**Part 5 – COVID 19 – situation in the Western Balkan countries on 3rd June 2020**

Following the most critical period of COVID- 19 crisis, during which majority of countries restricted or even prohibited movement of individuals and economic activity in the area of production and services, all aimed at protection of public health, the countries began to gradually relax these restrictive measures. The situation with the spread of virus is certainly much better, but the economy is now more and more the topic for discussion. Being mindful that the spread of virus cannot be completely prevented, that the virus is still present, the countries started with gradual – in several phases – opening of companies, services. The last phase would mainly be left for the reinstatement of public transport and schools.

Occupational safety and health measures offers practical support for returning to the workplace. Appropriate preventive measures will help to achieve a safe and healthy return to work following the moderation of the containment measures and in particular of physical distancing measures, and they also contribute to eradicating the transmission of COVID-19.

With assistance of colleague from NHS Croatia, the office is also in contact with ZSSS.

Trade unions marked 1st May – International Labour Day - in a specific circumstance related to COVID crisis and restrictions of movement and gathering, but they have sent a strong trade union messages in their statements.

KSBiH, SSSBiH <https://www.sssbih.com/prvomajski-proglas-sssbih/>

KSBiH, SSRS <http://savezsindikatars.org/poruka-radnika-republike-srpske-povodom-1-maja-medjunarodnog-praznika-rada-u-vrijeme-pandemije-izazavane-virusom-covid-19/>

NHS <http://www.nhs.hr/novosti/prvosvibanjska_poruka_70937/>

UATUC<https://youtu.be/sRC-L9Pjzc8>

CATUS <https://www.sindikat.rs/covid19.html#47>

TUC Nezavisnost <https://nezavisnost.org/prvi-maj-kao-nijedan-drugi/>

SSM <http://www.ssm.org.mk/mk/prvomajska-pobeda-na-ssm-stop-za-mozhnosta-za-otpushtanje-na-rabotnici-gi-vrakjame-nazad>

KSS<https://kss.mk/%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%b2%d0%be%d0%bc%d0%b0%d1%98%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b8-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d0%b3%d0%bb%d0%b0%d1%81-2/>

CTUM <https://www.sindikat.me/>

UFTUM <http://usscg.me/2020/05/01/prvomajski-proglas-usscg/>

***Brief update of latest information, per country:***

**Croatia:** Croatia is still presiding the EU, it is the first half of 2020. Croatian Government earlier adopted economic and i Trade unions ask for the public List of companies that use support related to COVID-19 measures, in order to monitor the utilisation of public funds. The situation with COVID-19 is getting better in Croatia; the companies are opened, as well as services, OHS mandatory measures are introduced aimed at prevention of second wave of epidemics. UATUC has in course of these days marked 30 years of its operation, and in relation to the role of workers during the pandemic, it organized the campaign “Gratitude to workers, but first rights”. The campaign presented in this way how valuable all workers are, particularly at the time of pandemic, for the functioning of society and everyday life. This primarily applies to healthcare workers, but also those without whom the normal life could not exist, such as shop assistants, cleaning staff, police officers, firemen, drivers, and others. That is why the trade unions with this campaign demand better rights for workers – higher wages, better working conditions, better protection of health and security and work. Trade unions have also emphasised that there is no room for any change in the labour legislation, aimed at reduction of workers’ rights. It is now the time for a new direction in social and economic development based on principles of economic democracy and social justice.

Under the pressures from the Croatian trade unions, the list of employers receiving the Government support related to COVID crisis is made public. A very relevant provision was also adopted, according to which the employer receiving the support from the state cannot pay the dividend or share of profit until December 2021. The negotiations on the model of shortening working hours also began in certain activities, based on which the state would co-finance, from separate funds, the difference for the wage of employees for the remaining part of working hours.

**Serbia:** National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia has on 6 May 2020 terminated the state of emergency, which lasted for 52 days. The measure of restricted movement is suspended with the termination of the state of emergency.

During the state of emergency, the inspectors carried out 1,572 inspections, mainly ex officio, while 41 per cent of inspections were carried out on request of employees. In terms of structure: 417 inspections due to the lack of protective equipment; 79 inspections due to the unregistered work; 126 inspections due to the termination of labour contract; 26 inspections due to the requests of pregnant employees and maternity leave; 317 inspections due to the request related to violation of labour rights relations (unpaid wages, compensation of wage, no transport for the employees to come to work …); 71 inspections due to the work related injuries, namely 1 in relation to the death case at work, 3 in relation to collective injuries at work, 55 in relation to serious work related injuries, and 12 in relation to light work related injuries.

A session of the ESC of the Republic of Serbia was held on 22 May, during which the ministries and the Republic institutions submitted their reports and information on their work during the state of emergency. The ESC also discussed the Proposed Decree on preventive measures for safe and healthy work aimed at prevention and spread of disease COVID 19 caused by SARS-CoV-2, whose proponent was Ministry for labour, employment, veterans and social affairs. TUC NEZAVISNOST supported the adoption of decree and had suggestions to improve the text. CATUS also supported the adoption of the document, whereas the Union of employers of Serbia gave the negative opinion. So, there was no consensus required for the conclusion. ESC will continue considering the effects of economic and health related measures, which should help remove or mitigate detrimental effects of COVID-19 pandemic.

- The payment of three minimum wages continued – for April, May, and June – to all employees in entrepreneur shops, micro and SME’s, provided the employer did not layoff more than 10 per cent of work force (not counting employees with short-term contracts, whose contracts expired during the state of emergency;

- The initiative to pay 100 euro was mainly realised (in dinars); it was paid to all adult citizens who applied to the Ministry of Finance, and it was automatically paid to all pensioners and beneficiaries of social welfare.

As already stated in our information, there was no massive layoff of employees. There are no final, official data, but the estimates suggest that around 12 thousand employees were laid off during the state of emergency and epidemic. This figure is certainly much bigger, as it is difficult to assess how many workers in informal economy lost the job. On the other hand, official data deny the increase of unemployment, suggesting that a significant number of workers with short-term contracts returned to work with the normalisation of situation. It remains the fact that the agency workers and workers with contracts on temporary and occasional jobs were first to be affected. Precise data and effects in labour market are to be seen in the forthcoming period.

The election campaigns continued also with the termination of state of emergency. Parliamentary and local elections are scheduled for 21 June 2020 in Serbia. This is the first time that the election campaigns, most probably the elections as well, are taking place in conditions of epidemics, which will be an additional challenge for the implementation of epidemiological measures aimed at protection of population.

in the course of state of emergency and epidemics around 12 thousand workers lost their jobs. It is believed that around 350 thousand of nationals of Serbia returned to the country after they had lost their jobs abroad. Some of them will remain and they will join the labour market. It is difficult to assess the number of those who would go abroad again. In this way, significant amounts of remittance were lost.

CATUS Serbia decide to hold its Congress on 30 June 2020 (Congress scheduled for end of May 2020 earlier has been postponed due COVID crisis).

**Montenegro:** Montenegro was officially declared as the first "corona free" country in Europe. From June 1, foreigners will be allowed to enter Montenegro, without prescribing quarantine and self-isolation measures, provided that the key criterion for admission is the rate of active cases of coronavirus which has to be less than 25 per 100,000 inhabitants in the country of which the foreigner is resident and from which a foreigner enters Montenegro.

So far, there are no significant number lay-offs of employees. In most of cases, if an employee’s contract expired during the previous two months they didn’t get extension.

National Coordination Body pointed to the significance of the advisory and preventive role of inspection bodies in controlling the implementation of adopted measures and the importance of further responsible attitude of citizens and consumers, expecting employers to be an example of the expressed responsibility - towards both, employees and consumers, i.e. users of services. starting from May 4, 2020, under special conditions (in accordance with the epidemiological situation), most of the business started working.

On May 11, 2020, catering facilities and shopping centers started operating and the use of beaches was allowed, but with strict adherence to epidemiological measures and guidelines issued by the National Coordination Body for Communicable Diseases.

Public road and rail transport started functioning on May 18.

As of May 4, there were 40,382 unemployed persons in the records of the Employment Agency of Montenegro, out of which 23,325 were women or 57.76%. On the day of the introduction of measures to combat the epidemic of the new coronavirus COVID-19 (March 15, 2020), 35,466 unemployed persons were registered in the records of the Agency (number of women was 20,541 or 57.91%). Thus, the increase in unemployment by 4,916 persons or 13.86% occurred. The registered unemployment rate on May 4 was 17.41%, and on March 15 it was 15.29%, so the unemployment rate increased by 2.12%

In the observed period (March 15 - May 4, 2020), 611 persons whose employment was terminated during that period were registered as unemployed.

Trade unions point out that the previous economic measures to support the economy and citizens were comprehensive but did not meet the expected goals and were not as generous as they had to be (in order to really meet the goals). The lack of social dialogue in this regard (when creating economic and other measures to support the economy and citizens) is something that is very worrying, and which trade unions have been facing since the beginning of the epidemic in Montenegro.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina:** There is still no cooperation of political actors between two entities of BiH on COVID-19 crisis. The trade union cooperation at the level of the entire BiH is also missing.

The Government of FBiH responded with a special law to regulate these measures – financial support to businesses to maintain jobs, reduce dismissals to minimum, so that the workers could survive this period. The Law known as “Corona law” was adopted relatively late and started to be implemented in April, but without retroactive rights. That means that the state / Government will pay the amounts of contribution and tax on minimum wage to the employers for all employees in the companies that have been affected by the crisis. Employers should secure payment of the minimum wages themselves. If employers can pay the wages above minimum to workers, the difference for social contributions on those higher paid wages shall be borne themselves. The cantons (10 cantons in the FBiH differently regulate it) also support the companies in form of payment of wages to workers (via employers).

The amendments to the Labour law were adopted in the FBiH on 14 May, and they regulate certain matters between employers and workers in time of COVID-19 crisis. Although some suggestion of trade unions were accepted at the time of adoption of amendments to the Labour law, and although these amendments have the temporary character (at time of effects of COVID 19 on economy), there is a concern that the employers might abuse these provisions to the detriment of workers. Namely, amendments related to the introduction of some measures by employers in time of emergency situation, however only in consultation with trade unions, but not with the approval of trade unions. Based on these amendments, employer may in time of emergency situation reduce wages to employees up to the level of minimum wage; they may demand the use of annual leave during the emergency situation; they may temporarily ask employee to use paid leave, whereas the compensation amounts to minimum wage in the FBiH; they may ask them to use unpaid leave (in agreement with a worker); however, it may be assumed that only the employers will decide on these new amendments. It is certainly clear that in terms of adoption of these amendments to the Labour law, trade unions were in unfavourable position during the social dialogue, and this is caused by the lack of unity within SSSBiH.

The entire BiH, for a number of years, especially in the recent period, has been facing very tense political environment and permanent tensions between political structures – between two BiH entities, between opposition and parties in power in each of the entities. In time of COVID pandemic, the state has been affected by big affairs with corruption in background – this is the case of corruption in the so-called “state of emergency”, in which the public procurements are enforced based on special ( shorter) procedures. The Prosecutor’s Office and the Court are seriously engaged in this matter right now; they pursue activities also against high-ranking officials.

Republika Srpska Government has adopted some measures as response to crisis and created one special Solidarity Fund to help to economy in RS. That issue has not been of concern for SSRS. The government financially supports the employees (via employers) of the companies that have been affected.

**North Macedonia**: After the announcement of the state of emergency on the entire territory of the country, a series of measures and restrictions were introduced in the country in order to protect the health of citizens. There has been a reduction in the duration of the curfew in the past week, and it is predicted that some of the measures will be reduced over the next week. Shops, beauty salons have been opened, next week it is considered restaurants and mall to be opened with certain restrictions, schools decided to end the school year, they will begin working from September.

Upon request of SSM, 21.542 companies will receive funds of 14.500 mkd per worker for payment of the April salary as a result of the government's Decree on financial support of employers for payment of salaries for April, and so far, in just a few days at least 500 workers have been returned to work after they were dismissed in the period from March 11 to April 30.

Out of the total number of submitted requests for financial support to companies, 2.377 are coming from hospitality and catering sector, 253 from travel agencies (tour operators), 2.177 from transport industry, 258 from hotel and accommodations, and 16.625 from other sectors.

Regarding the dismissals of workers, SSM has initiated a series of procedures before the institutions, so far several complaints have been adopted and about 150 workers have returned to work, the remaining procedures are ongoing.

Regarding the social dialogue, an official session of the Economic and Social Council has been held once, and regular online meetings with social partners and civil society organizations are held every Wednesday and Friday, on which remarks regarding the measures are made, proposals are being submitted as well as sharing information from relevant partners regarding their field activities.

[www.ssm.org.mk](http://www.ssm.org.mk)

**Albania**: The Albanian government has been freezing the functioning of the social dialogue institutionally for a year. One year also has no functioning the National Labour Council as well as its respective Commissions. Even in the situation created by COVID 19 Pandemic Government did not include unions in the Inter-Ministerial Civil Emergency Council despite our requests and the special ITUC letter send to Prime Minister Rama. The unions have done sufficiently two-way activities with employers exercising all our positive pressure on the protection of employees from the negative effects of the created situation and measures in the framework of pandemics.

The government has been quite strict regarding the financial support of workers for coping with the consequences of COVID 19. It has undertaken two supportive financial packages but has set very strict rules for their benefit and consequently many employees have not obtained. It has not provided any support for informal sector workers when it is known that informality in Albania is very high at the rate of over 30%.

Officially, 61,000 employees have been laid off with intermittent jobs and permanent. This does not include employees in the private agricultural sector and that informal.

The sectors that on May 11, 2020 have resumed activity are trade workers and commercial services, shopping centres, tourism hotels, hairdressing-aesthetics, dental clinics, taxi service.

**Kosovo:** Kosovo Government decided to relax measures in three phases, starting from 14 May, so the companies will again start to work as well as some services. Regarding social dialogue and discussion on workers’ rights, the BSPK president has sent a request to the actual Minister of Labour expressing his concern about Social Dialogue Council and claimed that this council should meet to discuss about current situation of workers. The Ministry promised to organize that meeting soon.

When it comes to incomes of course private sector is more under control, private companies have to apply to Ministry of Finance / send requests for payments for workers who couldn’t work during the COVID crisis. BSPK received a lot of complaints from workers that have not yet received that payment- BSPK claims that that many employers didn’t declare exact number of workers even before the pandemic. BSPK also received some complaints from employees of the health sector – that have not received financial support, although they have to work under risk (security, persons in charge of cleaning and working in the hospitals’ kitchen). In fact, doctors and nurses have received compensation despite their salaries. This will be discussed between the BSPK leadership at the forthcoming meeting with Minister of Labour who is also minister of economy, employment, trade, industry, entrepreneurship and strategic investments.

Kosovo Government earlier decided to give some benefits for health and police workers - despite their salaries, the employees in these sectors regularly receive additional amount of 300 Euro monthly during the crisis period. The Government also supports the private sector - they give to employer for each worker an amount of 170 Euros (an amount of minimum wage in Kosovo) – that apply to the companies that have been closed during the period of restriction.

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