for journalists' and media associations;
- to advocate for providing funds for legal and psychological support for journalists;
- to support the national association in their advocacy efforts in the field of changes media and labour rights policies;
- to share good practice among their affiliates.