

Agata Domachowska

Montenegro in the face of COVID-19 pandemic

Montenegro was the last European country to confirm a case of SARS-CoV-2. Yet even before receiving this information, the Montenegrin government undertook a number of actions to prepare the state and its society for the pandemic. Also an economic package was presented with the aim of helping entrepreneurs to survive the crisis. Simultaneously, the Montenegrin authorities look to receive some support from their foreign partners in the struggle with the spreading coronavirus and its negative influence on the state's socio-economic situation.

It was not until 17th March 2020 that the first case of SARS-CoV-2 was confirmed in Montenegro. As of 3rd April 2020 there were 160 people infected with this virus, and two persons died. The highest number of cases was reported in Podgorica municipality, i.e. the state's capital (73 cases) and in the neighbouring Tuzi (34 cases). Initially, the number of recorded cases grew the fastest in Tuzi, thus on 24th March the municipality was put in a complete lockdown. The Montenegrin authorities expected a rapid growth in the number of the coronavirus cases in the next two weeks.

Reaction of the authorities. Although the first SARS-CoV-2 case was confirmed in Montenegro not earlier than in the second half of March, the Montenegrin government had already undertaken a number of actions to prepare the state to the crisis. The interdepartmental National Coordination Body for Infectious Diseases (*Nacionalno Koordinaciono Tijelo*, NKT) responsible for implementing subsequent solutions to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2, decided to establish on 25th March the Crisis Medical Staff. On the following day, the NKT announced coronavirus epidemic posing a nationwide threat. One of the first decisions taken by the government was to close from 16th March kindergartens, schools and institutions of higher education and to organize remote classes instead. Then the quarantine facilities for the citizens were prepared at the premises of the Regional School of Public Administration in Danilovgrad and in the former Zoganj barracks in Ulcinj. Moreover, shopping centres, sports facilities, playgrounds and restaurants got closed. Organization of mass gatherings was prohibited. Aleksandar Bogdanović, the Minister of Culture, announced financial assistance for cultural institutions and the media sector. The government also organized a series of meetings with representatives of retail chains, who confirmed that they had reserves for the next three to four months.

Religious services can only take place without the participation of the congregation, and funerals can be attended only by the closest family. Earlier (13th March), the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral announced that the prayer marches organized since December 2019 and attended by crowds would stop (see "Komentarze IEŚ", No. 106). He also asked the public television (RTCG) to broadcast. At the same time, he offered the Church facilities for persons in quarantine.

Initially, the Montenegrin government decided to close selected border crossings and to ban yachts in certain ports. Next, the complete closing of the borders was announced and foreigners were forbidden from entering the country. Air, rail and bus services were also suspended. Under the new restrictive measures, only two adults were allowed to travel in one vehicle. What is more, on 30th March, the government introduced the curfew from Monday to Friday from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. and from 1 p.m. on Saturday to 5 a.m. on Monday. The ban did not apply to e.g. health service workers, inspections, police, the army, fire brigade, municipal services and the media. Moreover, children under 12 could stay outside their home only if accompanied by an adult.

The Montenegrin authorities also decided to postpone local government election in Tivat, planned for 5th April. Another restriction measure introduced by the government (on 21st March) was publication of a list of people in mandatory 14-day self-isolation. This decision caused controversy in the society. In the opinion of part of

opposition and some non-governmental organizations, this solution poses a threat to human rights and freedoms as disclosing the identity of isolated people in Montenegro is unconstitutional and against the personal data protection act. They also claim that the introduced measures have no legal basis in a situation where a state of emergency has not yet been declared. As a result, these circles have been appealing to the government to cease these practices (de facto stigmatizing and discriminatory ones). However, the Montenegrin prime minister Duško Marković says that the list will not be removed, arguing that the health and life of citizens is more important than protecting personal information. Meanwhile, in the Montenegrin media there appears more and more information about individuals detained by the police for violating the self-isolation order or other bans introduced by the government in order to counteract the pandemic.

Economic package. Since the beginning of the crisis, the Montenegrin authorities said that the novel coronavirus will negatively influence the tourist branch, so important for the Montenegrin economy, which will affect the economic growth. To calm down the citizens, on 16th March the President of the Central Bank of Montenegro Radoje Zugić announced that the measures to address the negative effects of the pandemic would be taken quickly. On 19th March, the Montenegrin government presented further solutions to reduce the negative effects of the pandemic, which include:

- postponing the due date for repaying the loan at the request of citizens and enterprises for a period of 90 days,
- establishing a new credit line aimed at improving cash flow of entrepreneurs – the beneficiary can receive up to 3 million euros. These funds are for businesses from the medical, tourist, catering, transport, and food industries,
- providing one-off financial aid of 50 euros to pensioners with the lowest income, as well as to people using other social benefits,
- postponing by 90 days the due date of rental payment for state-owned properties,
- suspension of all budget allowances for work in commissions, committees, and other provisional bodies of government administration,
- limiting and controlling budget expenditure, including freezing of public investments, except those necessary for the functioning of the healthcare system. The budget is to ensure both the protection of citizens' health and the efficient functioning of the state.

At the same time, the Montenegrin prime minister assured that the government would limit budget expenditure and abolish the payment of allowances to MPs' salaries. It was also decided that members of the government would pay half of their salary to the NKT account. On 30th March, the prime minister also established a working group to prepare a new package of support measures for entrepreneurs and citizens to minimize the negative effects of the crisis. The NKT chairman, Milutin Simović, hoping to obtain assistance for the Montenegrin state, organized a meeting with ambassadors at which he presented the government's plan of action regarding the fight against the coronavirus pandemic and the calculation of Montenegro's estimated quarterly needs of 59 million euros.

To intensify efforts in combat with the pandemic and limit its negative economic effects, the Montenegrin authorities appeal to the other Balkan countries to deepen their regional cooperation. Prime Minister Duško Marković said that Montenegro would make all its ports available to partners from the region to maintain the flow of goods. He also called for solidarity in the face of the global coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, as the head of the state's government which currently chairs the Central European Initiative (CEI), Marković proposed to organize a regional conference on defence against coronavirus.

Support in the fight against coronavirus. The European Union will provide Montenegro with 3 million euros for necessary and immediate assistance to the health care service and 50 million euros as part of a long-term support program to improve the socio-economic situation of the country, in line with the needs defined by the Montenegrin government. Montenegro has already received limited aid from other countries. China donated five thousand protective masks and one thousand coronavirus tests to Montenegro. Support in the form of one thousand tests was offered by Turkey as well. In turn, the United Arab Emirates sent to Montenegro e.g. 3 tonnes

of medical supplies. Moreover, private investors have also been involved in supporting the Montenegrin authorities in the fight against the pandemic (for example, the Greek businessman Petros Stathis at the special request of Prime Minister Marković donated 3.5 thousand tonnes of protective equipment for Montenegrin hospitals). Meanwhile (27th March), the NKT turned to the NATO Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) with a request to provide Montenegro with support in the form of hospital beds, respirators, surgical masks, disinfectants, defibrillators, ECG devices, contactless thermometers etc. The Montenegrin authorities are also hoping for expert and financial assistance from the UN and WHO.

Conclusions. Even before the first case of SARS-CoV-2 infection was confirmed in Montenegro, the government had begun to consistently introduce a series of preventative and protective measures, aimed at preparing the state and the society for the pandemic. After the outbreak, Montenegro – like other states in the region – decided that citizens should self-isolate in order to slow down the spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authorities have also implemented subsequent solutions which are to mitigate the negative influence of the pandemic on the state's economy. The most afflicted branch has been tourism, which generates approximately 25% of Montenegrin GDP. The citizens have complied with the changes; however, they clearly oppose the government publishing information about persons in mandatory self-isolation. The way in which subsequent changes have been introduced (the government makes decisions without consulting the parliament or the society) has been criticized as well. Due to limited capability of the Montenegrin health service to combat the pandemic (according to health workers, in hospitals there are shortages of equipment, means of personal protection and COVID-19 tests), the government of Montenegro, like other Western Balkan countries, is forced to rely on the help from foreign partners.