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COVID-19 Students' Policy Challenge finalists

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Foreword

Within our “Science Engagement Programme” we organized COVID-19 students’ policy challenge. Our aim was to mobilize undergraduate and graduate students’ skills, ideas and capacity to contribute to dealing with and recovering from COVID-19 by suggesting innovative and evidence-based solutions to the pandemic-related challenges. The contest was organized in two parts: firstly, all interested students submitted policy briefs, and only the best ones in each of the Western Balkans countries advanced to the final. In the second part, a final online competition was organised whereby they presented their policy ideas in three minutes to the representatives of donor community, government and civil society.

Students have been asked to respond to two challenge prompts:

- **Challenge 1**: How to respond and recover from COVID-19 by strengthening social justice and protecting the most vulnerable?

- **Challenge 2:** How to respond and recover from COVID-19 in a manner that helps building resilience to climate change?

You can read these policy proposals in this publication. The finalists of the COVID-19 Students Policy were bright minds among undergraduate and graduate students in the Western Balkans who designed polices to help the elderly, victims of domestic violence, improve environment, etc. Every single policy brief our students came up with has been uplifting and inspiring, and the passion and rigor that they brought to the task fills me with confidence that the next generation will be well-equipped to take on the societal challenges across the Western Balkans.

Milan Gnjidić,
Programme Manager

#challenge1

Author: Aleksa Janković

“LBGTQIA+ COMMUNITY DURING THE PANDEMIC – MUTE SCREAMS FOR HOPE”

The COVID-19 pandemic situation challenged everyone in many aspects of life. The governments around the world applied restrictions on free movement in and out of their country. Almost every country took preventive measures against Covid-19 by applying policies that locked down the entire countries or major cities, closed private businesses, and enforced new regulations and action. Amidst all existing problems, the need to consider how the pandemic situation has impacted marginalized groups like the LGBTQIA+ community is very important.

The main reason the public is not aware of the impact caused by Covid-19 on the LGBTQIA+ community is the fact that the latter choose not to expose their challenges publicly. United Nations in Montenegro (after a brief study) published information indicating that around 50% of the community lost their jobs due to the pandemic and are therefore obliged to return to their abusive and unwelcoming homes. NGOs that actively protect the rights of the community have reported there was a considerable increase in domestic violence against the members of the community, especially after having returned to their family homes. Finally, the pandemic situation has displayed the reduced availability of counselling which negatively influenced the lives of LGBTQIA+ community members (UN Montenegro, 2020).

“The Strategy on improving the quality of life of LGBTI people in Montenegro 2019-2023” indicates that the quality of life of LGBTQIA+ people in Montenegro remains a concern (Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, , 2019). The report also states that institutional protection is essential to improve the quality of life of the LGBTQIA+ community. Furthermore, institutional discrimination and lack of its visibility are supported by the fact that people are either afraid of being vocal about it or don’t want to be recognized as a member of LGBTQIA+ community (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2010). Even though the report is 11 years old, the situation remains quite alarming, with more than 100 complaints (hate speech, discrimination, abuse) filed to the police in 2019 by the members of LGBTQIA+ community (USDOS, 2020).

A significant number of examples that express hateful behaviour are perceived. The difference is that the practice of reporting such behaviour became relatively normalized, and people have more confidence that the state institutions will protect them. The fight for LGBTQIA+ rights got a considerable momentum when Montenegro passed a bill that recognized civil unions for same-sex couples in 2020. The Strategy on improving the quality of life of LGBTQIA+ people in Montenegro includes a lot of crucial points, it fails to take into consideration the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the LGBTQIA+ community, as it was published in 2019.

There has been a rise in the number of incidents of xenophobia and racism related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in some countries, there have also been COVID-19 related incidents where LGBTQIA+ people were targeted. In South Korea, members of the LGBTQIA+ community were targeted and accused of spreading the virus (Thoreson, 2020). This caused fear among the community members to get tested and to name their contacts, due to distress of backlash and persecution.

In Montenegro, in 2020, there has also been an increase in the number of incidents where LGBTQIA+ people were targeted. One of the most recent cases is the brutal attack on a gay man in the capital of Montenegro, Podgorica, where he was left on the street with a broken jaw and cheekbone. The indifference of passing people was alarming, as no one aided him after the assault

(Durović, 2021). Most of the Pride parades across the globe were cancelled, due to the pandemic, including the one in Podgorica (Haynes, 2020).

Montenegro is a traditional society with conservative values. It is also a small country where there is a very small LGBTQIA+ community, and many people continue to remain reluctant to openly declare they are members of the community, due to stigma and fear of rejection. Law on Prohibition of Discrimination clearly states in the Article 19 that discrimination of a person based on sexual orientation is punishable with fines ranging from 200 to 20.000 euro.

However, paradoxically, Montenegro does not lack legal solutions, but rather the informative aspects – people tend to be less informed on their legal protection and legislation. Centre for Democracy and Human Rights in Montenegro (CEDEM) has published a study that was conducted from 11th until 19th of September 2020, stating:

- Every fifth person in Montenegro has an opinion that LGBTQI persons are no better than criminals and should be punished with the highest sentence (CEDEM, 2020).

- 43% of People believe that LQBTQI persons should not have equal rights as other citizens of Montenegro have (CEDEM, 2020).

In the past, the parliament focused on the law recognizing civil unions between same-sex couples, and members of some political parties have compared the same sex-marriage bill with mental disorder, zoophilia and paedophilia. One of the horrifying examples is that of the current president of the Committee for Human Rights in the Parliament of Montenegro, Jovan Vučurović, who called the bill “ill- favoured”, and described it as an attempt of Montenegrin government to caress the lobbyists’ needs from Brussels (Durović, 2020).

In Europe, 55% percent of Europeans would feel comfortable if their child was in a relationship with an LGBTI person, while the percentages are even lower for intersex and trans people (ILGA Europe, 2020).

The United Nations (Montenegro is a member state) identified the need to address this issue. In its statement on 17 May 2020 “COVID-19: The suffering and resilience of LGBT persons must be visible and inform the actions of States”, the UN calls for states to adopt legislation, public policies and take action to protect LGBTI communities during the pandemic (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2020). Although the United Nations called upon the States to take actions, Montenegro did not change any of the policies. Therefore, Montenegro should bring a fresh policy to protect the LGBTQIA+ community.

The new policy focusing on the direct aid of LGBTQIA+ community in Montenegro during COVID- 19 crisis would not only benefit members of the community, their families but also would be beneficial for all citizens of Montenegro mainly because it would increase the awareness, and visibility of the delicate situation for the LGBTQIA+ community. Outcomes of such policy could achieve the goal of decreasing stigmatization against LGBTQIA+ community in Montenegro. The policy would also be in line with the United Nations recommendations given the fact Montenegro is a member state. Additionally, it would be a step in the right direction for Montenegro’s EU path.

Recommendations

Establishment of an institutional cooperation body between the Ministry of Justice and Human and Minority Rights, Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, Ombudsman, Police, and Parliamentary Committee for Human and Minority Rights

Establish cooperation between the executive and legislative branches and representatives from Human Rights NGOs and LGBTQIA+ community.

Launching a campaign where Montenegrin citizens would be gradually informed about the LGBTQIA+ community and as a result, would begin to have more tolerance toward the community.

After the information campaign, LGBTQIA+ youth will find it easier to fight for their rights. Moreover, social openness would impact their mental health positively.

The right to freedom of expression would be strengthened. It would allow LGBTQIA+ individuals to be visible, professionally included, and closer to the solution of many institutional problems in the role of direct advisors. Police would have a significantly deeper insight on the attacks towards the community and closer monitoring on ensuring the safety of the community.

Additional training in human rights sphere could consequentially influence the knowledge of what motives may be identified as potentially endangering and provide jobs for people that suffered loss of job during the pandemic, which is around 50% of community (UN in Montenegro, 2020).

To protect the marginalized groups in Montenegro, particularly during extraordinary situations, the law on the protection of marginalized communities in Montenegro should be fully implemented.

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Authors: Viktorija Mitevska and Filip Taskovski

"SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF ROMA AND SEX WORKERS: A RIGHT TO SOCIAL INCLUSION"

We observe a constant social exclusion of the Roma community and sex workers who are endangered in any way possible. From a social point of view, they cannot socialize and do not exercise their rights as other people because they are often discriminated, and are not accepted by the wider community. On the other hand, the difficulty to access employment opportunities is a major issue.

With the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19), the social exclusion of the Roma community doubled. Many Roma families depend on performing temporary jobs, such as collecting used materials and second-hand materials, plastic, paper or selling at the open market and 90% of them are at risk of not being able to provide the basic and necessary supplies to support their families and protect them from the pandemic. Roma living in provisional and temporary dwellings throughout the country are left without the opportunity to follow the recommendations for protection and hygiene measures, as they do not have access to running water nor the means to supply it, neither do they have protective equipment and hygiene items. There are many examples during this pandemic that have additionally burdened the socioeconomic and health position of the community.

For example, in Suto Orizari, many citizens were left without a family doctor. Pregnant women from this municipality, faced problems in examination, because the gynaecological office was without a gynaecologist during the pandemic. Also, the vaccination ward in Suto Orizari was ceased, leaving preschool and school-aged children without doctors. There is still no public transport in Delchevo, which is an additional problem for the socially vulnerable groups, in need of medical help or examinations in clinical hospitals.

Moreover, as a consequence of poor coordination between institutions, many vulnerable persons have not received financial assistance. In the past four months, non-governmental organizations that advocate for the rights of the Roma community urged the state institutions for socio-economic support. However, they received negative replies.

Due to the pandemic situation, with the increase in prices, many Roma families are unable to secure hygiene products. Besides economic difficulties, they risk the infection as well. Thus, it is an urgent matter to supply the community with hygiene products, masks, gloves, antiseptic, antibacterial gels, and disinfectant sprays. The Roma community is placed in the suburbs of the cities, therefore medical facilities or pharmacies are far away from them. They face food shortages and cannot supply their families. The need for food packages is elementary. They have limited access to drinkable water supplies, thus, settling water tanks is fundamental.

Many initiatives have been launched for the Roma in the Republic of North Macedonia and many strategies have been prepared, such as the Strategy for the Roma in the Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020, which covers several areas, namely health, culture, employment, education and housing. Several non-governmental organizations and the Red Cross are key factors in supporting the Roma community.

Apart from NGOs that undertake different activities for the emancipation of the Roma community, the state institutions have failed to provide essential assistance. Since the Covid-19 outbreak, the NGOs were the main instrument that attempted to protect the Roma community from the risks of infection. The vulnerable groups make up a high percentage of the population in the Republic of

North Macedonia, hence, the state institutions should take immediate measures to support them. Not to forget, the Red Cross provides temporary accommodations, food and clothing, however it is not enough.

The COVID-19 pandemic situation exposed social exclusion for the category of sex workers also. The current circumstances have reduced the medical care for this category. Discrimination and stigma in healthcare facilities prevent sex workers from receiving appropriate care and support. National policies often exclude sex workers to benefit from the workers' assistance program. They also cannot obtain documents that would grant them social assistance.

This is a worldwide issue. Governments have managed to provide social protection for different categories of people and communities, especially to the self-employed, unfortunately, sex workers are not included. Therefore, public institutions must initiate an emergency fund to support them. In the meantime, many sex workers are forced to work. They risk being infected and get financial penalties at the same time. Due to preventive measures against Covid-19 brothels and strip clubs closed, thus halting the financial incomes of sex workers.

The Roma community, sex workers, and other vulnerable groups did not receive sufficient protection and healthcare services, except for the minimum one-time assistance of 3000 denars for the Roma community. Non-governmental organizations in cooperation with the Red Cross, distributed food packages, protective masks, hygiene and disinfection products, yet it was not enough. Therefore, state institutions must play an essential role to this process. They must apply the anti-discrimination law to protect vulnerable groups. Nevertheless, comprehensive cooperation between institutions and civil society organizations is pivotal for the immediate implementation of the law.

To conclude, social exclusion of the Roma community, sex workers and other vulnerable groups should be prevented because all of them have the right to social inclusion. We are all human beings and deserve the right to be treated humanely and justly.

"We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color is" - Maya Angelou

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"THE CLICK TO JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS"

Domestic violence has increased since the enforcement of lockdown as a part of the preventive measures against Covid-19. Simultaneously, health and social support became limited and hardly accessible. Based on reports, the national helpline for women received around 2000 calls during the isolation period from March 10 to May 18. This marked a threefold increase comparing to the same period in 2019.1 However, the data do not present the actual situation because many victims never report the violence for various reasons. On most occasions, the abuser and the victim share the living space, therefore due to the lack of alternative shelters or different reasons, they are afraid to report the violence.[1]

Problem Statement

The employment through informal economy reaches 30.3% in Albania. As a result, victims of domestic violence find it difficult to get a job. In poor countries like Albania, victims of domestic violence cannot find a job easily. As a consequence, the economic dependency forces the victims to stay with their abuser. Therefore, the economic independence for this category is essential for their safety. In a few cases, state institutions, civil society and the private sector promised to help the victims of domestic violence. Taking into account the facts, I propose to create a website where domestic violence victims can freely access job opportunities during the pandemic situation.

Policy Options

In Albania, more than 50% of women aged 15-49 faced minimum one form of violence. Based on the different campaigns, cooperation between relevant institutions is crucial to address the phenomenon of domestic violence. In Albania, more than 30 organizations are active in monitoring and supporting survivors of domestic and gender-based violence.[6] They provide good counselling services. Their main focus is the psychological assessment and legal counselling. Yet, employment is out of focus. On the other hand, the online information tools are not working. Therefore, the need for an online website to guide the victims of domestic violence to find a job and become economically independent from their abusers is essential.

Recommendations

Granting safety and employment opportunities for the victims of domestic violence must be a high priority. Websites are accessible for everyone, even in pandemic situations, therefore, it would be easier for the victims to report the violence in this way and be able to concurrently search for a job. The website could also include inspirational stories, advice, online career counselling, a community forum, etc. Nevertheless, employment should remain the main purpose.

Furthermore, we could invite the private business sector and the media for cooperation. Good coordination between private businesses and media by posting the job vacancies through the latter is a possibility to consider. In the end, non-profit organizations would be of great help by monitoring the whole process and sharing their advice and human resources.

If the victims would be able to find a job, they would have financial self-sufficiency. This would make the whole recovery process easier for them. Implementing this policy will not solve all the

challenges that these victims face, but it's a start. This website would encourage the victims to take action knowing that there is a solution.

Conclusion

With this platform, we enable women and men to know more about their potential and help them raise their voice for themselves. With Covid-19 ravaging the economy, such crises as domestic violence are set to become much more frequent.[8] Promotion of this scheme will raise greater awareness of the problem in our society. Supporting this marginalized group would be highly beneficial.

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"THE GENDER EMPLOYMENT GAP IN ALBANIA: HOW TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES THROUGH CHILD CARE SUBSIDIES"

It has been almost one year since the first cases of COVID-19. In a short time, the governments around the world mobilized all their resources to cope with the pandemic and to break the cycle of the COVID-19 transmission. While most people's lives and work have been negatively affected by the crisis, in Albania women's jobs and livelihoods are more vulnerable because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to pre-existing gender inequalities, women are more likely to lose their job comparing to men because of the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. Factors such as child care due to mobility restrictions and school closure may take an important part in explaining the vulnerability of women's jobs. Therefore, there is an urgent need to prevent widening gender inequalities through a strategic plan.

The government and stakeholders in Albania have to tackle this challenge by subsiding child care. This policy will not only serve to alleviate the situation created by the pandemic but will also encourage Albanian women to join the labour market. As a result, the gender inequality gap regarding employment is expected to narrow within a few years.

Problem Statement

The Coronavirus outbreak turned out to be a multidimensional crisis. While it started as a health shock, it has spread with adverse effects on the economy, education and gender equality. Evidence on the impact of the pandemic show that the gender gap in employment will amplify because women are being hit hardest by the emergency situation. Albania is no exception to this global concern. According to UN Women Albania, the livelihood of women is affected disproportionately compared with the livelihood of men.[1]

The Rapid Gender Assessment revealed that 3 out of 4 women in our country experienced increased unpaid care and domestic work during the lockdown period; 46% of women and 67% of men received help from the partner; 51% of women and 27% of men worked remotely. The results of the survey showed that men faced a greater risk of unemployment (17%) compared to women (12%), due to the large percentage of men employed in the worst-hit sectors from the restrictions. However, due to informality, women working in informal employment were not included in the official data. Despite the lack of data, this category makes up a large number of informal workers who have lost their jobs. Therefore, the gender inequalities related to employment deepened further during the pandemic.[2]

Exploring the root causes of the gender gap in employment during the pandemic requires special attention, especially by the stakeholders. The employment rate in Albania for the population aged 15-64 is 68.2 % for men and 54.4% for women.[3] Because of existing gender inequalities women are more vulnerable to COVID-19 related economic and financial effects.

Since the beginning of the pandemic in our country, the government implemented nationwide school closures as a measure to prevent further contagion, therefore caregiving responsibilities

disproportionately fall on women. Also, the nature of work in Albania remains significantly gender-specific. Women have more than the average share of employment in three of the most affected sectors by the pandemic (tourism, gastronomy, and industries), as measured at the national level.[4] This phenomenon has led to women's workforce progress backward.

The socio-economic consequences of the disease caused by the novel coronavirus have a global impact on people's everyday life and welfare. Regarding unemployment, the International Labour Organization estimated that in the second quarter of 2020, COVID-19 eliminated 495 million full-time jobs globally.[5] Albania is no exception to this concern, due to the economic impact of the pandemic.

Unlike previous economic and employment crises, the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting women the hardest. This applies to both formal and informal sectors. Women in developing countries including Albania, do most unpaid care work within the home.[6] Despite progress, women continue to bear a heavier load than men in children care due to the lack of help from the partner, which is reflected in the data extracted from the Rapid Gender Assessment: 46% of women and 67% of men received help from the partner.

Policy Options

Gender equality is a fundamental right recognized by the European Union and also a condition to be met by the Western Balkan countries, including Albania, which aspires to join the EU. Therefore, as part of its preparation for an EU future, in recent years Albania has taken steps to advance women's rights regarding employment. Regional Directorates and Local Employment Offices implemented a National Employment Program with a focus on reducing the gender gap in employment, through the employment of girls and women.[7]

In addition to state initiatives, in September 2015 the Albanian government adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) alongside all other Member States of the United Nations. This program aimed to improve the status of women in the labour market, by valuing gender equality as a condition to achieve sustainable development.

Although progress has been noted, these policies have not resulted in maximum efficiency. The National Employment Program has not been comprehensive, as only a certain category has benefited from this initiative, including girls and women with vocational education and excluding farmers, migrant and irregular migrant women, as well as the graduated women. On the other hand, the UNDP Program employs a very small number of women ranging from 10 to 100 per year, which excludes most of those who are in need.

Women are facing a double burden because of their work and family obligations. There is a lack of evidence that child care has entered the public policy agenda in Albania. According to a study in 2010, having children in Albania harms women's role and wages in the labour market.[8] Government should consider adopting a new policy which accounts for women's unique needs. A powerful mechanism to reduce gender inequalities, which will show the results shortly, is the child care subsidy.

The main argument in favour of this proposal is that it should help low and middle income Albanian mothers to become economically self-sufficient in the future. Another encouraging fact is that a child care subsidy reform will allow women to invest in their potential by improving their skills and by engaging in education and training activities, which will help them to ensure livelihood and wellbeing in the long term. Improving the state's child care system needs attention from policymakers because it not only contributes to improving the quality of life of children but also has an important role in economic development.[9]

Evidence suggests that child care subsidies can contribute to stability for both children and parents. Since child care is becoming a barrier to work especially for mothers who take on unpaid caregiving responsibilities when their family cannot afford child care or even quit the job, the beneficiaries of child care subsidy will be all the Albanian women in the maternal age from low and middle income families which constitute 85% of the population in Albania.[10]

Recommendations

Before implementing this policy, the Albanian government has to identify the instruments available, to encourage women's employment. To achieve the goal, accessibility and affordability are very important to ensure that no one is left behind. Therefore, policymakers should have a special focus on installing a fair system that will not create new inequalities.

The most challenging part is to create a strategy which will shorten the waiting time for subsidy approval. This can happen if the state grants temporary eligibility to applicants, while their application is under review. Additionally, the reimbursement should be based on the type of care and children's age. Considering the big need for care during non-traditional hours, tiered reimbursement may result in effective tool. According to the findings, countries with higher availability of affordable childcare have high maternal labour force participation rates, however, a good budget management may lead to the implementation of this package.11

Subsidizing childcare to ensure social justice, will improve health and welfare if is fully implemented and fully funded. This policy aims to prevent widening the gap of inequalities regarding women and men and also tends to promote the entry of women into the labour market. Subsidized child care should be considered as the lifeline to healthy children, economic security and women's independence.

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"PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE ONES DURING THE PANDEMIC"

From the beginning of the pandemic until today, we can see a fall in all areas of people's activity. Many businesses did not need workers during the pandemic and as a result, a lot of workers lost the jobs. However, this is not the central problem that people face today. In addition to the critical financial situation that directly affects all other spheres of life, many people during the pandemic are psychologically affected. The current situation is only getting worse and today we face many changes in society. We are not used to what is happening to the world today.

Everyone in society is currently thinking about the end of the pandemic, yet no one has the right solution because the media is overcrowded with information of how the pandemic is taking over the world and no one is motivated to give a solution. To support the vulnerable persons, the government must lower the taxes, give financial support to the local businesses, and reduce unnecessary expenses.

Problem Statement

Most of the people affected by the Coronavirus are the workers, elderly people, underage, minority communities, migrants, prisoners, sex workers, drug users, poor people, people with disabilities, etc. At this point, the citizens who faced financial instability before the pandemic like sex workers, people who live in poverty, the elderly, etc. are affected even more because the state institutions are not able to provide full support. The affected groups are also the students who are unable to find a job, nor to finish their studies properly.

Policy Options

Students will receive partial reimbursement of university tuition fees and IT courses. A lot of students lack financial support. Even those students who are financially stable were barely able to fund a semester. Students need to buy books and they are expensive. Many of the students who come from poor families decided not to attend university this year. Consequently, this situation increased unemployment because the same students are searching for jobs and they are unable to get one because they do not have a degree.

Our government decided to raise the prices of medical supplies and hygiene products. People were not ready for these changes. At the moment, we have great medical students who are capable to work as nurses and as a result, ensure the same job in the future. Because of the high prices, poor families, the elderly, minority communities, etc. cannot buy medical supplies or other essential products. Given that fact, the number of infected people can double because of their financial incapability to buy essential medical supplies to protect themselves.

Vulnerable households received financial support through existing social schemes and cash vouchers, yet it was not enough. Moreover, people also received a certain amount of money to buy essential products; however, this was not sufficient. Therefore, people started to sell their cash vouchers. Others managed to save money and buy cheaper nutrition products. Most of the people received the cash vouchers; nevertheless, many poor families and people from Roma community did not get any financial help.

The government is unable to fully protect the vulnerable persons. Given that most people do not comprehend the true risks of the Covid-19, the government should organize a better plan to manage this challenge.

Besides, the hospitals are crowded with people treating the Covid-19. This led to a reduction of the other medical services. Therefore, healthcare institutions must change this policy. They need a well-thought strategy to provide medical services for all people in need, not only for those with Covid-19.

Recommendations

Hygiene products must be cheaper. Thus, people could buy them without financial burden. Thus, people can buy them more easily and protect themselves from the virus.

We need to engage the graduated medical students to support the poor families. As a result, the poor will save money and avoid the risk of infection by visiting the hospitals.

The elderly need to stay in quarantine in order to protect themselves from the virus. The young students should be available to buy them daily groceries and other material products they need.

There should be a centre outside of the coronavirus zone where people with other illnesses can be checked by a doctor 24/7.

Conclusion

Several important things should be taken into consideration during this pandemic, and the most important thing is the effort to save as many lives as possible because every life matters. The governments should work hard to protect people.

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"CHANGING THE WAY WE AGE"

High rates of mortality, birth rates decline, and the aging of the population are serious problems in Montenegro and European Union. The growth of the elderly population is often a challenge for public finances, pensions, and the healthcare system mechanisms. For this reason, amending and implementing new socio-economic policies is essential

According to Eurostat data in the European Union in 2019, the elderly comprised around 20.3% of the total population, compared to 2018 which represents an increase of 0.3%, and compared to 2009 an increase of 2.9%. (Eurostat, 2020) The Covid-19 pandemic situation showed the vulnerability of the old people and the need for their intensive care.

In Montenegro, it is necessary to initiate policies that promote maximal care for the elderly. It is important to increase employment and boost daily activities to improve their health through physical activities. The research paper titled "Composite indices on the example of Active Aging Index in Montenegro" based on European Quality of Life survey, Labour force survey, European Survey of Income and Living Conditions found that the care for the elderly is at a very low point in Montenegro (Skrijelj, 2020, p. 25-60).

Problem Statement

According to a UN report "The impact of Covid-19 on older persons", Covid-19 caused fear and suffering for the old population across the globe. (UN, 2020, p. 2) It is necessary to repair the consequences of the spread of Covid-19, which caused large mortality of the elderly population. Eventually, it should be beard in mind that countries such as Netherlands, Finland, Germany, etc. which embrace active aging culture are having lower Covid -9 mortality rates compared to the Western Balkan.

In Montenegro, this problem should be highly positioned on the agenda of decision-makers, especially due to the fact that Covid-19 mortality rate was the third highest in Western Balkan (Radio Free Europe, 2020) as well as the fact that as many as 25% of the total population is aged 55 and over, according to the 2011 census (Statistical office of Montenegro, 2012).

Furthermore, Montenegro has not yet created a strategy that focuses strictly on active aging. In this regard, creating a National Strategic Policy for Active Aging will improve the quality of life of older citizens and give base through calculating Active Aging to monitor progress.

Policy Options

Currently, there is a strategy in Montenegro that aims to improve the social protection of the elderly and enhance the quality of life and employment. However, the main problem is that this strategy is not adequately formulated to make its results measurable. Implementation of an Active Aging Policy should be directly focused and built on the results of the Active Aging Index. This index serves as a tool to measure the untapped potential of the elderly population for active and healthy aging, as well to measure the level to which older people live independent lives, participate in socio-economic reality and the capacity of society for active aging (UNECE, 2019 p.5).

Regarding the calculation of Active Aging Index for development of strategic policies of active aging, it is worth mentioning the good practices of Malta and Poland. Malta has participated in all

four waves (2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016) of calculating the Active Aging Index in the countries of the European Union and is one of the countries that have made significant progress in active aging. For the period from 2010 to 2016, Malta's Active Aging Index increased by 7.4, while in Europe it increased on average by 2.1, i.e. from 33.6 in 2010 to the last measured average value in 2016, which is 35.7 (UNECE, 2019).

Malta has recognized the importance of active aging and all aspects of active aging - the active participation of older workers and older people in employment, participation in the society and healthy aging and has positioned them high at the level of national policy. The result was the creation of Malta's strategic social policy, which is based on a multidimensional concept and fundamentally strives for more just society based on principles of social justice. This social policy calls for three key values: equal respect, equal opportunities, and a comparable standard of living between different generations. Its goal is to transform the structure and functioning of society into a "society for all ages" that is flexible and responsive to the needs and opportunities of all. In order to update these policies in a timely manner in accordance with the needs and wishes of the elderly population, a final emphasis on empowerment has been given (National Strategy of active aging 2014-2020, 2013).

Also, the Polish Government managed to design and promote programs to boost the contribution and potential of older people; this was directly linked to the country's low AAI score. In addition, Poland's 16 voivodships (the regional governments) are responsible for many aspects of the various policies on seniors and active ageing (European Commission, 2016).

Eventually, adopting the same approach in Montenegro would be beneficial to the elderly population. The field of public finances, the healthcare system, and the general standards of living would have positive change.

Recommendations

The results and general calculation of the Active Aging Index should represent the basis and key guidelines while formulating the National Strategic Policy for Active Aging in Montenegro, whose focus should be in line with the Maltese approach to further increase older people's participation in the labour market, increase social inclusion and capacity building, enhance better independent living of the older population through social inclusion mechanisms and promotion of the application of lifelong learning for older workers, improved working conditions and modernization of the organization of work to better meet the needs of older workers and effectively use their expertise (Formosa, 2013).

Moreover, at the societal level, it may be fostered through campaigns to promote active aging aimed at changing perceptions of the potential contribution of older workers and promoting a change in public opinion through educational campaigns.

Conclusion

Apart from the labour market, this policy introduces measures that will improve the life and health conditions of the older population. This approach will ensure practical solutions in future crises also. In Montenegro, such an approach would have a positive impact on the growth of employment and social inclusion of the elderly population. Therefore, these policies would ease the public finances in general, and the elderly population would have an active and productive daily.

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"IMPROVING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE ELDERLY THROUGH DIGITALIZATION"

The Covid-19 pandemic situation has caused an increase in the number of people with mental health issues. The preventive measures against Covid-19 such as social distancing, sanitary measures, awareness posters and the obligatory wearing of masks, proved to be ineffective and with consequences to mental health.

These measures have made us feel more anxious, stressed and lonely, and have had a greater impact on vulnerable people, which the Serbian government has done little to address. This is a particular problem for the elderly, as they are more vulnerable to bereavement and a drop in socio-economic status with retirement, resulting in isolation, loneliness and psychological distress, not to mention how the COVID-19 virus and social distancing measures[3] compound these issues.

To tackle this issue, we propose a pilot program in which voluntary elderly participants receive tablets containing necessary apps, as well as a pre-recorded virtual assistant on how to use these apps, provided by the government. This would address the primary issue of mental health, whilst tackling the secondary issue, the lack of digital literacy amongst the elderly population. We believe this will improve an array of health issues, both mental and physical, save costs in the long run and improve the social environment, aligning the country with the EU.

Worryingly, little attention was given to the mental wellbeing of the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia. The policies implemented by the government since the COVID-19 pandemic consisted of extreme social distancing measures for the elderly such as a permanent lockdown,[4] as well as lack of visits of close relatives. Since the beginning of lockdown, an independent helpline was created on March 17th, 2020 to help the people cope with their mental health.

Based on the currently available data in Serbia, 3556 calls were made to the 'National Line for psychosocial support during COVID-19 epidemic in Serbia' between April and May. The highest percentage of users at 32.8% called because of anxiety and feelings of tension due to the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating a strong desire to receive mental health support[5]. Furthermore, according to the demographics, the largest percentage of callers were between ages 61-80 at 37.6%[5], implying that the people in most needs of psychological support were the elderly.

The elderly are experiencing physical distancing, but this does not mean they have to experience social distancing. Elderly people can benefit significantly from the use of technology to improve their sociability and mental health. In Serbia, between 22nd June and 22nd September, 44.7% of persons aged 65-74 used a computer[6] and 50.3% of the same age group used the internet[6]. This is significantly lower than any other age category, indicating the lack of access to technology and low level of digital literacy amongst the elderly population. Furthermore, with an aging population of 19% in 2019[7], a 5% increase in the past 10 years, and Serbia experiencing a decrease in the younger population[8], digital literacy of the elderly should be of paramount importance to the government.

Although COVID 19 is affecting everyone, the digitalized younger generation is more adaptable to lifestyle changes introduced by the pandemic. Many have not been able to see their close relatives and friends. Elderly people lack digital literacy, missing the benefits of technology. The emergence of digitalization has allowed us to feel and stay connected, despite not physically being together. Younger generations know how to make video calls, pay bills online and have products delivered to their doorsteps. They know how to use search engines, obtain information, and entertain

themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, it is difficult to imagine not having access to a mobile phone or a computer, or not knowing how to use them. This is what most of the elderly population is experiencing, as some do not have a person to show them how to use a computer or a mobile phone to its full advantage.

During this pandemic, it poses a risk to go to the supermarket. The risk for severe illness with COVID-19 increases with age, with older adults being at the highest risk[9]. If the elderly do not have someone to run errands for them, they have to do it themselves. The policies implemented in the past were strict physical distancing and help from volunteers that were in charge of delivering items the elderly needed at that time. It is uncertain where this pandemic will take us and when all of this will end, but we need to make sure that all parts of our society stay not only physically well but also mentally well. Digitalization can help us with that.

Existing policies are standard social distancing measures represent an improvement in relation to the initial forced measures. However, this is a minimal approach implemented by the government with an apparent overlooking of mental health. With the likelihood of future forced lockdowns, we need to ensure that the elderly are prepared to deal with not only their physical health but also their mental health, which is of equal importance[10]. During COVID-19, after a couple of weeks, the measures were lifted to allow a maximum one hour walk two to three times a week. This was the only measure aimed at the mental health of the elderly. Furthermore, the grocery stores were open for them between hours 4 am – 7am[11] aimed to separate them from the rest of the population thus decreasing the chance of getting sick. Whilst this was beneficial for their physical health, again, this was another measure disregarding the mental health.

Our proposed policy would be performed as a pilot program. This program would be conducted in a chosen municipality, for example, “Savski Venac”. To be more precise, the Serbian government and the “Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy” would collaborate with the municipality ‘Savski Venac’ to distribute smart tablets to voluntary elderly participants of the program. These smart tablets would contain different applications helpful for the elderly population. Necessary applications such as those used for shopping, online banking, and online video applications would be included. Besides, a pre-recorded virtual assistant would be installed to help the elderly learn how to navigate, manage and use these applications. For example, if they wanted to call people they know, a simple click on any of the pre-installed video calling applications would present a virtual guide, taking them through the steps of making a call.

Reasons for choosing smart tablets are simple. They are compact, versatile and less expensive comparing to computers. In comparison to mobile phones, a smart tablet provides easier reading due to large text, icons and font, which elderly people would find useful. These tablets would come with an internet connection through collaboration with providers, such as Telenor or MTS. This internet connection would only be accessed through the provided tablets. Through the utilisation of these tablets, the elderly would be able to improve their digital literacy and utilize the benefits that digitalization has to offer.

Improvements in the digital literacy of the elderly have been evident in other countries such as Canada with the ‘ABC Internet Matters’[12] in collaboration with the ‘Youth Empowering Parents’, as well as ‘Seniors Go Digital’[13] in Singapore. Both programs emphasize the digital literacy skills of the elderly through workshops, resource books, and online material. They have proven benefits to the elderly such as reduced social isolation, improved digital literacy and a reduction in the generational gap[14]. Further, although not specifically directed towards the elderly, in response to COVID-19, the ‘Youth Empowering Parents’ distributed tablets to students in need to assist them with eLearning[15], indicating that tablets are an effective device for online learning during this time. Both the ‘ABC Internet Matters’ in collaboration with the ‘Youth Empowering Parents’ and the ‘Seniors Go Digital’ are supported through funding by their respective governments.

Concerning the implementation of our proposed pilot program, physical distancing of the elderly to protect their physical health would remain, but social distancing would no longer be an issue; they will be connected to a world they have struggled to keep up with. Moreover, the pilot program has the potential to adapt by including further applications such as broadcasting of theatre plays and

virtual museum tour guides. Potentially, we could have future lockdowns. On top of that, we could have future viruses. By ensuring the elderly are prepared for such scenarios, we will not make the same mistake twice.

In addition to the benefits during the current pandemic, it would improve the future social environment of the elderly population. Our community will flourish, as we will be able to communicate with our elderly relatives more consistently and without hassle, which has been a drawback in the past to staying in touch with them. Furthermore, with the government seeking entry into the EU, expanding the existing digital orientation will be in line with the EU's 'Digital Europe' program, which starts on January 1, 2021[16]. Finally, from a financial perspective, we believe the benefits of improving the social environment and the citizens' mental health being at the focus of the government outweighs the initial cost of the pilot program, as an estimated $925 billion attributable to depression and anxiety disorders is lost every year[17].

We suggest conducting the pilot program by using data the municipality already has on citizens to randomly select and call those who belong to the elderly population (65+). Another way could be through a survey, in which we would receive confirmation of those who would be willing to participate in the program. A third option we have that would be effective in spreading awareness of the program would be to put up posters in the entrances of apartment complexes in the selected municipality.

We are becoming more aware as a society of the consequences mental health problems could have. Yet despite the growing awareness, there are still steps to be made. The benefit of mental healthcare is crucial for general well-being. Furthermore, technological progress is shaping the world, particularly due to the COVID-19 situation which shifted the majority of activities online.

Our pilot program would be beneficial to Serbia in many ways. It would benefit the aging population in Serbia, leading to social improvements which would help Serbia stand amongst other countries in terms of commitment to social responsibility, and move Serbia forward in its pursuit of joining the EU. Certain people need our support to keep up with this fast-paced change. Elderly people embody so many of the fundamental values in our society. It is only correct that we look after those who have looked after us for so many years.

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“CITIZENS’ EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RISK COMMUNICATION”

After the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus, fake news began to spread tremendously causing panic, hysteria and anxiety

Communication about risk which is not science-based and built on trust could result in additional inefficiencies and collateral damage in the current pandemic. It can also result in a long-term damage and influence our attitudes in a future crisis. With a goal of better communication of the experts, executives and the public, aiming to make citizens well-informed and empowered, the author proposes an establishment of research and executive body composed of a multidisciplinary expert team in charge of (i) communication of risks and measures with the public through the mass media and (ii) direct risk communication and better connection with local communities with special emphasis on vulnerable groups consisting of women, minorities, people with mental disabilities, rural and low socioeconomic status communities.

Characteristics of the first wave in mid-March of the unknown virus caused strict measures and lockdowns, while peculiar sensationalist reporting caused anxiety in the population.

Studies have found that media exposure about the pandemic has a negative effect on mental health, making the population more likely to suffer from depression or anxiety (Djukanovic and Injac, 2020; Huang and Zhao, 2020). The risk perception of the population, shaped by different media was of particular concern. Study of the influence of media on risk perception (Djukanovic and Injac, 2020) found that estimation of severity (mortality rate) of Coronavirus decease in the population had a bimodal distribution, with one group estimating mortality ranging from 1% to 10%, and other group estimating it around even 40-50% at the time!

Among others, important factors shaping that unrealistically high perception of risk were the level of education, anxiety, and media exposure about COVID-19. The cause of this can be found in the frequency and framing of the information in the media. Another characteristic of this period have been the strict measures with entire weekend lockdowns in Serbia, and bans of two or more people being on the street together in Montenegro which resulted in numerous arrests.

Subsequently, after “flattening the curve” both countries suddenly called off the measures organizing elections, celebrations, protests about elections, etc. Rolling lockdown effect (Shammi, 2020), that the second wave of the virus is more severe than the first after the sudden cancellation of the measures can be arguably attributed to inconsistent and poorly thought-out policies and communication from the government and the experts, resulting in a lack of trust and irrational behaviour of the citizens. After strict measures and sensationalist media narrative that provoked panic and anxiety, the public has reached fatigue, scepticism, and indifference about the virus. Arbitrary and inconsistent measures that are not respected by the population may have caused the second more severe wave of the virus in Serbia and Montenegro.

Especially vulnerable groups were struck by this kind of policies and media communication. Studies found that minorities groups and low socioeconomic communities have been especially struck by the pandemic (Ambrosi, 2020). According to the cultural hypothesis (Wildavsky and Dake, 1990) different cultures and communities have different approaches to risk perceptions.

The media has not yet put the effort into communicating messages about COVID-19 risk with the representation of cultures of minorities and acknowledging the importance of local knowledge.

Educating and communicating risk and measures on a local level among low economic status citizens and rural communities of the minorities has also been neglected. Communities that do not have access to mass media had little information about the outbreak. It has also been found that women tend to have a higher score on state a of anxiety during the pandemic (Djukanovic and Injac, 2020). Long lockdowns especially are problematic for victims of domestic violence, making them trapped with their abuser.

Harrari (2020) stated that the choices we make in this pandemic between repression and citizens' empowerment will have consequences not only on dealing with this crisis, but also on our way of life and all the future crises to come.

Communication that is not in the function of informing the public, but in the function of gaining publicity, addressing this pandemic will not only be inefficient in terms of complying with measures, such as wearing a mask or social distancing, but will also cause problems with its finalization, in the form of the vaccine which is on the horizon.

Scientific approach on the risk communication has been left on purely academic and theoretical grounds, without more serious practical application of the findings, except some lonely examples like Finland, Bangladesh, etc. (Lohiniva, Sane, Sibenberg, Puumalainen and Salminen, 2020; Shammi, 2020). Despite the rising number of research papers, risk communication is still rather arbitrary and inconsistent and not based on scientific evidence, leaving findings of psychologists and other experts that could optimize communication to achieve efficiency and solidarity unapplied and unknown to anybody except the academic community and perhaps some curious reader.

To summarize, the current approach is failing on two fronts: (i) poorly organized communication through media, which does not take into consideration cognitive, psychological and culturally specific factors, and (ii) inconsistent, poorly complied measures and lockdowns. The consequence is the population with a lack of solidarity and trust. Medical media campaigns can be categorized into two frames: threat and efficacy (Chang, 2011).

The threat frame carries the information about the severity and negative consequences, while the efficacy frame contains the information of what to do to avoid or fight the threat. Efficacy and mixed frame make about only 20% of all the information in the news (Chang, 2011). To fight the threat, we want the public to be educated about what should they do, we do not want them to be anxious, scared, and in a state of panic.

Periodic and inconsistent lockdowns and measures had resulted in fighting the first wave, but as soon as they were withdrawn, a second more severe wave occurred. Making drastic changes in public lifestyle is hard enough, people tend to stick to their routine and status quo; inducing and then withdrawing drastic changes periodically can have only one result. This result we are witnessing right now.

Taking failures of the current approach into account, the author proposes to initiate the establishment of a research-based and executive body composed of a multidisciplinary expert team in charge of: (i) communication of risks and measures with the public through the mass media and (ii) direct risk communication and better connection with local communities with special emphasis on vulnerable groups consisting of women, minorities, people with mental disabilities, rural and low socioeconomic status communities. The goal is to form a long-term strategy for consistent and efficient measures which will be communicated by the experts and the executives to the public, with maximum consideration for scientific evidence and research. The result is the system that is creating empowered and well-informed citizens. We can see a similar example of South Korea, which was one of the most successful countries in the world in dealing with the first wave. Their approach relied on the solidarity and consciousness of the public. Keeping the citizens well-informed, with mass testing, this country did not suffer from the mass panic and extreme restrictive measures (Harrari, 2020).

While mass media can be utilized to inform the majority of the public efficiently, it fails to take into consideration the minorities and rural communities. That is why we suggest empowering the

communities on the local level, with a better connection of the communities to the institutions and the experts. In that regard, an experimental study has shown that direct interpersonal communication with the people living in rural communities in Nigeria has proven significantly efficient in raising consciousness and knowledge about COVID-19 (Ezeah, Ogechi, Ohia and Celestine, 2020).

The author proposes taking into consideration specific differences in vulnerable groups including minorities, people with mental disabilities, rural communities, and applying principle of direct interpersonal communication through educated and trained experts in the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, social work, etc. Those experts would be in charge of communication about efficacy, threat, and raising awareness and knowledge, but also serving as a better connection between vulnerable groups and the medical institutions. They would be taking care of both the physical and mental health of the groups. Special emphasis should be on distributing means of protection against COVID-19 to vulnerable groups, such as face masks and sanitizers, and educating them about the way and importance of using them. Needless to say, the whole process must be maintained with the highest compliance with the measures against COVID-19.

The body in charge of risk communication would have a dual structure, with research and executive team. The multidisciplinary research team would provide recommendations and strategies based on scientific evidence, previous theories, and research they would conduct about public opinions, risk perception, mental health, and well-being. The executive team would be in charge to think and organize the communication, which would be through mass media and a direct interpersonal approach. The teams would rely on collaboration between medical experts, psychologists, journalists, social workers, etc.

Firstly, taking into consideration the scientific evidence about the importance of information framing and the way it is communicated, medical experts, epidemiologists, and journalists will revise an optimal mass media strategy for risk communication together with the research team, with emphasis on research regarding human cognition, the ratio of threat and efficacy frames, and cultural representation of the different groups in risk messages. Secondly, analysis of discourse and content on social media by the research team should identify disinformation and conspiracy theories circulating on social networks, and instead of censorship, official social media profiles of experts and institutions led by the executive team would address the false information with arguments and correct information, educating the public in the process. Thirdly, social workers and representatives from other professions from the executive team would be in charge of covering supplies and direct interpersonal communication with local communities, with emphasis on rural and low socio-economic status communities. Better connection between communities will improve their access to health institutions, raise knowledge and awareness about the threat, maintain mental well-being and empower citizens and local communities in fighting Coronavirus disease.

Serbia and Montenegro could focus on forming these teams of experts and journalists who have shown to have the trust of the public. The cooperation of medical, social workers and the media would create the optimal strategy for the solidarity we need during crisis. If that would be the general strategy for risk communication with the population, the other aspect aimed at minority and risk groups at the local level could provide the specific attention that they need.

Countries need to better understand the problems and specific needs of those groups in dealing with the pandemic. The team of experts should do field work and various research techniques such as focus group interviews, to directly get to know the important needs of risk groups.

The author proposes such a solution based on scientific evidence and ethical belief that well informed and empowered citizen represent the basis not only for fighting the crisis, but also the grounds of prosperity in the society. For consistent and efficient measures, we need a long-term strategy, solidarity and trust of the population. How we approach this crisis now will not only be the question of the current situation and collateral damage that might be made, but will also be the question of the vaccination, “the future crisis and the world that will await us after this pandemic” (Harrari, 2020).

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"CLINICAL APPOINTMENT SCHEDULE AND TELEHEALTH SERVICES AS NEW APPROACHES TO EASE THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM DURING PANDEMIC TIME"

The COVID-19 pandemic has put some health systems under immense pressure and stretched others beyond their capacity. The lockdown in particular has exposed weaknesses in almost all health care systems, in countries both rich and poor. Amid the chaos and the rising human toll, healthcare systems are undergoing fragmentation in many severely affected countries

The weak healthcare system led to different problems, which consequently resulted from the low budget, poor management strategies and a lot of other factors. The heavy workload and the possibility of infection with Covid-19 complicate further the normal flow of the health system and the services provided by them.Concurrently, a lot of patients who are not infected with the virus require routine medical care.

Problem Statement

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on healthcare services throughout the world. Health care systems tried to reduce non-essential activity and to increase inpatient and emergency care capacity to compensate for the large numbers of patients who would require hospitalization and respiratory support. Different countries reported that hospitals are operating at less than 50 percent capacity. Hospitals purposefully curtailed elective surgery and other noncritical medical services. Nonetheless, hospitals have also reported puzzling declines in admissions for acute medical illness, including stroke and acute myocardial infarction.

Policy Options

During the Covid-19 pandemic, healthcare services prioritized infected people more. We can initiate several actions to improve healthcare services and provide equal treatment for Covid-19 positive patients, and patients with other medical needs. To ensure the treatment for patients who need medical care other than Covid-19, a booking management system needs to be effective. All the patients who need medical care should make an early appointment at the clinics they tend to visit. On the other hand, it would be easier to manage urgent cases.

This would prevent large gatherings of people in the corridors and would be in coordination with the rules of social distance. Implementation of telehealth would minimize the risk for other patients to get the Covid-19. Consequently, with lower rates of infected people the healthcare system would improve, hospitals would not be overloaded, and would provide care to a wider range of patients.

Recommendations

Policy recommendations that would have an impact on regulation of continuities for treating the patients that are not infected are:

- The government must act responsibly educating the public, by providing information to the public, health sector on prevention and control practices.

- After positive test results of COVID-19, quarantine and social distancing must be aggressively implemented.
- To reduce the risk of infection and to practice social distancing we recommend the use of Telemedicine.
- Ensure hand hygiene (all people entering exiting facilities should wash hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer with 60% alcohol), appropriate use of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), and regular cleaning and disinfection, especially of frequently touched surfaces and shared objects.
- Limit number of visitors who may accompany patient to clinic or community-based services.
- Consider altering and repurposing clinic space or designating certain facilities for COVID-19 care while others are designated for essential non-COVID-19 services.
- Minimize patient contacts with health care workers and other patients to reduce risk of exposure or infection.
- Prolong time between appointments for stable, healthy patients.
- Use telemedicine visits.
- Provide staggered appointments to reduce the number of people in waiting areas and implement and enforce an appointment scheduling system to decongest clinics.

Conclusion

The human rights to have access to health care services and treatments are being violated. We should create different policies, strategies, and actions to better cope with emergencies and to also provide better health care services.

Managing the situation through the implementation of these policies would have a very positive impact on the health system. “Resurrection” of health care services would improve the quality of patient-centred care while respecting the rights and values that every human being deserves.

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"YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AS A WAY OUT"

The Covid-19 pandemic situation is causing negative consequences throughout all countries in the world. Consequently, the prevailing situation exposed serious deficiencies in many levels of social life. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in the field of public health, we are witnessing a shortage of medical staff. The healthcare system is responding to all the technical requirements unsuccessfully, it is not providing the essential care for patients with COVID-19, and regular patients also who are not touched yet by COVID-19. Conclusively, the institutions are failing to manage the public healthcare system

We bring into focus the shortage of medical and non-medical staff in hospitals, medical clinics, and healthcare institutions. This shortage is not only caused by the COVID-19 pandemic but rather it is already a long-existing problem that has worsened.

As we already know, Bosnia and Herzegovina is experiencing brain-drain. Because of the high rates of unemployment, young people are fleeing the country seeking jobs in European countries, and most of them have medical degrees. Acknowledging that fact, we can see that the medical staff can't handle all the situations and tasks they have to fulfil. We recommend a strategic engagement of high-school and university students and unemployed people, as a support for hospitals and health care centres.

Problem Statement

The awareness that the healthcare system is weak in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not make institutions take concrete steps to solve the issue. The outbreak of COVID-19 showed the real condition of our healthcare system. We realized that the problems in the healthcare system existed for many years before the situation with COVID-19, which has only confirmed such state of play, not only in healthcare system but also in economic and educational systems as well.

From the first COVID-19 case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we knew we were going to encounter much bigger problems in terms of the responsiveness of our healthcare system. First, our hospitals and healthcare institutions lack a well-defined plan for detecting, registering, and maintaining the databases of elderly patients, new COVID-19 cases, particular care for elderly and disabled people, and those patients in financial need. Second, there is not enough staff who will be able to care for all those in need. Unfortunately, there is no cohesive and strategic cooperation plan established between the hospitals, state institutions, private companies and foreign partners.

As the number of new cases increases, the decisions about testing people, drug prescription, hospitalization, intensive care, medical equipment distribution and even the processes of disinfection are being done without a well-thought plan. This disregard has led to unintentional neglect of the patients who do not have COVID-19 and induced more stress for the medical workers.

Policy options

In the recent years, we have seen growth of volunteering individuals and NGOs all over Bosnia and Herzegovina. There were numerous volunteers during the pandemic who have been dedicatedly helping through various types of work. However, we witness two major issues: these volunteers are devoting their time, and risk getting the virus by helping the most vulnerable citizens. Yet, they do not benefit any financial support. On the other hand, citizens are struggling with job losses. A lot

of students are not optimistic about their future employment and do not have the opportunity for practical engagement and future career preparation.

We propose a policy that harmonizes the cooperation between institutions that are in charge of the healthcare and education system. The policy suggests that relevant institutions should consider the engagement of all students of medicine in supporting the medical staff during pandemic emergencies. As a result, the same students can apply these experiences to easily access work in the future.

This puts forward more benefits. First, all the medical staff shortages will be filled. Second, assistance for families in need will be greater. Third, the hospitals will have the capacity to treat all the people in need of medical care equally. Thus, this policy excludes the prioritization of Covid-19 patients only.

Recommendations

The policy will have significant influence. The implementation of this policy would encourage young people to contribute to their country whenever necessary. The policy includes:

- The requirement that all the relevant institutions, hospitals, and NGOs should cooperate to manage the collection and preparation of the database for Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 patients, the elderly, persons with disabilities who need constant medical care, etc. Invitation of all unemployed medical students to apply for engagement in this project.

- Registration of the applicants includes:
  – Their employment status.
  – Overall financial situation of their families.
  – A university degree.
  – The present level of education.
  – A CV or resume that displays the past experiences and soft-skills.

- Mobilization and work force distribution

- Providing a financial support for all the participants in the project

- Recording the volunteering hours as working hours and bonus points in a “job booklet”

- The students who are already employed will have the opportunity to support through volunteering. Even though they will not be paid for the working hours, they will have the job booklet, as an evidence for contribution to the country in time of emergencies.

Conclusion

The financial support process can be divided into two stages. The first stage may start with donations from local NGOs and the Red Cross. The second stage may continue with support from the governmental budget with the help of foreign partners.

The Covid-19 situation shed light on many essential problems in our country that need to be tackled with a serious approach and commitment. On the other hand, the situation showed us the problems we need to address.
Our policy can make a social impact; not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but in other countries as well. The benefit of this policy is comprehensive and will solve many actual issues. Also, it will have a positive impact on the future.

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"EMPATECH - TECHNOLOGICAL EMPATHY: ENSURING THAT EVERY CHILD HAS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY TO ATTEND ONLINE CLASSES"

Education is a fundamental factor of development. Unfortunately, not everyone can afford it. Globally, 31% of all children cannot access online classes (UNICEF, 2020), and since the majority of countries do not legally regulate the online education system, many of them are left behind. Likewise, in Serbia, he technical issues and the lack of technological support are often cited as a problem, as listed in UNICEF's research (2020) – as well as smaller income than before the first wave of the virus spread

Furthermore, after the outbreak of the Covid-19, many experienced some kind of loss; either the loss of close relatives, friends or jobs. Anxiety became a daily issue. This will have a negative impact on children's education and future. One way to address this issue is to transform the e-waste into repaired and updated functioning devices, then supply those in need. This process would engage several volunteers to work on the devices, which would contribute positively to the environmental pollution also. The category which would benefit most are the children. Nevertheless, it is an opportunity for different volunteers to contribute to the community at large.

Problem Statement

Research performed by the National Youth Council of Serbia suggests that around 38% of young people said that this new situation has negatively affected their schooling, and 21% assessed it as very negative (Stojanović & Vukov, 2020). According to the UN SDGs report on SDG3 (2020), that is, Quality Education, by April this year, close to 1.6 billion children and youth were out of school – and nearly 369 million children who rely on school meals needed to find other sources for daily nutrition. This is just some of the many other problems that they have to face due to online classes.

Furthermore, the sudden transition to online teaching has led to a large number of children and young people being left out of the educational system completely: according to a survey conducted by the Union of Education Workers of Vojvodina, in eight hundred schools in which they have their representatives, every tenth student could not attend classes during the state of emergency (2020). A vast number of children and young people in Serbia do not have devices (tablets, computers, laptops) or Internet access that enable them to attend a newly-formed mechanism of schooling.

And those who possess some kind of a device are faced with another challenge: their siblings have to (simultaneously) participate in their classes as well, and/or the situation at home isn't good. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2017), there are more than 591.000 families have two kids in their household, and more than 99.300 have three kids. Imagine what it's like for those who are already marginalised. This is backed up by the fact that since the beginning of the state of emergency, we could see many requests in Facebook groups of parents asking for some kind of a device for their children.

The end of the first semester for the students is near, which means that many of those youngsters have already lost a chance to gain new skills, necessary knowledge and competencies properly. We are witnessing the shortage of equality and equity again, but hopefully, we can change that: by working together. Currently, there is no evidence that something is being done for those children.

Since everything has moved online, children and youngsters do not get the quality and the necessary psychological support from their school psychologists. Given the stressful situations, they also face the feeling of isolation. Their mental wellbeing is at stake too and could lead to developing depression. This could prove to be another threat taking lives apart from the virus. As WHO stated in their research on the matter (2019), one person commits suicide every 40 seconds. In Iran, for example, a 13-years old girl committed suicide for not having a cell-phone to attend her classes online (Iran News Wire, 2020). We can only hope that the numbers have not gone up due to the psychological burden we all have to bear nowadays, because, by the time you have read the next two paragraphs, one more life will be lost.

Policy Options

Some schools have given their old devices to families in need, but the number of those is very limited and their functionality is questionable. Then again, how do they decide which family gets a device and which is left with no help at all? Moreover, isolation from their peers is another problem that could be decreased through access to technology, as many children and many young people suffer the consequences of isolation from their friends to families that are often problematic, dysfunctional, or living in difficult conditions. Regular contact and online socializing with friends can be an important protective factor for them in this difficult and depressing period.

We could deal with this issue on the local levels if we were to form “hubs” (either as part of NGOs or local self-governments) where people could bring their old (and functional) devices – which would further be assessed, repaired, updated, and improved by groups of volunteers specialized in IT or similar spheres. These devices, mainly computers and tablets, will be given to families whose children fell behind their peers and needed our help. In this way, we will not only tackle the shortcomings of online schooling, but also of the dangerous electronic waste (e-Waste) that would end up in landfills. With this activity, we will allow the volunteers to contribute to their country. Regarding this issue, more than ¾ of young people have not been engaged in a voluntary experience; plus, lots of them have felt unaccomplished and isolated (Ivković, Stojanović, 2020). Those with no access at all could use these hubs as an inclusive and safe environment where they can continue their studies, undisturbedly. We would call these hubs “EmpaTechs”, because, as stated before, we need empathy more than ever in these rather depressing, lonely, and technology-oriented times.

Another devastating fact is that out of the whole budget of the Republic of Serbia, only 0.09% goes to young people: and that is mainly to sports activities (Stojanović & Vukov, 2020). Now, given the aforementioned facts, the proposition made here is for the Ministry of Youth and Sport and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development to work together on the issue at hand, but also include other experts such as teachers, social and youth workers. Raising the budget would be the first step in order to finance the local communities and their “hubs”, and this has to be a stand-alone item in the revised budget.

The only similar activity with the same objective addressed here is a short-term project implemented by the Volunteers’ Centre of Serbia (VCV) and it was undertaken on the territory of Novi Sad only. In December, 25 functioning devices were given to youngsters and families in need. This is an example of good practice – and partnering up with the VCV could develop our pilot EmpaThec hub in their working space. This would support us to find better solutions in achieving our goal. As a result, all the children would have an equal opportunity to attend online classes.

Recommendations

The hubs will host volunteers who want to contribute and the students who need to be there to participate in classes either because of the lack of internet access or the situation at home because of the epidemiological measures enforced by state institutions.
The hubs will need a financial support from public institutions. Working to recycle devices does not require a large sum of money, only basic tools for hardware control and repair. Devices ready to be provided to families in need will be listed in an inventory and Hub coordinators will sort them accordingly. Each device that does not work will be recycled to decrease the amount of e-Waste

and preserve the environment. Coordinators will receive financial support also and they should have a little experience of voluntarism and teamwork. However, the volunteers do not have to be young people only, everyone is welcome to help.

We need to create opportunities for all the children and students to attend online classes. They must be in classrooms one way or another like everyone else. Therefore, we need to consider all the possibilities to find a solution to this problem.

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"THE INABILITY OF CHILDREN TO ACCESS ONLINE LEARNING DUE TO UNFAVOURABLE ECONOMIC & TECHNOLOGY CONDITIONS WHICH LIMIT THEIR BASIC RIGHTS TO EDUCATION"

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on all spheres of our life. Restriction of movement of citizens and closure of many business activities has had an immediate impact on employability and led to the decline of the economy. The pandemic effects have been particularly noticeable on the system of education, which is facing major challenges to function properly. "Hence, there was a new kind of feeling, with new immediate responsive state caused by the change of learning patterns" (Bajçinovci and Dugolli, 2020)

Many countries around the world are already practicing online learning, however, various factors affect its delivery and quality. Online learning has made education accessible to students around the globe. This is indeed the most feasible way to deliver learning during a pandemic, but what about those children who do not have the equipment to connect online? How do children who cannot afford to have personal laptops or tablets engage in online learning? Or, how do children who have siblings but possess only one piece of equipment at home deal with this situation? In other words, is it possible for everyone to have access to online learning?

Among these factors is the inability or the difficulty of children from low-income families to access online learning due to unfavourable economic conditions and lack of technology which limits their basic right to education. The silence and failure of Kosovo institutions to take concrete actions for those vulnerable groups additionally exacerbate their situation. The children who do not possess the equipment needed for accessing online learning, lag behind their peers which negatively affects their future educational opportunities. For this purpose, additional classes for those children in primary schools (1st – 5th grade) are recommended to help them catch up with their peers. Students of the Faculty of Education in Southern Mitrovica would offer group instructions as a part of their practical learning.

Problem Statement

Covid-19 brought to light these kinds of questions and the social and economic inequalities that underpin them. The problem of accessibility is certainly linked to the economic situation of Kosovo. Families with social assistance from Kosovo's budget amount to about 25000, with about 110.000 members, (Institute for Advanced Studies, 2019). The Institute finds that these families receive 50-100 euros per month, depending on the number of family members, which is hardly enough to cover their basic needs. "According to official data, the poverty rate in Kosovo is 23%; the general poverty is 17%, whilst extreme poverty is 5%" (Gjocaj, 2020). Mitrovica has the largest number of families with social assistance for about 6000 families (Gecaj, 2020). Those numbers suggest that low-income families struggle to secure main items such as food or clothing, consequently they also struggle to provide equipment for all their children, which may not be a priority considering their basic needs.

We have researched this topic for a university course project and found that several children mainly in rural areas have difficulties accessing online learning. Some others do not have access at all, while others occasionally use their parents' phones if their siblings do not have to attend a class at that time. The unequal access to education has hindered some children's cognitive development compared to others, while also showing neglect of the relevant institutions to provide equal educational opportunities for all during those challenging times.

Policy Options

The difficulty of online learning for children of low-income families in the context of elementary school should be addressed by the relevant institutions. However, only a few concrete steps have been taken so far with a clear strategy still missing. Teachers have been asked to be considerate to those children who do not have access to online learning, yet, the institutions do not take into account the consequences that missing lessons has for children's future. Unfortunately, the state doesn't have enough budget to cover all the needs of children specifically to provide them with laptops or Ipads to access online learning. If a child is frequently absent from the learning process, they lose a lot. When lesson they are absent from a lesson, they lose the lesson's order and they cannot regularly learn.

The access to education in developing countries like Kosovo remains a pressing problem, but the ideal solution in this specific case would be to offer extra lessons delivered by the students of the 3rd and the 4th year of the Faculties of Education in Mitrovica. Since the institutions do not have the conditions to provide the necessary technological equipment, the best possibility would be to provide additional teaching hours.

They should hold extra classes, so in this way, the children would improve their learning and compensate for their absences. An additional advantage of this proposal is that the students of education would be able to do some practical work. Universities in Kosovo focus disproportionally on theoretical learning. "Local and central level institutions continue to offer no professional internship programs for students" (Këshilli Rinor Kosovar, 2016). At the Faculty of Education in Mitrovica for instance, practice as a learning method is conducted in local primary schools for only three to four weeks per academic year. Given that students must be well prepared to teach, this is an ideal chance for us as students of education too because we would not solely help economically marginalized children to catch up with their learning, but it would be an opportunity to develop our teaching skills at the same time.

Recommendations

For children of low-income families with limited access to online classes to attend additional lessons several actors need to be involved. This policy brief would only be possible if the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the municipal directorate of Southern Mitrovica and the University of Mitrovica, and the local schools would coordinate and collaborate.

We therefore propose the following recommendations:

- The municipal directorate of Southern Mitrovica in collaboration with the municipality of Mitrovica should identify low-income families with poor financial conditions who receive social assistance, and whose children have been absent from the learning process.

- After identifying these families, an on-the-ground investigation should be undertaken to identify the number of children and their possession of the equipment such as laptops, tablets, or computers.

- The names of the children should be sent to the municipal directorate.

- The directorate of education in collaboration with respective schools identify those children and divide them into groups of five.

- The directorate of education in collaboration with the University of Mitrovica should appoint the most distinguished students of the 3rd and the 4th year as teachers who will hold additional classes with these children.

- Each student will work with one group (so each student will have a maximum of 5 children who will work with them).

- The teaching will take place in schools and social distance will be respected. Each class with five children would have a specific schedule to not overlap with the normal schedule of the respective school.

- The number of children benefiting from this policy brief depends on the budgetary planning, which remains a challenge.

The implementation of recommendations ensures equal access in education for all, in particular for those children who could not access online learning during the lockdown. Every child deserves the right to education, therefore, the proposed recommendations will address some of the shortcomings brought by Covid-19 in this domain to guarantee that some children do not lack behind their peers.

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#challenge2

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“ECOVID-19 RECOVERY POLICY PACKAGE”

The outbreak of Covid-19 turned into a major challenge for the world. Nevertheless, it helped the environmental recovery to a certain extent. The reduction of human activity caused various problems in many levels of everyday life. Simultaneously all the governments around the world faced the challenges of sustainability and Serbia is no exception

A greener economy has been neglected at the expense of economic growth, yet small steps have been made recently. Despite the need for a policy amendment due to pressure from the European Union, there is a long way ahead. The approach to the problem should be comprehensive. Thereby, the “ECOvid-19 recovery policy package” will cover the fiscal aspect of the issue, with concrete immediate actions and measures to be taken into place. This includes environmental employability, waste management, financial nudges, local sustainable energy sources, and the shift to more sustainable vehicles.

Problem Statement

In Serbia, the overall dependency of all sectors of production and trade on nature is immense. Still, the impact of the linear economy on nature is highly negative and is accountable for its current state. The latest UN Research revealed hundreds of sites in Serbia that have been polluted with heavy metals and carcinogens. The research went on to point out that out of identified 32 most dangerous sites, 14 require immediate remediation (MEPS, 2020) due to their abolishment, thus making soil pollution in no control whatsoever. Adding onto this, it is estimated that waste, as a consequence of COVID-19, may rise from 30 to 50% thus raising the risk of a system failure (ISWA, 2020).

Having in mind the historical data, indications are that about 75% of COVID-19 plastic waste will end up clogging the landfills and floating in seas (UNCTAD, 2020). This adds onto the data from the German development agency Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), which states that 78% of Serbian plastic packaging waste end up in nature or landfills, and the report from Serbia’s Fiscal Council, that states plastic was the least recycled packaging material at around 19%, with the wider EU rate close to 40%.

Air pollution has been one of the most pressing issues for various cities all around Serbia. Apart from the loose regulation and scarce inspections on climate non-friendly businesses, the crucial air pollutant remains transportation. The fact that about 50% of crude oil is consumed in transportation (Spasić, 2020) proves the magnitude of the effect fossil fuel burning has on air quality. The Serbian used-vehicles market is under great pressure as it is gaining a constant supply of air-pollutant vehicles coming from the European Union.

Due to constant changes in European regulation regarding the reduction of CO2 emissions, the vehicles are usually sold outside the EU thus making Serbia a perfect market due to the country’s proximity to the outer borders of the EU. On an additional note, new studies indicate that a small increase in particulate matter (PM2.5) is associated with an increase in the COVID-19 death rate from 8-16% (Wu et al., 2020), making Serbia particularly exposed to a higher death rate risk. There were, throughout the world, localized improvements in air quality due to the stoppage of economic activity. However, the WMO experts have declared current emission declines could be sustained only if matched by decisive post-coronavirus structural change (WMO, 2020).

In 2018, only 21% of electricity was generated from renewable sources in Serbia. This is far from the plan included in the Directive 2009/28/EC where Serbia has committed to increasing this share to 27% by 2020 (Lewis, 2018). This year, the reports show that Serbia is lagging behind the projected goal (EC, 2020). Although transportation and heating systems consume a lot of the energy produced in Serbia, experts agree that the most effective way of reaching the goal is by tackling the electricity sector. There have been numerous pledges from the management of the sector to start the shift to more sustainable options, however, only systematic change can truly have an effect in this sector.

Policy Options

One of the most commonly used methods for combating environmental issues, especially in the past few years, have been taxes, fees and other financial nudges. Although certain fees from "The law on fees for the use of public goods" have been proven effective, there are still some areas that are left unregulated or are encouraging pollution. One of such policies is the subsidy for coal mining, which is three times larger than the investment in renewable energy sources (EC, 2019). Additionally, according to EUROSTAT and National Statistical Office, total costs for environmental protection for the 2006-2016 period stood at 0.7% of GDP compared to the Central and Eastern European average of 2% while total environmental protection investment amounted to 0.3% in comparison to the same average that stands at 0.7% (MEPS, 2020).

Environmental protection is a relatively young field in the Serbian legislation, therefore, there are a lot of opportunities for passing new and innovative laws. The biggest concern for the politicians and the general public is the loss of the jobs that a shift to a greener economy may produce. Overall, most of the research points to the fact that, with a degree of flexibility, green policies would have no or very little negative impact on employment rates (OECD, 2017).

The Minister for Environmental Protection has declared at the beginning of 2020 that the measures regarding the ban of single-use plastic will be in place until the end of the year. However, none of the measures have been taken whatsoever, although the situation has been even worse due to COVID-19 outbreak. Furthermore, he noted that the consumption of plastic bags has decreased by 80% since the introduction of the "Packaging and packaging waste law". Still, the relation between plastics and the Serbian legislative system has been a stagnant one. All legislation that has been introduced to tackle plastic waste in Serbia have been duplicates of the old EU regulation, which has been delayed, making the process lengthy and inefficient. Serbia made a pledge to transpose all EU legislation into its regulatory system by 2021, but experts believe this will not be achieved in the time frame proposed (UNPD, 2020).

When addressing the already existing subsidies, the Government of Serbia has been giving subsidies and financial aid to agricultural producers who wish to invest in solar panels. However, there is lack of support for individuals and local communities which would like to switch to more sustainable energy resources. This lack of funds makes it harder for communities, who are interested, to incorporate sustainable solutions and doesn't incentivise the communities who are still not aware of the benefits of renewable energy sources to switch to these alternatives.

Recommendations

In order to overcome the negative effects of COVID-19 and the shortcomings of the current legislation, we propose the following measures and actions to be taken into effect to complete the "ECOvid-19 recovery policy package":

An unavoidable way of curbing air pollution in a world increasingly dependent on transport is to switch to greener types of transportation. In addition to the measures in place, we propose the following actions:

- We highly recommend the Ministry of Environmental Protection to ban import of vehicles with Euro 3 emission standard motors1 without any delay.

- We urge the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure to provide incentives targeted at parking lots, petrol stations and other publicly crowded spaces for introducing EV charging stations in order to boost consumer demand.

- We support the initiative of "Roads of Serbia" to increase the number of charging stations at the Corridor X Highway through Serbia and the introduction of the aforementioned stations in the Serbian national road network.

- We invite the Ministry of Environmental Protection to promote greener methods of movement around the city by subsidizing electric scooters, electric and non-electric bicycles alongside the introduction of new and enlargement of current cycling lanes.

Following the good practice of financial nudges, the "ECOvid-19 recovery policy package" proposes additional taxes and changes in the system:

- Following the recommendation of the European Commission, the policy implores the Ministry of Environmental Protection of Serbia to abolish the subsidies for coal mining and redirect the funds towards renewable energy sources.

- Suggests the Ministry of Environmental Protection of Serbia to increase the gas emission fee by 15%, so that it impacts big pollutants who are responsible for 71% of gas emissions on average (CDP, 2017).

- To combat the issue of renewable energy sources on a local level, the policy invites the Ministry of Environmental Protection to introduce subsidies for communities who want to invest in solar panels and electricity-producing mini-windmills. Such equipment can, individually, generate from 45% to 50%, resulting in an almost complete shift to renewable energy if combined (SEIA, 2020).

Following up on the recent surge in medical and plastic waste, ECOvid-19 recovery policy package recommends:

- Ministry of Economy to introduce subsidies for labour-intensive plastic-substitutes production within the Republic of Serbia.

- Recalls the Ministry of Environmental Protection to keep promise on changing current legislation with the relevant European one and thus close Chapter 27 on Environment and Climate Change.

- Calls the local governments to introduce local collecting points for household's medical waste.

- Urges Ministries of Health and Ministry of Environmental Protection to ensure that disposal of all wastes is in line with the recommendations of International Solid Waste Association.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has slowed our economy but on the other hand the consumption of energy also, which makes this recovery an important standpoint of the energy sector in Serbia. In the end we rise two important questions: Will the Republic of Serbia return to the environmentally unsustainable approaches, and will the institutions of the Republic of Serbia launch a green recovery plan?

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"SOLVING THE PROBLEM WITH POLLUTED AIR AND INCREASED AMOUNT OF MEDICAL SAFE WASTE DURING THE PANDEMIC"

During the pandemic, beyond actual problems with air pollution, we encountered difficulties with the management of the increased amount of medical waste from used masks, visors, and gloves. One of the main causes of air pollution is the excessive use of cars for private purposes. The other causes of air pollution are also scarce heating of the citizens during the heating season and the great pollution caused by the industrial facilities. Due to the measures for carrying mandatory protective equipment we are facing an environmental catastrophe due to the inconsistent implementation of the EU regulations for proper treatment of medical waste.

Problem Statement

According to the report "Air Pollution and Human Health: The Western Balkans Case", air pollution is a reason for one in five premature deaths in 19 cities in the Western Balkans, including Skopje, Tetovo, Bitola, and Veles. According to a survey from NGO Eko-Svest Skopje in cooperation with Neda Korunovska and Mike Holland for Economic assessment of the effects on human health and life concludes that the Macedonian thermal power plants in Bitola and Oslomej are "responsible" for 5,104 lost years of life per year, or 476 premature deaths cases per year. Similarly, they relate to 155 new cases of chronic bronchitis or 486,109 days of limited activity per year.

One recent study found that even small increases in fine particulate matter, known as PM2.5, have had an outsized effect in the US. An increase of just 1 microgram per cubic meter corresponded to a 15% increase in Covid-19 deaths, according to the researchers, led by Xiao Wu and Rachel Nethery at the Harvard University T.H. Chan School of Public Health. These are not the first studies to highlight the connection between air pollution levels and deaths from viral diseases. A 2003 study found that patients with Sars, a respiratory virus closely related to Covid-19, were 84% more likely to die if they lived in areas with high levels of pollution.

Another preliminary study detected Sars-CoV-2 (the virus that causes Covid-19) could even be hitching a ride on PM10 (particulate matter) particles – the same stuff as PM2.5, just in slightly larger particles. The researchers, based at several universities across Italy, suggest the virus could be dispersed more widely with air pollution particles.

As we previously mentioned, in addition to the polluted air issues, we are confronting the challenge to reduce the medical waste (used masks, gloves, and visors) which belongs to the group of hazardous waste of infectious type. According to research conducted by Asian Development Bank (ADB) each infected person increases the infected medical waste by 3.4 kilograms everyday.[4] According to these numbers, until recently we have produced about 256 tons of additional medical waste from 85000 infected people in our country. This has burden existing medical transport and disposal infrastructure around hospitals.

Policy Options

Our government prepared a program to reduce air pollution. The main goals of the program were a combination of measures that includes changing the heating methods of households and all other sectors: construction, heating of small firms, transport, the arrangement of public areas, together with strengthening the capacities of the inspection supervision and frequent controls in industrial capacities and other legal entities, which will give the best results to solve the problem.

The regulations for managing medical waste in our county were adopted in 2007 which was later used to consolidate the text in the law about waste which was adopted in 2016. This is also a big problem in many EU countries. According to Franz Daschner (German physician) who made research about the disposal strategies of hospital waste in 5 different European countries (Italy, Spain, France, United Kingdom and Germany) by an examination of the waste management in one hospital which was selected in each country, the research revealed that to date there is no specific legislation concerning hospital waste disposal in any country.

There are different laws concerning hygiene, work security and waste disposal, which regulate the disposal of hospital waste. The overall management of the problem of hospital waste disposal is generally the responsibility of the hospital administration. More support is needed to differentiate the kinds of waste in particular. Not all hospital waste is toxic or infectious. Because of a lack of specific scientific information 'normal' household waste coming from hospitals is treated in a specific chemical way. This treatment could be avoided. Hospitals need a clear waste definition according to their specific situation and a way of to differentiate this specific waste. The project concluded that hospitals would need more managerial support to deal with the problem from inside and outside.

Recommendations

Previously, we mentioned that our government has a program to reduce air pollution with some priority actions, yet the program is insufficient to settle the problem of air pollution generally. We think that this program is not fully implemented and that is the main problem in the current situation. We are suggesting the immediate implementation of this program across the country. In addition to that, we are recommending some additional actions that need to be implemented as soon as possible.

Our action includes increasing the use of bicycles and electric vehicles and a different approach about the treatment of medical waste especially about the treatment of used masks. To increase the use of bicycles and electric scooters, the authorities and companies should give their employees vouchers that will be a substitute for travel expenses and reallocation of part of the food (maximal 20% of the average net pay per employee paid during the previous year and the transport costs in the amount of the actual costs in the public transport). The minimal amount of the voucher should be 50% per year of the legally prescribed food costs and the actual costs in public transport. This measure will be for employees up to 50 years and for all others who will be interested. Those who will accept to use this kind type of voucher will be obliged to use the bicycle or electric scooter for some of the work activities.

Our opinion about the used masks should be recycled in such a way that they will be identified and placed in a separate box marked with "used protective masks". They will be recycled previously being sterilized and disinfected and after that finely chopped and the chopped parts will be used to produce a new mask. We choose this recycling process as opposed to incineration (burning of the masks) because it doesn't pollute the air and is a practical way to reduce medical waste.

Conclusion

We think the implementation of these measures will improve the current situation with the air pollution and the pollution of the environment and will reduce the traffic jam caused by excessive use of vehicles. All of the above actions will help to improve the general conditions of health issues, and the common picture for the society in general.

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"GETTING RID OF THE LIFE-THREATENING ENEMY: THE DISPOSABLE MASKS"

The demand for the production of plastic masks and other medical supplies has risen drastically due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Plastic waste causes enormous pollution in the environment because it will probably end up in landfills or floating in the seas, and all over the place. According to scientific evidence, plastic entails a major threat to marine life, because tons of plastic end up in our seas and oceans. Moreover, microplastic pollution is often consumed by marine animals and humans as well. Plastic waste is certainly life-threatening to marine animals. Therefore, this issue calls for immediate action (National Geographic, 2020).

Currently there is no simple strategy to deal with medical plastic waste such as disposable masks and gloves. It is unclear whether these outrageous amounts of medical supplies are being recycled or not in our country. For that reason, banning the use of disposable masks and applying financial penalties for individuals who throw the medical supplies as debris is an effective solution because it helps prevent pollution and other problems.

Problem Statement

The current pandemic is challenging humanity and our planet. When it comes to our planet, certain environmental issues need to be addressed immediately. The demand for disposable masks and other plastic medical supplies intended only for single use has surged drastically due to the ongoing pandemic. Consequently, the pollution from considerable amounts of plastic waste has skyrocketed. Disposable masks are particularly damaging the marine life and also the environment because they contain plastics which pollute water and can harm wildlife who eat them or become tangled in them. (BBC, 2020)

Disposable masks and other medical supplies are largely available for purchase, at a low cost. Therefore, everyone can afford to buy one. Thus, placing restrictions on the availability and purchase of these medical supplies can be helpful to reduce the amount of plastic waste and pollution. I strongly believe that banning the use of disposable masks by the citizens of our country would help to tackle this critical issue. Instead, the mandatory use of fabric masks composed of easily recyclable or natural fibers can contribute to the solution of this problem. According to WHO, fabric masks provide effective protection against Covid-19. (WHO,2020)

Policy Options

It's not difficult at all to purchase single-use masks and other medical means such as disposable gloves which are made of plastic. We can buy as many as we want. On the other hand, it is uncertain these huge amounts of plastic are recycled or simply end up in landfills. The way of dealing with plastic waste in our country remains unclear. For that reason, more environmentally friendly alternatives are needed.

One way to tackle the massive use of disposable masks is to ban their use and make the use of fabric masks mandatory in the community and public, except for vulnerable people aged more than 60 years old or with other underlying medical conditions. These members of the population must necessarily wear a medical mask, as recommended by WHO. World Health Organization suggests that fabric masks composed of 3 layers provide effective protection against Covid-19

for the majority of individuals. Hence, using a disposable mask is purely optional, except for the elderly, vulnerable persons, and medical staff. Thus, banning the use of disposable masks will help to reduce the amounts of plastic waste significantly and prevent pollution. Thus, I strongly believe that this strategy will help to solve the issue in question effectively. (WHO, 2020), (BBC, 2020)

I conducted small scale research to discover the perception of citizens about this issue. Participants were asked whether they are aware of the damages that plastic causes in our environment and if they would agree on using a fabric mask instead of a disposable mask. 90% of the participants had no information regarding the consequences of plastic waste. Whereas 95% of them would agree to wear a fabric mask to minimize the damages that plastic causes to the environment. Therefore, providing adequate information for the issue in question is of fundamental importance.

Recommendations

Here is a list of specific actions and measures that can be implemented to deal with the issue in question:

- Informing the population regarding the damages that medical supplies made of plastic cause to our health and environment. (Government & Audiovisual Media Authority)
- Obligating the citizens to use fabric masks instead of medical masks. (Government & Ministry of Health)
- Providing clear instructions on how to make and maintain a fabric mask. (Audiovisual Media Authority)
- Demanding businesses, especially the large ones to provide their employees with fabric masks. (Government)
- Placing restrictions such as a fine, if violations are to arise. (Government)
- Placing restrictions such as a fine if people throw the medical supplies on the ground.
- Investing on small businesses that sell fabric masks. (Government)
- Ensure that the plastic waste caused by disposable masks and other medical supplies is going to be recycled. This can be used as an effective strategy to create new jobs. (Government)

Conclusion

Environmental issues such as pollution from the plastic waste call for immediate action. Extraordinary amounts of plastic are produced each year. The severe increase in medical supplies made of plastic extends the magnitude of this issue even further. Therefore, resorting to more environmentally friendly alternatives is indispensable if we do not wish to drown in plastic and cause irreversible damages to the environment. It is essential to fight the pandemic without damaging the environment.

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Author: Ružica Krklješ

"THE AFTERMATH OF THE COVID"

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to many changes in the world. We are facing severe repercussions, possibly long-lasting. This could cause an economic crisis but we are also facing environmental problems. Similarly, as in Montenegro, it appears these problems are neglected in all the countries around the world. Hence, many climate change issues highlighted by the pandemic, need to be addressed in Montenegro

In Montenegro, there still has not been any published research on the impact of the novel coronavirus on the environment. We need measures that will take care of climate change, air and water pollution, biodiversity loss and waste management for the future well-being of societies around the world. On December 7, researchers from various institutions presented their findings at the American Geophysical Union's 2020 fall meeting. They found that the environment is quickly changing, and the timing of those changes seems to be associated with the pandemic (Science News, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic, although a health threat in the first place, brings many other concerns that should not be neglected. There have been both positive and negative short-term environmental impacts and time will show which of them are going to be temporary and which are going to make long-term structural changes. Root causes of the problem are apparently the same as those in the past; with some of them being more or less enhanced for the time being. For example, water quality improved and air pollution is declined as a result of reduced industrial activity, ground travel and air travel. Global CO2 emissions are expected to decline overall by 8% in 2020 but the atmospheric concentration of CO2 continues to climb rapidly (Helm, 2020).

Montenegro became a member of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) on 27 January 2007 as a non-Annex 1 country (European Environment Agency, 2010). The body in the Montenegrin government which deals with climate change is the Directorate for climate change and Mediterranean businesses (Montenegrin: Direktorat za klimatske promjene i mediteranske poslove), which is part of the Ministry of ecology, spatial planning and urbanism. In July 2020, the Third national report on climate change in Montenegro was published. However, the report itself does not consider COVID-19 (it was most likely prepared before the pandemic had fully started).

Montenegro currently does not have enough capacities for waste management, recycling is not a common practice and waste reduction is still not a topic commonly discussed (Ministry of Tourism and sustainable development, 2020). Worldwide, waste management challenges have escalated significantly, mostly because of the increase of medical waste and demand for single-use plastics. Many governments have included ''green'' recovery measures in their policy packages designed to address the short- and medium-term socio-economic impact of the pandemic. Even though some of these measures may be temporary, as a part of emergency rescue and support plans, other risk having long-term environmental, economic and social implications.

The green recovery is an opportunity to undertake wider-reaching and a fundamental restructuring of critical sectors and activities to support the transition to low- emission climate-resilient and resource-efficient economies in socially inclusive ways and to enhance the resilience of their economies (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2019). It poses a particular challenge for developing countries rich in non-renewable resources, notably fossil fuels and minerals. This is especially important for Montenegro, as it is an ecological country.

Montenegro should create a Strategy on green recovery, which would focus on the impact of the pandemic. This should be performed by the existing Ministry of ecology, spatial planning, and urbanism, as well as with international consultants in the field of the green recovery and climate change.

Montenegro has adopted a policy on protection from negative influences of climate change in 2019 and in all three national reports published so far, the advantages and possibilities Montenegro has have been discussed. The most urgent issues that this strategy needs to address are waste management and pollution.

The quality of air and levels of pollution in the capital Podgorica and the northern town of Pljevlja have been high for some time. There needs to be a clear strategy on how to address this issue. COVID-19 is a virus that causes respiratory problems and research should be done on whether people from areas in which there are problems with pollution are more likely to have severe complications. Perhaps the government could create a working group which would address the issues of pollution and air quality in Pljevlja and Podgorica.

Waste management is another important issue that this Strategy needs to address. There are many illegal landfills all over Montenegro, which are dangerous for the environment and are not in line with the image of our country as a tourist destination.

The transition to a greener country also requires new skills, both for newly emerging jobs and for existing jobs that are evolving. The ministry should use the opportunity to work with international experts on green recovery to create a clear strategy. Addressing global issues such as climate change, air and water pollution, biodiversity loss, ocean degradation, deforestation and inefficient resource use has become even more important as countries seek to rebuild their economies, and enhance resilience against future shocks.

While Montenegro does have certain policies in place, a clearer direction is needed and a policy which focuses on the impact COVID-19 has had in our country needs to be explored for the country to recover from the pandemic and prepare for a greener future.

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Author: Vedrana Kapor and Mina Marković

“PLASTIC – NOT FANTASTIC”

Plastic pollution and poor management of plastic waste is a problem that has continued for a long time. However, with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, production of single-use plastic products increased over time, therefore needs to be addressed as soon as possible to avoid further deterioration of the current ecological state of the planet. We suggest finding efficient ways to raise awareness of the current ecological state, as well as the importance of taking the necessary steps to improve it. In addition to this, we recommend the introduction of multi-use biodegradable products made from renewable materials, with a focus on protective equipment and the use of unrecyclable plastic by food delivery services, both of which are on the rise due to the ongoing pandemic

Problem Statement

We would like to focus on the extreme rise of plastic pollution, which is directly caused by the skyrocketing production of PPE (personal protective equipment) due to the ongoing global pandemic. Another important issue to consider is the rise of food delivery services, which results in growing numbers of distribution of plastic packaging and utensils.

The nature of the COVID-19 pandemic imposed the increase of single-use personal protective equipment, such as surgical face masks, latex gloves and visors. The main materials used in the production of this equipment are polymers, such as polypropylene, which is identified as one of the primary sources of plastic pollution. The use of disinfectants, such as hand sanitizers and rubbing alcohol, which are usually sold and stored in containers made of hard plastic, has also become extreme.

The majority of these plastic products are mishandled after use - they are thrown out together with all other types of trash, without separating or recycling. As a result, there has been an alarming growth in the amount of plastic waste concentrating in landfills and recycling factories, as well as in forests, rivers, and oceans. Mass dumping of medical waste forces institutions to resort to alternative ways of waste control, such as uncontrolled incineration, which can lead to the release of toxic fumes thus permanently affecting the environment.

A major rise in the plastic waste can also be attributed to the necessary use of food delivery services, caused by lockdowns all around the globe. Due to lockdowns, households are left without ways to access food supplies, leaving them with no choice other than to resort to ordering in. Recycling capabilities have also decreased as a consequence of the virus since the number of factory workers is lowered in order to maintain their health and safety. Furthermore, a considerable number of countries still haven’t developed adequate policies for separating and recycling waste.

The repercussions of increased production of PPE have been manifesting globally. For example, after the outbreak, China produced up to 20 million single-use face masks per day. Until the end of February, this number reached 166 million. According to the business consulting firm Grand View Research, global sales of disposable face masks increased from $800 million to $166 billion. In developing countries, approximately 2.5kg/bed/day of healthcare waste is being accumulated every day. In Wuhan, China, the amount of healthcare waste adds up to 106 tons per day. When it comes to household waste, major rises have been reported in numerous parts of the world. They are directly connected to the continuous reliance on food delivery services since it is the main source of incoming waste during lockdowns.

Policy Options

The biggest shortcoming of the current system in Serbia is the fact that the focus on ecology and the repercussions of our current lifestyle are minimal, which results in the lack of ecological consciousness among its people. Since there is no developed system in place, and the country's resources and living standards aren't high enough to place focus on ecology and recycling, the proper habits were never formed.

As a result of the ongoing global pandemic, one of the main issues that arise due to the current system's dysfunctionality is the lack of appropriate ways to deal with the accumulation of medical waste. A large amount of single-use PPE is being thrown out every day, without concern of how it impacts the environment and how to discard it appropriately on a household level. It is directly linked to the absence of initiative from government institutions, which haven't introduced the idea of waste separation and recycling and haven't ensured that the recycling system works properly. This is most likely caused by inadequate resources, lower living standards, and placing the ecology and waste problem much lower on the priority list.

One of the possible solutions to solve the medical waste issue, and include the eco-friendly aspect, is to introduce a country-wide distribution and the utilisation of biodegradable multi-use face masks. This would directly face the problem of extreme use of regular surgical masks, which have proven to be one of the biggest polluters since the beginning of the pandemic.

Another answer would be to introduce recycling and sustainability courses into the educational system. The main focus group in this case would be children, whose early development of ecological consciousness would provide future generations with strong habits of mindfulness towards the environment. The current educational system in Serbia does not provide sufficient knowledge on the topic of ecology. Therefore, this problem does not receive the proper attention. The implementation of educational courses which we are suggesting could also be applied to both public and private institutions.

An additional solution would be to establish policies that would require food delivery services to find biodegradable alternatives to lower the use of and replace plastic containers and utensils. Food delivery services available in Serbia do not offer an option to exclude plastic utensils from the package unless the chosen restaurant adds the option. Regardless, even if the user chooses not to include the utensils, the restaurants will often add them anyway. Therefore, most orders will include plastic utensils. This solution intends to break the habit of relying on plastic packaging and utensils, which are unhealthy to be reused, and incredibly difficult to break down or recycle.

Recommendations

When talking about the solution related to medically approved biodegradable multi-use face masks, the main focus is on keeping them accessible to all users, regardless their background or financial state. Aside from lowering the negative ecological impact caused by single-use polypropylene face masks, they would prove to be more cost-efficient, while ensuring proper protection to their users. A great example is the entirely biodegradable AirX face masks, made from coffee yarn, a bio-tech material produced from coffee waste, and silver, which has disinfecting properties. Aside from ensuring safety from harmful particles, the cost of acquiring this mask is significantly lower per person, in comparison to the cost of regular single-use surgical face masks, which have to be changed and thrown away every day. The only requirement of this mask is the monthly replacement of its filter, which is also completely biodegradable. The wide use of these masks would remarkably lower the overall plastic waste on a global level.

Young Researchers of Serbia, a non-governmental organization that is a part of the Voluntary Service of Serbia, organize work actions that focus on cleaning waste from different towns and nature multiple times per year. However, these voluntary actions rely purely on the participants' goodwill and the organization's budget, which is often very scarce. Unfortunately, there are no compulsory programs of this type, thus the awareness of the necessity of this type of action is similar to none.

The implementation of courses on the topics of recycling and sustainability into the current educational system, starting at the beginning of primary school, would ensure the development of important ecologically conscious habits among future generations. This presents a solution that could bring long-term positive effects, which would permanently improve the country's ecological state. Aside from this, positive changes can be made among adults by establishing certain policies in public and private institutions, and introducing courses on recycling and dealing with waste in a more eco-friendly manner. However, this requires initiative directly from the current government and isn't affected by the lack of resources needed for interventions on a larger scale.

In regards to the problem of plastic packaging, a more difficult solution would be to ban the use of plastic containers for delivery altogether and replace them with containers made completely out of biodegradable materials. Introducing biodegradable packaging into the food delivery industry would significantly lessen the production and use of hard plastic, which would lead to the decrease of unrecyclable waste that ends up in landfills and nature. Manufacturing paper-based packaging relies more on the use of renewable sources of energy, lowering the toxic emissions released by factories that produce plastic and directly making a positive impact on air quality and climate change. Another possible solution would be to eliminate the use of plastic cutlery, and provide recyclable wooden cutlery, but only with an additional fee. This way, the distribution of cutlery would be much more controlled, and the substitute is ecologically harmless.

Production and distribution of eco-friendly solutions is something that we need to act on immediately, in order to make our world a healthy and liveable place for years to come. Since the pandemic is ongoing and doesn't have a specific ending date, and plastic pollution is on a continuous rise, it is urgent to come up with alternatives to single-use products, which would provide positive long-term effects on the environment.

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"MEASURES FOR RECOVERING FROM COVID-19 WITH A FOCUS ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE IN ALBANIA"

The recovery from the Covid-19 crisis should take into consideration a methodology that promotes growth and at the same time remains environmentally friendly. Scientists have predicted a potential appearance of a pandemic for a long time, the same way they alert about the climate crisis. Therefore, governments must undertake prevention measures and orientate their policies towards green solutions.

This policy brief presents measures at the regional level that may be undertaken by the municipalities to promote a more environmentally friendly recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. It calls for the recognition of the risk imposed by the environmental crisis on the world , indicating how even simple measures at a lower level than governmental can still make a change and influence for the better.

We present five main policy recommendations as follows:

- ***Reduce single-use products and improve their disposal.*** Plastics and single-use products are some of the biggest pollutants from our everyday life. Because of the pandemic, for sanitary reasons the use of these products has been extensive so measures are required to reduce their use and manage their disposal.

- ***Encourage growth of the local economy while maintaining low carbon emissions.*** In small countries like Albania, small businesses can cover the request of the consumers effectively. They are a big part of the overall economy of the country and at the same time the most affected by the pandemic.

- ***Improvement of urban planning*** to avoid low air quality as a result of heavy traffic near construction sites and/or road deviation and closure because of construction sites.

- ***Improvement of public transport*** by increasing the options of public transport for the citizens, increasing the number of the public transport vehicles like buses, trams, trains to avoid crowding and improving the sanitary conditions on these means of transport.

- ***Encourage greener forms of transport*** with very low or zero carbon emissions by building new and improving the current infrastructure for the use of means of transport like bicycle and electrical vehicles and changing the taxing method to favour the use of electrical or semi-electric cars.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, countries have been struggling both in economic terms and social terms. It was a serious hit in particular for the local small economy. At the same time, concerning the environmental issues the world is facing right now, this pandemic provided an opportunity to take a step back and rethink our actions.

The lockdown measures led several strong economic countries to the closure of the major carbon-emitting industries and the halt of carbon emissions emitted using transport. Due to the drastic measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus, carbon emission levels for the year

2020 reduced from 10% to 30% on average. Due to reduced human activity during the pandemic, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides fell by roughly 30%, but at the same time, sulphur dioxides released by industry fell by 20%. This year Earth's Overshooting Day was calculated on August 22, 2020 instead of the end of July as it was predicted. This serves as a good example that our industries and our lifestyle have an impact on the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the overall conditions of the environment.

Despite the sizable declines in carbon emissions during 2020, researchers warn that if current policies remain the same, the direct effect of the pandemic-driven response will be negligible, with a decrease of around 0.01 ± 0.005 °C by 2030. Therefore, it will do nothing to slow down climate change and the odds of meeting the Paris Agreement threshold are very low. In contrast, with an economic recovery tilted towards green stimulus and reductions in fossil fuel investments, it is possible to avoid future warming of 0.3 °C by 2050. [1] In 2011, a study by the Environmental Protection Agency that analysed the costs and benefits of the Clean Air Act, found that every $1 invested to reduce air pollution returns up to $30 in benefits. [2] Taking actions to make eco-friendly choices will not only help to fight the climate crisis, but also helps our economy.

Thus, the real challenge for every country affected by the pandemic is how to recover from the devastating effects of the lockdown in a way that helps build resilience to climate change?

There are many possibilities to help local businesses and minimize the spread of the virus while simultaneously addressing environmental issues like carbon emissions and pollution. To decrease these emissions, there are current policies that target non-eco-friendly vehicles by increasing the fees for these means of transport. By targeting only this group of vehicles, it does not encourage citizens to switch to eco-friendly cars, since it becomes inconvenient because of the rising price. On the other hand, public transport in Albania is one of the main areas that need improvement. Citizens do not feel encouraged to use public transport, because it is a very time-consuming solution. Using personal vehicles is a faster and more comfortable way to get to your destination.

Another concerning issue is the face masks, which have become a substantial part of our daily lives since the beginning of the pandemic. Many are made from plastics and designed to be used only once, which means thousands of tons of extra waste are going to landfills. Masks may also be a source of harmful micro-plastic fibres on land and in waterways. So far in Albania, there are no concrete policies on how to reduce the negative impact that the waste of face masks has on the environment and our health.

Taking into consideration the facts we presented, our policy package would include a series of regulatory and educational measures to eliminate or mitigate the impact of the pandemic in climate changes and our economy. These include:

Reduction of single-use products. Our proposal for single-use items has to do with replacing synthetics with biodegradable materials. This would be the first step in circular design thinking. Face masks might be designed to cause minimal harm to the environment, and still offer adequate protection to us. For example, the abaca plant (Musa textilis), a relative of the banana tree, offers one potential option. According to the Department of Science and Technology-X (DOST-X) research, its leaf fibre repels water better than traditional face masks, is as strong as polymer, and decomposes within two months. Research shows that reusable cloth masks perform almost as well as single-use masks [4], but without the associated waste. Masks that can be washed and reused are the best option for the environment and reusable masks with replaceable filters were the second-best option. Reusable cloth masks are already used massively. If single use masks were only available for doctors and other health services personnel, this would lead the citizens to the other option, the reusable cloth masks.

Encouraging the growth of the local economy while maintaining low carbon emissions. Small local businesses are the ones that were affected the most by the crisis especially in small developing countries like Albania. We propose financial support for these small local businesses and investment in the education of the consumers on the importance of choosing products with low carbon emissions. Besides, by increasing the customs duties for imported products which

are also produced in our country, customers will be more encouraged to buy local products. This would not only help the local business recover but at the same time, it would guide the consumers towards low carbon products. Locally produced goods require much less transportation and storage conditions because of the small distances and shorter time that they require to reach the consumer, which means significantly less chemicals used to extend shelf life of the products and less carbon emission than imported products.

Better urban planning. Air quality is an important factor in the occurrence of diseases of the respiratory tract and subsequently the overall recovery from Covid-19. Concurrently, one of the biggest air pollutants in cities today is transport. An improved urban plan of the city should avoid multiple constructions in main streets which would lead to crowded roads and traffic jams which would increase carbon emission and pollution.

Improvement of public transport. Now more than ever, because of the pandemic, citizens are much more reluctant to use public transport. Policy measures need to support new investments in improving existing forms of public transport to have the necessary parameters to provide security measures for the virus. This could be accomplished by improving the health standards in public transports. Adding additional options of transport other than busses and increasing the number of busses would help to keep the distance between the passengers and reduce the waiting time in public transport stations. In this way, citizens would choose public transportation over private vehicles and help to reduce road congestion and travel times, air pollution, energy, and oil consumption, all of which benefit the most to the environment.

Greener forms of transport. Another measure would be to encourage citizens to use forms of transport with zero or very low carbon emissions like the bicycle or other green vehicles, such as electric cars. We propose to maximally reduce customs import taxes for electric vehicles and increase these taxes for vehicles that emit greenhouse gases. These ecological means of transport are not affordable by most of the Albanian population, but these measures will direct the upper class of society to more environmentally friendly choices. With this policy, we aim to lower the number of imported means of transport with internal combustion and increase maximally the imported green vehicles. Consequently, the actual non-eco-friendly vehicles will be gradually replaced in the future by vehicles that use alternative fuels. This will not only be beneficial for the environment and air pollution but will help the economy too, because they even have better fuel economy than conventional internal combustion engine vehicles.

To conclude, a greener recovery from Covid-19 has critical policy relevance in the context of mitigating the impact of the pandemic in climate changes and in our economy. Urgent policy actions are required across the key five issues identified in this policy brief namely (1) Reduction of single-use products; (2) Encouraging the growth of the local economy while maintaining low carbon emissions; (3) Better urban planning; (4) Improvement of public transport; (5) Greener forms of transport.

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Biographies

Mario Ajdini

I am Mario Ajdini and I'm 23 years old. I'm from Albania. I'm studying English Language at Aleksandër Moisiu University of Durrës. I have worked as a customer service representative for five years. Besides learning foreign languages, I take a great interest in environmental issues, reading and graphic design. In the future, I aspire to become an English Language professor.

Aleksa Antić

Aleksa Antić is pursuing a double degree in Economics and Finance at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the University of Belgrade. During his studies Aleksa has participated in numerous competitions, winning second place at the National Competition in Mathematics and representing London School of Economics at the International Case Competition. Since 2016, Aleksa has been a member of the European Youth Parliament where he has presided over sessions and committees in over 10 countries around Europe and led over 20 teams. Apart from his passion for finance and public policy, Aleksa is also a 3rd year student at "Dr Vojislav Vučković" music school, pursuing studies of opera singing.

Elona Bellaja

Elona Bellaja was born in the city of Gjakova, Republic of Kosovo. Ms. Bellaja is a fluent speaker in two foreign languages: English and Turkish. She graduated Natural Sciences at "Hajdar Dushi Gymnasium" in Gjakova and now is a third-year Nursing student at Heimerer College in Prishtina. Through her education she participated in a lot of competitions such as Math Olympics where she took the fourth place in the Republic of Kosovo, and also was a participant in Intelligence Competition, and Chemistry Competitions. Ms. Bellaja participated in numerous trainings and finished different courses for her personal advancement and professional development. She has earned certificates of achievements from prestigious universities and organizations such as: Public Health England, Johns Hopkins University, King's College London, Swinburne University of Technology, and Central Queensland University. She completed an internship in the Nursing Department of Heimerer College, and through her study years she was a student tutor and also showed interest in the research field. She is ambitious, and has intentions to advance in the field of nursing and research.

Sara Beqiri

I am Sara Beqiri, born on 28.06.2000, in Mitrovica, Kosovo. I am an undergraduate student in the University of Mitovica – Faculty of Education, 3d year. I live in Mitrovica with my family. I am working a lot to be a good teacher in the future, but I'd also love continuing my studies in science and art.

Some goals that I want to achieve in my life are:

- Study abroad
- Being successful in my job and all the fields I will study, so I will convince my students that nothing is impossible
- Travelling- visiting places all around the globe and exploring cultures and new things.

Snežana Bojkovska

Snežana Bojkovska is a student at the Faculty of Education in Bitola, North Macedonia. She is interested in learning foreign languages and currently apart from English she is learning German and Italian. She has been learning English for 10 years. She hopes to finish her studies and continue her education abroad.

Stefan Buzhevski

Stefan Buzhevski is a postgraduate at the Law Faculty Kicevo and a member of Youth Alternative Tourism Association POVIK Bitola. My hobby is fishing.

Danilo Đukanovic

Danilo Đukanovic was born 11. of June 1998 in Podgorica. He attended “Vladimir Nazor” elementary school and Gymnasium “Slobodan Skerovic”. In the fourth year of high school, he won the third place in the national philosophy essay writing competition, qualifying himself for participation in the International Philosophy Olympiad in Rotterdam, where he won “Honourable mention” award. After high school, he went to the University of Novi Sad, where he is currently a fourth year student at Philosophical Faculty, department of Psychology. During summer of 2019, he took part in Work and Travel programme, through which he spent three months working in Anchorage, Alaska. During his studies, he is active in student organisations and in multiple research groups regarding psychology of personality, cognitive psychology and social psychology, with special interest on risk perception and media communication during mass health crisis. His first published research paper, which he was co-author of, was published in June 2020 in “Psihijatrija” scientific journal named “Risk perception and state of anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic in Montenegro”. During February 2021 he founded the NGO Centar for Social and Behavioural studies (NGO Centar DiBS).

Sara Gjevori

My name is Sara Gjevori and I was born in Elbasan, Albania. I am currently studying General Medicine at the University of Medicine, Tirana. I feel that my education further ignited my passion for the medical field and assisted in moulding me into the person I am today.
During high school I developed a great passion for natural sciences such as chemistry, physics and biology. I have participated in various Olympiads organized in Albania.
Taking part in “Sfida e Studenteve COVID-19” was a challenging experience. I would recommend it to everyone.

Ajla Graho

My name is Ajla Graho. I am 21 and I am a student, sportswoman, volunteer and Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering. Currently, I am studying for a master’s degree on faculty of Mechanical Engineering, on Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar. My biggest occupation through elementary and high school was sport, precisely karate. I was training karate for over 10 years; I own a black belt and many medals. Due to injury, I stopped being active in sports and devoted myself to politics, activism and volunteering. My biggest goal is to progress in my engineering career and hopefully, one day become a professor. I would say that I’m ambitious, hard-working, dedicated and most of all, person who is grateful for everything in my life.

Narcisa Hadžajlić

My name is Narcisa Hadžajlić. I am 22 years old, and currently a final year student of Mathematics and Informatics at the University of Zenica. I was born in Iran, where my Bosnian parents had been studying human sciences like Pedagogy and Islamic philosophy. Growing up in an international environment in Iran, I had the opportunity to learn intercultural dialogue, to respect differences between people, and to love my origin Bosnian culture and nourish it. In those circumstances, I had to learn 4 languages: Persian, Bosnian, English, and Arabic, which I use actively in my everyday life. Since coming back to my country and enrolling in university, I have started to work more on training myself as a math educator and to engage in IT-oriented projects like software and web development. Since 2018, I’ve been a scholarship receiver and volunteer member of Hastor Foundation in Bosnian and Herzegovina, and have got more interest in volunteering. This interest was one of the reasons for contacting my friends Amina and Ajla to prepare this project scheme for addressing the problems that have worsened due to the pandemic in our country. It was a great honour to work on the project, and my friends and I look forward to implementing it one day. Besides my studying and social work, I passionately work in the field of fine arts. I was a member of the Fine Arts Association of Qom, Iran; where I learned different techniques of drawing and painting. In my free time, I professionally engage in painting. My biggest dream is to connect my two souls, the artistic and the scientific one, to show the beautiful world of maths, arts, and humanity by educating and teaching younger generations.

Sarah Ibërshimi

My name is Sarah Ibërshimi and I am a fourth year medical student at the University of Medicine in Tirana. I have always been passionate about education and I have demonstrated dedication to create a solid academic background by being among students striving for excellence. I have the privilege of leading the Department of Projects and Activities in Albanian Committee of Medical Students, a youth organization which represents and integrates medical students and young professionals in a national and international level. My mission is to empower hard-working students to achieve what sometimes feel unattainable and also to advocate for change concerning the improvement of standards of health education for all students, irrespectively of their status.

Aleksa Janković

Aleksa Janković is a 21-year-old student from Podgorica, Montenegro. He finished both elementary (OŠ "Štampar Makarije") and secondary school (JU Gimnazija "Slobodan Škerović") in his hometown with "Luča" award for outstanding academic achievements in all grades of education. Since an early age, he gained interest in exploring foreign countries, hoping to one day possibly study in one. Therefore, he decided to participate in student exchange during his 11th grade of secondary school, and it took him to Milwaukee, USA (Shorewood High School) for 10 months. This experience helped him in shaping his own beliefs, working on shortcomings and identifying strengths, but most importantly taught him to understand other cultures not just by comparing them to his own, but rather by becoming a part of another one. Since then, he gained an even greater interest in foreign languages. He speaks Montenegrin, English, Slovene and Italian language. Currently, he is a first-year student of law at University Donja Gorica in Podgorica, Montenegro. Besides enjoying the academics concerning legal studies, he is also a volunteer of AIESEC Montenegro, an international youth organization, where he works with incoming global volunteers and on many local activities that AIESEC organizes. One of his main aspirations is to aid in reforms and progressive platforms concerning Human and minority rights.

Vedrana Kapor

My name is Vedrana and I am (almost!) twenty-two years old. I am from Bosnia and Herzegovina, but currently living in Serbia for my studies, where I'm studying towards a bachelor's degree in architecture. Alongside being a full-time student, I also do analogue and digital photography; the subjects of my photographs are different aspects of architectural elements to its smallest details, as well as nature in any form or shape. As someone who enjoys nature and spending time in it, with architecture I hope to be able to help and change the environment for better with more green and sustainable buildings, and to make a balance between green spaces and built-up areas.

Ružica Krklješ

My name is Ružica Krklješ. I was born on January 21st 2001, in Podgorica, Montenegro. I studied at High school of economics "Mirko Vešović" and I am currently a second student at the Faculty of Economics, University of Montenegro. I volunteered for NGO "Mladiinfo", a student organisation that provides learning and self-development opportunities for young people in Montenegro. I participated in numerous events that "Mladiinfo" organized and gained valuable work experience. In the future I hope to work in my chosen field, expand my knowledge and use my full potential in the challenges that are ahead of me.

Amina Madžak

Amina Madžak is a 21 years old girl from Konjic; she lives in Sarajevo during her management studies at IBU. She loves activism, socializing, and teamwork. Her greatest love is the stage and the theatre, where she spent most of her time in primary and secondary school. She was always a great student, and she discovered her spirit for entrepreneurship at the end of high school. With her friends, she founded the first mental health treatment app, called D-App. She loves music, love, socializing, a job full of challenges, and during the pandemic, she discovered that she might also be interested in graphic design. She sees herself as a person working in the marketing and design sector of a company full of life, culture, and the best products. In this project, Amina and her team saw an opportunity to contribute to the country, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and perhaps the world, if the project becomes implemented.

Iris Markja
My name is Iris Markja. I am 21 years old. I am from Tirana, Albania. I am a student at University of Tirana, Faculty of Natural Sciences, for a master's degree in molecular biology. I take interest in issues concerning the environment like climate change, species diversity as well as solutions that aim sustainable growth. I believe if we all play our part, however small, in protecting and improving our environment, we will make a difference together.

Mina Marković
My name is Mina Marković, I am from Serbia, and I am a student at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade. Aside from being an aspiring architect, I enjoy graphic design, reading and writing, and participating in international work camps as a volunteer. I graduated from the Philological Grammar School in Belgrade, and plan on continuing my studies with a master's program in Germany.

Mihajlo Matković
Mihajlo is a youth worker and activist from Novi Sad, and an apolitical youth representative in the Council for Youth within the Government of the Republic of Serbia, serving his fellow youngsters and making sure their challenges are being acknowledged, voices respected, and needs met. In his many youth-related endeavours, he is focused on youth participation and activism, education, structured dialogue and co-management, and the recognition of the NFE and youth work. Besides, he's a co-founder of Once Upon a Youth programme, writing workshops aimed at the aspiring young authors who have published a collection of short stories so far. Mihajlo likes to joke that – in his free time – he's pursuing a Bachelor's degree in English language and literature; though, often, pens his own.

Keisi Mecaj
My name is Keisi Mecaj. I am a master student of Molecular Biology at University of Tirana. Science is my passion but I also love taking care of animals and nature. I am curious about exploring different cultures so I travel a lot. In the future I aspire to become a researcher in the field of Genetics.

Viktorija Mitevska
Viktorija Mitevska is student at the Faculty of Law Bitola and Business Academy Smilevski. As part of the faculty, she participates in seminars, trainings, conferences; she is a member of the Moot Court club Titus Flavius Orestes through which she participates in simulated human rights courts where she faces the work on the ECHR. She promotes human rights and youth activism through active volunteering and participation in youth projects. She is an excellent communicator and builds strong links between youth and civil society. She has excellent organizational skills, teamwork, ability to work with people, interpersonal communication, and creativity. She has work experience in law offices and the Basic Court in Bitola, and at the same time she is a member of the Legal Clinic in Bitola where she provides free legal aid to socially vulnerable groups. She is a human rights activist, especially for those who are socially disadvantaged, which is the biggest reason why she applied to participate in this policy contest. Viktorija passionately writes prose, reads books and loves to play sports, for more information, get another way, vikimitevska629@gmail.com

Darko Mitrevski
Darko Talevski has primary degree in law and he is a student at the Law Faculty Kicevo. He is also a member of the Youth Alternative Tourism Association POVIK Bitola. His hobby is hunting.

Ivana Petrovska
Ivana Petrovska is a student at the Faculty of Education in Bitola, North Macedonia. She has been studying English since she was 10 years old. Despite learning English she has been state champion in kick-box for three years. Now she is finishing her studies and planning on continuing her studies abroad.

Matija Popović

Matija is a double degree Economics and Finance student at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and at the University of Belgrade. Since 2017, he has been a member of European Youth Parliament in Bosnia and Herzegovina where he took on various roles in projects in multiple European states. For one term he performed the roles of Board member and of a President of the Organization respectively. He was a National Coordinator and Head Trainer of the "Understanding Europe" project in Bosnia and Herzegovina, initiated by the Schwarzkopf Foundation. Passionate about public speaking, he has won many debating awards during high school. Similarly, he went on to compete in case study competitions and is representing LSE at the International Case Competition.

Amira Shehu

Amira Shehu was born and raised in the city of Gjakova, Kosovo. She finished high school at "Hajdar Dushi Gymnasium", and now is a third-year Nursing student at the University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani". This year she was a beneficiary of a full scholarship at "Universum College" where she started her first year in Business and Management field. She has held trainings in "Team Communication" and "Stress Management during Covid-19" and also attended "Prishtina International Summer School" in the University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina", where she was also certified. Besides English, she also has knowledge of Turkish language. She is currently doing internship in the office administration of "Universum College". Amira has big plans for the future and wants to pursue a career in public health education.

Nerma Škrijelj

My name is Nerma Škrijelj. I am 23 years old graduate of the Faculty of International economics, finance and business, and I hold a Master of Science degree in European Official statistics from the University of Donja Gorica. During my bachelor studies, I participated in an ERASMUS+ mobility programme at the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics. Currently, I am working at Statistical Office of Montenegro as a data analyst. Previously, I worked at the Investment and Development Fund of Montenegro and had internships in Ministry of Finance and Montenegro Stock Exchange. I am also working for civil society organization NVO IKRE that mainly focuses on the gender equality and women empowerment. As a result of my academic achievements, I have been awarded several scholarships including the Student's Award for exceptional success. Also, my team won regional student competition Hackathon "Dialogue for the Future" in 2019.

Michael Stokey

My name is Michael Stokey and I am a 22-year-old Business Economics student at Singidunum University in Belgrade. I am originally from England and started studying in Belgrade over 3 years ago. My academic interests are risk management, macroeconomics and finance. My personal interests consist of hosting the 'English Podcast in Serbia', which I hope to grow gradually over time, as well as practicing meditation techniques and journaling. The combination of these academic interests and personal interests led me to be thoroughly absorbed, committed and engaged with the 'COVID-19 Students' Policy Challenge', which was one of the most influential experiences I have had during my studies.

Mihajlo Talevski

Mihajlo Talevski is a student of Psychology at the Slavic University Gavrilo Romanovich Derzavin in Bitola. His hobby is playing chess and he is also a member of Youth Alternative Tourism Association POVIK Bitola.

Filip Taskovski

Filip Taskovski, student at the Faculty of Economics and project manager of the civil society organization Innova Lab Bitola. As a project manager he was the coordinator of several European projects implemented in Macedonia, he has participated in a study exchange in Thessaloniki, Greece and in several youth international exchanges in Croatia, Serbia and Greece. During his studies in economics he was twice an intern in one of the largest banks in Macedonia. Thanks to his rich biography, he has a range of skills such as organizational, communication, management, team work abilities, computer skills and of course sharpened skills in the field of study such as accounting, auditing and so on.

Vahide Ujkani

I am Vahide Ujkani, born on 18th December 1999. I am an undergraduate student in Faculty of Education, 3rd year in University of Mitrovica. My ultimate goal is to be able one day to visit London.

Some things that I'd like to achieve in my life are:

- Become a teacher and inspire my students to never give up on their dreams
- Being able to travel around the world and visit places such as Japan
- To have a study degree in English.

Andrea Veličkovski

My name is Andrea Veličkovski. I am a 4th-year student studying Business Economics, Marketing, and Management at the Singidunum University, foreign studies. I was born in New York City (USA) but my family and I moved to Belgrade (Serbia) before I started school. I am currently in the process of learning German as well as Italian since Italy is the country where I plan on studying for my master's degree. In my spare time, I also do photography which I am extremely passionate about. Currently, I am doing an internship at a fashion company here in Belgrade.

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