

THE BALKAN CORONAVIRUS DIARY

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Socio-political issues that have emerged or intensified during COVID-19 in the Western Balkans

COVID-19 has been the most frequent word on the whole globe in the past several months. The pandemic has made the world united around a joint problem with which, almost everybody (ironically) dealt from a separate room. Pulled through litmus paper, the world showed all its known and unknown weaknesses, sometimes less and sometimes more evident. Solidarity and empathy went through different phases and seemed to be forgotten as the attempts of derogating the basic democratic values prevailed. The discussion on the topic of numerous violations of rule of law and human rights, corruption, and other abuses for the purpose of preserving power and growing authoritarianism, have been left for later. However, 'the later time' has already come, and we must remember and memorize all the wrongdoings as to heal on time not only from the disastrous consequences of the virus, but also from the devastating consequences of undemocratic management of the crisis and the states.

There are some bright examples in the world, some of them in the region as well, but only a few to be shadowed by those which we need to confront. In order to remain well noted and not to go unpunished, we remind you what, in some countries of the region, was happening behind COVID-19 crisis.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

NEW CRISIS, OLD HABITS

All the three national parties tried to use the crisis to benefit politically, while opening the doors for corruption and mismanagement of funds

By Aida Cerkez, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The COVID-19 - just as any global or regional crisis - has in Bosnia and Herzegovina been seen as an opportunity to revive the same, old dilemma that caused the 1992-95, armed conflict: should this be an independent country or should it be dissolved and parts of it annexed by its neighbors?

Although the war stopped a quarter of a century ago, that question has never been answered, and the two opposite concepts keep fighting with other means for victory while the youth "is voting with their feet," leaving the impoverished country.

So, with the first registered case on March 5 in Banja Luka, one of the two 'entities,' - a term used when referring to the country's two semi-autonomous regions - begun acting as an independent country, while the other brought its own internal ethnic division into full view.

Russian planes with medical equipment and medical experts landed in the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska, which declared a state of emergency on its territory and then announced it was considering closing the internal border toward the other entity - the Bosniak-Croat federation, which had far less COVID-19 cases at the time.

Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, declared that Serbs in Bosnia "have to lean on Serbia," and explained that he did not trust the State Border Police and wants officers of the Republika Srpska police to guard the international border together with state border officials.

He later gave up under international pressure.

The entity government went on a shopping spree, purchasing ventilators, masks and a mobile hospital through dubious companies that had never dealt with medical equipment.

As Russian planes were landing in Banja Luka, US and Turkish planes carrying aid were landing at the Sarajevo airport, while neighboring Croatia donated 5.7 million Euro to the hospital on the Bosnian Croat side of the divided southern city of Mostar.

A 330 million euro International Monetary Fund (IMF) aid package was blocked for two months because the Bosniaks and Croats could not agree how much will go to the entity government - preferred by the Bosniaks - and how much to the 10 cantons - fancied by the Croats.

From the beginning of the crisis, it's been a battle between the usual three national parties which tried to use the situation to benefit politically, and the opposition calling each of them out for corruption and mismanagement of funds.

Opposition in Zagreb keeps questioning donations to Bosnian Croats and the fact that they can move between Bosnia and Croatia and spread the virus despite closed borders because they have dual citizenship.

The prime minister of the Bosniak-Croat federation - a Bosniak - has been arrested in a case evolving around a government contract having been given to a company running a raspberry farm to purchase 100 ventilators bought in China.

When the way overpriced ventilators arrived, they turned out to be of questionable quality.

From Thursday, when the PM was arrested until Sunday when the court released him, Bosnians thought for a moment that the long-awaited rule of law has finally arrived in their corner of the world.

However, after having read the prosecution's arguments that included accusations such as "conspired with others to buy ventilators," the public enthusiasm dwindled, with Bosnians in that entity realizing again that their judiciary may be highly politicised and used in the ongoing pre-election campaign.

Opposition in Republika Srpska has been calling out the ruling party and the entity government for being untransparent in purchasing equipment, including a mobile hospital that has never been made operational.

COVID-19 is dying down in Bosnia, mainly thanks to restrictions the population has almost religiously observed. Some say that's because Bosnians took care of themselves due to the deep mistrust they have toward their government.

Shops have opened, public transportation is running again, children are returning to kindergartens with private business owners and economists calculating the damage and the new unemployment rate.

It shouldn't be bad. "We destroyed our economy in time so we're not worried about it," is the ongoing joke.

Meanwhile, cows and sheep are grazing around the empty and abandoned-looking tents of the new COVID-19 mobile hospital outside of Banja Luka.

It was paid two million euros and never completely assembled. "Balkan Global" d.o.o. Bijeljina, a company listed as having two employees that generate \$6,223 in sales, imported the tents of the hospital on behalf of the government, but never delivered the rest of it.

No investigation has been launched.

Kosovo

POLITICAL POWER VERSUS VIRUS POWER

The situation with Coronavirus is getting better in Kosovo unlike the political battle which is getting worse

By Lavdim Hamidi, Kosovo

The political war that faded the war against Coronavirus in Kosovo. Kosovo's first confirmed case of COVID-19 was March 13, 2020. It arrived as Kosovo was in the midst of a political war, where the newly elected government of Prime Minister Albin Kurti, leader of Levizja Vetevendosje (Self-Determination Movement), had lost the trust of its partner coalition, Isa Mustafa's LDK (The Democratic League of Kosovo), and was counting the last days in power.

Kurti's government has been constituted on 3 February 2020 after the snap parliamentary elections were held on 6 October 2019 which came as a result of the resignation in July 2019 of former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj who was summoned by a Netherlands-based international court to be questioned over alleged war crimes.

On March 25, 2020, Kurti's Government, which had only 50 days in power, became the first political victim. The fall of the Government in Kosovo highlighted the fact that the political war won over the social welfare of its citizens and the deadly virus, where millions of people around the world have been infected.

A successful no-confidence vote by the parliament of Kosovo led to the collapse of the Government at the height of the pandemic. This further aggravated the political crisis and has been quite unique as it has not happened anywhere else in the world. Furthermore, there have been cases from EU countries, where the opposition have supported the government to deal with the deadly virus in the best ways possible. After more than two months, the power of the virus has begun to wane, and there are days where zero new cases of Coronavirus are confirmed.

However, the political battle in Kosovo is only getting worse.

The political war has intensified in recent days, following the decision of the Constitutional Court of Kosovo, which confirmed the right for the second largest party in Parliament, with candidate for Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti, to form the new Government.

Hoti, was the first deputy of Prime Minister Albin Kurti, but who was fired by the latter after the dissolution of the coalition with his party, LDK, took over the leadership of the Government of Kosovo, after reaching a coalition agreement with the party of former Prime Minister of Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj and minority political parties.

Such a decision by the Constitutional Court has been strongly opposed by Kurti, while his political party, the Movement Self Determination "Vetëvendosje", called for mass protests in Pristina, demanding new elections and no new Government without democratic legitimacy from the voters.

Such political developments could be sufficient evidence that the health of citizens and their wellbeing are secondary in comparison with the interests of the political class in Kosovo.

In the coming days, political battles are expected to return in Kosovo, while the battle with the deadly virus will be forgotten. This comes at a high cost, which will likely endanger many people's lives.

North Macedonia

ELECTIONS IN (POST)CORONA TIME

Despite public health risks, elections will be held in North Macedonia as well

By Mite Kuzevski, North Macedonia

As of today, May 28, 2020, many of the restrictions have now been lifted. Curfew was ended on May 26 and today the restaurants and cafes are opening despite the constant growth of new cases which in the last 7 days was 25 new cases per day on average. For an illustration, this number was much lower when the lockdown started. Just today there have been 38 new cases and 3 deaths.

However, the ruling party is still planning to hold an election in June or July. There is a huge political crisis regarding this question since the political opposition is opposing this plan saying that the coronavirus is a threat and the election will jeopardize the public health. On the other hand, many businesses are suffering and not satisfied with the government's economic relief action plan. There is reason to believe that bigger companies are receiving a greater deal of help finally compared to smaller businesses. Many of which are struggling across the board to access much needed support.

On the other note, there is a violation on the human rights reported by the NGOs working with the marginalized and vulnerable communities. Some of them did not receive any help and even the regular help that they were receiving was stopped. There are reports that children who do not have access to the internet to follow education are still waiting for government provided internet dongles. Roma community are even more marginalized during the pandemic and have been portrayed by some media as responsible for spreading the virus, reporting that they are the ones who are not respecting the recommendations from the government. This is happening despite the fact the Ministry of Health published data that showed the municipalities with dominant Roma population in Skopje were causing among the lowest numbers of coronavirus spread.

Serbia

DESPITE THE RULES

Political and electoral campaign has been conducted during all the time of the pandemic in Serbia

By Nataša Bogović, Serbia

Two days after the regular parliamentary and local elections were announced, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Serbia, at the exact moment when the citizens were lining up to sign the lists for participation in the elections.

The government passed the first set of measures, including a ban of gatherings of more than 50 people. This bylaw was used as an explanation why the state of emergency was not introduced by the parliament of 250 members, but was approved by the president of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and the Speaker of the National Assembly Maja Gojković, seven days after the first confirmed case on the March 15th.

At the same time, that meant the interruption of the election campaigns and the postponement of the elections, but not the easing of growing tensions and division in Serbian society.

The opposition, whose party announced earlier that they will boycott the elections, criticized the introduced measures and actions of the government, while the government, on the other hand, ruthlessly led an official campaign.

Thus, the President of Serbia personally visited Niš and Novi Pazar, where the respirators were being delivered due to the growing number of people suffering from COVID-19. These visits did not take place without a gathering of citizens. The authorities claimed that everything was in accordance within the regulations. However, the opposition argued that the health of those who attended the gatherings was put at risk.

Coronavirus prevention measures were becoming more and more rigorous, so during the Christian Orthodox Easter weekend, citizens were ordered not to leave their homes for a total of 84 hours - from Thursday afternoon to Monday morning.

Simultaneously with the introduction of the curfew, only essential workers were allowed to commute with special permits including the order of the employer in which the exact route and purpose of movement were stated. Citizens began to applaud every evening at 8 PM from their windows and balconies as a tribute to medical workers.

While officials claimed they would not speak out against political opponents, their rhetoric was taken over by pro-regime media and tabloid journalists. They used live TV broadcasts and high-profile Crisis Staff press conferences to push their agenda. Which consisted of allegations that belittled and labelled members of the opposition.

At the invitation of an opposition movement Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own (Ne da(vi)mo Beograd), citizens began the action of making noise every evening at 20:05, as a way of expressing their dissatisfaction towards the introduced measures, as well as with other government officials. The authorities were indignant at the action as they felt the medical workers are being underappreciated by the lack of applause meant to acknowledge their efforts, while the citizens countered those statements with the even louder noise that they produced from their windows with whistles, vuvuzelas, banging on pots, etc.

However, this dissatisfaction did not go unnoticed, as a not so well-known youth organisation called on social networks for an action of noise making every evening at 8:30 PM. Allegedly, this was a move by the ruling party, and among those who called for this action was an MP from the ruling party.

For several nights in a row, mostly young men who, as the police claimed, in some cases even had permits to move, occupied the roofs of buildings in Belgrade and other cities in Serbia, and installed sound systems on them. At 8:30 PM, while an insulting chanting against Dragan Djilas, the leader of the opposition Party of Freedom and Justice, "Djilas, thief" played from the sound systems, they lit torches on the roofs of some parts of the cities.

After such a performance disturbed the underage children of the opposition leader - he announced that he would wait for the "torchbearers" in front of the house the next evening. Opposition leaders, as well as citizens, joined him. That evening, while the opposition was gathered in the street during the curfew, instead of insulting chanting and torches on the roof, patriotic songs were played from one of the apartments.

Revolted by the actions of the authorities, the leaders of the opposition held a protest on the steps of the Parliament during the curfew.

As the intensity of the epidemic decreased, the temperature on the political scene rose, so a protest of citizens was held during the curfew in front of the building of Presidency of Serbia.

The state of emergency was lifted after 52 days - on May 6th. It was abolished by the Parliament, which previously confirmed the decisions made by the Government during the epidemic.

This created a window for the official continuation of the election campaigns. The elections, initially scheduled for April 26th, have been moved to June 21st. Part of the opposition persisted in

announcing that they will boycott the elections, while the other part changed mind and announced its exit. Tensions have not dropped.

This activity is part of a joint effort by The Balkan Forum in partnership with Insjader and European Movement in Serbia, IDEA SEE in North Macedonia, Bulgarian Hub for United Balkans in Bulgaria, FrontOnline in Kosovo, to foster regional cooperation of media in the Western Balkans.

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