

Public Statement

In the midst of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Western Balkan Region has strived to adopt a strategy that can adequately control the spread of the virus and thereby maintain the stability and functioning of existing healthcare systems. The Kosovo Government's main priority in the fight against this virus should be the establishment of clear principles of crisis management that would protect the population from an epidemic of even greater proportions. However, as the risk of the further spread of the virus grows greater by the day, a shared approach and cooperation, rather than division, becomes ever more necessary in the suppression of this pandemic. Still, in the complex circumstances that reign in Kosovo and in the absence of translations of official statements and press releases issued by the Kosovo Government that reach Serb community only very late, COVID-19 seems at times to be a uni, rather than pan-national virus. Furthermore, important information about the virus sent by mobile networks are delivered to users exclusively in the Albanian language. Lack of clarity in terms of decisions regarding entry into and exit from Kosovo, recognition of personal documents, the isolation and quarantine of individuals entering into Kosovo, movement around Kosovo itself, have all created additional confusion in Kosovo Serb communities. Due to these numerous ambiguities, hospitals' and pharmacies' supplies of protective gear, such as masks, gloves and disinfectants have been very nearly depleted, something that significantly raises the level of risk that local residents are faced with. In light of minimal and in many cases, non-existent cooperation between the Ministry of Health of Kosovo and healthcare providers in Serb-majority areas, it is questionable whether or not we are in any way prepared to respond adequately to the emergence of a pandemic.

This is just one aspect of the problem that the Serb community is facing and that, without a doubt, demands a different institutional approach to the one taken up until now. We would draw attention to the fact that in an emergency situation, unbroken communication between officials and the equal treatment of all media is of vital importance in ensuring that all ethnic communities in Kosovo are kept well-informed. This kind of approach significantly reduces the risk of the spread of misinformation and panic through social media.

However, this situation also begs the question – which approach is best suited to combat this 21st Century monstrosity in which the suppression of the pandemic relies exclusively on inter-personal cooperation, full access to information of public importance, as well as raising the awareness of every individual regardless of ethnic belonging on the importance of

respecting the measures put in place? Why must we, even in these extraordinary circumstances, remind institutions and the wider public of legally and constitutionally guaranteed rights?

In order to ensure that these questions do not remain unanswered, and that citizens, particularly those belonging to the Serb community, do not remain uninformed, we appeal to the institutions of the Government of Kosovo to take the following steps:

1. Adopt clear principles for communication with non-majority communities and to respect constitutional and legal provisions for the use of the Serbian language as one of Kosovo's official languages. All written statements and decisions must be available to the media and wider public in both official languages and press conferences should have simultaneous translation available;
2. Establish two-way communication with healthcare centres in Serb-majority communities in the goal of facilitating information exchanges on a daily basis on the status of infected patients and to regularly inform the public in all communities in Kosovo of the current situation;
3. We consider the creation of a stronger front to be one of the key priorities in the fight against the COVID-19 virus and therefore call on both the Kosovo as well as on the Serbian government to adopt a principle of functional flexibility that would allow for the unhindered movement of healthcare workers within and outside of Kosovo. This would allow for the strengthening of the ability of healthcare workers to provide necessary treatments to patients in need of medical care in specialised hospitals;
4. The government should update the Serbian version of the website of the Ministry of Health <https://kosova.health/sr> and also add versions in the languages of other non-majority communities in Kosovo. This must include compilations of important information on the current situation related to the COVID-19 virus, government decisions as well as the telephone numbers of healthcare institutions in various regions throughout Kosovo that can be reached by those who have potentially fallen ill from COVID-19;
5. In the goal of reducing the spread of disinformation, we propose that creation of a mobile application for Android and IOS platforms that would contain information identical to that published on <https://kosova.health/sr>;
6. We appeal to the leading mobile operators (VALA, Ipko) in Kosovo to ensure that information of public importance is shared in all of Kosovo's official languages;
7. To strengthen the communication and activities with non-majority communities, including the most vulnerable groups in this situation, above-all those in need of social assistance, internally displaced persons in collective centres and individuals with disabilities.

25th of March, 2020

Empirika Members:

Aktiv, Advocacy Center for Democratic Culture (ACDC), Center for the Rights of Minority Communities, EMEG, Forum for Development and Multi-ethnic Cooperation (FDMC), Gračanica online, Humani Centar Mitrovica, Communication for Social Development (CSD), New Press, Radio Kontakt Plus, RTV Kim, RTV Mir and Sinergija.