

# Helsinki *bulletin*



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Declaring the State of emergency: Pres. Vučić with National Assembly Speaker Maja Gojković, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and members of the Crisis Team

Photo: R. Prelić / Tanjug

## SERBIA AND PANDEMIC: CARE FOR CITIZENS AS AN EXCUSE FOR THE USURPATION OF POWER

During the months-long isolation and state of emergency imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Serbian authorities revealed their true character – from arrogance to the tendency to take absolute control over all segments of life in the country, especially its citizens. Although the imposition of a state of emergency or just emergency situations implies certain restrictions of human rights, the boundary between necessary

security measures and their abuse at the expense of rights and freedoms is delicate, so that it can easily be overcome. This was evident in the case of Serbia.

The changes that occurred during the coronavirus disease spread are not new. It is a question of the already ongoing processes that were only catalyzed by the crisis. The new coronavirus

pandemic is speeding up the transformation of the world and the trends that are long underway. The Western Balkans are part of that bigger picture.

The new element in that realignment could be a wave of emotional charge – fear and hope – among peoples and state as a consequence of the scourge that ravaged the whole world.<sup>1</sup>

In the analysis of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), dedicated to the impact of the pandemic on the Western Balkan countries, it is stated that the current crisis represents a “turning point” after which nothing in the Western Balkans will be the same and two scenarios are possible. One of the authors, Professor Florian Bieber, emphasizes that in the worst case scenario this would mean the deep aggravation of democracy, path to autocracy, orientation towards China, economic collapse, worsening of a health and social situation, which we are already witnessing, as well as the government’s distrust in its citizens and vice versa. It is also possible to have a better scenario which implies that all weaknesses coming to light during the crisis are used to improve the relationship between citizens and government, and rectify the problems with democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Serbia was unprepared for the crisis, so that all of its weaknesses, not only those associated with its collapsed health system, but also those associated with the condition of all other institutions, became evident. This is probably the reason why Serbia introduced the most rigorous measures (state of emergency) in Europe. Due to its own incompetence, the current government acted with panic, which resulted in its heightened arrogance in communication with citizens.

1 Dominik Moisi, “Geopolitika emocija” (strah, nada i poniženje), Belgrade: Clio, 2009.

2 Biber: Vlast Srbije šalje lošu poruku EU, moguće trajne negativne posledice, .

As a result, there followed the attacks on independent media and absolute centralization of the information system under the exclusive control of President Aleksandar Vučić. Heightened pressure on the media, including the arrest of journalists and press conferences without their presence, and the suspension of parliament proved to be unnecessary, since they had no impact on the efficiency of measures. However, such rigorous restrictions caused uneasiness and the fear that they would be retained after the abolition of the state of emergency among many citizens.

President Vučić’s behaviour and numerous activities (personal distribution of medical equipment and other anti-coronavirus devices) put at the service of future elections (it is speculated that they will be held in June or July depending on the duration of a state of emergency). The Crisis Team, which handled the crisis, was subordinated to the President of the Republic (although it was formally led by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić) and so were experts. However, experts with balanced and expert instructions for behaving in times of crisis are much more trusted by citizens.

The opposition (and a wider public) generally accepted the measures, especially at the beginning of the crisis – it did not even criticize some anti-constitutional moves. In the meantime, however, it became more critical but its criticism was mostly directed against President Vučić.

Despite being considerably more rigorous, the protective measures implemented by Serbia did not prove to be more efficient than those implemented across Europe. Citizens were put under lockdown, which can have a serious impact on their health. This especially applies to senior citizens, who were almost completely “put under lock and key”.

Serbia's shift to China and Russia during the crisis, coupled with turning its back on the European Union (EU), provoked reactions from numerous European politicians, which points out that the EU is also giving up its multi-year policy of pandering to Vučić. As emphasized by European officials, his behaviour will have influence on the future relations, which can also threaten his position in the country in view of the fact that Serbia needs financial assistance from the EU and its members (Germany) for its survival.

The mutual distrust between a considerable part of the population and the authorities was only further strengthened, thus worsening the social climate as well. The frustration of citizens and the existential problems that will emerge after the crisis can seriously endanger the country's stability.

## THE INTRODUCTION OF A STATE OF EMERGENCY

While Covid-19 was about to spread across Europe and Italy was already faced with the pandemic drama, Serbia underestimated this threat in a quackish way. Apart from some doctors,<sup>3</sup> this was also done by Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, on 4 March (the first case of coronavirus was registered on 6 March), he called general elections for 26 April.<sup>5</sup> However, on Sunday, 15 March, he addressed the nation via television stations with national frequencies and declared a state of emergency. He brought such a decision together with Prime Minister

Ana Brnabić and National Assembly Speaker Maja Gojković.

In its first "edition", the state of emergency implied the deployment of soldiers (with long-barrel weapons) in the streets to guard hospitals, as was explained, shutting down of schools, nurseries and all sports activities, including gyms, banning of movement with the penalty of 150,000 dinars for potential coronavirus spreaders (all those for whom the sanitary inspection prescribed self-isolation) and appealing to citizens older than 65 to stay at home.

However, just six days later, on Saturday, 21 March, the state of emergency measures escalated with the imposition of a curfew, first from 8 p.m. until 5 a.m. and then from 5 p.m. until 5 a.m., shutting down of all hospitality establishments and strict home isolation of all senior citizens aged over 65 (in urban environments), that is, over 70 (in rural regions), suspension of intercity and urban transport, closing of airports for international flights, banning foreign nationals from entering the country, postponement of elections for an indefinite time... All this was accompanied by an inappropriate way of addressing citizens,<sup>6</sup> including shouting, threatening and an occasional unconvincing and pathetic outpouring of love and concern for the life of senior citizens. In fact, Serbia turned into a quarantine with its anti-virus measures being constantly supplemented. Thus, on 28 March, the state of emergency was prolonged for another two hours on weekends (from 3 p.m. to 5 a.m.), all markets were closed down and the decision allowing the walking of pets in evenings from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. was brought.

<sup>3</sup> Like pulmonologist Branimir Nestorović.

<sup>4</sup> The press conference of 26 February which was directly televised.

<sup>5</sup> On 6 March, when it was announced that the first coronavirus case was registered in Serbia, Vučić boasted that 90,000 people gave their signatures to his Serbian Progressive Party for parliamentary and local elections; *Vreme*, 19 March 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Apart from President Vučić, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić also distinguished herself by arrogance when addressing senior citizens. Angry and grumpy, she shouted at the press conference: "Where did all these people in Belgrade go during the state of emergency, when it was appealed that they should stay at home"; *Dnevnik*, TVN1, 16 March 2020.

Thereafter, on 2 April, one more restrictive measure was introduced: the duration of curfews on weekends was extended – from 1 p.m. on Saturday to 5 a.m. on Monday (senior citizens were allowed to shop for groceries for three hours, from 4 a.m. to 7 a.m.), while gatherings of more than two people at one place were banned. Only pets were happy because they regained the right to evening walk from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. On 10 April, however, everything turned into a curfew “weekend” – movement was banned from 3 p.m. on Friday to 5 a.m. on Monday. Although the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) asked that Orthodox believers should be allowed to attend church services on the Easter on 19 April (this was also asked by Dveri lider Boško Obradović), this did not happen. After the meeting with President Vučić, Patriarch Irinej agreed to hold the Easter liturgy in an empty church. The curfew “weekend” was prolonged for one day, thus lasting from 5 p.m. on Friday to 5 a.m. on Tuesday.

Such measures caused great discontent among citizens. Miodrag Zec, Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, stated: “...the pandemic will be remembered for our claim that this is the funniest virus and for the longest curfew. I think that nobody had a 90 hour-long curfew in history or during a war”.<sup>7</sup>

The first relaxing measure for senior citizens, exposed to the most drastic movement ban (actually the deprivation of freedom, as stated by non-government activist Nikola Kovačević), was introduced after more than a month. On 20 April, in the seventh week after the outbreak of the epidemic, they were allowed to walk for half an hour three times a week (by the same Government’s decision, markets and smaller trade shops could be opened).

<sup>7</sup> Danas, 22 April 2020.

During an epidemic, it is necessary to have essential protective equipment – face masks, gloves and disinfectants. However, nothing of these items could be found in pharmacies. In hospitals, which are already in a poor condition, like the entire health system, there were no necessary medical devices and equipment, especially the most important ones – from Covid-19 detection tests to respirators. Instead, in his daily address, President Vučić would promise the acquisition of everything that was needed.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, he alluded to his readiness to do even something semilegal, illegal or dishonest to secure such an acquisition.<sup>9</sup>

The Crisis Team’s briefings with President Vučić (and Prime Minister Brnabić) in the foreground and epidemiologists, immunologists and other experts in supporting roles, irritated the critically-minded part of the public. In addition to the fact that Vučić is “responsible for everything”, “one gets an impression of total domination... total fear, total control, total isolation”. This was stated by Sanda Rašković Ivić, an opposition member of the Serbian Assembly.<sup>10</sup>

President Vučić’s contemptuous statements – due to which he was also criticized – referred

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- <sup>8</sup> Appearing as a guest in the RTS show “Upitnik” (Questionnaire) on 7 April, Vučić described in his style how he would obtain respirators kept in storehouses in some foreign countries: “I’ll board a plane! I’ll pick up the respirators we have paid and I’ll personally put them on the plane. Well, let me see who can stop me! (twice)”.
- <sup>9</sup> Podgorica, for example, accused Belgrade of confiscating, that is, “stoling” three respirators out of five which the Montenegrin Health Insurance Fund had ordered and paid for them; *Politika*, 27 March 2020. President Vučić dismissed this allegation and said that he would donate five ventilators to Montenegro.
- <sup>10</sup> *Danas*, 20 March 2020. On the same occasion, she also said: “In this boundless totalitarianism there emerges the figure of the Saviour in the personality of the President. He saved us from bankruptcy, saved Kosovo... and now will implement the measures that will save us from the pandemic and threat of death”.



especially to the two “categories” of Serbian citizens. The first category included guest workers, students and other Serbian citizens staying and working abroad who did not respond to his appeal not to come back. However, the coronavirus disease was spreading and many of them lost their jobs, so that their most rational option was to return to their country. President Vučić even said that his “one and only mistake” was to allow them to come back, as the potentially most dangerous coronavirus spreaders.<sup>11</sup>

His second target were pensioners when he did not pathetically try to ingratiate himself with them. Paying no attention to what he was saying, his threats would occasionally sound morbid: “I appeal to pensioners to stay at home and not listen to anyone’s proposals.<sup>12</sup> If you, dear pensioners, obey those proposals, Lešće, New Cemetery, Central Cemetery and Bežanija Cemetery will not be sufficient.”<sup>13</sup>

However, the Serbian Orthodox Church and its clergy were spared threats and bans. Although the Communion is an absolutely unhygienic ritual – the use of the same spoon for all believers during the ritual – the authorities did not react. On the other hand, the Church proclaimed all critics of its practice to be anti-Orthodox and anti-Serbs.

The fact that the handling of the pandemic crisis was taken over by politicians, that is, President Vučić, from experts caused a considerable number of citizens to doubt the truthfulness of the presented claims.<sup>14</sup> Apart from creating con-

fusion, President Vučić’s verbal escapades, ranging from anger, shouting and threats to affectations, pleas, condescension... had a disturbing impact on many citizens. Some of them publicly called<sup>15</sup> for his withdrawal from the scene, thus leaving experts to speak. An online petition with the same request was also launched. In a span of a few days it was signed by 1,500 citizens<sup>16</sup> and the number of signatures kept increasing.

## THE (UN)JUSTIFIABILITY OF A STATE OF EMERGENCY

A state of emergency in Serbia was previously introduced 17 years ago, after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić, in order to break the link between organized crime and state institutions. It is remembered as the Operation Sabre. The declaration of a state of emergency due to the Covid-19 outbreak passed without any more serious protest by the opposition parties or the public in general. However, during its duration, well-founded criticism was mounting. It was primarily coming from the media outside the government’s control and certain politicians, experts and public figures.

The most serious remarks referred to the fact that a state of emergency was not declared by the National Assembly as stipulated by the Constitution. One of the politicians who drew attention to this fact was Saša Radulović, leader of the *Enough Is Enough* movement.<sup>17</sup> Commenting the declaration of a state of emergency without the National Assembly’s decision and, in this context, banning gatherings of more than 100

11 Aleksandar Vučić’s interview with TV Prva.

12 The proposal to allow pensioners to go out for an hour-long afternoon walk came from some opposition parties (Alliance for Serbia).

13 *Politika*, 26 March 2020:

14 In an interview with *Danas* daily on 20 March 2020, Dragoljub Bakić said: “What is now demonstrated and is becoming evident is distrust in institutions, the government’s distrust in people and people’s distrust in the government.”

15 “The Impression of the Week” audience, RTV Nova S, 22 March 2020.

16 *Danas*, 25 March 2020.

17 The authorities ironically responded that he has “only now remembered the Assembly...”, because his party is one of those boycotting the work of the Republican Assembly for months.

people in enclosed areas, *Vreme* weekly reminded us of the situation when the “Serbian Government held its session in the Kolubara Strip Mine in 2016”.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, under the Constitution a state of emergency cannot last longer than 30 days with the possibility of being extended for another 30 days. The decision on the declaration of a state of emergency, which was made by the ruling troika, did not contain any time limit. Legal experts were also divided over the regularity of such a decision-making method. While some of them held that, under the given circumstances, such a method was “constitutionally acceptable”, Miodrag Jovanović, Professor at the Faculty of Law in Belgrade, holds that the declaration of a state of emergency had to be preceded by the relevant decision of the National Assembly, all the more so because the session could be held in a real or virtual space, thus “resembling the ‘highest representative body’ of Serbian citizens as defined by the Constitution at least for a moment”.<sup>19</sup> In the opinion of this legal expert, “regardless of the justified wish to ‘express state unity’ under such dramatic circumstances, the President of the Republic should harness his autocratic proclivities and stop usurping the competencies that do not belong to him under the Constitution”.<sup>20</sup> Namely, in the two laws governing such a situation, the Emergency Law and the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management, there is no provision that will grant any competence to the President of the Republic.

The Bar Association of Belgrade also claimed that a state of emergency was introduced contrary to the Constitution, since the decision on its introduction “does not give the explanation...

18 *Vreme*, 19 March 2020.

19 *NIN*, 26 March 2020.

20 *Ibid.*

that is, the reason why the National Assembly could not meet”.<sup>21</sup>

The Initiative for Social and Economic Rights of Non-Governmental Organizations (A11) also pointed to “impermissible deviations with respect to the observance of human rights”. The Initiative also stated that there was no need for the introduction of a state of emergency (an emergency situation would be sufficient) and “available measures ... with respect to the right to liberty and security of person...”<sup>22</sup>

The limitation of human rights, including some fundamental ones – such as citizens’ right to objective and truthful information – came under justified criticism from experts and media. On 28 March, allegedly in an attempt to avoid the spread of fake news and panic, the Government brought the decision to centralize the information system: the data and news on the epidemic fell within the exclusive competence of the Republic’s Crisis Team. It largely affected local media because they are denied access to the relevant information from local environments and their health institutions. On 1 April, NovaS Portal journalist Ana Lalić was apprehended by the Novi Sad police for failing to respect the decision and spreading fake news and panic. After the protest of the journalist associations, one part of the public and international organizations, she was released from custody without charge the following day. On the same day, 2 April, Ana Brnabić announced via Serbian Radio Television that the Government would revoke the disputable decision. According to her, the President (Vučić) asked her to do that so as “not to cast a shadow” on all the “hard work” they have done.<sup>23</sup>

The trials of those violating the self-isolation measure have also started by an emergency procedure. The first such trial of the accused (he was

21 *Danas*, 3 April 2020.

22 *Danas*, 31 April 2020.

23 *RTS*, 2 April 2020.

immediately sentenced to three years in prison) was held without his presence in the courtroom – via skype. In this connection, lawyers pointed out that such a form of trial is not stipulated by the Constitution or any legal regulation. The absence of the accused represents the violation of the basic human right to a fair trial.

The reputed Belgrade lawyer Zdravko Tomano-  
vić remanded that “Every decision and measures  
and regulations adopted during a state of emer-  
gency must be reconciled with the Convention  
on Human Rights and the Constitution”.<sup>24</sup> He ad-  
ded that no regulation adopted during a state of  
emergency can create new elements of a crime  
or abolish the right to a fair trial. In his opi-  
nion, “we have the unlimited power of the exe-  
cutive branch of government, on the one side,  
and the disempowered individual, on the other  
side. The right of every individual... is not the  
privilege, but the right to live during a state of  
emergency without feeling injustice and anxiety  
which of his rights will not be accessible to him  
any more.”<sup>25</sup>

Nikola Kovačević, a lawyer and activist in the  
non-governmental sector, also pointed to the  
fact that Serbia failed to inform the United Na-  
tions (UN) and the Council of Europe about the  
number of human rights restrictions, which it  
was obliged to do.<sup>26</sup> In his opinion, due to the  
drastic violation of fundamental human rights,  
such as a restriction on the freedom of move-  
ment, or double judicial proceedings (for the  
same offence – both a misdemeanor and a cri-  
minal offence), citizens will be able to seek judi-  
cial protection after the abolition of the state of  
emergency.<sup>27</sup>

All in all, the confusing and chaotic behaviour  
of the executive authority – the unexplained

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24 *Danas*, 3 April 2020.

25 *Ibid*.

26 TV N1, 2 April 2020.

27 Radio Free Europe, 20 April 2020.

situation in hospitals where medical staff did  
not have adequate protection led to the co-  
llapse of the system in some towns (hospitals in  
Ćuprija and Leskovac) and greater morbidity of  
medical staff (Gynecology and Obstetrics Cli-  
nic in Belgrade, Dragiša Mišović Cardiovascu-  
lar Hospital), which resulted in a great number  
of infected medical staff – 10-15% of the total  
number of diseased persons, inadequate qua-  
rantine facilities for the mandatory isolation of  
returnees (Subotica, Morović), emergence of new  
hotbeds of disease in risky institutions (150 di-  
seased residents and staff in the Nursing Home  
in Niš), alternative hospitals without appro-  
priate conditions (Belgrade Fair), non-existence  
of timely testing as the most reliable method of  
detecting whether someone is healthy or sick....  
was confined to the message that solely citizens  
are responsible for the success or failure of the  
fight against a dangerous disease. Thus, apart  
from emphasizing that citizens must be the  
most disciplined ones, they were also threatened  
with the imposition of new restrictive measures.  
Prime Minister Ana Brnabić shouted: “If the Go-  
vernment should be more restrictive – it will be.  
I don’t threaten, I promise.”<sup>28</sup>

When Covid-19 spread to Europe, the shortest  
and most effective appeal of the World Health  
Organization (WHO) was: “Test, test, test!” Howe-  
ver, Serbia’s reaction was slow and very limi-  
ted. At the beginning there were no enough test  
kits; the situation did not improve when test kits  
arrived – only a few hundred persons were te-  
sted at a time, while some patients waited for  
the results five or six days. As a result, both he-  
althy and sick people were in quarantine and  
self-isolation.

On this occasion, epidemiologist Zoran Ra-  
dovanović said: “Test kits have arrived, but we  
have no coronavirus testing devices, altho-  
ugh they are not very expensive. We have no

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28 *NIN*, 2. april 2020.

staff to handle them, since this requires special training”.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the testing of 1,000 persons a day was possible only in the fifth week after the registration of the first coronavirus case in Serbia; at the end of the sixth week it was possible to test a little more than 2,000 persons who corresponded to the “case definition”.

Therefore, Serbia recorded the fastest growth rate of coronavirus cases in the region. The number of cases doubled in 8 days, while in Croatia, for example, in 15 days. As stated by epidemiologist Zoran Radovanović,<sup>30</sup> this steeper growth rate occurred “because we tested much less people. Our epidemiologists knew very well that testing was essential, but they also knew that we had no test kits...”<sup>31</sup>

## ATTACK ON THE MEDIA

Intolerance between the media controlled by the government (during the past eight years after it came to power) and the media free from government control turned into a deep and insurmountable gap amidst the pandemic. The few media that are not controlled by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) never operated in such a hostile environment as was the case during the state of emergency.

The arrest of Ana Lalić, NovaS Portal journalist, on 1 April was the initial fuse for a fierce mutual showdown. The police comprehended the journalist on charges that in her article about the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina in Novi Sad she incorrectly described the situation in it (claiming that doctors and other medical staff are not adequately protected). This incident happened at the moment when the Government’s decision to centralize information about a coronavirus

epidemic in Serbia was in force. Pursuant to this decision, the Republic’s Crisis Team was the exclusive source of data relevant for the course of a coronavirus epidemic and protective measures.

Although the journalist was released from custody the next morning (charges against her were withdrawn only at the end of April) and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić revoked the information control decision,<sup>32</sup> the Crisis Team’s conference, in the presence of President Vučić, turned that same day into an unprecedented attack by pro-regime media editors and journals against their colleagues “on the other side”. It was preceded by backstage direction from the top. Namely, upon invitation, the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina was visited by journalists for the Reuters News Agency,<sup>33</sup> whose report was contrary to that written by journalist Ana Lalić (all doctors and medical staff wore full protective gear). Referring to that report, Dragan Vučićević, Editor-in-Chief of *Informer*, Gordana Uzelac, TV Pink journalist, and the editors of *Srpski telegraf* and *Alo* tabloids attacked “taikuns’ media”,<sup>34</sup> posing the question whether one should believe foreign media more than domestic ones, claiming that (due to Ana Lalić’s text) “a lie has become the truth”, and launching the most monstrous

32 She explained that this was done at the “explicit plea of Serbian President” and not to “give an excuse to Tanja Fajon to criticize us” (Tanja Fajon is the European Parliament Rapporteur for Serbia, author’s note); *NIN*, 9 April 2020.

33 In the Reuters report it was written that many hospitals in Serbia lacked protective gear at the start of the coronavirus epidemic and that the Government has since bought equipment and received aid from China and the European Union. .

34 An allusion to Dragan Djilas, an opposition leader from the Alliance for Serbia who, until a few years ago, “ruled” over the media market, and Dragan Šoljak, the owner of SBB Company with a stake in United Group, within which TV N1 operates.

29 Ibid.

30 *NIN*, 16 April 2020.

31 Ibid.



accusation that they “wish for the coronavirus to win”.<sup>35</sup>

As written by *Nedeljnik* Editor-in-Chief Veljko Lalić, “in a deeply polarized country where there is no politics, whose parliament was suspended much before the outbreak of this pandemic and introduction of a state of emergency, and where there have been no political debates and opposition on national television channels for a long time, a new enemy has been found – journalists who ask different questions.”<sup>36</sup>

Tamara Skrozza, a *Vreme* weekly commentator, points out that “at the time when they keep mentioning solidarity and the need to close ranks in order to save ourselves, a new trench was dug between government and media just like between media and ‘media’.”<sup>37</sup>

Instead of showing solidarity, tabloids, as self-proclaimed government protectors, continued their campaign of accusing “taikuns’ media” of stirring up fear and panic and, indirectly, bearing the responsibility for the coronavirus spread and increased number of infected and dead people. In that sense, the case of *Kurir* vs. TVN1 was the most explicit. Claiming that there is an “especially evident connection” between the leader of the Alliance for Serbia, Dragan Djilas, and this television channel, the tabloid also wrote that this television, due to its biased and non-professional reporting... “seems not to be aware that in this way it can also affect citizens’ lives and thus increase the chance that a larger number of people get infected with the coronavirus.”<sup>38</sup>

The atmosphere of intolerance and accusations of others “who ask different questions” culminated in the Government’s new and astounding

decision: the future press conferences of the Crisis Team will be held without the presence of journalists!<sup>39</sup> In other words, the Crisis Team’s members will only answer the previously sent questions by e-mail. A few days later, the Provincial Crisis Team of Vojvodina also started holding “press conferences without the press”.

The unprecedented ban was preceded by a “different question” put by Milan Stanojević, the TN1 correspondent from Niš, to President Vučić<sup>40</sup> – whether he was tested for Covid-19. Namely, two or three days earlier the President announced that his older son was tested positive (caught coronavirus) and was in the hospital. Instead of answering the question, Aleksandar Vučić began his pathetic tirade that he knows why such questions are asked, what they (journalists) actually want and think “how to remove me... how to isolate me politically and let the coronavirus win”.<sup>41</sup>

By this decision, the government put health workers in an awkward situation. Their representatives within the Crisis Team claimed that the absence of journalists at press conferences was in their interest because by moving around the city and being personally present in the Palace of Serbia (where press conferences were held) they would be exposed to the coronavirus.

Most journalists responded to this Government’s move with disapproval. As they warned, if it is not possible to formulate a question on the basis of new information all reactions will be late: “In times of epidemics timely information is essential and extremely important”, the

35 Ibid.

36 *Nedeljnik*, 16 April 2020.

37 *Vreme*, 9 April 2020.

38 *Danas*, 16 April 2020.

39 The Government brought this controversial decision on 10 April.

40 On 10 April, like a few days earlier in Novi Pazar, President Aleksandar Vučić visited Niš in order to deliver respirators to the municipal health system.

41 Vučić’s well-known allusions on “haters” (from the ranks of the opposition and media) who desire his death.

executive producer of TVN1 Igor Božić said.<sup>42</sup> Even journalists from the rival “camp” were not enthusiastic. Ratko Dmitrović said that “there is nothing more normal than having journalists attend conferences for journalists”,<sup>43</sup> while the Editor-in-Chief of *Srpski telegraph*, Milan Ladjević, also agreed that “journalists should be present at conferences”.<sup>44</sup>

The editorial staff of FoNet News Agency also agreed with this reasonable comment and decided not to send their questions by e-mail (any more) because “such a method of communicating with interlocutors is neither in the journalistic nor public interest”.<sup>45</sup> *Danas* daily also agreed with Fonet’s decision to report on the pandemic only indirectly in the future.

The Crisis Team’s press conferences without direct communication with journalists lasted until 21 April, when their presence was allowed again. However, not all of them could be present at the same time, only “by groups”.

Aleksandar Vučić’s hobby is to “confront” journalists who have no affinity for him even without a state of emergency. However, during the epidemic, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić especially distinguished herself by angry outbursts towards certain media and their representatives. In addition to restrictive measures, which she introduced with satisfaction and revoked them “heavy-heartedly” (the suspension of information centralization), the Prime Minister with her rhetoric approached the vocabulary of tabloid newspapers. This was especially evident during her guest appearance in the “Cyrillic” (Ćirilica) show on Happy TV. She accused journalists and media not being under her control of hating Aleksandar Vučić, as well as the state and people because they “keep digging” until they

find something!<sup>46</sup> Then she added with pathetic self-pity: “... while every morning you wake up with the number of those who died the previous night, you read in parallel the news of so-called independent media, which have nothing to do with independence; they are taikuns’ media...”, “... come on try once to be proud of your country!”

One must certainly bear in mind that the amount of anger expressed by the authorities and their tabloid helpers towards so-called “taikuns’ media” is absolutely disproportionate with their number and, consequently, their influence: one daily newspaper (*Danas*), two news agencies (Beta and FoNet) and one television station (N1) without national frequency. Since the journalists of several weekly journals (*NIN*, *Vreme*, *Nedeljnik*) did not attend the Crisis Team’s press conference, they were significantly spared of its sharp attacks and qualifications.

International organizations for the protection of journalists and some officials also reacted to the media situation in Serbia in “the time of coronavirus”. The South East Europe Media Organization (SEEMO) expressed its “serious concern about the media situation in Serbia” due to the fact that journalists are unable to ask their questions directly. Oliver Vujović, SEEMO Secretary General, called attention to the fact that, thanks to the advancement of communications, it is possible to talk directly via video-link. Thus, “the Government’s decision to request journalists to send their questions by e-mail is utterly questionable and undemocratic,” since non-transparency may lead to the “abuse and selection of questions that will be answered.”<sup>47</sup>

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media expressed his concern about the brutal attack on two NovaS TV talk show anchors, Ivan Ivanović and Zoran Kesić. Namely, *Srpski*

42 *Danas*, 13 April 2020.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 *Danas*, 16 April 2020.

46 “Cyrillic” show, 6 April 2020.

47 *Danas*, 13 April 2020.

*telegraf* tabloid quoted the death threats sent to them by folk singer Aca Lukas. He accused the anchors of the show talks “An Evening with Ivan Ivanović” and “24 Minutes with Zoran Kesić” that “they will be responsible if his mother dies” and that in this case “he will push them through the window” (claiming that they encourage the elderly to violate the Serbian Government’s measures).<sup>48</sup>

US Ambassador in Belgrade Anthony Godfrey also pointed to the significance of objective reporting – with praise what was done well and criticism for what was bad – in a discrete diplomatic way. He also pointed out that the responsibility of free media “has never been more necessary”.<sup>49</sup>

The annual report on the media status in the world was also issued in the last decade of April. Serbia regressed on the media freedom list (it is below the countries in the region with the exception of Montenegro) and now ranks 93rd.

As for the media scene in general, it is evident that it also closely follows the government’s “virus diplomacy”. Although before the declaration of a state of emergency the media were more favourably inclined towards Russia and China than towards the European Union, the United States and the West in general, the survey conducted by the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) is indicative. Namely, its monitoring shows that in March every fifth article mentioning a foreign country was in favour of China.<sup>50</sup>

48 Dnevnik TVN1, 18 April 2020.

49 *Danas*, 17, 18 and 19. April 2020.

50 *Danas*, 15 April 2020.

## THE OPPOSITION IN THE “TIME OF CORONAVIRUS”

Shortly before the proclamation of a state of emergency, the government’s election preparations were well underway. At the same time, a large part of the opposition was making preparations for a boycott. During this weeks-long emergency situation caused by the threat of the coronavirus disease, which spread to Serbia in early March and had to imply the suspension of political activities, almost nothing changed. Although the elections (scheduled for 26 April) had to be postponed indefinitely, the authorities were practically carrying out campaign activities, while the opposition, conditionally speaking, remained stuck in the boycott.

For the sake of truth, it must be noted that during the periods of unpredictable social crisis and danger, when the burden of responsibility for handling them lies entirely with the authorities, the activities of the opposition parties are objectively reduced to the minimum. In other words, the opposition abstains from its “basic activity” – criticism of the government. It is simply deemed politically incorrect, since it affects the assumed solidarity. Dragan Djilas, the leader of the Alliance for Serbia, the strongest opposition bloc said: “...we have remained committed to the stand that during the pandemic we should not have political demands or request an enquiry into the government’s responsibility for its disastrous mistake of failing to respond to the coronavirus until-mid March”.<sup>51</sup>

According to Bojan Klačar, CESID Executive Director, the behaviour of the opposition not only in Serbia, but also in other countries is very limited under such circumstances. There are three reasons for it: the authorities are the most visible... they carry out most of the crisis management activities; the second reason is that there

51 Interview with *Danas*, 10-12 April 2020.

are few themes outside the attitude towards the crisis, which changes citizens' priorities, problems and concerns; finally, the third reason is that in such a situation citizens are more inclined to understand the government's position.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, the government's rating is rising. Otherwise, this is a worldwide phenomenon: the ratings of all leaders rose abruptly – from Chancellor Angela Merkel, as the most responsible and most deserving for effectively managing the coronavirus crisis in Germany, to Donald Trump who proved to be absolutely unfit and incompetent in facing the greatest temptation during his presidency.

The rating of Aleksandar Vučić also went up, although the data obtained during a state of emergency should be taken with a grain of salt.<sup>53</sup> According to him, "The Serbian Progressive Party, which usually pays two public opinion survey per week, has not ordered any of them since the beginning of the "Covid-19 crisis" because, as he emphasized, Vučić is not interested in it in view of the fact that his "job is to behave responsibly when the country is threatened and attacked".<sup>54</sup>

Vladimir Pejić from Faktor plus agency said that technical circumstances for a public opinion survey are not favourable (it would be exclusively confined to online communication) during a state of emergency. Therefore, his and other relevant public opinion research agencies restrain

<sup>52</sup> *Danas*, 15 April 2020.

<sup>53</sup> In cooperation with Ninamedia agency, the Institute for European Affairs carried out a survey between 12 and 22 March, which showed that the rating of Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party jumped to 61 percent. However, neither the Institute nor Ninamedia rank among the professionally most competent public opinion researchers. Their shortcoming is also the fact that their survey also covered the days before the imposition of a state of emergency and the first week of its being in force.

<sup>54</sup> *Politika*, 17, 18, 19 and 20 April 2020.

themselves from experimenting with the assessment of politicians' ratings: "In the coming period we will probably conduct a combined survey, by phone and online, but I am almost certain that we will not have precise ratings which can be publicized because such a survey will be rather unreliable."<sup>55</sup>

However, Srdjan Bogosavljević's agency Ipsos Strategic Marketing publicized its results. According to it, 58 per cent of Serbian citizens have a positive opinion on how Aleksandar Vučić performs his function, which is a 12 per cent increase relative to the result obtained before the pandemic. In general, the confidence in the current authorities increased enormously: 92 per cent of Serbian citizens have confidence in the measures taken with a view to preventing the spread of a viral infection, while 88 per cent support the Government's economic measures aimed at mitigating the impact of the epidemic.<sup>56</sup>

As for the politicians, Aleksandar Vučić holds the convincing first place. The first subsequent politician enjoys only 1.2 per cent support.<sup>57</sup>

It could actually be expected that, due to the emergency situation, the weak, disorganized and confused opposition – which does not represent a serious alternative to the authorities – withdraws completely from the public scene. Namely, regardless of the objectively narrowed room for manoeuvre, the unprecedented state of emergency, which was introduced by the top authority (one man), had to provoke the justified reaction of the opposition. However, it remained completely dumb, especially at the beginning.

Thus, for example, declaring a state of emergency in an unconstitutional way provoked

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Danas*, 24-26 April 2020.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

more resolute and better founded reactions by some nongovernmental organizations and legal experts. The opposition parties, which boycotted Parliament during the previous months, completely forgot its constitutional status as the country's supreme legal authority. They did not challenge some drastic emergency measures, especially those which brutally affected the fundamental human rights.

Only some lonely opposition voice would reach the public, making it known that there are still politically organized opponents to Aleksandar Vučić's dangerous autocratic regime. The leader of the New Party, Zoran Živković (the Prime Minister during the state of emergency in 2003), announced that he would request the Prime Minister to form a commission for monitoring the implementation of the measures that deviate from the constitutionally guaranteed rights during the state of emergency. According to his proposal, the commission would consist of nine members, five of whom would be from the opposition: "This would guarantee objectivity and the opposition would be obliged to seriously with government control."<sup>58</sup> Later on, nothing could be heard about the fate of this initiative in public.

When evaluating the work of the Serbian opposition it is necessary take into account the objective restraints. The absolute domination of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party over public spaces, achieved by the will of citizens and aggressive (and occasionally forcible) conquest of almost all parts of the political scene, from bottom (local self-governments) to top, reduced the possibility of opposition activities to the minimum. All the more so, because the mastering of all mechanisms of political activism also anticipated putting under control both the relevant media (all television stations with national frequencies and main political daily *Politika*

which is partially government-owned like Tanjug News Agency that has not been shut down) and complete unprofessional yet influential tabloid machinery.

Thus, the communication of the opposition – permanently exposed to the accusations of the authorities and their media that it has "ruined the country" while being in power (2000-2012) – with the electorate and the public in general, which implies direct face-to-face debates with government representatives, is absolutely blocked. During the state of emergency, some more "bricks" were built into a high "wall" between the government and the opposition.

On the other hand, due to their controversial moves, the largely impotent opposition parties contributed in large measure to their marginalization by leaving the National Assembly almost a year ago and announcing the boycott of elections.

In the absence of public debate between government and opposition, and government control, which is one of the basic postulates of a democratic system, citizens have listened – in a deeply divided and polarized society into which Serbia has been transformed – to the (accusing) monologues of one side or the other, depending on their affinity. On the other side, the opportunity of the opposition and its leaders to address the public has been confined to one daily newspaper (*Danas*), two television states without national frequencies (N1 and NovaS) and three weekly magazines – *Vreme*, *NIN* and *Nedeljnik*; the unequal distribution of media power could hardly be replaced by social media networks and some local media that are still not under full government control (like Portal Autonomija in Novi Sad, TV Šabac, Kikindske in Kikinda, Južne vesti in Niš...).

After the initial restraint and caution not to be accused of sabotaging an "all-national effort" to

<sup>58</sup> *Danas*, 2. april 2020.



restrain coronavirus spread by their criticism, the opposition leaders began drawing attention to the flaws and omissions of the authorities.

The focus of their attention was Aleksandar Vučić, whose dominant (in essence, unnecessary) public appearance and addressing were regarded as an indirect election campaign. Also, his way of addressing the public during the state of emergency fully revealed his obsession with a totalitarian control of society.

Sergej Trifunović, the leader of the Free Citizens' Movement, said: "If an opportunity can create a thief, then a state of emergency can create a dictator."<sup>59</sup> He also pointed out that "it is obvious that Vučić likes to talk almost orgasmically about war, death, long barrels, blockades, enemies, miracles... he believes he is now living the realization of his dreams".<sup>60</sup>

*Danas* daily offered a peculiar forum to the representatives of the opposition as an opportunity to have their messages reach citizens as well. Borko Stefanović, Vice-President of the Freedom and Justice Party, stated that the "whole world sees that our government, under the guise of epidemic, abolishes the remaining normality, democracy and media freedom".<sup>61</sup> The President of the Civil Democratic Forum, Aleksandar Olenek, criticized a delay in the adoption of the necessary measures, ranging from social distancing to the alleviation of the impact of economic crisis that would certainly follow: "The failure to summon the National Assembly seriously calls into question the constitutionality of the state of emergency... a special problem is posed by the effort to introduce censorship by preventing journalists from doing their job and even arresting them"<sup>62</sup> The leader of the New Party, Zoran Živković, said: "A state of emergency is not a 'despotic government'. A state of emergency does

not imply a 60-hour curfew or all current bans, but the bans corresponding to that moment".<sup>63</sup>

As stated, inter alia, by Radomir Lazović from the "Don't Let Belgrade Drown" Movement, Serbia is on the way to abolishing democracy: "The government is seriously heading for the abyss. Vučić has become the only actor on the political scene, while the citizens and whole opposition are under lockdown. His will is nowhere reconsidered; it is simply carried out because, as stated by the Prime Minister, he is the boss."<sup>64</sup>

Recalling the fact that, amidst the pandemic, Aleksandar Vučić organized a meeting in the Krušik factory in Valjevo, after which this town became one of the pandemic hotbeds, the former leader of the Democratic Party and head of the Vojvodina Government, Bojan Pajtić, said that for a successful fight against a pandemic it is most important to prevent panic: "In Serbia, however, after dozens of blunders and fake news launched by the people leading the country, panic is not spread by the virus, but the awareness that the country is ruled by liars and scoundrels who care more not to lose one voice than one life."<sup>65</sup>

If, in a political sense, the state of emergency "produces" at least one positive result, that will be the change of the decision of the greater part of the opposition to boycott the forthcoming elections. The first hint came from Jasmina Lukač, a columnist of *Danas* daily, whose views are close to those of the Alliance of Serbia and its leader Dragan Djilas. In the column titled "Against Dictatorship"<sup>66</sup> she appealed to the opposition to "adjust to the situation" and, as it pointed out, "it is the right moment to switch from boycotting the elections to participating in them; the coronavirus is more than a good reason for

59 *Danas*, 21 April 2020.

60 Ibid.

61 *Danas*, 16 April 2020.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Interview with *NIN*, 9 April 2020.

65 Interview with *Vreme*, 9 April 2020.

66 *Danas*, 21 April 2020.

the latter". The following day, Janko Baljak, Professor at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, wrote in the same daily that the "real opposition" should consider the new circumstances. According to him, it is possible that the decision to boycott the elections might be reconsidered and that a "new strategy sought".<sup>67</sup>

One part of the opposition, especially at the local level (Šabac, Paraćin), which did not support election boycott, is under a great government pressure even when it supports preventive measures. However, the response of Mayor of Šabac Nebojša Zelenović, who efficiently organized preventive measures and activities against coronavirus disease, is encouraging. So far, the Municipality has earmarked 8.5 million dinars (c. €72,000) for this purpose, while more than two million dinars have been earmarked for the acquisition of new equipment for medical institutions from the local budget. Apart from equipping the Dr Laza K. Lazarević General Hospital, Dr Draga Ljočić Health Centre and Public Health Institute, the Municipality has distributed 90,000 face masks to citizens for free (60,000 face masks are made of cotton and are reusable). In addition, at nine locations in the town there are canisters containing a disinfectant, sodium hypochloride, which citizens can take for free and use in their homes. They are also available in five suburban settlements and 50 Šabac villages.<sup>68</sup>

## VIRUS DIPLOMACY

The pandemic intensified all dilemmas caused by Serbia during the previous years – its affiliation towards the West or the East. It seemed as if the crisis backed up the points of sovereignists, since they also appeared within the EU, so that

<sup>67</sup> *Danas*, 22 April 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Zelenović: Šabac oprema zdravstvene radnike iz sopstvenog budžeta, .

Serbia was increasingly openly inclined towards them. When Covid-19 spread to Europe and Serbia, President Vučić met twice in seven days with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Órban (first in Belgrade and then in Budapest), who rules by decree in a state of emergency. Serbia has declaratively been on the road of European integration over the last seven years. However, Serbia is developing increasingly deeper relations with Russia and China, so that its European orientation has continuously been questioned.

In Serbia, during the previous years, there was much public thinking about the survival of the European Union. The view on the possibility of its collapse (especially after the Brexit) was mostly advocated by right-wing political options and sovereignty-prone individuals. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, this theme was also tackled by mainstream media which, like pro-government daily *Politika*, wonder: "Will the European Union outlive Covid-19?"<sup>69</sup> It is also pointed out that the EU "torn by a migrant crisis and then shaken up by the Brexit, is well on its way to becoming a collateral victim of the coronavirus" and that "powerless and sleepy Brussels watches how the scaffolds for the reconstruction of the 'European fortress', erected by Emmanuel Macron, are collapsing under the onslaught of an invisible enemy..."<sup>70</sup>

Such a perception of the future of the European Union, especially by the media, could also be observed in Belgrade's response to the coronavirus. One of the headlines on the front page of *Politika* daily on 21 March read: "The corona reveals sincere friends". This headline corresponded to a series of President Vučić's angry statements on account of the European Union (EU) and some of its members. Apart from emphatically insisting that the "virus came from Italy", "all from Milan" and "in Niš from Lugano", he laid special emphasis on the EU's failure to come

<sup>69</sup> *Politika*, 31 March 2020.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

to rescue. He also claimed that Europe banned the export of necessary medical equipment, primarily respirators.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, he euphorically praised China, friendly Chinese people and, in particular, the “friend and brother” President Xi Jinping. Immediately after the proclamation of a state of emergency, Vučić wrote to the Chinese President Xi with the message that he places his greatest hopes just in him and his country.

Before long, the (first) plane arrived from China. It carried a large aid shipment, including medical devices, personal protective equipment and eight Chinese epidemiologists. It got a great deal of media attention, accompanied by President Vučić’s euphoric statements of gratitude to both the Chinese leader and Chinese people which, apart from aid gathering, asked their leadership to “give priority to Serbia”.<sup>72</sup>

The euphoric praises to China and its President and unweighed criticism of Europe (“European solidarity does not exist”; it is “only a beautiful fairy tale”) prompted some analysts and commentators to conclude that Serbia is abandoning its European path and definitely turning to “their geopolitical opponent China”. Thus, Germany’s *Die Zeit* wrote that it is now clear that “Vučić relies on China and not on Europe any more” and that some other politicians in the region could probably follow suit.<sup>73</sup> The British newspaper *The Guardian* also arrived at the same conclusion. According to it, while the pandemic is spreading, the rival powers are, in addition to providing aid, distributing “soft power” in order to achieve their foreign policy goals.<sup>74</sup>

71 In this connection, it has been explained by Brussels that exports of medical equipment have not been banned, but are subject to an authorization, *Politika*, 21 March 2020.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 *Politika*, 14 April 2020.

In early April, the first Russian plane with medical equipment arrived at the Batajnica airport. It came ahead of a convoy of 11 planes carrying humanitarian aid, which Moscow planned for Serbia. It was noticeable that, instead of Aleksandar Vučić who personally welcomed the first planes from Beijing, Russian humanitarians, who came with medical equipment, were welcomed by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. This diplomatic “ranking” continued, so that the Turkish plane carrying aid was welcomed by the head of Serbian diplomacy, Ivica Dačić.

*The Guardian* also wrote that in many respects the situation with the coronavirus was a continuation of the previous battle of the heart and mind in Serbia. It also added that a survey conducted in December 2019 showed that many Serbian people believed that Russia and China were the biggest donors during the last two decades, although the EU actually donated about 100 times more funds than others.<sup>75</sup>

The former Swedish head of diplomacy, Carl Bildt, responded to the confounding behaviour of Serbia, whose President welcomes “symbolic aid” from China at the airport, and ignores the donation of €15 million which was urgently earmarked by the EU.<sup>76</sup>

It is indicative that there was no remark concerning the lack of solidarity from Moscow which, as noted by some cynics, sent only – snow.<sup>77</sup> Analyst Dragomir Andjelović, who is favourably inclined toward Russia, commented this issue in the following way: “We are not in integration with Russia, but with the EU... and, naturally, we speak about the EU’s aid and its unreadiness to help us”.<sup>78</sup> According to him, the much

75 Ibid.

76 Radio Free Europe, 2 April 2020.

77 A cold wave, accompanied by snow and a strong wind, which hit Serbia and region in the last week of March, came from Russia.

78 *Danas*, 20 March 2020.

more important question is what the EU will do, “since we have talked so much about European values and solidarity and not about Russian values”.<sup>79</sup>

The news that, in late March, Russia sent 15 planes carrying aid and 100 military experts and epidemiologists to Italy also passed without government officials’ comments.<sup>80</sup> The media interpreted this aid as a “slap to NATO”, which behaved similarly to the European Union. In April, after a telephone conversation between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, Russia sent a number of military planes with medical equipment, including respirators, to the United States. According to *Moscow Times*, the selective aid to some vulnerable countries (Spain, for example, was excluded) was “purely geopolitical”. “In the case of Italy, it emphasizes the lack of European solidarity... while in the case of the United States, Russian aid makes Washington look weak and incapable of handling the crisis.”<sup>81</sup>

## EUROPAN AID TO SERBIA

In the meantime, the European Union approved the aid of €7.5 million, while Norway alone donated another €5 million, but the government-controlled media failed to give adequate publicity to this aid. The EU also financed some Air Serbia flights to Beijing and back, and approved Serbia to redirect nearly €100 million for fighting the coronavirus pandemic. In the joint statement by the Ambassadors of the 27 Members of the European Union and the Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia it is emphasized that in the space of only one week since Serbia has introduced the state of emergency and asked for assistance, the EU has designed and offered

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Finally, one plane with Russian experts and equipment arrived in Belgrade on 3 April.

<sup>81</sup> *Blic*, 10-12 April 2020.

a first and comprehensive package, worth €93.4 million, in donations, “together with a number of key non-financial assistance measures”.<sup>82</sup>

Former diplomat Srećko Djukić said that it would not now be “correct to underestimate the assistance of the EU which is also amidst the pandemic...”<sup>83</sup> According to him, it must be understood that the EU countries will first solve their problems and that the EU will adequately meet its obligations toward Serbia and the countries in the region.<sup>84</sup>

It is also indicative that the Serbian Minister for European Integration, Jadranka Joksimović, tried to “control the damage” from Vučić’s unweighed words on account of the EU. She pointed out that the “sustainability of the European Union is necessary more than ever before both to us as candidates and potential candidates”.<sup>85</sup> She also said that “every citizen of the European Union and Serbia, as well as the rest of the Western Balkans should imagine how the relations among the European countries would have looked like if it had not been for the damping influence of the EU, especially on the north-south line”.<sup>86</sup>

President Vučić’s unweighed behaviour provoked numerous speculations about his geopolitical position. Some hold that by threatening the West with his turn toward the East he actually tries to receive better treatment in Brussels. Namely, as is written by commentator Vera Didanović, if the West’s response to winking at the East is “even greater tolerance to autocracy, it is logical... that this newly conquered space will also be used for an additional training of rigidity”.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>82</sup> *Politika*, 28 March 2020.

<sup>83</sup> *Politika*, 30 March 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with *Politika*, 6 April 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> *NIN*, 9 April 2020.

In any case, on 20 April, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament announced that it would more closely follow the progress of the negotiation process with the Western Balkan countries, and secure financial support. On that occasion, Josep Borrell, EU Commissioner for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, reproached Belgrade for having billboards in honour of Chinese President, “brother Xi Jinping” on its streets, while the gratitude to the European Union for its years-long generous support of Serbia was never expressed in such a way.<sup>88</sup>

## THE TOTALITARIAN POTENTIAL OF THE PANDEMIC

“We are at war!” This was the first sentence of President Vučić’s address to the nation announcing the introduction of a state of emergency on Sunday, 15 March. To tell the truth, the leaders of other countries also used the war vocabulary during pandemic such as “enemy”, with the attribute “invisible”, against which we are “fighting”, underway is the “defence of the people and the state” and the like. However, there are less of those for whose political character and authoritarian ruling style such rhetoric is better suited than for Aleksandar Vučić.

This could be seen, for example, not only because he immediately opted for a “state of emergency” instead of an “emergency situation” which was considered to be more appropriate by some experts, but also because of the way in which it was conducted and the tempo with which it was implemented. Also, the state of emergency introduced in Serbia due to the coronavirus epidemic implied the extreme measures that resembled a state of war in many respects. Even in comparison with other countries and

societies which also resorted to the introduction of a state of emergency, Serbia “stuck out” from them due to its rigidity and restrictiveness.<sup>89</sup>

According to epidemiologist Predrag Djurić, Serbia was not prepared for a pandemic “of which the authorities were also aware; this probably caused some kind of panic at the beginning. It was probably concluded that only with restrictive measures, like those which were implemented, it would be possible to avoid the most disastrous consequences”.<sup>90</sup>

This was also confirmed by epidemiologist Zoran Radovanović who stated that “we claimed that we had everything but, in fact, we had nothing”.<sup>91</sup>

The most drastic measure was the one prescribed only for some categories of citizens – the population aged 65 and over. It was without precedent, even in comparison with the previous post-totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Moreover, soldiers with face masks and long-barrel weapons were present not only in the vicinity of hospital compounds, but also in the centre of Belgrade; at the beginning, the curfew lasted from 8 p.m. until 5 a.m., but was very soon prolonged for another seven hours (from 5 p.m. until 5 a.m.). Moreover, it was threatened that, should it be necessary, the curfew could last 24 hours! Contrary to the opinion of the relevant experts, it was also announced that whole towns might be put under lockdown. The penalties for violations of restrictive measures exceed Serbian citizens’ income (this especially refers to retired people).

Both in theory and practice (in particular), the state of emergency poses a temptation for every

<sup>88</sup> Dnevnik TVN1, 20 April 2020.

<sup>89</sup> The European countries with the most stringent protection measures after Serbia (which holds the first place) are Slovenia and Croatia.

<sup>90</sup> *Danas*, 21 April 2020.

<sup>91</sup> *NIN*, 16 April 2020.



society, regardless of whether it has democratic tradition, or is inclined to be ruled with a “firm hand” and its citizens mostly give priority to “security” over “freedom”. It is difficult to determine a subtle dividing line between the introduction of the measures needed to protect society, on the one side, and the limitation of fundamental human rights, on the other side, but is easy to erase it. According to the current regulations, the responsibility for the defence against threats like this one or some similar to it (earthquake, flood...) lies with the government. On the other hand, the government is obliged to introduce proportional measures, that is, the measures that restrict the guaranteed human rights “only to the extent deemed necessary” (Article 202 Section 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia).

President Vučić’s announcement of the possible imposition of a 24-hour curfew raises the justifiable question, as was put by Miloš Mitrović, foreign desk editor of *Danas* daily, “where is the boundary between really necessary measures and something else”, because the “combination of a campaign, fear and well-known inclination of the leader of the Progressives to a firm hand”, who “gets around excellently under (pseudo-) democratic conditions, is not at all disgusted by a naked dictatorship.”<sup>92</sup>

Boško Jakšić, a foreign policy commentator, emphasized that the President deals ignorantly with the Assembly and commands the ministers, forgetting that he is no longer prime minister. He brought the judiciary into such a position that it listens to him. He created pit bull terriers who label the opposition as being Nazi, fascist, treacherous, trash and thieves. He views the media that are not under his control as personal, family and state enemies.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>92</sup> *Danas*, 23 March 2020.

<sup>93</sup> *Politika*, 10, 11 and 12 April 2020.

Like all other authoritarian rulers, Vučić also has his devotees and “voluntary followers”, who are prepared to creatively supplement whatever the ruler has already undertaken with their own proposals. Such is also the case of Nebojša Krstić (the former media advisor of ex-Serbian President Boris Tadić) who, in his regular *Blic* column, proposed the shutting down of social media and arrests of “deceivers of the public”.<sup>94</sup> Proceeding from the thesis that such proposals are never first made by the high officials themselves, but by the “wretches who are assigned such tasks”, the author and teacher at the university programmes in Florence, Dejan Atanacković pointed out that “... once you find yourself under a state of emergency, it is difficult to believe that the regime will not come to appreciate the totalitarian potential of epidemic.”<sup>95</sup>

Although the immediate reason for the imposition of a state of emergency may seem reasonable and justified, Teofil Pančić reminded us that states of emergency, both in theory and practice, are actually a pretext for the imposition of dictatorship.<sup>96</sup> He also pointed out that in the “pre-fear of an invisible microscopic enemy” the social paradigm is shifting. In democratic societies, as he emphasized, politicians are accountable to citizens: “However, when Vučić snarls and threatens with penalties, prison and curfew... or when Ana Brnabić wrings her hands over ‘poor discipline among citizens’, it is clear that the time has turned upside down, so that we will be accountable to them.”<sup>97</sup>

Yuval Noah Harari, a well-known Israeli writer and essayist, as well as the author of several best-selling books worldwide, also pointed to the traps of a state of emergency, which tends to be of long duration (even when the reasons for its introduction cease to exist). He reminded us

<sup>94</sup> *Blic*, 17 March 2020.

<sup>95</sup> *Danas*, 21-22 March 2020.

<sup>96</sup> *Vreme*, 19 March 2020.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

that in Israel the state of emergency was introduced in 1948, during the War of Independence, which implied a number of measures ranging from press censorship and land sequestration to special regulations for making pudding! Israel has never officially proclaimed the end of a state of emergency and abolished many of “temporary measures” adopted in 1948; the regulations for making pudding were erased in 2011.<sup>98</sup>

The famous Stanford Professor Francis Fukuyama has pointed out that most democratic societies prescribe the conditions under which the executive branch of government is granted extraordinary powers (in the event of a national crisis): “The real test is whether those repositories of power will regain their power after the crisis ends.”<sup>99</sup>

European officials are also concerned over the dangerous potential of a state of emergency. In her interview with *Danas* daily,<sup>100</sup> Tanja Fajon, a member of the European Parliament (EP), said that the “coronavirus must not be an excuse for locking democracy”. She also said that “a great problem is posed by shutting down the borders completely”. Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin (one of Vučić’s outstanding devotees) responded her roughly that if she, who is otherwise a Slovenian member of the European Parliament (EP), “...cannot help us, we would be grateful if she would not hinder us. This would also be of great help to us.”<sup>101</sup>

<sup>98</sup> *Nedeljnik*, 26 March 2000.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with *Nedeljnik*, 9 April 2020.

<sup>100</sup> 26 March 2020.

<sup>101</sup> *Politika*, 27 March 2020.

In addition, a group of EP members wrote to Oliver Varhelyi, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement, pointing to an “extremely disturbing” situation in Serbia. They asked him to comment on an “extremely serious” situation in Serbia and the statements against the EU.<sup>102</sup>

In this context, it is especially disturbing that Serbia’s society, practically without democratic tradition, is very inclined toward authoritarianism. However, this also applies to other countries in the region, as was warned last year by Florian Bieber, the connoisseur of the situation in the region, in his book dealing with the return of authoritarianism to the Western Balkans. As was commented by Dejan Jović, a political scientist from Zagreb, “considered from a liberal viewpoint, it is disturbing that citizens call for an even stricter system and the suspension of even more rights...”<sup>103</sup>

In North Macedonia, this tendency to call for the imposition of a curfew, “in accordance with Serbia’s horrible model of transferring the responsibility for the coronavirus disease to citizens (you are to blame for its spread, so that we will lock you into your houses like in a zoo garden) also raised concern by the well-known author Rumena Bužarovska: “All of a sudden, my fellow fighters for human rights have confidence in the police and ask them to protect us. Some of them call for complete lockdown...”<sup>104</sup>

<sup>102</sup> *NIN*, 23 April 2020.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with *Vreme*, 2 April 2020.

<sup>104</sup> Author’s text for *Vreme*, 2 April 2020.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The pandemic has revealed the serious maladies of Serbian society – chronic problems, corrupted political class, incompetent bureaucracy, fragile economy, divided society...

In the time of heightened uncertainty and fear for one's own life and future, citizens turned to their own families. However, under such circumstances, the first victims are freedom and democracy.

Preventive measures were accepted by citizens and it can be said that, apart from small deviations, all restrictions were respected. According to official statements by the World Health Organization, almost all post-socialist countries have so far achieved enviable results in the prevention of disease transmission. As far as Serbia is concerned, many of them hold that this is also due to the Yugoslav public health system, which also implied compulsory BCG vaccination. The system has been established by Dr Andrija Štampar.

Despite the fact that during the last decades the public health system was rather devastated and that a considerable number of medical workers went to work in the West, it was proved that its remainders still function. This contributed in large measure that disease transmission was under control throughout this period, without dramatic and disturbing jumps in the numbers of coronavirus infections and deaths.

In Serbia, the pandemic sharpened the basic dilemmas with which its society and its political elite, in particular, are faced. The dogmatism of the Serbian elite and missed opportunities like those in 1989 and after 2000 inevitably impose the question whether it will be able to move forward and make the crucial decision about Serbia's future, that is, to substantially opt for the country's Europeanization.

The pandemic completely exposed the character of the regime, its arrogance, incompetence and inability to assess the current international circumstances.

The behaviour of the government and President Vučić, in particular, points out that Serbia is distancing itself from Brussels and its officially declared policy about the European path.

By criticizing the EU and Brussels in this crisis situation, Serbia opted for a rapprochement with China and some centres of power and individual states, including Moscow, Washington (more with the Trump Administration), as well as Berlin.

The suspension of Parliament, attacks on independent media and sharp reactions against critical thinking, as well as some discriminatory measures, point to the potential for authoritarianism is on the rise and citizens' justified fear that this can also be practiced after the crisis ends.

The pandemic served President Vučić to conduct an election campaign at the time when the other side objectively had no conditions for any advertising or promotion activity.

Bearing all this in mind the Helsinki Committee recommends the European Union to seriously take into account everything that has been written and adjust its strategy for Serbia to the pro-European forces in Serbia, including in particular:

- The civil sector that advocates European values and systematically promotes theme;
- Adequate support for professional media that are not government-controlled, so that the public can gain insight into the EU's true values and potential for the country's development within the Union;
- Support for local communities (like Šabac, Paraćin) and local initiatives which, despite pressures and endless negative campaigns, persevere in their advocacy of European values and solutions;
- Support for environmental movements, which are gaining ground in Serbia and, in that sense, are on the European threshold;
- Support for small and medium-sized enterprises for which the European market is of vital interest;
- Bearing in mind the pronounced anti-European behaviour of the Government and the President during the crisis, the EU should give up its policy of pandering to Serbia in order to win it over;
- After the end of the crisis, the EU should react more robustly and prevent Serbia's renewed destabilization policy in the region, primarily in Montenegro, Bosnia and Kosovo where Belgrade's traditional claims were clearly expressed during the pandemic;
- The EU should also prevent placing the division of Kosovo on the agenda because it would have unforeseeable consequences not only for the region, but also for Europe.