

The state institutions should fight against the coronavirus, not the freedom of media

We draw the attention of the domestic and international public to the unacceptable recent moves by the state authorities in Serbia during the state of emergency introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which undermine democracy, rule of law, basic human rights and especially freedom of media. We condemn [the arrest of Nova.rs journalist Ana Lalić](#), to whom the Novi Sad Police Department imposed a measure of detention of up to 48 hours on April 1, 2020 because, as her lawyer stated, she is suspected that she could repeat the crime, publishing articles which are causing panic and chaos. This kind of treatment of journalists not only directly represents a violation of media freedom, but also creates an intimidating effect for all journalists in Serbia, which are the key point for adequate information of citizens in this country.

In a difficult situation we are in, combating a contagious COVID-19 disease that threatens all of us, the activities and measures of state bodies even in the state of emergency must be in accordance with the Constitution of Serbia, the European Convention on Human Rights and the international acts to which Serbia committed itself to. One of them is certainly the freedom of media, and above all the right of the public on accurate, true and timely information, especially in a situation where the public health of the entire population is endangered.

[Announcement by the Prime Minister of Serbia Ana Brnabić that today, on 2 April 2020, just four days after the adoption, the Government will withdraw its Conclusion on information](#) during the coronavirus pandemic, which stipulated that all information regarding the pandemic is provided exclusively by the Crisis response team headed by the Prime Minister of Serbia, is a positive step. We hope that the decision to withdraw the Conclusion was made by the Government of Serbia after listening to the opinion of the profession, journalist associations, legal experts and international organizations whose mandate is the protection of human rights, who considered that [this kind of centralization of information represents censorship](#) and drastic violation of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution - freedom of expression, freedom of media and the right to be informed. On the other hand, we think that the Prime Minister's statement that she will appeal to [the relevant authorities not to make similar arrests](#) is not in accordance with the Constitution and the principle of separation of powers, therefore it can be considered as pressure on the prosecution by the executive branch, which has become a frequent practice to which we have pointed out before.

While we believe it is important that the Government of Serbia and the Crisis response team continue to publish information on the number of tested, infected, hospitalized, deceased and citizens in home isolation, quarantine and similar accommodation in Serbia, and on the measures that the state intends to introduce and provide interpretations of intended and existing measures, we also consider it necessary that not only national, but

also institutions at the local level (mayors, emergency staffs, etc.), as well as health institutions and health workers, provide information to the public that may be relevant for the suppression of the infection. It should be noted that the health and lives of people depend on the timely response of the authorities.

At the same time, we urge the Government of Serbia to introduce all measures it adopts during the state of emergency imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular those relating to the derogation from human and minority rights, in the form required by the Constitution of Serbia and in proportion to the need for their introduction.

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