

# Life behind a face mask: probation in Croatia during COVID-19

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The year 2019 was the best and the most hectic year of my life. Maternity leave, a new born baby, one child starting school and the one in the middle always in attention deficit. End of 2019 was the date I was supposed to start working again. And it seemed to me, I suppose, like the first day of conditional release must feel for the offenders I work with.

I work as head of one Probation office in Croatia, but by vocation I'm a probation officer: this is the part of my job that I enjoy the most. Our office covers two counties and we have a lot of field work to cover. Just as I got the hang of every day work, routines with my private life at home, kindergarten, school, even pub quizzes on Mondays – the newspapers started to report of a terrible situation with a new virus in China. I wasn't paying too much attention. Then it started in Italy and it hit me – the reality, it was coming.

## Preparations for corona

Beginning of March we started preparing instructions for our staff members about social distancing, disinfectants, face masks, gloves... Our everyday routine, at work, was pretty much the same, accompanied with humor, filled with medical knowledge that we picked up along the way. We watched almost all medical series on TV. But in the air, in the atmosphere you could sense tension, something unknown. And it was coming, we knew that, but when, and what would it be like? That we didn't know...

It almost seemed like a relief when the first person fell ill. Soon after that several measures were implemented at the national level – the „lockdown“ started. We were prepared for this option, we had a plan for working in teams. Half of our staff was working from home, the other half at the office, and after 14 days we switched. The 14 days rounds were epidemiological recommendations if one of us got sick. We used all the technical achievements that we could. We were constantly on-line, exchanging information and creating new strategies of work in this situation between our staff members and our Central office.

## Work with offenders

One of the distinctiveness of the Croatian probation system is that with offenders we mostly work individually, and in this period this was our asset. For our communication with offenders we mostly used phone calls. The offenders that our office is in charge of mainly come from rural parts, and are economically disadvantaged. Some of them have mobile phones that don't have the capacity for video calls and others do not even have a mobile phone. Also, their information literacy is poor, and for them it's very complicated if they need to use some other programs and applications other than a simple phone call, or a text message. Also, because they are in rural parts their signal coverage is questionable. We were worried about the offenders who only formally cooperated or didn't cooperate at all. It was easy for them in this situation just to ignore our calls. However, some of them that we couldn't reach earlier now answered our calls. The social distancing caused that the probation officer you had been avoiding now seemed like an desirable interlocutor.

Our strategy was to identify at-risk groups of offenders, and the ones with history of gender violence. Since we were worried about #stayhome consequences, we contacted them more often. We focused on providing support and protective factors because we were aware that supervision and control in these moment were our weakest points. We cooperated with the police, but because of the situation we were very careful in using their resources too much.

Everybody around us was worried. We were worried about our jobs, family members, when and how all of this would be over. And our offenders were worried as well. Along with all of our worries, they were also worried how could they fulfil their obligations, how this would affect their conditional sentences, if they would need to go to prison. They needed support and understanding that I think we did provide. And they also needed personal contact – the thing we couldn't give them.

### **Earthquake**

Zagreb was hit by an earthquake on Sunday, 22nd of March at 6: 30AM and I will never forget that moment. It was a strong earthquake, 5.5 on the Richter scale. When you think the pandemic is the worst thing that can happen, an earthquake appears. I'm not a person that get scared easily, but this time I was scared to go to work on Monday. I took the stairs even if our office is located on the 13th floor. One of the Zagreb pobation offices was greatly damaged in the earthquake and we had to make new strategies of work in again new conditions. The earthquake showed me that while as I was concentrating on providing support and supervision to offenders, my staff members also needed support. They are experts in communication and mental health, but they are also people, with their own fears and worries, some with chronic illness, missing their family members that they are distanced from, some with spouses that lost their jobs, some who had no way of getting to work, some who just wanted to go to work to keep their minds busy.

### **Looking forward to normal life**

Now the measures are less strict, so we are developing new strategies on how to work with offenders during the pandemic that include field work and personal contact. I miss my colleagues, I miss our humor, our staff meetings, our funny stories. I'm sorting out office supplies that now include face masks, gloves and disinfectant. I'm looking forward to seeing everyone again, to live our "normal" lives behind face masks, because although everyone will be wearing them I can still see by their eyes when they are smiling.