

Croatia: Why are Journalists Not Covered in Government's Emergency Measures?

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Trade Union of Croatian Journalists and Croatian Journalist's Association regret that the measures proposed by the Government to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic crisis do not include – the media.



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We would like to remind that since the last crisis in 2008, the number of journalists employed has almost halved, and we believed that the Government, aware of this, would propose measures to protect the people whose importance is shown in these difficult times and who are exposing to danger in order to serve the public.

Therefore, we asked the Ministry of Culture for measures for journalists and the media: first and foremost, in addition to financial relief or delay for entrepreneurs or publishers, guarantees that are firmly in place to secure job preservation, and to ensure that there will be no layoffs of full-time media employees, no cancellation of co-operation with external associates or freelancers, or reduction of salaries for full-time employees, as well as other employment rights. However, we do not see such guarantees in the proposed measures.

The action measures neither provide any relief for freelance journalists in order to give them tax reliefs, nor do they accept the proposal on the possibility of sick pay for part-time associates in case of coronavirus infection.

We also demanded that the process of awarding funds secured through the European Social Fund be accelerated, but also to immediately publish a call for tender for the second tranche, the remaining HRK 15 million, and the announcement of payment of funds to the publishers who are beneficiaries of the Fund for the Promotion of Pluralism. This is not a novelty but contractual obligation and regular payment to those who received these funds in the tender in 2018. We do not know what the conversion of these funds means, and it is unclear how it would be distributed.

In conclusion, we believe that the Government needs to cover the media sector with current measures in order to save jobs and those who play one of the most important roles in society in the current crisis.

Journalism in the health and economic crisis caused by coronavirus epidemic is more needed than ever. The functioning of vital public services – from healthcare, through supply, to the financial system – and the personal sphere of citizens' lives depends directly on timely and verified information, while spreading misinformation can make all crisis scenarios much more difficult.

The mass media today has the ability to quickly get to every screen, every isolation or quarantine. However, news is not generated in self-isolation or solely by searching the internet. Quality reporting cannot be ensured without a press presence at numerous crisis sites. This includes increased exposure of reporters to the coronavirus.

Therefore, Trade Union of Croatian Journalists and Croatian Journalist's Association ask the Government of the Republic of Croatia to provide safeguards and rapid testing for the presence of coronavirus for all journalists, photojournalists, cameramen and technicians on assignments.

Should a general quarantine be declared – we request that all journalists, all photojournalists and their technical staff who have a proper press card of their media, or a press card from CJA, Union or IFJ be allowed to move freely.

Media outlets, but also journalists, photojournalists and other media workers have not yet recovered from the negative effects of the 2008. global economic crisis, and are expected to be further affected by the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. The assumptions are that advertising revenues of media companies, which are already ending up in the hands of global digital companies, will now decline further, which will again threaten the liquidity of commercial media, and thus journalists and all media employees.

We are extremely concerned about the circumstances and the future development of the situation, which could again lead to the extinguishing of the jobs of journalists and other media employees and the devastation of the media, in particular small and local and independent, non-profit media. Given that there is a problem in the media sector of the unregulated rights of freelance journalists, we express particular concern about their fate, aware that in most media they may be the first to be hit by the effects of the coming crisis, either through layoffs or through stagnation of new engagements.

We recall that, according to the National Media Report (Ministry of Culture 2015.), the global economic crisis of 2008. affected the long-term crisis in Croatian media, which called into question

the exercise of the Constitution's guaranteed rights to freedom of expression and the democratic function of the media. From 2008. to 2012., media employment was down 25 percent – from 12,500 to 9300 workers.

Furthermore, while the decline in the number of employees in the Croatian economy in 2013. was 16 percent compared to 2008., media activities recorded 29 percent drop in employment over the same period, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics. According to the same source, the number of journalists reporting in writing decreased by 53 percent at the same time. Such a large decline in journalistic employment has resulted in a decline in media production, media awareness and erosion of previously unprecedented journalistic standards, as warned, according to the National Media Report (2015.), by media workers themselves. From 2004. to 2014., the Croatian Employment Service recorded 5206 entries of media workers into the unemployment register.

Given into consideration the announcement that the coronavirus crisis may have lower revenues, the state could respond by providing entrepreneurs – in this case, media publishers – with certain financial relief or delays, we are asking the Croatian Government to provide for every form of assistance and financial relief to media companies firm and exclusive bound in a clear, written, contractually defined obligation by a media company to guarantee that during the crisis and at least one year after the use of state aid, there will be no layoffs of full-time media employees, as well as cancellation of cooperation with external associates, ie freelancers and freelance journalists. We also ask that financial relief measures be firmly linked to media owners, with the obligation not to reduce salaries for full-time employees and the fees of external associates and freelance journalists.

We also request that institutions not only provide measures for companies in action plans and measures, but also freelance journalists must be included in such measures, so that they can be further relieved of taxation, allowing them tax deferrals and benefits, at least up to one year after an epidemic has passed.

It is also necessary to provide financial incentives and measures that would allow employers to pay permanent freelancers or freelancers and freelance journalists a remuneration of at least 70% of the monthly contract fees previously paid, or 70% of the last paid fee, in case of need for self-isolation or treatment from COVID-19 for a total of up to three months. We believe that tax breaks can be one possible solution, another may be the creation of a special national payment fund not only for journalists but also for other professions where part-time work is common. Finally, as of 2017., freelance journalists (as well as other professions in which such a form of work is possible) pay contributions, therefore, health insurance contributions, and are not entitled to sickness benefits, and in that case they would lose income.

In addition, given that in 2016. the third of media sector (which grew in the post-crisis period) was devastated by the disastrous decisions of the then Ministry of Culture administration, the new crisis would completely destroy it. We are therefore asking the Government to expedite the process of awarding funds (HRK 15 million) secured through the European Social Fund (ESF) for the Community Media Program, but also immediately call for proposals for the second phase of the same program, ie for the remaining 15 million HRK, also secured through the ESF.

Furthermore, given into consideration the announcement by the Electronic Media Agency that they will accelerate the disbursement of funds to the beneficiaries of the Fund for Promoting Pluralism and Diversity of Electronic Media, we are requesting that the Agency announces a new two-year call for funds allocation in the third quarter of 2020.

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