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## The Virus Diaries: Managing a law firm as crisis escalates in Serbia

Easter weekend in Belgrade. Late on Saturday night and into the early hours of Sunday, thousands of people would normally congregate in front of the Church of Saint Sava to celebrate the Holy Fire ceremony and the beginning of the Orthodox Easter. But this year the city was silent. The usual kissing of icons during communion services in Serbia's Orthodox churches now brings fatal risk.

Doors were shut and candles were lit inside instead of on the street. The government imposed an 84-hour curfew, lasting from Good Friday afternoon until early on Tuesday the following week to keep people inside during Easter festivities.

"There were a lot of vague and unclear messages from Church officials about whether people should attend Mass," says Gecić Law's founding partner Bogdan Gecić. "So the government enforced total lockdown." The lockdown, though relatively brief to begin with, was severe. A week ago, restrictions were imposed again.

Covid-19 came to Serbia just a couple of weeks after the outbreak in Italy at the end of February, which was only around a month prior to planned regular parliamentary elections in Serbia.



Knez Mihailova

Gecić Law, housed in a neo-Renaissance building on Knez Mihailova, the main pedestrian road in downtown Belgrade, shut its doors on Friday 13 March and on 16 March the government officially announced a state of emergency. Serbia laid down some of the most stringent lockdown rules in Europe – curfew ran from 5pm until 5am throughout the week. Even the weekend brought no solace as people were not allowed outside from 5pm on Friday to 5am on Monday.

After nearly three months of lockdown, Gecić Law's founding partner Bogdan Gecić can now eat lunch outside a downtown café. Lockdown officially ended in Serbia on 7 May, from which point the firm prepared to reopen for 1 June. The Serbian legal market is still relatively young. Bogdan Gecić founded Gecić Law in 2015 and it now has a headcount of 25 in Belgrade and a small satellite office in Montenegro. Due to its legacy as part of the former Yugoslavia and UN sanctions, Serbia has a troubled relationship with the idea of privatisation. The radical push for privatisation and the free market began only after the democratic revolution in October 2000, after which came a second wave of privatisation in the 2000s. As the practice of corporate law is still in its early years, many senior Serbian lawyers are millennials.

Though Serbia's legal market may not yet be fully developed, its youthful firms are at the crux of change. Belgrade has a booming tech scene with entrepreneurs, who once left the country for opportunities elsewhere, but are now returning to establish start-ups in fields such as blockchain, cloud platforms, research and machine learning

technologies and cyber security. Gecić Law outsources its IT work to a company that upgraded its systems and switched the firm over to Microsoft Teams from Office 365 and Skype for Business within 48 hours.

The plan for the return to the office began at the beginning of May, overseen by chief operating officer Hristina Kosec. The firm carried out a number of anonymous and open surveys, asking whether people were ready to come back to the office and under what terms. Only once the poll showed that more than 50 per cent of the workforce was ready to return did the firm give people the opportunity (almost three weeks after the lockdown was officially eased). Around 20 to 30 per cent of the office continue to work remotely.

"Measures such as spaced seating have been brought in on public transport, yet it is still not risk free. We want to be responsible for everyone in the firm – not everyone is of the same means. We have a number of employees that live in student dorms, for example. So we still have an open policy that people can work remotely," Kosec says.



Gecić Law office

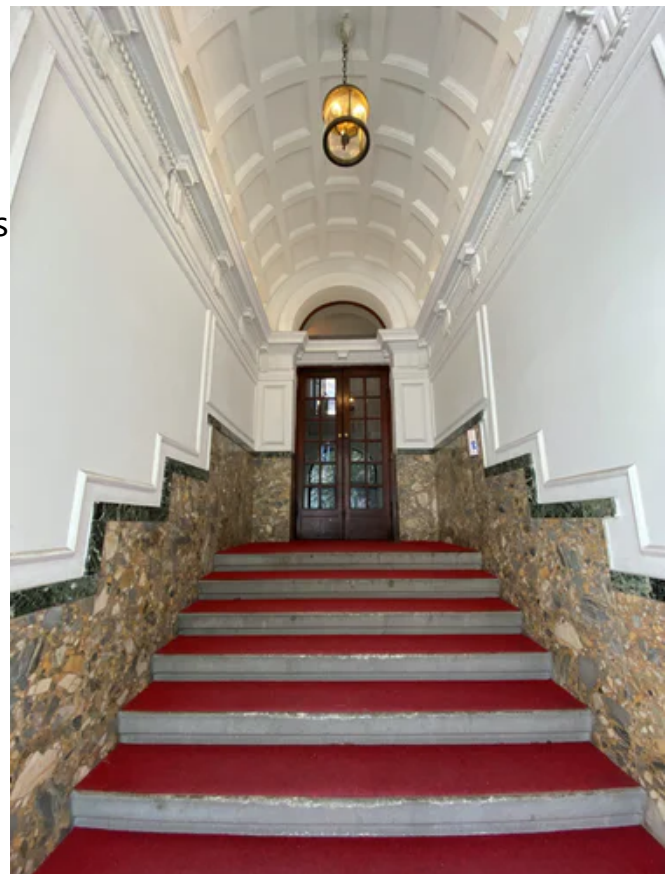
“Dezo barijera” (anti-viral sheets) have been placed on the floor of entrances to disinfect the soles of people’s shoes. An Airbus A330 landed from China in Belgrade’s Nikola Tesla airport in late March with medical aid, including the sheets for medical facilities. They have since been rolled out in offices. Upon entering the building, each employee also receives a protective mask and gloves for the day.

“We don’t expect people to sit at their desks wearing masks” says Gecić. “However an issue that is arising here and across southern Europe is air conditioning and whether it spreads the virus. So far we have kept the AC off but once it gets warmer we’ll have to reconsider what we are doing. We’re on the same latitude as Genoa so it can get pretty warm – up to 40c in August.”

Nonetheless, upon doing some research the firm found that the history of its building means it is in a better position to control air flow. Gecić Law’s Belgrade base is housed in the Nikola Spasić Endowment Building, built in 1889 as a residential home and now protected as an historic building in the city. Instead of a central air conditioning, it has individual units in each office. The firm has installed HEPA filters to provide extra protection against Covid-19, while many hotels and modern office spaces now have to rethink how they use their AC.

Like the legal industry, Gecić Law’s HQ is intertwined with its Yugoslavian legacy. The Nikola Spasić Endowment Building was confiscated by the communists after WW2, who considered the neo-Renaissance buildings of Serbia’s past to be bourgeoisie folly. The Communists in control of erstwhile Yugoslavia promoted a utilitarian brand of non-ornamental architecture to reflect its allegiance to Stalin and the Soviet Bloc, containing no inflection of Serbia’s history. These buildings have gradually been returned to the people.

The Endowment Building was only restituted ten years ago and Gecić Law moved in upon its inception in 2015. “When we moved in we refurbished our space and found boxes for heaters from the 1930s in French Art Deco



GL entrance



design, in geometric patterns” Gecić says. “We renovated and preserved them.”

Like many, Gecić has found that lockdown brought the world a little closer – if only for a few hours. The firm took part in the TerraLex Virtual Global Meeting alongside more than 600 lawyers from across the globe and time zones.

Gecić states, “Not only has this been a fantastic (and frankly never done before to my best knowledge) event to network and discuss business opportunities in Covid-19 times, it is also a great way to reengage people who felt cutoff during the pandemic.”

**Update:** Shortly after *The Lawyer* spoke to Gecić, Serbia recorded a spike in Covid-19 cases and a state of emergency was declared on 2 July. Throughout June, Serbia was preoccupied with general elections, with the worrying resurgence of coronavirus infections seeming like an afterthought.

At the end of June, the use of masks on public transport and closed areas was made mandatory. Gecić states that it serves as a cautionary tale against a swift easing of lockdown.

For the young workforce, a second lockdown will be even harder than the first – particularly if, as expected, cases rise again in the autumn. Around 90 per cent of the firm are working remotely again and the firm, whose HR director is trained in cognitive behavioural therapy, is offering mental health support to its employees.

“We are just satisfied we were able at least to do right for our own people. Nonetheless, the situation is becoming quite serious,” Gecić says.



The Nikola Spasić Endowment Building

By **Gabriella Kane** 16 July 2020 09:00

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