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PRESS RELEASES

Impact of the coronavirus on the life and work of European citizens

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In late September 2020, Dublin-based European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) published a new report presenting the results of a survey on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on personal and professional lives of citizens across the European Union (EU). The period between April and July 2020, despite showing a mild improvement in terms of working hours and job security, also saw a very unfavourable cumulative social and economic impact of the pandemic on citizens' lives, especially for women and young people. Croatian respondents to the survey highlighted significant existential problems, they are pessimistic with regard to their financial future and have very low levels of trust in the national governments and the EU.

Eurofound conducted two rounds of the e-survey: the first one in April, when the majority of EU Member States were in lockdown; the other one in July, when societies and economies gradually started re-opening. This piece of research, with its 87,477 respondents from across the EU, is unique in this respect as it enables us to reveal certain trends during the crisis. At the EU level, the most relevant conclusion drawn is that the negative impact of the coronavirus is evident in a large increase in intergenerational and gender inequality. Namely, even though some indicators improved – such as fear of becoming unemployed and feeling of isolation – due to higher unemployment rates the position of persons aged between 18 and 34 on the job market deteriorated. Only half of this population gave positive assessment of their own economic and social position.

Furthermore, in the midst of the pandemic (between April and July), women were more likely to lose their jobs than men, while those women who remained employed experienced greater imbalance between their professional and personal lives. The coronavirus had the most negative impact on women aged between 18 and 34 as they were the ones who experienced the most layoffs (11% of women and 8% of men in this age group lost their jobs due to the pandemic). On the other hand, men aged between 35 and 49 were least likely to become unemployed (6% of men and 9% of women in this age group lost their jobs). Among those aged 50 or over, 8% of both men and women lost their jobs.

Self-employed respondents were more likely to become unemployed than regular employees, while persons with secondary education or lower were at a much greater risk of losing their job than respondents with tertiary education. 15% of employed respondents to the April survey felt they were likely to lose their jobs in the upcoming three months. In the July survey, such a feeling was shared only by 10% of employed respondents. Bulgaria and Greece had the highest proportions of respondents expressing this fear, whereas this fear was lowest in Denmark, Austria and Hungary. In Croatia, 8% of respondents lost their jobs in this period, which is in line with the EU average. The likelihood of losing their job in the upcoming three-month period was expressed by 19% of Croatian respondents in April and 11% in July. Both of these numbers are slightly above the EU average (15% in

April and 10% in July); however, they are still much lower than those for Bulgaria, Malta, Greece and Portugal. Croatian respondents, similar to their peers in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, did not feel emotionally drained by work.

Many persons in employment in the EU reported working fewer hours than normal. In April, almost half of the respondents said that their working hours had decreased, while in July the same answer was provided by slightly over one-third of respondents. The number of working hours completed decreased by a huge margin in Southern European countries – Cyprus, Malta, Greece, Italy and Spain, except Portugal. Almost half of Croatian respondents said that their working hours had remained unchanged, 22% reported that they had increased, while 28% reported fewer working hours. The sectors of economy most affected by decreases in working hours were construction, commerce and hospitality, while public administration and healthcare were least affected.

Enforced closure of a large number of companies led to many employees switching to working from home. Almost half of the employees spent at least some time working from home, while one-third worked exclusively from home. Croatia reported the lowest share of employees (less than 20%) who worked exclusively from home and the highest share (more than 40%) of those who worked at various other locations. At the EU level, the experience of working from home appears to have been a positive one for many employees. July respondents indicated their satisfaction with the quality of their work in particular and, to a slightly lesser extent, the amount of work performed. Around 70% indicated that they were generally satisfied with working from home and that they would appreciate having this option occasionally in the future as well.

The balance between professional and personal life at EU level was stable during the observed period. The highest level of work-life balance in July was reported by respondents from Austria, Germany, Hungary and the Netherlands, while Portuguese respondents reported the lowest levels. The level of work-life balance of Croatian respondents in April was almost equal to the EU average, whereas it substantially decreased in July, when it was one of the lowest among the observed countries. The highest levels of stress in professional and personal lives were experienced by women with children under the age of 12 (38% said they were worried about their job even when not working, 36% reported being too tired after work to do household work, while 35% stated that their job prevented them from spending quality time with their families). For millions of people across the EU, working from home due to the coronavirus meant that their work life entered their private surroundings, which disturbed the work-life balance of many people and increased the existing inequalities between family members.

When asked to self-assess their personal financial situation in the upcoming three months, almost 40% respondents in April expected it to deteriorate, while in July this fear was expressed by one-quarter of respondents. The lowest fear of deterioration was reported in Denmark and Luxembourg, while this fear was highest in Croatia and Greece. 47% of April respondents at the EU level declared that their household had difficulties making ends meet. In July, this was reported by 44%. In July, the EU country that most frequently reported great difficulties in making ends meet was Croatia (23%), while only 9% of Croatian respondents expected their financial situation to improve in the upcoming three months. On the other hand, the same feeling was expressed by 24% of Estonian and 18% of Latvian respondents. In other words, Croatian citizens were the least optimistic about their future financial situation.

Furthermore, the survey also took into account financial support measures during the pandemic. The support measures were divided into three groups: support with expenses (such as deferral of payment or cancellation of debt), financial support and support from NGOs or family and friends. The research has shown that around 23% of employees in the EU received some form of financial support (for instance, 9% of employees and 12% of self-employed persons received wage support). Around half of self-employed respondents received some form of financial support. With regard to the usefulness of support measures for the improvement of their financial situation, around two-thirds of the respondents benefited the most from aid from friends and family, whereas slightly more than half of the respondents highlighted the support with expenses and financial support as useful.

Finally, political scientists believe that the trust in the national government substantially determines the extent to which societies can efficiently respond to the corona crisis. The least amount of trust in

their national governments was reported by Polish and Croatian respondents, while respondents from Luxembourg, Finland, Denmark and Germany trust their governments a great deal. Apart from this, levels of trust in the EU were the lowest in Croatia and Greece, while the EU is trusted the most by Irish, Polish and Lithuanian respondents.

In short, the present report shows that Croatian citizens reported substantial financial and existential problems (so-called making ends meet, with one of the highest rates in the whole EU); they are very pessimistic when it comes to their future financial situation and they have very little trust in the national government and the EU. Despite initial confusion at the start of the pandemic, when citizens noticed a lack of necessary coordination, EU decision-makers, drawing from experience of the previous crisis (2008-2013), initiated various activities for alleviating economic and social consequences of the corona crisis. For instance, in July the EU sanctioned numerous measures and substantial financial resources to Member States, which is a clear example of European solidarity. Citizens, not only in Croatia, are often not well aware of all results achieved at the national and European level. For this reason, we should adopt a clear communication strategy but also further encourage European solidarity. This could lead to greater trust of Croatian citizens in both the national and EU governments, which is currently at very low levels.