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A Bunch of Prima Donnas? Artists Seek Earlier Retirement

In Europe, Ballerinas, Opera Singers, and Matadors Are Exempt From New Laws

By Bob Davis

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Milicia Bezmarevic, teaching ballet dancer Sanja Kostic at the National Theater in Belgrade.

ILLUSTRATION: NEMANJA KNEZEVIC FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

BELGRADE—In five years, Milicia Bezmarevic, a ballerina at the Belgrade National Theater, will be old enough to qualify for Serbia's social security. She'll be 50.

For Ms. Bezmarevic, dressed in a black leotard, her long auburn hair tied in a ponytail, that's too advanced an age for a ballerina to retire. A more reasonable age, she says while chain-smoking Assos cigarettes, would be about 40.

"I'm desperate," says Ms. Bezmarevic, who complains that her spine and feet ache. "When people see me dancing they think that it's perfect, but I feel the difference. Ballet is for the young."

Across Europe, governments are raising retirement ages in response to budget woes. In France, more than a million people are expected to participate in strikes and rallies Tuesday to protest a two-year increase in the retirement age to 62. The Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary and Turkey are boosting their retirement ages to 65. Germany's retirement is moving to 67, Britain's to 68.

Nevertheless, a few select groups can still call it quits much earlier. In Spain, matadors can retire their capes at 55, 10 years earlier than other Spaniards. Spanish trapeze artists can collect checks at 60. In Iceland, seaman can retire at 60, seven years earlier than other workers, according to a World Bank survey.

And in Russia, dwarves are eligible to retire at 40, if they are female, men at 45, reflecting a Soviet-era concern for their shorter lifespans.



Milicia Bezmarevic

Serbian dance unions think ballerinas work too long. The union has been lobbying to lower the age that ballerinas can hang up their toe shoes—from 50 to the mid-40s—ever since Serbia agreed to change its retirement rules last year.

To qualify for a loan from the International Monetary Fund, Serbia said it would reduce its pension bill by increasing its early retirement age to 58 from 53.

Ballerinas were among a list of professions—including opera singers, bus drivers, chemical workers and police officers—that kept their exemptions from the higher

retirement age and are permitted to collect social security earlier than ordinary workers.

But the dancers say 50 is too old to don a tutu.

The pounding on their bodies is too tough for dancers beyond the early 40s, union officials say, and ballet companies need to clear space for younger dancers. In fact, they complain that after they leave the stage, they aren't qualified for decent jobs. They are unable to teach—because the Belgrade high school that produces ballerinas has a separate teachers union that precludes them. And some would prefer not to do administrative work, ticket taking or other jobs.

"It would be like asking Michael Jordan, after he is done playing, to start cleaning the arena," says Dragan Todorovic, a Belgrade ballet labor leader, about asking the best dancers to do other jobs.

Ms. Bezmarevic, one of the Belgrade theater's oldest dancers, still keeps a rigorous schedule. She leads the morning workout for two dozen much younger male dancers, shouting out the steps in French. She demonstrates the proper form at the barre for pliés, footwork and port de bras, and corrects them when they flounder.

But it's a long way from her heyday in her 30s when she ran up 15 flights of stairs and climbed rocks to train. Her performances as a solo ballerina used to garner standing ovations, she says, recalling a performance of "Cage" in Sarajevo in 2001, after the war with Serb nationalists, that left the audience breathless.

But at age 41, after one particularly demanding performance as Mirta in Giselle, a role filled with leaps, she was so exhausted that she decided "this is the end for me," she says.

Sandra Dokic, who handles pension issues for Serbia's deputy prime minister, expresses sympathy for the ballet dancers.

"Can you imagine a 60-year-old ballerina?" she says.

But she argues that the government has already made enough of a concession to the dancers by freezing their retirement age at 50.

"It's difficult enough for me to explain to a woman in a factory why ballerinas can retire at 50," she says. Parliament is expected to take up the government's pension reform system by November.

In the old Yugoslavia, ballet dancers were a privileged group in an arts scene heavily influenced by the Soviet Union. Serbian ballerinas could retire at 42 back then and male dancers at 45, union officials say.

When Yugoslavia broke apart in the 1990s, Serbia's pension system changed.

Ballet dancers were credited with 18 months of work for every year they labored. After about 30 years on the job, they could retire; those with less time could collect pensions at 50.

Not all older ballet dancers are eager for a change, however. Because they are considered government employees, National Theater dancers draw full government salaries until they are 50, whether they perform or not.

Some dancers show up at the theater to practice. Others don't bother. Retirement would reduce their pay outs by at least 40%.

"They're like white bears," says Aja Jung, president of the Belgrade Dance Festival. "They're protected for their whole life."

Marjama Atanckovic, a 41-year-old member of the National Theater, says she hasn't danced with the theater company since 2001. She took five years off to have three children and hasn't worked herself back into shape since then.

"I am not fat for the street, but I'm fat for ballet," she says.

Still, Ms. Atanckovic says she comes to rehearsals and continues to get her monthly salary of €380, or about \$500. If she were formally retired, she would only get about €200.

"I'm a single mother with three kids," she says. "We couldn't survive."

In Serbia's second-largest city, Novi Sad, 49-year-old Momcilo Nenadovic, a ballet dancer and union rep, sips coffee at the rooftop café of the fortress-like Serbian National Theater. He's determined to reduce the retirement age even though that would reduce his own income. He collects a €380 monthly salary although he hasn't danced in four years.

The government is bound to crack down on a nondancing dancer, he figures, leaving older performers worse off. Better to slash the retirement age now, so dancers can quit when they should.

Mr. Nenadovic's friend, Branislav Jatic, a 54-year-old opera singer who slugs down vodka, warns him not to expect the government to budge. He recalls one strike by singers and dancers in Novi Sad to replace a theater director.

"The government officials told us that if we were bakers they would react," he says.

"But they said that you artists can strike as long as you like."

—*Nonna Fomenko in Moscow contributed to this article.*

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