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Media reports about abuse of subsidies full of half-truths and incomplete information

Media reports about abuse of wage subsidies for employers that hire persons with disabilities are full of half-truths and incomplete information, it was noted at the joint press conference of **the Association of the Youth with Disabilities (UMHCG) and the Union of the Blind of Montenegro (SSCG).**

“By reporting on allegedly irrationally high earnings of **persons with disabilities (PWDs), the message is sent that persons with disabilities do not deserve high earnings because they are unable to work, even if we have the same qualifications** or when we are more qualified than persons with disabilities,” said Marina Vujačić, Executive Director of the Association of Youth with Disabilities.

She added that she believed **that was the reason the amount of earnings it had been written about in texts compared to the salary of the Prime Minister and the President of Montenegro. “I guess they are meritorious citizens, by reason of their office, whether they are delivering results or not, and regardless of the way they are carrying out their duties.”**

“I am convinced that there was one intention – **obtaining support for reducing scope of existing rights, in such a way that the amount of the subsidy will be limited, which I expressly oppose, that is, the intention is to define the upper limit of subsidies that can be obtained by employers. What comes next – prescribing maximum earning amount persons with disabilities are entitled to?”**

She believes that this *conference* should have been organized by the **Government of Montenegro**, i.e. authorities of which it is composed, and who are responsible for labour and employment policy.

“Since the **Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare** and the **Employment Agency** of Montenegro do not address the continuous negative campaign, i.e. propaganda concerning the alleged abuse of subsidies, but with their statements also directly contribute to it, and perhaps promotes his campaign, it is time for us to try to stop it from progressing any further,” said Vujačić.

She highlighted that was difficult, after all this happened, to minimize negative consequences and the damage caused.

According to what she said, it is appalling that employers **in Montenegro are free to choose whether to hire a person with disability or, if they do not, pay a special contribution for their employment. She added that this fact was absolutely justified, because if employers hiring PWDs did not have any guaranteed rights to various types of subsidies, the number of PWD employees would be reduced to a statistical error.**

This was the situation until the **Fund for Professional Rehabilitation** was founded, but even for years after that. Even now, it is more likely that persons with disabilities will find a job through so called project grant schemes than on a regular basis. Fifteen years after the application of the *Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities,* the number of employed PWDs is lower than the number of PWDs who have been registered in the record of the **Employment Agency”, explained Vujačić.**

She reminded that this *Law* had been adopted in 2008 as a special Law, which in itself confirms that the *Labour Law*, as a general law, cannot solve the problem of social injustice and the position of PWDs in accessing the labour market.

At the same time she said she believed it was a pity that nowhere in the media and official reports people could read about **multiple benefits of employing persons with disabilities, but also about the disproportionate impacts of their unemployment and lack of employment opportunities.**

“A person with disability with no adequate income cannot have an independent and productive life, but is dependent on family and the system, often put in the position where he/she barely survives. Quite often, the members of person’s family forgo their personal preferences and choices – forced to provide support to this persons in meeting basic needs. **What logically follows is that feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and uselessness set in. This causes that they rather choose to stay at home than be mentioned in media, in a text with negative connotations, which would later lead to stigmatization by the community**. Thus, persons with disabilities are expensive for society, and that is why that the society itself cannon have developed and advanced economy”, stated Vujačić.

She pointed out that if there are some abuses and they can be proven, those who carry them out must be sanctioned, and that everything adverse to this way of dealing with abuses causes harm to persons with disabilities. Neither employers nor the state of Montenegro is damaged, “and we are marked as thieves, pests and immoral people”, added **Vujačić.**

Finally, she concluded that it was unacceptable that put themselves forward as persons representing the rights of PWDs talk about need to limit the amount of the subsidy because “allegedly, the amount of earnings of some PWDs and high amounts of subsidies cause delay in subsidy payments. It is not said that this happens due to irregular work of the **Employment Agency**, i.e. those engaged within the **Fund for Professional Rehabilitation**”, concluded **Vujačić.**

Speaking at the same time as the **President of the Council of the Fund for Professional Rehabilitation**, the **Executive Director of the Union of the Blind of Montenegro Goran Macanović** said that the entire situation which was a topic in the media, was a consequence of the fact that many requests had been for too long in the **Agency**, and why they were not promptly submitted to **the Council** which is responsible for this, is a question to be put to the **Employment Agency** and employees of the **Fund**.

“This clearly shows that the **Fund for Professional Rehabilitation** did not calculate and pay those wage subsidies submitted to the Agency during the year”, he added.

**Macanović** also said he, as the President of the **Council of the Fund**, carried out an analysis based on the official excel tables used by the Institute, and not by using applications. He did it because of the lack of knowledge of employed of the **Agency.**

“To shed some light on the story about high wages of persons with disabilities, we are going to look at data indicating that: **Out of the total number of wage subsidies paid in 2021 and presented in a monthly breakdown, the highest number of wages above 1,000 EUR was 120, or about 9%. On average, 1,136 requests were processed and paid in 2021, and there should have been more than 2,000 because the number of employed PWDs increased in 2021**”, said **Macanović.**

“Only this piece of information is a strong evidence that the **Fund for Professional Rehabilitation** did not calculate and paid wage subsidies the employers had applied for,” said **Macanović.**

He said that out of a total of **810** requests examined at the sessions of the **Council** in 2023, **298** of them were submitted in 2022, **19** were submitted in 2021, and **one request was submitted in 2020**.

Hi highlighted that year after year the number of employers hiring persons with disabilities has been increasing, there were **319** of them in 2017 and **2970** in 2022.

At the end of 2017, 319 persons with disabilities were employed, for which the **Fund had assigned 5,299,282.98 EUR, although the majority of that amount covered the expenditure of grant schemes and other subsidies, not only wage subsidies. The expenditure of the Fund in 2022, 2021 and especially in 2022 do not correspond to the increased number of employed persons with disabilities because it was not accompanied by maintenance of regular payment.**

While presenting data he obtained as the president of the **Council of the Fund**, he pointed to the data from 2021 as particularly interesting because he believed that crucial problems began that year.

On average, the **Employment Agency** processed and paid **1,136 wage subsidies monthly in 2021. He reminded that there should have been more than 2,000 of them**, because the number of employed PWDs increased in that year.

“**When a person with a lower percentage of disability finds a job, the state has lower costs than if this persons was registered as unemployed,” said Macanović**.

He added that hiring of a person with lower percentage of disability presented a lower cost for the state than if the same person was receiving compensation for unemployment from the **Labour Bureau.**

**The effects of employment of PWDs with a net salary of 700 EUR corresponds to the budget income of 303.38 EUR, while the budget income related to the unemployment of a PWDs is only 31.24 EUR. Monthly budget expenditure for one employed person with disability, with a subsidy of 75%, amounts to 329.41 EUR, and with a subsidy of 50% t amounts to 118,48 EUR,” explained Macanović.**

On the other hand, **costs borne by the national budget for an unemployed PWD amount to 148.76 EUR monthly** – it was shown by the analysis carried out by **Macanović.**

Finally, the Executive Director of the **Union of the Blind of Montenegro** urged the **Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare** and the **Agency** to start publishing data on the Government’s tax revenue collected from employers who hire PWDs, instead to think about limiting subsidies. While answering journalists’ questions, he reminded that more than 100.000 EUR had been spent by the Government without a specific purpose, and this money had been paid for years by employers for not hiring persons with disabilities.