

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

PARTY POLITICS AND THE STATE OF EMERGENCY

Behaviour of Political Parties during the
Coronavirus Pandemic

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The Coronavirus crisis has laid bare both the strengths as well as the weaknesses of political systems, democratic institutions and the political parties throughout the region, mirroring the real state of democracy on the ground.



The already weakened democratic institutions have deteriorated even further, and the fragile checks and balances systems have demonstrated their inefficiency in practice.



Political leaders rarely managed to resist the temptation to use the unprecedented opportunity of power up for grabs, misusing restrictive measures as a convenient instrument to strengthen the position of government and weaken political opposition.

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INTRODUCTION

There is widespread concern that the coronavirus pandemic is disrupting democracy and governance worldwide (Brown, Brechenmacher, Carothers, 2020). Public discourse is overwhelmed with reports about the negative outcomes of introduced responses and measures on democratic political systems throughout the world. The expansion of power of the executive branch of government, compromised electoral processes, corruption, destabilizing political confrontations, restrictions on civil society and the media and violation of human and individual rights are undermining the democratic foundations of many states. The global political reality provides enough evidence to count democracy as just one of the many casualties of the raging pandemic. Still, as always, there is the other side of the coin. Far less visible, due to the public's appetite for sensation and scandal usually satisfied through a steady stream of negative news and reports, are developments in which "effective state responses may share up trust in government and technocratic expertise" (Brown, Brechenmacher, Carothers, 2020). Election administration, faced with pandemic-related restrictions, can be the subject of substantial IT-based innovations; civil society groups mobilizing responses on the frontlines of the pandemic may reinforce democratic vitality at the local level, and so on.

Unfortunately, when it comes to global challenges of this kind, this region usually falls into the negative side of the story. Serbia's "Democracy and the State of Emergency" reports issued during the outbreak of the pandemic led to the conclusion that the region in general failed to go beyond the expected in its response to the pandemic crisis and did not fully appreciate the potential of the crisis in terms of enhancing its democracy and governance. On the contrary, all those states observed, to a certain extent, experienced almost all the negative aspects of pandemic crisis impact over democratic practice, including:

- Centralizing power and closing up of the democratic space;
- Different forms of violation of human rights;
- Restrictions on civil society;
- Electoral disruptions;
- Further spread of distrust toward democracy and democratic institutions;
- Decreased governance viability and regime stability;
- Pressure on overall sociopolitical cohesion of society;
- Heightened corruption;
- Local–national disconnect.

The above is not a definitive list, since the crisis is still far from over, and it is yet to be seen how it will progress in the coming period which, without doubt, will bring additional challenges for regional democracies.

Driven by an authoritarian agenda rather than public health interests

The pandemic crisis places a particular risk on fragile states. Fragile in terms of strength of their democratic institutions and consolidation of their democratic procedures, too many states were initially ill-equipped to address the pandemic crisis effectively. Usually, these states were, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic crisis, burdened by conditions of severe political conflicts arising from deep social cleavages. The obvious need to address this tremendous threat to public health pushed executive authorities to the forefront of the overall national efforts to organize their states regarding effective prevention and protection from coronavirus spread. As a result, political parties and their leaders found themselves in a position of extraordinary and unexpected power and, as our insights will show, in most cases were unable to resist the temptation to exploit the pandemic response to advance their own particular political and, sometimes, even private objectives and interests. The dangers of introducing measures driven by an authoritarian agenda rather than public health interests, and overall democratic backsliding with long-lasting effects, proved to be greatest in those countries which faced the pandemic with weak safeguards and eroded checks and balances. In some cases, such as fixed public procurement of medical equipment, these political abuses of the unfortunate health circumstances occurred at the expense of an effective and responsible government response to the pandemic crisis challenges. Generally, such behaviour provoked strong reactions from opposition political parties and their leaders, but it also mobilized civil society actors and independent media outlets to attempt to defend undermined public interests. Inevitably, the initial health crisis evolved into or furthered a deep political crisis with opposing political parties as its key actors.

Heated political tensions do not represent an environment conducive to health crisis management. The countries under our analysis here, more or less, fall into the above-described context. This is extremely unfortunate since the fact is that disasters of such magnitude have the positive potential to diminish political conflicts as rival parties embrace the need

to work together for the benefit of preserving the healthy state of their societies. Instead, the fusion of health challenges with severe political conditions – such as weak institutions, ethnic tensions, lack of trust in leaders, and so on - give rise to new crises or even exacerbate existing ones. Additionally, strong political confrontations where the political opposition heavily criticize their political adversaries in government are further eroding the already low trust of the population in their government. The exchange of accusations between the position and opposition is raising skepticism among the population of the adequacy and relevance of government response to the challenge of the pandemic crisis. The expectation of the disease's catastrophic economic impact is also contributing to the intensity of political confrontations. Disrupted trade, raging unemployment rates, austerity measures, labour disturbances and social instability are perceived as consequences of the pandemic crisis and their outbreak is making relations between government and political opposition very tense.

Political leaders and political parties are key factors in the political exploitation of the crisis. Exploitation can go both ways – toward a socially positive outcome or, on the other hand, deeper and harsher social cleavages. Careful observers of pandemic crisis dynamics can easily notice a prevalence of negative outcomes in the public sphere. Many politicians were unable to resist the temptation to apply restrictive measures, initially introduced in order to protect public health, as a convenient instrument to strengthen the position of government and weaken political dissent, protest and disagreement.

EMERGING PATTERNS IN THE BEHAVIOUR OF POLITICAL LEADERS AND PARTIES

The Coronavirus crisis has laid bare both the strengths as well as the weaknesses of political systems, democratic institutions and the political parties throughout the region, mirroring the real state of democracy on the ground. Some of the countries have faced the pandemic amidst political and institutional crises, while in others political crises emerged in the light of the unprecedented health crisis that demanded effective, responsible and accountable functioning of all institutions and actors. Government and opposition parties both sought ways to capitalize on the effects of the pandemic in their battle for political gains ahead of the elections in Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, while rifts within the ruling coalition in Kosovo resulted in changes of government, due to a loss of support from coalition partners. Amidst the initial shock, the countries throughout the region homogenized in the face of the Coronavirus, which served as an “external enemy” impelling opposition into political convergence with the responses and measures introduced by governments and a sense of national unity. At the early stages of the crisis, the opposition in most of the countries acted as a “salient observer”, with widespread support for the measures introduced by governments, calling for solidarity and preserving national unity. For instance, all key political actors in Montenegro contributed to the new national soli-

arity with financial donations for fighting the pandemics, while in North Macedonia political leaders of all relevant parties met on the initiative of President Stevo Pendarovski and reached a consensus to postpone the parliamentary elections until the crisis ends, thereby leaving the technical government to continue as the acting government in the meantime.

Confrontation between the opposition and government

However, the harmony soon faded away with the (re)emergence of political battles within most of the countries. The cooperation was replaced by political confrontation between government and opposition, as well as within the ruling coalition in some of the countries. Croatia was a rare example where most relevant political parties managed to preserve an overall sense of national unity, along with some of the inevitable criticism from the opposition, but with mature and responsible cooperation from all sides that enabled a more or less smooth decision-making process on a number of issues throughout the crisis.

On the other hand, for most of the countries in the region, even the deep crisis stirred up by the pandemic did not represent an incentive powerful enough to overcome mistrust among the political parties and evaporate the deep political and societal polarizations.

Political debates centred around government-opposition relations

The initial constructive cooperation was replaced by confrontation between opposition and government by the end of March. Traditional debates soon re-emerged and, with many of the countries preparing for the election race, the toxic polarization of society returned. The political debates that centred around government-opposition relations reclaimed public discourse, including the regular political disputes among political parties on ethno-national, religious and ideological lines, as well as the opposition's criticism of government and proposals for alternative measures to combat the pandemic. Along these lines, the harmony among the political parties in North Macedonia turned from an almost immediate consensus on postponing the elections, into a stall between the two main political parties (SDMS and VMRO-DMPNE) that lost its appetite for compromise on the exact date of the elections. Cross-accusations dominated relations between the government and opposition in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), with sporadic declarative calls to overcome political disagreements and unite in response to the pandemic, which in reality lacked a genuine commitment to cooperation that could surmount deeply rooted divisions mostly on ethnic lines. The political confrontation between the ruling ethno-national parties ahead of the BiH local elections, held on November 15, obstructed the decision-making process over numerous issues with direct consequences on citizens' rights as well as their quality of life. For instance, the inability of the political parties to reach a compromise on political agreement regard-

ing the local elections in the city of Mostar, one of the most striking living illustrations of the depth and persistence of ethno-national divisions in the country, left its citizens deprived of their right to political participation for a long period of eight years. Moreover, disagreements and conflicts among the ruling and opposition parties, as well as among various authorities from the local up to state level, have blocked any meaningful efforts to address the migrant crisis, with thousands of migrants left in the northeast part of the country in dire living conditions. In Montenegro, the toxic polarization and mistrust among radical opposition parties towards the ruling parties diminished cooperation, despite a more nuanced approach from other opposition parties in the country. In Serbia, a brief period of cooperation waned in the light of preparations for the parliamentary and local elections, initially scheduled for April 26, and an atmosphere of political tension quickly resumed.

In general, confrontations between government and opposition can be clustered around several main fronts of political battles:

- the constitutionality of measures imposed by governments and restrictions of human rights;
- medical and economic measures introduced by governments, aimed at fighting the pandemic, compensating for economic damage from the COVID-19 outbreak and preventing further collapse of the economy;
- misuse of the Coronavirus crisis for advancing the narrow political agendas of political leaders and political parties, at the expense of public interests and citizens' health;
- excessive centralization of power in the hands of the executive and a lack of parliamentary activities, particularly with regard to oversight over the executive,
- re-emergence of traditional political debates, such as those on national identity (Montenegro); ethnic relations (Kosovo), (im)migration (Slovenia); or public procurement affairs and corruption (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia); foreign policy and relations with strategic partners (Kosovo, Serbia).

The opposition criticized government for its late and unsystematic response (in Albania and Serbia) and failing to introduce adequate measures to combat the consequences of the pandemics earlier. In some countries the opposition demanded that the government increase testing for COVID-19, while in others intensive debates have been stirred up by questioning the constitutionality of severe restrictions on human rights imposed by government measures (Croatia and Montenegro), as well as regarding potential violations of human rights as a consequence of tough measures introduced by government (Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Serbia). The issue of conditions for free and fair elections, and electoral reform resurfaced as well (in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia), with opposition parties engaged in a parliamentary boycott followed by an announcement of an election boycott due to a lack of conditions for free, fair and transparent competition in the elections. Moreover, the trends of centralization and personalization of power in the hands of the ruling

parties and political leaders, under the emergency measures and crisis response, have also been the focus of criticism, both by the opposition and civil society in several countries of the region.

Unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of ruling parties

The concentration of power in the hands of the ruling parties reached unprecedented levels in Serbia and Albania, countries that have faced the COVID-19 pandemics with a disrupted balance of power and weakened checks and balances. Along these lines, both Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić could not resist the temptation to grab an even greater political and institutional role in decision-making and emergency management, as well as media presence by announcing in person at daily press conferences all the information, numbers, measures and decisions, in some cases even before they were formally made. The case of Serbia is quite illustrative, with the omnipresent President of the Republic, as well as of the ruling party, managing to hold daily press conferences to inform citizens and respond to questions, personally welcome a plane bringing Chinese aid to Belgrade airport with a livestream on Serbian Broadcaster Radio-Television of Serbia, lead the endeavours to purchase ventilators and acquire the necessary personal protective equipment, as well as personally hand over the ventilators to a hospital in the town of Novi Pazar. On the other hand, the opposition enjoyed almost no space in media with national frequencies except in the very last weeks of the election campaign when the representation became slightly more balanced, due to the obligatory electoral segments in the media (CRTA, 2020:70; FES, 2020:5-6).

In addition, a peculiar trend of self-inflicted isolation of parliament has emerged in Serbia, as well as North Macedonia where parliament has not convened for four months. The Serbian parliament was reactivated 44 days after the State of Emergency was declared, however its performance has again confirmed its rubber-stamping role in the decision-making process, similarly to the Albanian parliament. Although the Montenegrin parliament initially remained passive, it managed to re-engage further into the crisis, reclaiming its role in providing space for open debates between the ruling majority and the opposition. However, the parliaments have proved to be the most active, engaged and effective in performing their foreseen legislative and oversight roles in Croatia and Slovenia, which are considered to be the most advanced regarding the institutional stability and consolidation of democracy.

Marginalization of the opposition, opponents and critics of the regime

The political crisis that shook Slovenia at the beginning of the year serves as a reminder that democratic progress cannot be taken for granted as irreversible. Namely, in January 2020 the Slovenian centre-left ruling coalition led by Prime Minister

Šarec lost the support of its coalition partners, to be replaced by the centre-right government led by Janez Janša. Although Šarec resigned, following the resignation of the Finance and Health Ministers from his party, convinced of the continuing support of his coalition partners, it was Janša who in the end managed to form a new coalition government on March 13, following consultations between the president and political parties at the end of February. Yet, the political crisis that marked the beginning of the year in Slovenia has also demonstrated the key importance of a stable and functioning system of checks and balances, enabling the opposition and media to play the vital role of gatekeepers of democratic institutions, processes and values.

Slovenia: opposition and media as gatekeepers of democratic institutions, processes and values

Amidst attempts by the new Slovenian government of Janša to influence the police, prosecution and journalists, a wave of protests appeared on the streets along with the opposition engaged within the parliament, that united with several interpellations of ministers from the new government due to dubious government spending on medical equipment, as well as a decision to lift the administrative ban imposed by Maribor of the concert of right-wing nationalist singer and political activist Thompson, promoting the Ustasha and a Nazi legacy. As a result, two deputy prime ministers were indicted, one through an interpellation and the other upon resignation. The Orban-like tendencies of Janša's third government aiming at authoritarianism have been countered with wider and strong resistance, both on the streets and within institutions, using all the existing mechanisms to preserve democracy. On the other hand, the COVID-19 crisis laid bare the fact that preconditions for such effective institutional resistance to authoritarian tendencies in other countries of the region are hampered by a lack of consolidated and functioning democratic institutions and practices, which consequently enabled the closure of public and media space, as well as a complete marginalization of the opposition, opponents and critics of the ruling regime.

As time passed, the opposition's accusations towards the government throughout the region mounted, blaming governments for misusing the crisis for their own political interests and advancing their political agenda, at the expense of wider public interests, or even the health of their citizens. At the same time, the governments most often labelled the opposition and any other critics enemies of the country, rather than the more usual political competitors. A spiral of mutual blame and recrimination was unleashed, with none of the political or social actors able to put this genie back in its bottle. Some governments, such as the Slovenian and Serbian governments, opted for the strong, military-like terminology and metaphors of waging a war against an "invisible" enemy – the Coronavirus - which as a result contributed to an atmosphere of tension, fear and uncertainty among the people.

Rising tensions and numerous protests

The rising tensions eventually led to numerous protests around the region and violations of the measures introduced to combat the pandemic. Citizens in Albania protested on the streets regardless of the declared measures and the main opposition parties in Albania called on the citizens to "take back their rights". Opposition leaders in North Macedonia personally violated the measures, as well as in Serbia where opposition MPs organized protests. Mass protests emerged around the region, with different triggers reflecting the burning social and political issues in each of the countries. The citizens of Serbia organized mass protests and riots triggered by a suspicion of manipulation of COVID-19 data, a collapsing health system, and the tremendous irresponsibility of state officials who announced the re-introduction of harsh measures following mass gatherings around the elections, organized and attended by party officials and membership. In Slovenia, citizens found an innovative and safer mode of "bicycle protests" to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the government, while tensions between the government and Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro led to mass processions of several thousands of citizens sparked by the Law on Freedom of Religion.

Internal rifts within the ruling coalitions

In addition to the political battles between government and opposition, in Croatia and Kosovo the Corona crisis deepened internal rifts within the ruling coalitions, leading to the collapse of government in Kosovo. The clashes within the ruling coalition in Kosovo revolved around the government's approach to relations with its foreign partners, namely the United States and Serbia, which resulted in a public rift among coalition partners. The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) clashed with the Self-Determination Party (VV) over the US demand for tariffs on Serbia to be lifted as well as a Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, which resulted in, on the one side, internal rifts among the LDK membership, and on the other with the government firing the LDK Minister of Interior for not being aligned with government policy on the response to COVID-19 and siding with the president's recommendations to declare a State of Emergency. Consequently, a motion of no-confidence vote was passed by the LDK and other supporting parties on March 25, putting the LDK at the head of a new government without a general election, on the basis of a widely-criticized decision of the Constitutional Court. The crisis spilled over causing further shifts and disturbance within the party system, as well as skepticism and doubt as to the ability and effectiveness of the wide coalition government, seen as a "disjoint unnatural union of parties with narrow political existence agendas" (Brändle et al, 2020: 20), to deal with the upcoming political challenges and emergency management.

Ruling parties in most cases profited from the elections

However, from the perspective of the results of elections held in five of the seven observed countries, it can be argued that the ruling parties in most cases profited from the elections, despite the opposition's attempts to capitalize on the negative effects of the crisis' socio-economic difficulties resulting from the pandemic. In Croatia, North Macedonia, and Serbia, the incumbent parties came out of the 2020 elections as winners, indicating that the pandemic and socio-economic difficulties resulting from it had not caused significant damage to the ruling parties. At the same time, while the rating of major opposition parties did increase at the beginning of the crisis, it seems that in most countries the opposition did not manage to profit directly from the pandemic and its consequences in the short term. The only elections to bring significant changes were the parliamentary elections in Montenegro, which marked a change in government after two decades with a party composed of previous parliamentary opposition parties winning a narrow majority of parliamentary seats. The populist Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro led by incumbent President of Montenegro Milo Đukanović lost power for the first time since the introduction of the multi-party system in 1990.

Croatia: successful emergency management boosted support for government parties

The case of Croatia illustrates that successful emergency management in the Coronavirus crisis can boost support for government parties, strengthen mainstream ruling as well as opposition parties (HDZ and SDP) and at the same time weaken the populists. Croatia faced the pandemic following the presidential elections held at the beginning of the year, resulting in a weakening of the ruling centre-right party the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) whose candidate lost the re-elections. The internal conflict within the ruling HDZ party deepened following the first months of the crisis, with a strong inner-party right-wing opposition led by the party's deputy president challenging the party's leader and incumbent prime minister, Andrej Plenković. Yet, with the crisis management perceived as stable, effective and successful, the odds overturned. The HDZ strengthened both inside and out, with its leadership sweeping away both inner-party opponents as well as the opposition in the parliamentary elections held in July. On the other hand, in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the opposition seems to have profited from the COVID-19 crisis, although achieving a narrow majority.

Political leaders rarely managed to resist the temptation to use the unprecedented opportunity of power up for grabs, particularly in those countries that had already witnessed the daunting trend of centralization and personalization of power. Thus, as a result of the Coronavirus crisis, the already

weakened democratic institutions have deteriorated even further, and the fragile checks and balances systems demonstrated their inefficiency in practice.

DEMOCRACY-RELATED FACTORS BEHIND PATTERNS OF PARTY BEHAVIOUR

Political confrontation between government and opposition is business as usual in politics. The justified question is whether this behaviour is appropriate in a situation of pandemic crisis and great risk to public health. More precisely, how to perceive the role of opposition at times like these? Critics of political confrontations warn against "undermining public trust in the government during a crisis in which maintaining such trust is paramount", and so the opposition should restrain itself from being overtly critical toward government crisis policies and measures introduced. On the other side of the argument, the leading question is how can opposition hold the government to account in a responsible way, without "playing politics"? Obviously, the political opposition and its leaders face a crucial dilemma: whether publicly-raised criticism toward the government's handling of the crisis will be presented as facts or simply raise questions and a demand for more transparency and information, avoiding premature jumping-to-conclusions about the efficacy of the underlying strategy. If the opposition is to take the more responsible approach, sensitive to maintaining public trust in state institutions, then a variety of viable strategies can be applied, including:

- Articulating and raising demand for consistent and transparent public health advice and a substantial and comprehensive communication strategy of crisis management;
- Developing and proposing an alternative set of policies designed to address the main challenges;
- Articulating public concerns and translating them into the right questions to be answered by government, while, at the same time, projecting a sense of pulling together for the common good.

An opposition that opts for the above-mentioned strategies, as well as a government ready to welcome and acknowledge them without reservation, are examples of genuine political leadership demonstrating an undivided commitment to serve the purest democratic aim: to genuinely improve government policy, rather than simply undermine it.

As mentioned earlier, the opposition can choose another way to handle politics during a pandemic crisis. This is the strategy of identifying and embracing pandemic-related public fears, echoing them as hard facts back to the public, and, at the same time, using all available means of communication to disseminate strong messages developed to undermine government policies as ineffective and weak. The ultimate goal of this approach cannot be anything else but to prepare the public for the right moment when political takeover and seizure of power and government will take place. Finally, as a result of this political change, new policies on pandemic crisis management will be introduced for the benefit of the pro-

tection of jeopardized public health interests. One problem with this particular strategy, although possibly justified from the perspective of short-term, marginal political benefit, is that the period between now and “the right moment”, no matter how actually long or short it may be, is very often too long and too devastating for society in general because it causes serious collateral damage in terms of loss of public trust, institutional paralysis and inefficiency as a direct consequence of this loss. Having said this, it seems reasonable to ask if a political victory of such a nature is worth the price? Furthermore, there is another concern of importance in this regard which can be expressed in the form of the following question: How certain is it that political victory will result in a political payoff due to the fact that this new government and its new policies will have to face a limited space for political maneuvering due to the loss of that same public trust in the institution? In other words, winning a battle will not ensure winning the war, although, sometimes, winning the war is not actually the goal at all!

Weak performance of political parties as vehicles of representation

Which path will party politics take? Accusation or articulation? Echoing public fears or addressing public concerns? Confrontation or cooperation? Which factors will determine the decision-making of political parties in this regard? Obviously, in order to answer these questions, we need to have a comprehensive awareness of the nature of the democracies in which these political parties are operating. This is necessary since the concepts of democracy and political parties are inseparable. For Schattschneider, “the political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties” (van Biezen, 2004). Political parties are seen as the central notion for modern democracies, both by contemporary scholars and by policy-makers charged with fostering the development of newly-emerged democracies or with improving the quality of democracy in established democratic polities (van Biezen, 2004). It is exactly this importance of political parties for democracy that initiated serious criticism towards the performance of political parties in contemporary democracies. Scholars and experts speak of the decline of parties, underlining that they are losing relevance everywhere as vehicles of representation, instruments of mobilization, and channels of interest articulation and aggregation. At the same time, however, they have retained more or less exclusive control over candidate recruitment and the organization of parliament and government (van Biezen, 2004). So, parties are failing to fulfill their representative function, but their procedural or institutional functions are still strong. In other words, the situation concerning political parties in modern democracies is a kind of paradox: parties are key institutions for representative democracies, but their performance is inadequate especially with regard to their representative functions.

While the party system affects the quality of democratic performance of key institutions such as parliaments and govern-

ments, the performance of political parties is at the same time shaped, or even limited, by the wider context in which they operate – their environment. Therefore, insight into selected democratic context-related factors will help in explaining the behaviour of political parties in the analyzed countries during the pandemic crisis.

STATE OF DEMOCRACY AS AN ADVANTAGE OR LIMITATION

The basis of our observations regarding the democratic context of the analyzed countries will come from three popular democracy ratings (table 2):

- The Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EIU) Democracy Index
- The Global State of Democracy Indices
- Freedom House “Nations in Transit” Report

The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index provides a snapshot of the state of democracy worldwide in 165 independent states and two territories.¹ The 2019 edition of the Democracy Index was called “A Year of Democratic Setbacks and Popular Protests” which is self-explanatory and reflects Larry Diamond’s opinion that “we have been going through a democracy recession” (Democracy Index, p. 5). According to the Index (p. 6), the main manifestations of this democracy recession include:

- An increasing emphasis on elite/expert governance rather than popular participatory democracy;
- Growing influence of unelected, unaccountable institutions and expert bodies;
- The removal of substantive issues of national importance from the political arena to be decided on by politicians, experts or supranational bodies behind closed doors;
- A widening gap between political elites and parties on the one hand and national electorates on the other;
- A decline in civil liberties, including media freedom and freedom of speech.

The EIU’s Democracy Index 2019 rated all countries from our report with the exception of Kosovo. The region is represented in two categories: flawed democracies (Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia) and hybrid regimes (North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Slovenia takes the champion’s place in the region (rank 36), followed by Croatia (rank 59) and Serbia (66) in the flawed democracy category. According to the methodology of the Index, flawed democracies are regarded as countries with free and fair elections and respect for basic civil liberties, with some problematic issues such as infringements on media freedom, problems in governance, underdeveloped political culture and a low level

¹ The EIU’s Democracy index is based on a range of indicators within five categories, upon which it classifies each country as one of four types of regime: “full democracy”, “flawed democracy”, “hybrid regime” or “authoritarian regime”. For more details, see The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2019, <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>.

of political participation. Hybrid regimes are political systems with substantial electoral irregularities, restrictions over the political opposition, serious weaknesses in political culture, governance and political participation, together with a weak rule of law, civil society, freedom of expression and media, and widespread corruption.

The second resource for our insight into the strength of regional democracy is an instrument named “The Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoD Indices)” developed by the International IDEA. The GSoD Indices depict democratic trends at the country, regional and global levels across a broad range of different attributes of democracy, designed to provide evidence-based analysis and data on the global and regional state of democracy, with a focus on democracy resilience.² The latest edition of the GSoD Indices from 2019 was titled “Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise”, and brought disturbing keywords, while attempting to describe the present state of democracy worldwide, with notions such as democratic erosion, democratic backsliding and even democratic breakdown. The general remark about the state of democracy worldwide is: democracy is ill and its promise needs reviving. The GSoD Indices 2019 underlines that the value, viability and future of democracy are more contested now than ever before in modern history, or at least since the 1930s. An important observation is that democratic erosion is occurring in different settings and contexts and new democracies are often weak and fragile.

Dominant role of political parties in public life for all the wrong reasons

For the purposes of this research it is interesting to have an insight into the analysis of subattribute “free political parties” as part of the “representative government” attribute. It measures the extent to which parties are free to form and campaign for office, including the competitiveness of political participation, the autonomy of opposition parties and the extent of multiparty elections. In Central and Eastern Europe the GSoD Indices 2019 underlines that “political parties do not evolve to become membership-based mechanisms that articulate and channel citizens’ concerns. Instead, most parties are driven by narrow party leadership and lack intra-party pluralism, which results in the calcification of these parties. It seems that these parties are playing quite a dominant role in public life but for all the wrong reasons, including the fact

that their membership rate can be relatively high due to the importance of party membership for entering employment in public sectors. Quite often these parties are, in a sense, parties of power, defined by their relationship to the state, without significant independent policy agendas, combining civil servants, business elites and government officials. Moreover, in some cases they are dominated by leaders with authoritarian tendencies, who are, at the same time, also patrons of family-based and clientelist networks. Speaking about the Balkans, the GSoD Indices 2019 emphasizes the following:

...most parties in the Western Balkans are “controlled by a small circle of elites, who have managed to centralize power in their hands”, which gives them “excessive influence over candidate selection and thereby making every MP more dependent” (Keil 2018:68). There are several distinct patterns of “state capture” within the region (Bieber 2018:347). Albania and North Macedonia are in essence two-to three-party states, with a number of minority (i.e. ethnic Albanian) parties in the latter. Croatia and Serbia have a single heavily dominant party and several smaller opposition parties. Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina are predominantly communal: at the national level, all decisions are made by a virtually unchanging group of six to seven party leaders, while single parties dominate in some regional and most municipal jurisdictions. Kosovo’s parties are based on loyalty to a small leadership cadre dating back to the pre-independence period; most have little or no clear ideological leaning. The common denominator of all these examples is that governing parties function as patron-client machines, and party loyalty usually trumps other considerations in decision-making (Keil, 2018; Vise and Agaric, 2017; Stewart, B. 2019; Bajovic and Manojlovic, 2013).

The GSoD Indices 2019 classified all countries from the region as democracies, with Slovenia and Croatia leading as states with some high values of measured attributes, while the rest of the region follows with mid-range values on all attributes examined.

Our third source of informing insight into regional democracy context is the Freedom House³ reports: “Nations in Transit 2020” and “Democracy under Lockdown”. Freedom House measures the level of democratic governance in 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia through its annual Nations in Transit report, which classifies countries as consolidated democracies, semi-consolidated democracies, transitional or hybrid regimes, semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes and consolidated authoritarian regimes. Countries from the region fit into the categories of consolidated democracies (Slovenia, 5.93 score), semi-consolidated democ-

2 The International IDEA – International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance is an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide. Its Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoD) set out three broad regime types: (a) democracies (of varying performance); (b) hybrid regimes; (c) non-democracies. Democracies are defined as “popular control over decision-making and political equality among those exercising that control”, as well as governments emerging from sufficiently inclusive, clean and competitive elections. On the other hand, the methodology of the GSoD Indices sees hybrid regimes as states with nominally democratic institutions and some democratic processes and practices but characterized by pervasive informal practices eroding the functioning of formal institutions. For more details, see: IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, <https://www.idea.int/gso-d-indices/#/indices/world-map>

3 Freedom House is the oldest American organization devoted to the support and defense of democracy around the world. It was formally established in New York in 1941 to promote American involvement in World War II and the fight against fascism.

racies (Croatia, 4.25 score), and transitional or hybrid regimes (Albania, 3.82; Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3.32; Kosovo, 3.18; North Macedonia, 3.75; Serbia, 3.96; Montenegro, 3.86 score).⁴

The “Nations in Transit 2020” report is yet another paper with a self-explanatory title: The 2020 edition is called “Dropping the Democratic Façade” and adds to the worrying pool of keywords by introducing the notion of “democratic disintegration”. Regarding those countries of interest for this study, “Nations in Transit 2020” reports that “the breakdown of democratic consensus has been most visible in Central Europe and Balkans”. In the Balkans, according to the Report, “years of increasing state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and Milo Djukanovic in Montenegro tipped those countries over the edge – for the first time since 2003, they are no longer categorized as democracies in *Nations in Transit*”.

Marginalization and degradation of opposition parties

With respect to the behaviour of political parties, a very significant strategy is observed in the *Nations in Transit* report. In the reporting period (2019), full or partial parliamentary boycotts occurred in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia. They were the result of a strategy applied by the ruling parties aimed at systematic marginalization and degradation of the opposition parties. This strategy is well elucidated through the example of Serbia. *Nations in Transit* points out the following:

Since coming to power in 2012, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has systematically curtailed

the ability of the opposition to play a role in the business of governing. From 2016 to 2018, it only puts bills proposed by friendly lawmakers on the legislative agenda; in 2019, it entertained just two proposals from outside its ranks before voting them down. To limit oversight of its own proposals, the SNS shuts the opposition out of committees, and floods the docket with frivolous amendments that eat into the time allotted for debate. It also forces the adoption of laws via urgent procedure, a process that is only supposed to be invoked in extraordinary situations.

... In Serbia, then, the opposition does not feel that it can effectively advocate for policy changes because the ruling party has worked to deny it the opportunity to do so, and it doubts that it can ever win power through elections. Hence, it has chosen to boycott parliament, in addition to the upcoming 2020 parliamentary vote. In February 2019, the Alliance for Serbia, an umbrella group of opposition parties, walked out of what is dubbed the “usurper parliament”, forming a so-called free parliament in a bid to undercut the former’s legitimacy. The “free parliament” has been in session ever since, to little effect. Unfortunately, this exercise in symbolic protest has had the effect of damaging the perception of democracy among ordinary citizens.

This powerful strategy of diminishing space for the opposition through various filibustering, misuse and abuse of procedures is very much, in different forms, present throughout the region.

The pandemic has fueled a crisis of democracy around the world

Freedom House was also interested in reviewing the COVID-19 pandemic impact on democracy worldwide. It concluded that the pandemic has fueled a crisis of democracy around the world, with the condition of democracy and human rights worsening in many countries around the world, and especially in struggling democracies, where many countries on our list, as mentioned earlier, belong. Country-specific

4 According to the methodology of Freedom House in the “Nations in Transit” Reports, *consolidated democracies* represent countries which embody the best policies and practices of liberal democracies, while *semi-consolidated democracies* are seen as electoral democracies that meet relatively high standards for the selection of national leaders but exhibit some weakness in regard to protection of political rights and civil liberties. *Transition or hybrid regimes* are defined as electoral democracies that meet only minimum standards for the selection of national leaders. Their democratic institutions are usually fragile with substantial challenges to the protection of political rights and civil liberties. These settings very often exert government pressure on opposition parties.

Table 1
Classification of the state of democracy in the region by renowned/well-established democracy ratings

	The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index	The Global State of Democracy Indices	Freedom House “Nations in Transit” Report
Albania	hybrid regime	democracy - mid-range values	transitional or hybrid regime
Bosnia and Herzegovina	hybrid regime	democracy - mid-range values	transitional or hybrid regime
Croatia	flawed democracy	democracy - high values	semi-consolidated democracy
Kosovo	/	democracy - mid-range values	transitional or hybrid regime
Montenegro	hybrid regime	democracy - mid-range values	transitional or hybrid regime
North Macedonia	hybrid regime	democracy - mid-range values	transitional or hybrid regime
Serbia	flawed democracy	democracy - mid-range values	transitional or hybrid regime
Slovenia	flawed democracy	democracy - high values	consolidated democracy

ic issues in democracy have further deteriorated and it is very likely that they will need a substantial period of time to recover from this setback.

The most recent findings of these indexes on the state of democracy indicate a pattern of specific democratic context which is shared by most of the countries of the region observed in the framework of this analysis. Based on the classifications, as illustrated in table 1, the state of democracy in Slovenia and Croatia stands out from the rest of the region, indicating that democracy in these two countries, despite its flaws, can still be defined as consolidated, with a set of stable and effective institutions and processes capable of upholding the functioning of key aspects of the democratic system amidst sweeping crises such as the Coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, these two countries are the only EU member states among the former SFR Yugoslavia countries to so far have successfully completed the process of EU accession and joined the EU. Although contested throughout previous years on various grounds, the EU accession process does rely on a set of comprehensive reforms of the political system designed to ensure normative and institutional preconditions for a consolidated democratic system, as well as their functioning and safeguards in practice. Hence, the comprehensive political criteria embodied in the requirement of the rule of law reforms, can be used by aspiring EU members as a successful roadmap for ensuing strong and stable democratic institutions, with a functioning system of checks and balances, and effective democratic processes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The keyword of our concluding remark is *resilience*. International IDEA defines resilience as the ability of social systems to cope with, innovate, survive and recover from complex challenges and crises presenting stress or pressure that can lead to systemic failure. Democracy resilience is seen as the ability of a political system to recover, adapt and/or flexibly address such complex challenges, crisis and breakdowns (The GSoD 2019, 2019). Our key observation is that regional democracies which are members of the EU (Slovenia and Croatia) with the highest democracy score in different democracy ratings are demonstrating stronger social and democracy resilience in relation to other the flawed democracies of the transitional and hybrid regimes of the region. This is the point from which one of our main policy considerations emerges and calls for the international community to introduce a sound position and strong commitment to continuing the process of EU enlargement supported by sufficient accession instruments and revised conditionality in regard to good governance, democracy and human rights criteria.

Commitment to continuation of the process of EU enlargement

Regarding the behaviour of political parties, resilience strongly correlates with their ability to campaign for office through free and fair procedures, competitiveness of political participation, a strong autonomy of opposition parties and a wide

extent of multiparty elections. On the other hand, regional political systems with diminished democratic legitimacy are under immediate pressure to ensure a holistic approach to political representation and establish ideology-based programmatic political parties. These political systems are in need of a development of political culture of programme-based political platforms and political parties firmly connected to citizen constituents and accountable to a wider base of their members and voters. Having said that, there is a specific set of political party positions, no matter whether they are ruling parties or opposition political organizations, which can be expected to contribute to the goal of responsible political leadership at this time of pandemic crisis, and these include:

- Ensuring that all anti-pandemic measures are accountable, proportionate, and time-restricted;
- Ensuring that the public has full access to reliable and verified information related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects, including, among other data, information on the testing dynamics, infected cases, medical equipment, human and material capacities of the health-system, as well as on funds allocated for preventive and compensation measures, procurement procedures and loans made by state authorities;
- Ensuring support for capital investments in the development of IT and other infrastructure, provision of technical support and human resources development for work and activity in the online regime;
- Ensuring respect for free and independent media, as well as timely and fact-based communication strategies of authorities and crisis management structures;
- Demanding identification of human rights abuses followed by their condemnation and concrete action aimed at holding the perpetrators of these abuses to account.

A comprehensive and committed approach to the above-mentioned issues has the clear potential to contribute to increasing public trust in political parties and hence strengthen the overall socio-political resilience of each respective society in the region. Additionally, demonstration of responsible leadership as a prerequisite contributing to a rise in public trust in political parties, has the potential to encourage political parties to embrace the conception of internal party democracies as a condition for strengthening their democracy's resilience. Again, application of IT-based platforms for constituency and community building can be of critical importance for enhancing democratic and participative internal party decision-making in given circumstances, characterized by restrictive measures regarding social contact and public gatherings.

Internal party democracy as a condition for strengthening democracy resilience

Without any doubt, citizen participation contributes to democracy resilience. In spite of the fact that emergency meas-

ures, quite often, are restrictive toward public engagement of the population, demand for increased citizen participation in political decision-making is of the utmost importance for preventing democratic backsliding and breakdown. A precondition for citizens' engagement is timely, transparent and reliable informing of citizens, ensuring full public access to verified information on the numbers related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the testing dynamic, infected cases, medical equipment, human and material capacities of the health-system, as well as on funds allocated for preventive and compensation measures, procurement procedures and loans made by state authorities. At the same time, increased reliance on IT solutions represents one of the preconditions for informing and engagement of the citizens. To achieve this, legal and technical frameworks must be expanded and adjusted to the new circumstances. In addition, it is important to ensure the overall viability of prodemocracy civil society and grassroots movements. Civil society groups, citizen-led social movements, and other non-state actors with democratic agendas make up a key corrective factor with direct influence on behaviour and the political and policy positions of political parties and it is a matter of priority to ensure their supply with technical assistance and training in issues such as coalition and constituency building, advocacy, online activism, and so on.

Policy choices made to ensure recovery from the Coronavirus crisis have to be choices of compromises between a variety of interests and contribute to the strengthening of national sovereignty of states in the region. If management of the crisis was characterized by political conflict and confrontation, then a last chance to ensure that something good can emerge from the crisis is to introduce politically comprehensive recovery policies supported by the majority of a political spectrum. Having in mind the strength and visibility of the international community in the region, the issue of carefully negotiated recovery policies must be precisely communicated and demanded from key international actors in the region and wider.

Corruption as one of the worst enemies of democracy

The pandemic crisis caused a political crisis and further diminished the already decreased democratic legitimacy of the majority of authorities in the region. Experience from world democracies has shown that one of the best and most effective ways of dealing with decreased democratic legitimacy is to address the issue of corruption, as one of the worst enemies of democracies worldwide. Now is the right moment to take additional steps to invigorate the fight against kleptocracy and corruption and introduce enhanced domestic mechanisms that will guarantee the transparency of public funding. Along these lines, a comprehensive regional survey of citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards the political parties, democratic processes and institutions representing the backbone of the representative democracy, would be a significant contribution to both assessing the manner in which the Coronavirus pandemic affected the state of democracy in the region, and conceiving a roadmap for rebuilding trust and strengthening democratic resilience.

Now, more than ever in the recent history of the region, the post-Coronavirus period will forge a strong incentive for regional cooperation. With the critical input of responsible leadership and a strategic push from the EU, the recovery of the countries from the region could easily become a substantial regional integrative process. It is possible that the pressing need for fast recovery will be a driving force for overcoming existing disputes and placing focus on building more integrative relations in the region as an effort based on a shared awareness of the need for cooperation, shared geography, mutual understanding of national interests, and more.

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PARTY POLITICS AND THE STATE OF EMERGENCY

Behaviour of Political Parties during the Coronavirus Pandemic



Regional democracies which are members of the EU (Slovenia and Croatia) with highest democracy score in different democracy ratings are demonstrating stronger social and democracy's resilience in relation to other flawed democracies of transitional and hybrid regimes in the region. This is the point from which one of the main policy consideration emerges and calls for international community to introduce sound opposition and strong commitment to continuation of the process of EU enlargement supported with sufficient accession instruments and revised conditionality in regard to good governance, democracy and human rights criteria.



Regarding behavior of political parties', resilience strongly correlates with the ability of political parties to campaign for office in free and fair procedure, competitiveness of political participation, strong autonomy of opposition parties and wide extent of multiparty elections. On the other hand, regional political systems with diminished democratic legitimacy are under the immediate pressure to ensure holistic approach to political representation and establish ideology-based programmatic political parties.



Without any doubts, citizens' participation contributes to democracy's resilience. Although emergency measures, quite often, are restrictive toward public engagement of population, demand for increased citizens' participation in political decision-making is of utmost importance for preventing democratic backsliding and breakdown. A comprehensive regional survey of citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards the political parties, democratic processes and institutions representing the backbone of the representative democracy, would be a significant contribution to assessing the manner in which the Corona virus pandemic affected the state of democracy in the region, as well as in conceiving the roadmap for rebuilding trust and strengthening democratic resilience.

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