

Study of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the state of emergency in Serbia on employment, working conditions and household tasks

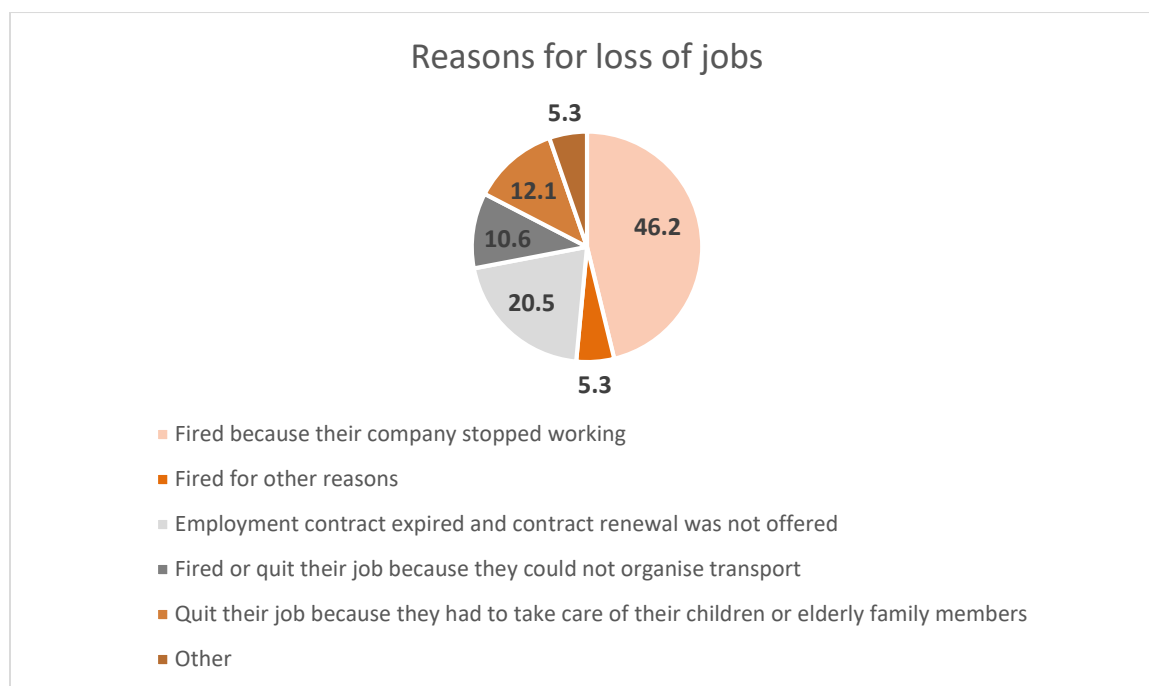
Some 200,000 people lost their jobs and almost half of them were rendered jobless because their companies stopped working

Belgrade, 13 May 2020

- *During the coronavirus pandemic and the state of emergency in Serbia, some 200,000 people or eight percent of those who were employed in Serbia (also including those who were informally employed or self-employed) in February 2020, before the pandemic was declared, lost their jobs, it was estimated on the basis of a study conducted in mid-April by SeConS Development Initiative Group with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.*
- *Women bore the brunt of the burden and the highest risk during the Covid-19 crisis as they accounted for as much as 86 percent of the “frontline workers facing the risk of infection”. Heavier workload in terms of domestic chores and looking after family members was also shouldered by women (in 70% of households), who mostly performed these tasks even before the crisis.*
- *Employees in Serbia adapted well to working from home: about one-fourth of them (24.7%) started working from home, of whom 90 percent were adequately equipped for doing so, while merely 15 percent of them were less efficient than usual while working from home.*
- *Two-thirds of the respondents were worried about health risks, 35.6 percent were worried about the looming economic crisis in Serbia, while 16.2 percent voiced concerns about the potential deterioration of freedoms, strengthening of repression and the authoritarian rule.*

This study was conducted with a view to gaining insights into the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the state of emergency on employment of the population, working conditions and practices related to household tasks and taking care of family members, covering a representative sample of 1,600 respondents who were employed in February 2020, and it reflects the situation and perceptions during the study period.

Almost one half of those who lost their jobs (46.2%) were rendered jobless because their companies stopped working. One-fifth of the total number of respondents (20.5%) was not offered a renewal of employment contract after the previous one expired. In most cases, the employees could not organise going to work and taking care of their family members, so they had to quit their jobs because during the state of emergency there was no public transport, schools and kindergartens were closed and social services to the elderly were suspended.



Most employees who lost their jobs were the ones employed in private companies, catering, trade and construction industries, self-employed, informally employed and those with fixed-term employment contracts. Although employees in all four regions of Serbia were almost equally affected, loss of jobs was slightly more frequent in rural areas than in urban areas. Young people were more frequently affected. In terms of gender differences, the ones who were exposed to higher risk of losing their jobs were men in urban areas and women in rural areas.

As for annual leave, 5.4 percent of employees were forced to take annual leave, while another 4.1 percent agreed with their employers to take annual leave. One-fourth of employees (25.2%) worked part-time or in a reduced number of shifts, whereas 5.6 percent had their wages reduced.

Table 1: The share of employees who were exposed to different changes at workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic

What changes took place due to the Covid-19 pandemic? ¹	% of respondents
Nothing changed	27.5
Working from home	24.7

¹ The total score in this table exceeds 100% because the respondents had a multiple choice of answers if multiple changes occurred at their workplace.

Seconded to a different location or a different facility	2.3
Seconded to a different post requiring similar qualifications	1.1
Shorter working hours or reduced number of shifts	25.2
Longer working hours or increased number of shifts	4.8
Reduced wages	5.6
Forced to take annual leave	5.4
Agreed with their employer to voluntarily take annual leave to share the burden with the employer	4.1
Forced to take unpaid leave	2.9
Work currently stopped	4.6
Currently not working due to sick leave	1.2
Not working due to isolation or self-isolation	1.4
Reduced workload	1.5
Other	3.3

Working from home

One-fourth of the employees (24.7%) worked from home and they mostly included those working in the education and ICT sectors, those performing expert, scientific and technical jobs or administrative and ancillary service-based jobs.

Working from home proved to be a quite appropriate solution for most respondents. More than 90 percent of those who worked from home were adequately equipped for doing so. Only a minority of the respondents found working from home problematic either because their family members disturbed them while they were working or because their work invaded their privacy too much with frequent online meetings, video conferences and undefined working hours, or because they lacked adequate space in their home where they could work. These respondents were mostly the ones living in multiple-member households or multiple-family households, or the ones with small children. Merely 15 percent of the respondents claimed they were less efficient than usual while working from home.

Working as frontline workers facing risk of infection

The largest share of those who continued working as frontliners facing the health risk included medical workers (51.7%), shop assistants (35.8%) and hygiene workers (4%), while the rest of them included personal carers, experts and technical associates in different sectors, as well as drivers.

The vast majority of employees working as "frontline workers facing the risk of infection" were women, who accounted for as much as 86 percent. This is the result of segregation in the labour market, manifesting itself as a stark concentration of women working in the economy of care that mainly comprises health care, as well as the ones working in the trade sector.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, women bore the brunt of the burden when it comes to what is called "reproductive jobs", i.e. unpaid domestic chores and looking after other family members. Although many men were working from home due to the state of emergency and could share the workload with women in terms of taking care of the household and family, nothing changed in this segment for 70 percent of households, while in those households where the workload shifted, in most cases women were still the ones who had to shoulder the brunt of the burden in terms of the above tasks, which they mostly performed anyway.

What are the (un)employed mostly worried about?

During the peak of the pandemic, most respondents (66.2%) were worried about the risk of infection. Almost half of the respondents (47.3%) were worried about uncertainty as to how long the state of emergency was going to last in Serbia. Concerns that a major economic crisis might break out were shared by 35.6 percent of the respondents, while 31 percent of them were worried about the economic situation of their own household.

Quite a few respondents, i.e. 16.2% of them, voiced concerns about the state of freedoms and apprehensions with respect to the strengthening of repression and the authoritarian rule.

People also feared losing their jobs, i.e. 12.3 percent of the respondents that mainly included those working in the sectors which were most affected by the measures that were put in place, as well as those who were informally employed or employed on the basis of fixed-term contracts.

Chart 2 - What are people most worried about?

