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Press Review

Sofia, March 13 (BTA) -

COVID-19 OUTBREAK

The coronavirus outbreak continues to dominate the press. On Thursday the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in the country climbed to 23 which prompted the government to propose a state of emergency in the country.

The Friday papers look into the effects of COVID-19 on the economy. Quoting an online poll by the Association of Bulgarian Tour Operators and Travel Agents Douma writes that 46.3 per cent of the tourist industry reports that sales have slumped by over 75 per cent. Some 57.4 per cent of managers and owners plan to lay off staff. The industry reports a nearly 90 per cent drop in sales in the past 40 days compared with the like period of 2019. The poll was carried out among over 1,000 representatives of hotels, travel firms, tourist establishments and transport companies. Bulgarian hotel owners plan to ask for assistance from the government for rescheduling of loans and low interest loans. However, Rumen Draganov, head of the Institute for Analysis and Prognosis in Tourism, told BGNES that the situation with the coronavirus should not affect negatively Bulgarian tourism. Douma also quotes mediapool.bg that insurance companies have excluded policies covering coronavirus from their travel insurance products. The same goes for trip cancellation cover when trips that fail to take place due to epidemics and pandemics. However coverage stays for life and standard health insurance policies.

Troud writes that the import of second-cars in Bulgaria has been blocked due to the coronavirus. Up until now 80 per cent of second-hand cars sold in Bulgaria were imported from Italy. Tsvetelina Tsaneva, executive director of the Bulgarian Association of Automobile Importers, told Troud that many cars in Italian car dealerships have already been paid by Bulgarian traders but their import in the country has been blocked. This leads to losses and the risk of bankruptcy for smaller car dealerships. The publication also quotes Krassimir Lalov of the National Association of Bulgarian Road Hauliers as saying that the situation is very grave as no one knows how many trucks are blocked in Italy. Italy's borders with Austria, Slovenia and Croatia have been closed, ferry services between Italy and Albania have been suspended and the only way to enter or exit Italy is via the ferries which run from Greece.

Sports Minister Krassen Kralev has banned all indoor

sports events in regions affected by COVID-10, writes Sega. In case it cannot be postponed the event will be held behind closed doors. All outdoor events should take place behind closed doors. Sports events involving children are banned.

Standard Weekly writes about plans to rearrange the school curricula and make up for the suspended classes. According to Dian Stamatov, chairman of the employer organization in education, the school year should begin earlier on September 1 or 8. Stamatov also calls for the Easter holiday to be cancelled. However, according to Education Minister Krassimir Valchev there are no plans to suspend the holiday. The Minister said that a 'reserve' of classes can be found in the so-called green schools which have already been banned.

Understandably, Capital Weekly dedicates its main story to the coronavirus outbreak and concludes that currently the only chance to avert a catastrophe is to introduce severe measures in order to slow down the epidemic. The publication makes runs comparison between the situation here and in countries such as China and Italy. According to the author a positive scenario for Bulgaria is still possible but that it is wrong to follow the example of countries such as Germany and Israel where the situation is completely different. The stricter measures may involve closing down of schools, shopping malls, and other public spaces, restriction on movements and isolations of vulnerable groups. Bulgaria still has the advantage of the delayed spread of the epidemic and should take this opportunity to prepare for the upcoming challenge. Some of the questions that need to be answered is how to protect the medical staff from infection, how to raise extra funds for the epidemic, how the Health Ministry and the National Health Insurance Fund will fund the treatment of the infected, how private hospitals can get involved and how to help people and companies to overcome the crisis with the least losses. The article also identifies Bulgaria's weaknesses in the war with the coronavirus: insufficient number of ventilators and testing, and unmotivated staff.

In a Troud analysis headlined 'Coronavirus versus Democracy', author Peter Kichashki argues that scaremongering is a recipe for social, legal and political failure and people should not sacrifice democracy for the sake of security. On the other hand psychologist Mladen Vladimirov tells Standard Weekly that desperate times calls for desperate measures. In his opinion the Bulgarian authorities are too

liberal and are looking for the balance between the interests of the people and coping with the situation. He says that the restrictions on movements will be a good measure.

ECONOMY

24 Chassa carries an interview with Road Infrastructure Agency chief Georgi Terziiski. in which he says that toll system has disciplined drivers and that in January and February the revenues from vignette stickers were 120 million leva, or up by 10 million leva from the like period of 2019. The revenues from heavy trucks tolls totalled 4 million leva between March 1 when the system was launched and March 11. Initially the government had planned 1 million leva in daily revenues and if the proceeds fall short of the 450 million leva planned then tolls will be increased.

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The state-owned gas supplier Bulgargaz has proposed a reduction in the price of natural gas by 40.49 per cent from April 1 according to the new formula for the price of Russian natural gas deliveries based on European gas markets prices. In addition the company has submitted more price proposals backdating to August 5 2019 from when the new formula will be used under the agreement with Gazprom. For each month from August to March the company has submitted exact calculations and documents for the setting of a specific price which will be different. According to Bulgargaz' proposal from April 1 the price of natural gas will be set at 26.21 lv (excluding grid access, transmission, excise and VAT costs), which is a reduction of 17.83 lv. Bulgargaz added that from now on the price of natural gas will be set each month according to the new formula. Until now the price was set quarterly. The supplier also said that it has taken steps to refund amounts

overpaid between August 5 2019 and March 2020 to its clients.

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24 Chassa writes that the National Sports Totalizator has tripled its revenues from scratchcards after the ban on private lotteries from several weeks ago.

POLITICS

Sega (online edition) writes that Parliament is amending the Access to Public Information Act in an intransparent manner through the back door by untying the hands of each institution to set the fees which it collects for the disclosure of information which in effect will hamper access to information. GERB stay true to their colours by amending an act through the transitional and final provisions of another unrelated act.

Lawyer Alexander Kashumov of the Access to Information Programme has sounded the alert. For many years his programme has helped journalists and citizens in their fight for information and no abuse on the part of the administration under the Access to Public Information Act has ever been found.

Currently the law stipulates that the costs for the disclosure of public information are paid under a tariff set by the Finance Ministers and can't exceed the actual costs for the provision. However on March 5 six MPs from the ruling party GERB including parliamentary budget committee chair Menda Stoyanova submitted a bill to amend and supplement the Excise Duty and Tax Warehouses Act. However its final and transitional provisions amend two provisions in the Access to Public Information Act which regulate information costs. The draft won't go through the parliamentary legal affairs committee. PP