

### Short description of what happened

On April 1, Serbian police arrested Ana Lalić, a reporter for news website Nova.rs, just hours after she published a report on chaotic conditions in a local hospital. Authorities held Lalić in custody overnight and charged her with publishing information that could incite panic, according to news reports.

After European Union bodies and journalists' groups protested Lalić's detention, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić walked back the country's strict rules on disseminating information relating to the pandemic, and authorities dropped the charges against Lalić on April 27, according to reports.

### Full case study

#### What was it like being arrested over your COVID-19 coverage?

I wrote a report about doctors and nurses who are working at the Clinical Center of Voivodina without sufficient protection (masks, gloves and suits). It was the start of the epidemic in Serbia, and hospitals weren't ready for this type of health crisis and challenge. They didn't have a protocol, and everyone could use only one mask and one pair of gloves for the entire shift.

[The article] wasn't controversial, it was the confession of two doctors and one nurse who were afraid for their safety. I didn't publish their names, because employees [of the center] were forbidden to speak to any media.

We published the report at about 3 p.m. on Nova.rs. In the evening, six police officers rang at my door. They confiscated my laptop and two phones and searched my house completely, looking for "narcotics and guns." A few hours later, when they finished searching, they arrested me and took me to the police station.

There, they took my statement and called the prosecutor who decided to put me in custody. I spent all night in a small, smelly cell without windows, only one bed with an open toilet. The next morning at 9 a.m. they took me in a police car to the court. The prosecutor decided to free me, but did not drop the charges against me. My case goes on, with the regular procedures. I'm still accused of spreading panic, which can bring six months to five years in prison.

#### How has the government responded to your arrest?

[Prime Minister Brnabić] didn't apologize at all. [The government] continued saying that I'm a liar, but

they didn't prove that I was wrong. The prime minister said it was a "stupid decision," but in my opinion she did that only because of the pressure and numerous reactions from journalists, the E.U. commissioner, and many other E.U. institutions.

Today, 20 days later, doctors and experts close to the government admit that hospitals didn't have enough equipment at the beginning of the epidemic. Unfortunately, the government didn't change. They just closed all press conferences for journalists.

We can ask questions by mail and we can basically only talk to the representatives of the government. Statements by doctors and medical staff can rarely be heard because they are mostly forbidden by the internal regulations of the hospital from talking to the media. If not officially prohibited, they don't want to make statements publicly, especially not those that contradict what the [government-run] Crisis Team reports.

#### How has the pandemic affected your work on a daily basis?

Like all over the world, the pandemic is the prime news. We are not writing only about health, but how every aspect of life now is changed and directly connected with the pandemic.

The biggest obstacle is to get another side of the story, because all information is centralized by the government, and every other source is censored. My biggest concerns are human rights violations in Serbia today, abuse of political power and laws, and propaganda.

#### How have you handled working amid the pandemic?

[I have been] doing my job as best I can under these conditions, keeping a sharp mind, checking every piece of information five times, and letting my colleagues, friends, and family always know where I am.

It's hard to keep sources safe because there are rumors that government services are intercepting our communications without proper legal approval. My correspondence with my sources was on my phone when I was arrested; police could take their names, which they did.

The government of Serbia today is fighting on two fronts. One is against virus, and the other is against the true and free press.

This case study was originally published by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

<https://cpj.org/2020/04/serbian-reporter-ana-lalic-on-her-arrest-and-detention/>

notes