

ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION OF STATE AUTHORITIES WITH CITIZENS DURING THE STATE OF EMERGENCY IN SERBIA INTRODUCED DUE TO THE PANDEMIC OF COVID - 19

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, state authorities' communication with citizens was characterized by contradictory messages, which changed almost daily. Contradictory statements came from the highest authorities. Primarily the President of the Republic of Serbia, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Education, but also from doctors, epidemiologists, members of the COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team and were often opposed to messages delivered only a day earlier. This confused the citizens, and caused a decline in trust in institutions, faith in the efficiency of the measures implemented to combat the pandemic, and Serbia's health system in general.

Contradictory and confusing statements resulted in citizens being less informed about the severity of the virus. Eventually, this could lead to poorer self-protection of citizens, i.e., inefficient execution of prescribed measures and recommendations. Additionally, such statements have opened up space for spreading false news, which occasionally caused panic or conspiracy theories. The risk of spreading the infection rose simply because people who spread false news or conspiracy theories proved to be careless both for themselves and others. Some doctors, members of the Crisis Team, occasionally accelerated the spread of conspiracy theories as well.

Preparations for the Pandemics

Contradictory and seemingly relaxed statements from the state authorities appeared when the virus still wasn't registered in Serbia, although it has already become clear that the pandemic is coming. It started with a statement from the Minister of Health, Zlatibor Lončar, who said on January 30, 2020, that "Serbia and its experts can make a vaccine¹". No doctor or expert has publicly commented this statement.

Later, it became clear that Serbian citizens were also in danger because many families spent the winter holidays in Northern Italy, where the first death of COVID-19 was recorded on February 22. Minister Lončar stated that "Hospitals and barracks, as well as some private facilities, will be designated for the accommodation of individuals infected with the coronavirus." Lončar then said that there was no room for panic, but he advised citizens not to travel to the northern part of Italy nor to be in close contact with people coming from those areas. These statements were made on February 25, 2020².

¹ https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/zivot/zdravlje/loncar-pod-nadzorom-svi-koji-dolaze-iz-kine-srbija-moze-da-napravi-vakcinu_1089003.html

² <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a572345/Zlatibor-Loncar-o-koronavirusu.html>

Minister Lončar's advice on avoiding the north of Italy proved inefficient on the very next day, February 26, 2020. On that day, a press conference was held in Serbian presidency, gathering the President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, doctors Predrag Kon, Mijomir Pelemiš, Branislav Todorović and Branimir Nestorović.

This conference can be seen as an attempt to suppress the spread of panic in the population. For example, the panic was reflected even in the excessive accumulation of food. However it was the first conference where confusing and contradictory messages were sent. In the coming months, we were witnessing the same events. Almost every statement sent from this conference proved to be incorrect over time.

- Meeting held between the president and the doctors yielded the following 'comprehensive prevention measures, emergency response measures of all competent authorities in case COVID-19 appears, are agreed, and we anticipated everything in detail'.
- "We will not have any problems, except for the problems caused by the intentional or accidental spread of panic. The panic is unnecessary."
- "This (COVID-19) is something milder than flu. (...) There is no need to scare our people, to fabricate facts and talk about catastrophic consequences for human health, when that is not true."
- The doctors convinced Vučić that some things are well done and suggested what else needs to be done, "and we are already doing it today, in two or three days, we will be prepared fully".
- It' said there is a reason for caution, there is a reason for a serious and responsible behavior, but "there is no reason for serious worries."
- Zlatibor Lončar told the president that medical alcohol kills the coronavirus. He suggested that, in his opinion, drinks containing 41-42% of alcohol might be useful as well, "and that where it is not very pure alcohol, but where it has 41, 42 degrees of alcohol. He found himself an additional reason "to drink one glass of alcohol a day," although it has nothing to do with medical alcohol. "
- Serbia will not close the borders, because, according to the president, "we will not pull out a show in front of our people, it is the easiest move that would bring nothing. Even if we close the borders, it does not mean we would prevent the virus from entering Serbia. "
- The upcoming elections and sports matches will be held as planned: "Everything will be held, as usual, people should go freely to the stadiums, halls... They should live their lives normally, and this will not cause any problems, said the President³.

At the same conference, the public could get to know Dr. Branimir Nestorović, thanks to his calming statements, which positively affected the population. However, the problem is that most of his statements were not true. Furthermore, many consider Nestorović's comments very dangerous. Nestorović delivered a speech at the Presidency of Serbia while President Vučić was standing behind him and often laughed are the following:

- "I cannot believe that the nation which survived the sanctions, bombing, all kinds of harassment, will be afraid of the funniest virus in the history of humanity, which exists on Facebook. At the meeting, I was even against ordering masks and testing material, as I believe it is pointless. If we didn't have the test, we wouldn't know it's an epidemic."
- The epidemic in China is ending, the virulence of the virus is declining (and it was weak, to begin with).
- "Let me say something about the women... Estrogen definitely protects women; women have mild forms of the virus; they do not die from this virus. So, as far as women are concerned, feel free to go shopping in Italy, I hear there will be discounts now because everyone is afraid of going there now "(the president, stands behind Nestorović, in this moments and reacts with laughter).

³ <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1766424>

In a day, the communication and statements coming from state authorities changed dramatically. From minister Lončar's statement, advising citizens not to travel to the north of Italy, we shifted to a recommendation stated at the conference in Serbian Presidency to travel there freely. It is worth noting that at the time, a fashion event was held in Milan. A fashion designer and the editor of a state-owned women's magazine from Serbia also participated in the event. It turned out that many of her guests were public figures, who will soon become some of the first patients diagnosed with coronavirus in Serbia.

Fourteen days after the conference, there are women infected in Serbia, which was to no surprise as all around the world, women were also dying from the virus. Italy is in quarantine. More than 600 people died of coronavirus in the Apennines, and the President of Serbia folds his hands and begs the citizens to report their trips to Italy.

"I beg you if you were in Milan or anywhere in the north of Italy, please tell us. Tell us so that we can protect you." said president Vučić.

However, the President of Serbia showed revolt when reminded of Dr. Nestorović's irresponsible statements.

"I can't stand this injustice of people attacking Dr. Nestorović, attacking these people here who are serious and responsible. They say 'the funniest virus'. Don't lie; no one said it was the funniest virus." said Vučić.

Eventually, the President of Serbia did adopt bits of advice coming from the experts:

"They taught me not to cough in my hand but in a handkerchief."

While Dr. Nestorović said on that day:

"I will not make jokes anymore, since joking is dangerous in Serbia" he said⁴.

In the coming months, Nestorović also continued to be calm, presenting unfounded messages which media broadcasted without any restraint. However, messages often deviated from the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations and some domestic experts. Dr. Nestorović is a pediatric pulmonologist by specialization, but he kept talking about areas where virologists, epidemiologists, and infectologists should be more reliable. Nestorović continued to rely on the fact that he is a member of the Crisis Response Team, formed by the Government of Serbia. On March 6, the first case of coronavirus happened in Serbia. Vučić again acted nonchalantly, sending reassuring but completely inaccurate statements about the supposedly increased danger from coronavirus. His comments were as follows:

- Serbia is not the hotspot of the virus. If the number of infected increases, it will be by two, three, five, ten cases, not hundreds and thousands, as happens in China, South Korea, Iran, Italy ...
- The most challenging day in the world since the beginning of the epidemic was February 10, when 108 people died worldwide. On that day, as Vučić reported, 26.283 people died of cancer, 24.200 died from heart diseases globally; 4.300 died from diabetes, while there were 28 times more people who took their own lives.
- Twenty-five times more people die every day from mosquito bites, which transmit malaria. "So, there is no room for panic; I will not put on a mask⁵."

⁴ <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a577050/Strucnjaci-i-Vucic-ozbiljnije-o-virusu-Nestorovic-kaze-necu-vise-da-se-salim.html>

⁵ <https://mondo.rs/Magazin/Zdravlje/a1292025/Korona-virus-u-Srbiji-prvi-slucaj-zarazenog-korona-virusom-Vucic-o-korona-virusu.htm>

Introducing the State of Emergency

On the evening of Sunday, March 15, 2020, Serbia entered the “war against an invisible opponent”, as stated by President Vučić.

“Based on the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, in accordance with the Article 5 of the Constitution, I inform you that we made a decision to declare a state of emergency on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. This was not an easy decision since state of emergency is only announced in extraordinary circumstances.”

“Life is being closed, so lives could be saved,” he said.

The President of Serbia announced that the Serbian Army will guard the hospitals while the police would execute the order of isolation of the infected.

Despite Vučić’s earlier statements, the borders were closed, regardless of his claim that “it is the easiest move that would bring nothing.” Regular parliamentary and local elections are postponed, as well as all matches, contrary to what the president initially announced.

In the days leading up to the introduction of the state of emergency, an important question was whether it was necessary to close schools. President Vučić, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, and experts such as Dr. Predrag Kon were against it, explaining that schools should not be closed for a few weeks because, in that case, the children would be returning at a time when we expect the peak of epidemics.

At that time, on Friday, March 13, many schools in Serbia dismissed students due to contact with people who may have been infected. This provoked anger of the Minister of Education Mladen Šarčević. He stated that everybody must follow defined procedures to shut down the schools and threaten to sanction those who behave otherwise. He said that the decision cannot be made by the principals individually and announced sanctions for those who acted otherwise⁶.

Threatening continued until, on the same day, information appeared that the private primary school “Ruđer Boskovic”, where Šarčević is one of the founders, decided to conduct online classes starting from Monday, March 16⁷.

The turnaround happened the next day, on Saturday, March 14. Aleksandar Vučić had a press conference at 11 am after the Crisis Team meeting. It was the first time someone mentioned the possibility of introducing a state of emergency. When a journalist from the Prva Television asked him about it, Vučić said that he did not rule out that possibility, but he spoke quite negatively about the emergency state. He said that these were the most difficult measures, but it was “the easiest thing to do to release the pressure⁸.”

“Do you think that any of us is stupid or crazy, that he likes to risk parents getting angry because parents care about their children the most?” said Vučić.

He also explained how could the state of emergency be declared from the technical point of view, but that it would mean complete isolation, “and the dumbest thing is that children and the elderly start coming out at the peak of the crisis, because they can’t stand it anymore, so after 21 days they start to go outside”.

“We should wait until the last, and the first necessary moment,” he said.

And then on the same day, just 12 hours later, the regular evening program of TV Pink was interrupted for the Minister of Defense Alexander Vulin to address the public. The Minister of Defense told the Serbian public that it was “under the Constitution and because of the endangered safety of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia

⁶ https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/mladi/obrazovanje/nakon-danasnje-obustave-dve-skole-od-ponedeljka-nastavljaju-sa-radom-ministar-najavio-sankcije-za-direktore_1102284.html

⁷ <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a577588/Obustavljena-nastava-u-skoli-Rudjer-Boskovic-roditeljima-stigla-SMS-poruka.html>

⁸ <https://mondo.rs/Info/Srbija/amp/a1295574/Srbija-Korona-virus-Vanredno-stanje-Aleksandar-Vucic.html>

on the largest part of our territory, he sent a letter to President Aleksandar Vučić demanding that, he takes all necessary measures to protect the population following his constitution⁹.

It was the first indication that state of emergency will be introduced.

What changed since Saturday at 11 am when Vučić called the state of emergency “the easiest.” measure” until Saturday at 11 pm when Vulin asked for “all necessary measures” to be taken, remains difficult to understand. That evening, there was no sudden increase in the number of infected; on the contrary, there were no new patients, nor were they tested according to the algorithm.

We received a possible answer for such a change in the leadership attitude on the state of emergency on Sunday morning, when Predrag Kurčubić, General Manager of Ipsos, was a guest on the morning program of Prva TV. He presented the latest results of a survey of citizens’ attitude towards the coronavirus. According to that research, it turned out that as many as 70% of citizens are “ready for more extreme measures and longer isolation.” Coincidence or not, the research also pointed out that the survey was completed on Saturday night, thus coinciding with Vulin’s sudden address to the public.

One of the government’s first measures was establishing a COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team¹⁰.

The Crisis Team’s was managed by the Prime Minister of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, the Minister of Health, Zlatibor Lončar, director of the Republic Health Insurance Fund Sanja Radojević Škodrić, and provincial secretary for health Zoran Gojković. The members of this body were directors of relevant institutes, clinics and representatives of other relevant bodies.

However, to date, we do not know the criteria upon which other members of the Crisis Team were chosen, nor which laws apply to them.

In this meeting, the Crisis Team for eliminating potentially harmful consequences of infectious disease COVID-19 for the economy was also formed.

The co-manager of this Crisis Team was the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, the Minister of Finance, Siniša Mali, President of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce Marko Čadež, and Governor of the National Bank of Serbia Jorgovanka Tabakovic.

Crisis Communications

Authorities communicated during the first days of the state of emergency with an encouraging and responsible attitude, which somewhat incentivized the citizens to behave more responsibly. They explained the need to introduce strict measures to preserve the population. The positive practice was also the decision to organize daily conferences with experts from the Crisis Team and state authorities at 3 PM every day. Combined with regularly updating the data on the site covid19.rs, citizens could feel well informed. Especially useful was that the conferences had no time limit and that the members of the Crisis Team initially responded to all of the questions asked. Besides, a marketing campaign began, spreading messages about pandemic control measures.

The most significant public response caused the President of the Republic, who had a substantial impact on the public even before. Having in mind his popularity and presence in the media at that time, this is not surprising. In times of crisis, that influence, understandably, became even more significant. In other countries, politicians

⁹ <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/17251/>

¹⁰ <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/450999/obrazovan-krizni-stab-za-suzbijanje-covid-19.php>

Suzana Miličić, director of the PR agency Contact¹¹, conducted research that showed the president did not change his way of communicating with the public in the time of crisis. He is consistent in his public appearances. Vučić spoke in the first person about everything that is supposed to be done by the state; he sent several political messages in parallel – both for the national and international public; he called by name the people around him to report to him, regardless of whether they are older or more skilled in a particular area; he kept using harsh words, strong comparisons, pleas, threats, and a lot of lively direct formulations addressed to the public, which he sometimes seemed to perceive as a living interlocutor.

Miličić notes:

“He was, and still is, a collective pater familias, who shouts at us, for our good, and we are like ungrateful children who do not understand his sacrifices. That’s his regular communication; it’s just that now that model became even more emphasized. With strong words, complicated descriptions, dramatic warnings:

- What awaits us will be terrible in every way.
- Many will lose their loved ones.
- I also expect many of us to be left without our loved ones.
- Please do not come (people from the diaspora) because that would be our end!
- I am happy that the people show fear because it will make them more disciplined.
- Do you want the Italian scenario to happen to us, do you like that?
- I will not say a word, but if, dear pensioners, you do not listen to these suggestions, Lešće Cemetery, New Cemetery, Central and Bežanija Cemetery, will be not enough to receive us all.

also showed that they are moving within these frames - personal style of communication and political agenda, democracy level in society, public opinion strength, and current circumstances. Emanuel Macron, the first man of France declared war on the virus just like the President of Serbia. The French liked it, and his rating soared in the last month. So, someone did take care of that too and measured rating as well.

Giuseppe Conti, the Prime Minister of Italy, the man who was the first in Europe to introduce quarantine for citizens, is now enjoying popularity among seven out of ten Italians. And the way how the mayors in northern Italy chased the citizens through the streets and forced them to stay at home, threatened them, and cursed them in video addresses, will be historical material or material for analysis for students of psychology.

It was not chaotic everywhere, though.

¹¹ <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/politicari-i-krizna-komunikacija-tokom-pandemije-ne-treba-nam-besna-glava-kuce-ne-go-strogi-porodicni-lekar/>

German Chancellor Angela Merkel had an extraordinary public address for the first time in 15 years. Journalists say that she convinced Germans to obey the state measures, mostly because she led by example and stayed isolated herself. Additionally, she gave an unusually emotional speech, which further inspired the public to obey.

Those who watched how Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, addresses the citizens regarding pandemics, saw that it was possible to speak honestly about the seriousness of the situation, show comfort and instill security at the same time. Trudeau even said, “We’ve got your back.” With both body language and tone of his speech, he sends the same message - this is difficult, but not impossible, the state will take precise steps, and we will go through everything together. He even tells his compatriots - find time for yourself and stay positive. “For a while, this kind of life will be our new normal. And that’s okay because we are in this together.”¹²

The Influence of China

A sudden change in the communication with the public happened on March 21, when the experts from China arrived to Serbia.

Three things were important:

- 1. All of the Chinese team members wore masks, while members of the Serbian Government who waited for them at the airport didn’t wear masks.** Before that, the Government and members of the Crisis Team were telling the public that face masks are not efficient in protection against the virus. Darija Kisić Tepavčević (epidemiologist and deputy director of the Institute of Public Health “Dr. Milan Jovanović Batut”) said that masks have a limited effect. She also said that the masks should be worn indoors; masks should be worn by those who already have coronavirus symptoms; healthcare workers should have them as well. However, in the first days after the arrival of Chinese experts, the cameras showed that all our state officials and members of the Crisis Team wore masks at the meeting with Chinese experts¹³.

Dr. Predrag Kon said at the Crisis Team conference held on March 23, “it’s time to wear masks.” He stated that Chinese experts are of the firm opinion that masks need to be worn. He even pointed out that Chinese always wear masks, which clearly shows their attitude towards protection measures. He admitted that there is another reason why wearing masks was not recommended earlier. There were not enough of them in the beginning. He said that Serbian doctors’ views did not change a lot, but they do change according to the availability of masks.

“It is not possible to recommend something that cannot be implemented everywhere, especially in health care institutions. This is not wise, and it isn’t polite if such a recommendation is given but cannot be executed. The situation is now different, and I wear the mask from the moment it became available to me” said Kon, answering the question about Chinese experts’ recommendations on wearing masks.

He added that wearing a mask is now recommended at a distance of two meters. All those conflicting messages have confused the public regarding whether face masks are efficient protection against the virus.

¹² <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/politicari-i-krizna-komunikacija-tokom-pandemije-ne-treba-nam-besna-glava-kuce-ne-go-strogi-porodicni-lekar/>

¹³ <https://nova.rs/drustvo/kon-vreme-je-za-nosenje-maski/>

- 2. Once Chinese experts arrived, the strategy of the state when it comes to testing changed as well.** Until then, the Government assured the public that we need to test only those with severe respiratory symptoms. They claimed that it is an efficient way to combat the epidemic, contrary to the recommendations on mass testing provided by the World Health Organization.

After the arrival of the Chinese, Serbia switched to a strategy of mass testing. Members of the Crisis Team and the Government began to talk publicly about the advantages of testing regardless of their initial opinion.

- 3. Instead of home isolation, all patients tested positive for coronavirus were referred to temporary hospitals like the Belgrade Fair.** Moving to a whole new strategy was confusing the public.

Profession and Politics

By the end of March, the public began to ask more often if doctors serve Vučić as a decoration (front page newspaper *Danas* from March 23). Two days later, the same newspaper reported about an online petition. During one day, 1.500 people signed the petition stating, “Vučić should shut up, the professionals should speak up”. The citizens thought that “Vučić is trying to raise his political rating “and “build a personality cult.”

In the coming days, the government seemed to adhere to this suggestion, so doctors from the Crisis Team appeared at press conferences more often than high ranking officials. Doctors patiently answered questions even though the questions often went beyond the scope of their profession. Some journalists kept imposing political topics, which caused discomfort to the doctors.

At the end of March, Goran Stevanović, director of the Infectious Diseases Clinic in Belgrade, left the conference after a short statement without allowing journalists to ask questions. Other colleagues from the Crisis Team followed him.

Later it was explained that that conference aimed to appeal to the citizens to respect the adopted measures. It was a challenging day in the fight against the virus, as seven people died during that day.

On the same day, a bit later, some citizens, users of the MTS network, received the following message:

“The situation is dramatic; we are approaching the scenario from Italy and Spain. Please stay at home “, it is stated in the SMS signed by the COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team.

The message upset the citizens who showed their protest on social networks.

On April 1, Dr. Kisić Tepavčević confirmed that the Crisis Team was responsible for the message, but claimed the purpose of the message was different.

“Spreading panic was not the goal. The goal was to inform the people who might not have been informed,” she said during the press conference.

In this example, we saw the Chinese influence - the authorities in China sent messages to the citizens during the pandemic to warn them of the virus.

Vučić himself said that “the most important thing is to listen to the professionals, and not to politicians and the media¹⁴”. He kept repeating in the months to come, that we need to respect the expert recommendations. Vučić relied on those recommendations when the measures for Easter, Labor Day, and upcoming elections tightened.

The state authorities did not respect professionals and their recommendations, despite official statements. This was seen in July 2020, when a proposal to close student dormitories appeared. The measure was announced by President Vučić, emphasizing that it was a recommendation coming from the experts. However, the students

¹⁴ <https://www.sns.org.rs/lat/novosti/vesti/vucic-najvaznije-je-da-slusamo-struku-ne-politicare-i-medije>

took to the streets the same evening and protested. Soon enough, we found out that “Vučić found a solution for them to stay in the dormitories.¹⁵”

When in July, Vučić announced that he might introduce a new curfew, and when citizens went out to protest, it took him for only one day to drop that expert recommendation.

However, Vučić did not lead by example. When a member of his family was infected with the coronavirus, the president did not answer whether he followed the measures of self-isolation, since he admitted that they were in close contact after the onset of the first symptoms¹⁶. It was the same when several members of the Government of the Republic of Serbia tested positive for coronavirus after attending the celebration of the Serbian Progressive Party’s victory after the elections on June 21. The celebration was held indoors and the President Vučić was in proximity to the infected persons.

Additionally, Vučić appeared at public events indoors (firstly in hangars at Batajnica airport and then at press conferences) without the face mask, regardless of introducing penalties for not wearing a mask in a public space, in July 2020. The other participants of those gatherings did respect the measure.

The very question of respecting the measures was the reason why Vučić was angry and did not answer the question of the journalists, on April 10 in Niš.

“I talk to the doctors every day. The moment they think there’s any chance, not symptom, but any chance that I am infected I will be tested. And don’t worry too much, the consequences would certainly be heavier than the isolation you are talking about and in which you would like to place me. So I am a very responsible person and I listen to doctors”, said Vučić.

Then he moved the story to the political field, focusing on political opponents and the media, primarily N1. Here he emphasizes belief that when asked about his health, they (N1) do not care about him, but about something else.

“Just let me take care of my own problems. I am sincerely fed up of those worrying about non existing problems. And don’t worry for me please because I know you never have. And tell people that it’s not out of concern, but out of a desire to have me politically isolated so that the coronavirus can win. The coronavirus in Serbia will never win. Nor can it defeat even me no matter how weak and devastated I am from the blows of our political opponents¹⁷”, said Vučić.

In comparison, in neighboring Croatia, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković publicly showed a negative test result in a TV studio, after being in contact with infected tennis player Novak Djokovic. He said it was the fourth time he was tested.

Abolishing Journalist’s Questions

Coincidentally or not, just a day after this unpleasant event in Niš, journalists were banned from press conferences was forbidden. Journalists could email the questions, but many independent media noted that their questions were not read.

Banning the presence of journalists was explained by the “increased possibility of transmitting the virus.”

“We are in the week when the possibility of transmitting the coronavirus is highest. Also, the virus already entered some newsrooms and infected individuals. Hence, it was decided, with the experts’ consent, to hold regular conferences without journalists.”

This was said by the Minister of Health Zlatibor Lončar and epidemiologist Predrag Kon. Lončar pointed out the

¹⁵ <https://www.sns.org.rs/lat/novosti/vesti/vucic-najvaznije-je-da-slusamo-struku-ne-politicare-i-medije>

¹⁶ <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:862147-Pozeleo-sam-da-mene-nema-Vucic-se-prisetio-mucne-noci-kada-je-vodio-sina-u-bolnicu>

¹⁷ <https://www.juznevesti.com/Politika/Vucic-u-Nisu-netestiran-i-u-punoj-sali-sa-medijima-funkcionerima-i-lekarima.sr.html>

Crisis Team's daily press conferences will focus on questions related to the situation with coronavirus and not the political questions¹⁸.

This decision became the subject of criticism from domestic and international journalism organizations¹⁹.

According to the regional survey conducted by the Association of Journalists of Serbia (UNS) among journalists' associations, similar events took place in neighboring countries. Only in Croatia and Bulgaria journalists were allowed to ask questions at COVID-19 conferences at all times²⁰.

COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team held conferences from Tuesday, April 21, in the presence of journalists, but alternately - in one day, there are journalists from television, radio and news agencies, and other day print and online media.

Centralizing the Information

Two Government's decisions caused the indignation of domestic and international journalist associations during the state of emergency. The first refers to the Conclusion on information, adopted on March 28, which prohibits crisis response teams of cities and municipalities from informing local media on the population's health.

The conclusion states that the COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team, led by the Prime Minister, is exclusively authorized to inform the public about the situation, consequences, and health measures. However, the Government soon withdrew this conclusion.

The centralization of information made it difficult for citizens to be accurately informed about the implemented measures and the dangers in their cities. For example, in Valjevo and Niš, local journalists could not get information about what exactly is happening.

Initially, it all seemed like a mere formalization of what has been happening in practice for years. Centralized access to information existed a long time before that Conclusion. Some newsrooms get information easily, while there are also those unprivileged ones who have to find other ways to inform their audience.

Months later, doubts arose as to why it is needed to centralize the information. This was particularly the issue with the discovery of the Balkan Research Network (BIRN) about the potential concealment of data on infected and deceased. We will discuss this further in the analysis.

Almost simultaneously with the adoption of that conclusion, the public learned that Ana Lalić, journalist of the Nova.rs portal, was arrested on April 1 for publishing a piece about the Clinical Center of Vojvodina. She wrote about the lack of protective equipment for the employees in that institution. Her article was designated as "spreading panic and fake news". The police released Lalić the next day, and President Vučić himself said the arrest was a mistake.

Instead of clearing up the mistake by simple retraction, state authorities sent a frightening message to all other professional journalists in Serbia. Authorities claimed the mentioned piece was "journalist attack on doctors". However, this seemed more like a message to journalists and potential whistleblowers "If you want to do your job, handcuffs are waiting for you."

¹⁸ https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/konferencija-za-medije-bez-novinara-zbog-velike-mogucnosti-prenosenja-virusa_1113138.html

¹⁹ https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/konferencija-za-medije-bez-novinara-zbog-velike-mogucnosti-prenosenja-virusa_1113138.html

²⁰ <http://www.uns.org.rs/desk/UNS-news/98291/od-trampa-do-srbije--zemlje-na-udaru-virusa-novinari-na-udaru-vlasti.html>

Economic Measures

The economic measures were transparent and well communicated with the public. The National Bank of Serbia (NBS) reacted immediately by reducing the reference interest rate to 1.75%, and the Executive Board informed the public about it on the same day (March 11). This measure was taken even ahead of European Central Bank (ECB), which announced their measures a day later (March 12). The National Bank introduced several other monetary measures (such as a moratorium on loan repayments). Representatives of the NBS, vice-governors, who usually do not appear in the media, publicly and explained these measures.

Fiscal measures were also transparent. Maybe primarily since these had to be accompanied with a budget rebalance, where increased expenditures could be seen. State officials presented the measures to the public, at press conferences and public appearances. Still, state officials were not responsive to some of the opposition media. For example, there is a misunderstanding in public regarding taking loans from the international financial market. Some media concluded that it was cheaper for Serbia to borrow funds from the IMF rather than to issue Eurobonds, which is not accurate. According to Serbia's quota with the IMF, Serbia could borrow a maximum of 800 million euros per more favorable interest rate. But that does not meet our funding needs this year, because our needs account for at least seven billion euros. The state officials were not available to explain this to the public.

In the second peak of the first wave of the epidemic, President Vučić sent a discouraging message, emphasizing that Serbia no longer has the funds to react case a new wave of epidemics. However, state support does not need to be only financial. There are also administrative measures that can help the economy.

Lifting the State of Emergency

The state of emergency ended on May 7. The government claimed that both conditions for lifting the state of emergency were met. However, the criteria were unknown, and we did not know when the requirements were even defined.

"The first condition is to keep the rate of infected below 5%, and the second one is to have significantly fewer people on respirators," said President Vučić.

Prime Minister Ana Brnabić said that Serbia had fulfilled all six conditions of the World Health Organization for lifting the state of emergency. The experts were unanimous in favor of lifting the state of emergency.

According to official data, there were more than 100 infected people in Serbia while people kept dying daily. For the sake of comparison, on the day when the state of emergency was introduced, we had only two new cases out of 15 tested²¹.

Many citizens doubted that the sudden easing of measures was the result of the civil protests. Every evening at 8:05 p.m., some citizens were showing their dissatisfaction by banging on the pots. Such a theory was in a way confirmed by President Vučić, who said two months later:

"As for relaxing the measures, and that was our decision and your demand. The people were banging on the pots; they wanted us to end the curfew, and to end the dictatorial rule of Vučić," he said²².

²¹ <https://ilovezrenjanin.com/vesti-zrenjanin/korona-virus-zarazene-jos-73-osobe-jos-jedna-preminula-veliki-broj-oporavljenih/>

²² <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/vucic-od-sutra-zabrana-okupljanja-od-petka-policijski-cas-u-srbiji/>

The easing of measures in Serbia began before the state of emergency was lifted. Citizens were able to use the services of hairdressing and beauty salons, open markets, and gyms since April 27.

On June 5, the Crisis Team lifted the ban on public gatherings, but even before that, on May 11, there were protests during a hunger strike by MPs of Dveri and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SPS) in front of the National Assembly in Belgrade. On June 10, a football match between city rivals Partizan and Zvezda was allowed in Belgrade in front of the audience. Only 11 days later, we even had the national elections.

On the same night, June 21, there was a celebration in the SPS headquarters as they were the election winners. As we could see on the TV footage, the social distance was not respected, nor did most participants wear face masks.

In the days after the elections, the public found out that several state officials present at the headquarters that evening were tested positive for the coronavirus, including the director of the Office for Kosovo, Marko Đurić, the Minister of Defense, Aleksandar Vulin, and President of the National Assembly, Maja Gojković.

The lifting of the state of emergency, and curfew, did not mean that all measures will be abolished.

It was said that “gloves and face masks will be mandatory in public transportation; but also in restaurants and cafes, social distance remains to be in force; public gatherings are banned; schools remain closed - distance learning continues; cinemas and theaters remain closed as well.”

Keeping a two-meter distance is still imposed; physical contact such as hugging or shaking hands has to be avoided, and people over the age of 65 will be able to move whenever they want. Still, the advice for them was to keep spending more time indoors. Walking is allowed, but not in groups.

However, making contradictory statements started happening again and caused a new wave of confusion.

The Minister of Health, Zlatibor Lončar, stated that at the beginning of the coronavirus epidemic, Serbia had all the predispositions to end up with thousands dead, as was the case in Italy and Spain; which was opposite to the initial statements. Lončar told TV Happy that we avoided such a scenario thanks to the excellent coordination between the health system and the authorities.

Pulmonologist prof. Dr. Branimir Nestorović started giving statements again, although he was sidelined during the state of emergency because of his wrong estimations and dangerous comments. This time, Nestorović received significant media attention. Some doctors (not those who are a part of Crisis Team) publicly claimed that Nestorović “was right that this was the funniest virus”.

Contrary to Lončar, Nestorović told Prva TV that “the Italian scenario could not have happened to us, but we could have had ten times as many dead.”

In only 24h, the Crisis Team members made completely different recommendations about the necessity of wearing masks. On the other hand, epidemiologists Srđa Janković and Branislav Tiodorović told the citizens that wearing a mask and maintaining a distance of two meters is still necessary. Which was contrary to what Branimir Nestorović told us the day before when he claimed the masks are not needed. It is enough to keep a distance of one meter from each other.

“Now we don’t have to wear a mask anymore, now we’re back to the meter,” Nestorović told TV Prva.

“The mask is still essential and mandatory when being indoors when you enter a shopping center or cafe,” Tiodorović pointed out for New Morning TV Pink (May 22).

Therefore, immunologist Dr. Srđa Janković decided to be consistent and keep his word - he will wear a mask until there is “zero infected”.

Another frequently criticized issue was city transport. The new rules for using public transportation were repeated for days. When in truth, the rules were abandoned after the very first day. President Vučić demanded that the city transport in Belgrade returns to the state as before the state of emergency²³.

Thus, all the warnings and expert advice about the organization of public transport have been forgotten abruptly. The public got the message that the expert advice is, in reality, not as respected as much as claimed in official statements.

Another ambiguity appeared in the case of mandatory testing when entering the country. This decision was abolished soon as well.

Member of the Crisis Team, epidemiologist prof. Dr. Branislav Todorović said for Nedeljnik (number 442, from July 2) that there is no contradiction among epidemiologists in the Crisis Team.

“If there is any variation, it is with a pulmonologist-pediatrician who sees individual patients- that is, the tip of the iceberg, while epidemiologists look at the population as a whole below the visible surface. That is why sometimes there are differences in interpretation that do not influence the definite position “, says the professor Todorović.

On May 10, Dr. Kisić Tepavčević said that Nestorović “gave her headaches many times”. However, the very next day, Nestorović stated that the pandemic was “almost over”²⁴.

These are just some of the cases that confused some citizens and made others angry.

When it became clear that COVID-19 had not been defeated as claimed, serious suspicions arose of the virus being deliberately released to ensure “population infection”.

The state of emergency was lifted on May 6, and Dr. Nestorović said on the same day that the time was right “for everybody to become infected.”²⁵

“I was pro opening schools. Children should go out and get infected. For now, until June 15, only those over the age of 65 must be careful, “he told Blic.

Dr. Kon reacted the next day, stating that the epidemiologist “should not recommend infection on any occasion.”

However, Dr. Kon gave a different statement to RTS on June 26, raising doubts about the intentions of the Crisis Team²⁶:

“We must understand that if we do not open up to life again, we will have this situation lasting for a couple of years. We must get either immunity or vaccine”, stated Kon, emphasizing that this is “ choosing the annual season when infection can occur.”

The Elections

The idea of deliberate infection of the nation in order to gain collective immunity, is not the only thing that made citizens suspicious. The elections scheduled for June 21 were another suspicious case.

Citizens and critics of the government claimed that the ruling party in this way additionally endangers the health of citizens. This attitude could be heard in some European circles who also believed that elections did not have to happen while the pandemic is still ongoing. They believed the elections could have been held later during the

²³ <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/vucic-od-sutra-zabrana-okupljanja-od-petka-policijski-cas-u-srbiji/>

²⁴ <https://nova.rs/drustvo/kisic-tepavcevic-nestorovic-mi-je-zadao-mnogo-glavobolja/>

²⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-53257800>

²⁶ <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/%D0%9A%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81/story/3134/koronavirus-u-srbiji/3999563/kon-koronavirus-mere-kazne.html>

year²⁷. Critics of such a haste decision on the elections said that the ruling party was clearly in a hurry and that it was obvious that lifting the state of emergency and relaxing the measures happened overnight.

However, according to the Constitution, the elections could only be postponed if the state of emergency was imposed again. There were no conditions for this, judging by the epidemiological situation represented by state authorities and members of the Crisis Team. Here are some statements coming from the member of Crisis Team, during June.

June 3, Predrag Kon:

It can always happen that some cases appear, but that does not mean that we are objectively in epidemic²⁸.

June 6, Predrag Kon:

We have reached the end, it is time to relax and I agree with Dr. Nestorović that it is time to remove the measures. We just need to continue to keep a one meter distance²⁹.

June 7, Darija Kisić Tepavčević:

Having in mind the increasingly favorable epidemiological situation in our country, which is primarily reflected in the predominant asymptomatic forms of infection, we decided that the conditions are fulfilled and we can have a less strict approach in supervision³⁰.

June 8, Zlatibor Lončar:

The last case of coronavirus infection in Serbia should be recorded around July 9 or 10³¹.

June 10, Predrag Kon:

The summer protects us, because all respiratory infections are seasonal and they are well apt to winter. We also have highly developed surveillance of contacts and extensive testing, and we do not expect a drastic deterioration of the epidemiological situation³².

June 19, Darija Kisić Tepavčević:

The characteristics of the virus are not the same as when it was detected in March and April, it causes much milder forms of the disease, but is transmitted in the same way. If we let the virus to attack us, he will use it³³.

A day after the elections, the statements started to change. Here's what it looked like:

June 22, Predrag Kon:

The situation worsened after June 5, when the restrictions on public gatherings were for thousand people, and later completely abolished. This deterioration is connected with the Partizan-Zvezda match played on June 10³⁴.

²⁷ <https://www.dw.com/bs/vanredno-stanje-baklje-%C5%A1erpe-i-izbori/a-53360577>

²⁸ <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/18733/>

²⁹ <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/455357/Kon-za-ukidanje-mera-osim-jedne>

³⁰ <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/245349/Broj-izlecnih-od-virusa-korona-u-Srbiji-za-dan-skocio-za-4000-Kisic-Tepavcevicobjasnila-kako.html>

³¹ https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2020&mm=06&dd=08&nav_category=12&nav_id=1692781

³² <http://www.srna.rs/novosti1/798433/situacija-zabrinjava--odredjene-mjere-mogu-da-se-vrate.htm>

³³ <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/%D0%9A%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81/story/3134/koronavirus-u-srbiji/3992851/kisic-tepavcevic-koronavirus-nastariji.html>

³⁴ <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/kon-epidmioloska-situacija-ponovo-preteca-pravi-izazovi-na-jesen/5472172.html>

June 26, Zlatibor Lončar:

There is no country that has not eased the measures. This proved we know little about the virus. We are all guilty because we expect someone else to solve a problem instead of us³⁵.

June 29, Zlatibor Lončar:

Everyone was safer on the pooling places than anywhere else. It is a safer place than any café and shopping mall³⁶.

June 30, Srđa Janković:

We knew the epidemic was not over, regardless of the fact that we rightly hoped we would have zero cases during the summer. We are surprised by the time frame of the new outbreak of the epidemic, but as we can see, it is not Serbia that has a second part of the first wave³⁷.

Questioning the Official Data

Based on insight into the official state information system COVID-19, only a day after the elections (June 22), BIRN announced that in Serbia from March 19 to June 1, 2020, 632 patients died of the coronavirus, which is 388 more than the officially reported number for that period, which is 244.

Instead of the authorities immediately dismissing any doubts and explaining where this difference came from, they did not respond to calls from BIRN journalists.

The article claims that BIRN tried to contact the representatives of the Ministry of Health, members of the Crisis Team, directors of hospitals, and the Batut Institute.

Confidence in the Crisis Team was further undermined because even after the publication of that article, it was not explained where this difference came from. Members of the Crisis Team, Dr. Predrag Kon, and Dr. Srđa Janković have pointed out on several occasions that they have not had insight into the Covid19 database.

Although they acted sincerely in their public appearances, this also aroused suspicion among one part of the public. It seemed that even the members of the Crisis Team do not have insight into this state base.

Minister of Health Zlatibor Lončar interpreted this on Pink Television on June 27 as an attack on the health system and health workers.

Prime Minister Ana Brnabić explained where this difference in the number of dead and infected came from. She was a guest in the Hit Tweet show on Pink Television on June 28 when she said, "For example, I have symptoms, I go to the COVID unit, I get tested, and I find out I am positive. My condition gets worse; I go to the Infectious Diseases Clinic. As I get the results, I am listed in the Covid19 database as infected. And the bus hits me. I die, and my death is registered as if I passed away from COVID19" said the Prime Minister.

That same evening, in the show named "Utisak nedelje", Dr. Predrag Kon and Dr. Srđa Janković admitted that they had no insight into the database, difference is a consequence of whether everyone who had the virus died from it. The president Aleksandar Vučić added to the confusion when he pointed out that we also had some celebrities (referring to the former national football team coach), who had the virus but did not die from it, "yet we also record it."

The Institute of Public Health “Dr. Milan Jovanović Batut” issued a statement only ten days after BIRN published the suspicious data. On July 2, they reject the information, “which is being given to the public about the number of dead and infected patients, because they are not accurate.”

Instead of the authorities and members of the Crisis Team immediately removing any doubts about this information, they first ignored the allegations, then gave unconvincing explanations and disqualification of BIRN. The public’s suspicion has not been removed, especially since these are specific people in question, which means data is easily verifiable. Journalists could also be given access to the documentation. This has not been done, and not all members of the Crisis Team had access to the documentation even after BIRN published their text.

Nemanja Nenadić, program director of Transparency Serbia, noticed that this is when the institute is “MJ Batut” should have applied the provision of Article 11 of the Law on Free Access to Information. This often neglected provision orders the authority that disputes the truthfulness or completeness of important public information, which was published, to communicate accurate and complete information, i.e., to provide insight into the document that contains accurate and complete information³⁸.

Nenadić states that “it is not enough following the law for Batut to state that the information published by BIRN “...are not accurate”, and especially not to deny something without clearly indicating whose and what information is the subject that denial”. Also, in this case, it is not enough to refer the public to already published databases as it is their credibility, in question. The correct answer to the doubts expressed would be twofold. On the one hand, that would be an unequivocal statement on whether there are “government reports” cited by BIRN and the disclosure of those documents. On the other hand, it would provide insight into the original database while protecting patients’ data.

It is the ignoring and concealment of the actual state of the epidemic and (non)action that raises a question of whether it contributed to the transmission of an infectious disease. Has the state endangered the health of its citizens?

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear now that Serbia is in a difficult situation due to the increasing number of people infected with the coronavirus. Some steps taken influenced this increase, such as early abolition of measures, gatherings at sports events, elections, and suspicion on data manipulation. Since June 27, we have more than 200 newly infected people daily.

When the situation in Novi Pazar was alarming, the citizens had to rely on appeals, information, and recordings that citizens shared on social networks rather than on authorized bodies.

The citizens had the overall feeling of being misinformed due to the contradictory information. Citizens are not skilled enough to individually assess the danger and its duration. Hence they depend on the information provided by those trained to manage the crisis.

The lack of clear communication and confusing messages increased fear and feelings of uncertainty, especially during a pandemic that never happened before in the whole world.

Many citizens have lost confidence in the health system and government agencies. This creates a suitable soil for spreading fake news and conspiracy theories.

This was best seen when President Aleksandar Vučić announced the introduction of curfew for the second time. Citizens who lost confidence took to the streets, expressing dissatisfaction with the announced measures.

³⁸ <https://www.otvorenarappravosudja.rs teme/ustavno-pravo/korona-i-pristup-informacijama>

With all this in mind, we recommend the following:

- Presenting accurate and verifiable information.
- Effective communication should aim to keep the public adequately informed and reinforce the feeling that the state is doing everything it needs to protect the population.
- Crisis Team members should agree on their attitudes before making official public appearances.
- Crisis Team members should talk about topics from their core specialization—pulmonologists on lung diseases, epidemiologists on the epidemiological situation, infectologists on infectious diseases.
- All doubts regarding potential data misuse need to be clarified.
- Publish all data from the Batut database in compliance with the Law on Personal Data Protection.
- The highest state officials should lead by example. They need to show us how to adhere to measures and recommendations.
- In addition to the central one, there should be local Crisis Teams that organize daily press conferences.
- Data should be detailed: number of patients, number of deaths, sex, age, number of epidemiologists, amount of drugs, and availability of respirators. Any information of public interest should be available to the public.
- Access to data should be verifiable, instead of relying on unverifiable statements from the officials.



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