



Briefing

## Political Trends & Dynamics

### Nature or Politics: Disaster Response in SEE

Volume 2 | 2020

## POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

### A FES DIALOGUE SOUTHEAST EUROPE PROJECT

Peace and stability initiatives represent a decades-long cornerstone of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's work in southeastern Europe. Recent events have only reaffirmed the centrality of Southeast European stability within the broader continental security paradigm. Both democratization and socio-economic justice are intrinsic aspects of a larger progressive peace policy in the region, but so too are consistent threat assessments and efforts to prevent conflict before it erupts. Dialogue SOE aims to broaden the discourse on peace and stability in southeastern Europe and to counter the securitization of prevalent narratives by providing regular analysis that involves a comprehensive understanding of human security, including structural sources of conflict. The briefings cover fourteen countries in southeastern Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries and Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

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Special Edition



## EDITORIAL

*Jasmin Mujanović, Alida Vračić, and Ioannis Armakolas*

Natural disasters, it turns out, are anything but. Instead, “acts of God” are in practice exacerbated by human practices and norms. Politics and governance patterns and norms, too often, determine the full contours and costs of otherwise non-human maladies, from disasters to pandemics.

In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of the Political Trends and Dynamics newsletter examines the human factor in Southeast Europe’s disaster preparedness protocols. Presently, parts of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are recovering from new episodes of severe flooding, just several years after devastating regional floods of 2014. Once again, emergencies were declared, people have been evacuated, and media reports hundreds of homes being destroyed. From the deadly Albanian earthquakes of 2019, to the most recent earthquake in Croatia, much of the last decade has been marked by the onset of severe natural catastrophes. And while climate change is a common factor in many of these phenomena – in particular increased seasonal flooding and increasingly severe wildfires – it is not the only factor.

Instead, the structural factor is human: the choices local policymakers and communities have (not) made to prepare for these events. From un-zoned and illegal construction, uncontrolled groundwater exploitation, excessive urban expansion, waste dumping in the river beds to inadequate public spending on emergency resources, and a general aversion to public planning, it is the decisions taken during “normal” times that define scale and cost when disaster strikes.

And then, of course, there are those phenomena which while affecting the natural environment and biosphere are, nevertheless, at heart man-made events. The regional air pollution crisis is, perhaps, the most obvious of these. But here too the “problem-creation” patterns are alike.

Local governments have known for decades that air pollution is a present and growing issue, that it is affecting the health and welfare of each and every person in society, and the remedies are available, but that they require a commitment to good governance and community-led urban planning. These remedies have been ignored, and thus a region with a virtually non-existent industrial and manufacturing capacity has, arguably, the worst air quality levels in the world.

Perhaps the recent earthquake in Albania best illustrates, how devastating consequences of poor planning and land use policy can be. Years of bad planning and illegal construction have resulted in dozens of casualties and a repair cost at over a billion euros.

This edition of our newsletter provides a broad survey of this phenomenon, asking, above all, what decisions need to be taken today to prevent natural disasters from devastating local communities, on a far greater scale than that of the events themselves? In short, what decisions needs to be made today to avert catastrophe tomorrow? How can citizens pressure local policymakers to prioritize disaster preparedness (and public health) issues? And how can the region’s international partners – above all the EU – help advance this agenda too?

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Drawing on the perspective of local experts and policy analysts, we offer a series of essays on this topic with the hope that they will stimulate policy debate and conversation, as the global community tentatively looks to the “new normal” in the post-coronavirus world. After all, as much as the pandemic has dominated international attention, it has not eliminated the need for broader policy conversation. And as another wave of flooding presently strikes the region, we argue that now is the time to take stock — to prepare for the inevitable.

## THE PREVENTABLE DISASTER OF THE 2014 BALKAN FLOODS

Ivan Stanojević

### Natural Disaster

The flooding of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, and Serbia in May 2014 was an unprecedented event in the minds and memories of the local population and officials. Even when faced with the facts of what was happening, some officials were unable to believe that the situation was real. For them, the floods were a black swan event – a highly improbable and unexpected event with disastrous consequences.<sup>1</sup> What was improbable and unexpected in this case was the level of precipitation, which surpassed every imaginable expectation. In just three days, an equivalent of three months' worth of precipitation fell, overwhelming local flood protection systems. In theory, these systems should be able to protect the population and property from rare cases of heavy rain that occur once every 100 years. The precipitation level in May 2014 was ten times higher than the one the system was designed to withstand. Such heavy rain swiftly increased the levels of streams and mountain tributaries, some rising up to 7 meters. As a consequence, bigger rivers which collected water from torrential tributaries rose steadily and persistently even after the end of the heavy rains. Naturally, their levels decreased very slowly after the peak, which significantly prolonged the situation. The heavy rains produced three disastrous effects:

- Swift torrential floods destroyed houses, bridges, and parts of roads;
- Huge and lasting flooding of urban and rural areas, as well as agricultural land;
- The increased flow of underground waters which activated numerous landslides, destroying buildings and infrastructure in the process.

Faced with such events, officials and the population were unable to react quickly and effectively enough to prevent material damage and loss of life. The consequences were dire. In the three countries, 79 people lost their lives: 20 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, three in Croatia, and 57 in Serbia. The material damage was unparalleled. The



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estimates were that damaged or destroyed property, lost production, and killed livestock summed up to more than 4 billion euros, making it the worst peacetime catastrophe in the region.

In Croatia, the floods affected nearly 54,000 people, 17,631 of whom had to leave their homes. 4,367 homes were flooded and half of all crops destroyed.<sup>2</sup> Overall, damages in Croatia estimated up to 300 million euros.<sup>3</sup> Even such enormous damage in Croatia was superseded by damages witnessed in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. In BiH, the floods affected 50 percent of the country's municipalities. Around 1 million people were affected and 950,000 had to be relocated. The floods activated 7,176 landslides and more than 100,000 housing units and buildings were damaged or destroyed, along with more than 230 schools and public health institutions. The total damage was estimated at around 2 billion euros.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> MVEP (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia) (2014): Poplave u Hrvatskoj i regiji – analiza situacije na dan 28. svibnja 2014 <http://www.mvep.hr/hr/mediji/priopcenja/poplave-u-hrvatskoj-i-regiji---analiza-situacije-na-dan-28-svibnja-2014-,21661.html> (accessed on 29 May 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Ivančan-Picek, Branka Analysis of catastrophic floods affecting Croatia in May 2014, Zagreb: Meteorological and Hydrological Service [https://www.unisdr.org/files/38803\\_sin4768801358gal8vs4m7sj73jvufatkhk%5B1%5D.pdf](https://www.unisdr.org/files/38803_sin4768801358gal8vs4m7sj73jvufatkhk%5B1%5D.pdf) (accessed on 29 May 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Jeleč, Nihada (2015) Upravljanje krizom – Primjer poplava u BiH 2014. Godine sa osvrtom na spremnost BiH za prijem većeg broja izbjeglica, Sarajevo: Parlament BiH <https://www.parlament.ba/Publication/Read/4728?title=upravljanje-krizom---primjer-poplava-u-bosni-i-hercegovini--2014.-sa-osvrtom-na-spremnost-bosne-i-hercegovine-za-prijem-veceg-broja-izbjeglica-&pagelid=0> (accessed on 29 May 2020)

<sup>1</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan* (New York: Random house, 2010).

Finally, in Serbia, the floods directly affected 1.6 million people and 31,879 had to be relocated. The floods and landslides damaged or destroyed 16,685 housing units. Total damages were estimated at around 1.8 billion euros. Destroyed material goods made up 57 percent of the damages, while production losses amounted to 43 percent, and the disruption of production activities temporarily closed nearly 52,000 jobs.<sup>5</sup> In addition, infrastructure was hit hard with 3,500 kilometers of road damaged or destroyed and 30 percent of the country's railways disrupted.<sup>6</sup>

## Institutional Failure

Although not all of the damage and loss of life was preventable, experts agree that a significant amount could have been prevented.<sup>7</sup> Responsibility for inaction or inadequate action in the countries hit by the floods lies with the institutions and institutional actors.

There are two main reasons for this: neglect of the flood protection systems and political negative selection. Firstly, all three countries more or less neglected their flood protection systems after the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Croatia even abandoned the concept of civil protection, which was considered too reminiscent of the socialist regime for the independent Croatian state, and instead substituted it with an inferior protection and rescue system. Consequently, Croatia had to rely heavily on the military during the crisis.<sup>8</sup> An official in charge of a Serbian reconstruction agency stated that the flood prevention infrastructure was the object of criminal negligence.<sup>9</sup> Experts in BiH claim that al-

though millions of euro are being appropriated for civil defence every year, they do not have up-to-date and standardized equipment, communication equipment is obsolete, and staff lack training.<sup>10</sup>

Public institutions established during the communist era to facilitate and protect the flood protection system were unsuccessfully privatised or disbanded. As a consequence, the system, along with all of the levies, embankments, dams, and measuring stations was seen as a relic of the past to new generations unaware of its significance and of potential dangers. Back in the day, embankments were guarded and all trespassing was forbidden. After these posts were abolished and guards disbanded, the embankments implicitly became free to use. Slowly, people started using them for different activities and even started driving motor vehicles on top of them, significantly reducing their durability in the process.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, negative selection in political parties prioritized party loyalty over professional competence. Hence, the important posts in public corporations and public administration were mostly taken by people inadequate for the job. This in turn made navigating and coordinating complex crisis management systems and institutional systems nearly impossible. Countries unable to coordinate their crisis management activities failed to coordinate their national crisis responses.<sup>12</sup> This meant that information was not passed from one authority to the other. For example, information from flooded towns upstream was not passed to those towns downstream, which were soon to be flooded. In other cases, information was received and not acted upon.

It was in this climate that Tomislav Nikolić, the Serbian President, and Miroslav Čučković, the head of the municipality of Obrenovac, went to visit the flooded village Poljane, near Obrenovac, on May 15<sup>th</sup>. They claimed that the situation was under control, in front of TV cameras, although the population of Poljane had been evacuated to the town of Obrenovac. Less than 24 hours later, the whole town of Obrenovac was flooded including the school where those displaced from

5 United Nations, European Union and World Bank (2014): *Poplave u Srbiji 2014.*[Floods in Serbia 2014], <http://www.obnova.gov.rs/uploads/useruploads/Documents/Izvestaj-o-proceni-potreba-za-oporavak-i-obnovu-posledica-poplava.pdf> (accessed on 29 May 2020).

6 AlJazeeraBalkans(2014b):'Balkanflooddevastation'exceedswar damage', <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2014/05/balkan-flood-devastation-exceeds-war-damage-2014521143138991821.html> (accessed on 29 May 2020).

7 Damir Kapidžić, Dušan Pavlović & Gordan Bosanac, Crisis Response in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia, in Džihic, Vedran & Magdalena Solska (eds): *Crisis Governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia: The Study of Floods in 2014.* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2018), 27–57.

8 Dušan Pavlović, Damir Kapidžić & Gordan Bosanac, Flood Protection System in the Precrisis Phase: The cases of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Džihic, Vedran & Magdalena Solska (eds): *Crisis Governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia: The Study of Floods in 2014.* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2018): 199–222.

9 BBC (2019): Pet godina od poplava u Srbiji: Bujica vode, ali i „kriminalnog nemara”, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-48226836> (accessed on 29 May 2020).

10 CIN (2014): Floods: Citizens Left to Fend for Themselves, <https://www.cin.ba/en/poplava-u-bih-gradani-prepusteni-sami-sebi/> (accessed on 31 May 2020).

11 Pavlović, et al, Flood Protection System in the Precrisis Phase: The cases of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, 199–222.

12 Kapidžić et al, Crisis Response in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia, 28.

Poljane were temporarily housed.<sup>13</sup> Evacuation sirens were sounded only after the town was flooded. Afterward, Belgrade mayor, Siniša Mali added insult to injury by publicly calling on the people of Obrenovac not to leave their homes.<sup>14</sup> Following the flood, the whole town was evacuated and entry was forbidden until mid-June.

In theory, early warning systems were put in place but they failed to function properly in Croatia or Serbia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the implications of this were the worst because of its very complex political and institutional system. BIH consists of two entities, similar to federal units, including Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (RS). The entities represent territories held by the warring sides at the end of the Bosnian war. Even decades after the conflict, political problems persist. There is significant room for improvement in political communication and coordination of policies. The early warning systems of the two entities of BIH were not even directly connected for political reasons. Unfortunately, the entity borders established after the Dayton Agreement, have not taken into account the complex interplay of tributary rivers in BIH. The entity institutions of Republika Srpska did not even monitor the water levels and crisis responses in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. People relied on personal contacts to gather necessary information, but the institutional response was missing. There were additional problems regarding communication between different levels of government within the entities in cases where elected officials from different parties held office and were supposed to coordinate activities.<sup>15</sup>

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Unprecedented heavy rains and decades-long neglect of flood prevention systems led to catastrophic floods in the Balkans in 2014. These floods caused arguably the worst peacetime catastrophe in the region. To prevent similar disasters in the future, affected countries should maintain and improve their flood prevention systems, reevaluate crisis response procedures, and try to establish multi-national coordinated responses in the Sava River basin.

The main issue rests on the lack of a central coordinating authority. A failure to coordinate crisis prevention and response instigated blame games

<sup>13</sup> CINS (2014): Čekajući predsednika, <https://www.cins.rs/cekajuci-predsednika/> (accessed on 29 May 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Al Jazeera Balkans (2014a): „Obrenovac: Tragedija za čiji razmjer je kriv ljudski faktor, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/obrenovac-tragedija-za-ciji-razmjer-je-kriv-ljudski-faktor> (accessed on 29 May 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Pavlović, et al, Flood Protection System in the Precrisis Phase: The cases of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, 199–222.

between officials, and ultimately, no one took responsibility and no one was punished for failing to take timely action.

One exception is the ruling of a Vukovar court in the case of Petar Sirotković. Mr. Sirotković was unable to save his mother during the flood and he pressed charges against the state. The court's verdict stated that responsibility laid with Božo Galić, the head of Vukovar-Srijem county, who failed to act on time after being notified about the incoming flood by the National Water Management Agency and the Agency for Protection and Rescue. While Galić was not himself punished, Mr. Sirotković received a compensation of more than 20,000 euros.<sup>16</sup>

### The Aftermath

Although the state governments have not taken responsibility for the deaths of their citizens or paid compensations for those deaths, they have helped the affected population with material damages. In addition, following the floods in July of 2014, the international community organized a donor's conference for BIH and Serbia<sup>17</sup> where representatives of 23 international organizations and 60 governments pledged to give 995 million euros to Serbia and 809 million euros to BIH.<sup>18</sup>

Experts state that Bosnia and Herzegovina had the most problems with the just and efficient allocation of international aid because of the mentioned ethnic and political divisions embodied in the complex political system. There are serious corruption accusations since there is no transparent information about 46 percent of the fi-

<sup>16</sup> Jutarnji list (2018): Najveća prirodna katastrofa u modernoj Hrvatskoj, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/najveca-prirodna-katastrofa-u-modernoj-hrvatskoj-evo-kako-izgleda-gunja-cetiri-godine-nakon-velike-poplave/7350612/> (accessed on 29 May 2020).

<sup>17</sup> European Commission (2014): International donors' conference for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia after the floods, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO\\_14\\_482](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_14_482) (accessed on 29 May 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Balkan Insight (2015): Bosnia, Serbia to Evaluate Post-Flood Reconstruction, <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/08/07/bosnia-serbia-organize-follow-up-donors-conference-on-floods-08-05-2015/> (accessed on 29 May 2020).

nancial aid usage.<sup>19</sup> Until the situation improves regarding corruption and the functionality of this complex political system, one can hardly expect to see improved institutional prevention and reactions in the event of a new natural disaster. The people of BiH have reasonable doubts as to whether anything has improved since 2014.<sup>20</sup>

A poor and uncoordinated response from Serbian authorities during the flood led the government to establish a new Office for Reconstruction and Flood Relief. The office carried out the relief efforts after the 2014 floods and for those in following years.<sup>21</sup> Afterwards, the public raised important concerns regarding flood relief and prevention. The relief issues were the criteria, injustice, and fraud.<sup>22</sup> In years after 2014, the agency spent 78 million euros, mostly to repair parts of the old flood prevention system, while there were no major upgrades. Consequently, smaller floods have occurred in recent years, in some places even multiple times. There are cases where the government prioritizes military factories over residential areas by raising higher embankments on one side of the river.<sup>23</sup> It seems that the government is more willing to compensate damages after the fact than in doing much to prevent flooding in the first place.

Croatia, as a member of the European Union, had the least amount of problems properly distributing relief funds. It is important to mention that Croatia was able to finance reparations and damages mainly on its own, despite numerous offers from international creditors. Out of an 80 million euro EU financial aid package, Croatia received less than 9 million.<sup>24</sup> However, some peo-

ple affected by the floods in Croatia were also unhappy with how money was spent during the sanitation and reconstruction period. For the future, the biggest question for Croatia centers on whether it will rely on the military in the case of a natural disaster, or if it will be able to organize a more effective civil service and flood prevention system.

To conclude, the 2014 floods should be seen as an unexpected natural disaster as well as an institutional failure. The significant loss of life and material damage, which followed, was preventable. There is plenty of room for improvement in the maintenance of flood protection systems and upgrades of the system. Additionally, countries should improve their crisis response schemes and try to establish proper coordination in dealing with natural disasters, especially in the Sava River basin.

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- 19 Iva Kornfein Groš, International Financial Aid in the Postcrisis Phase in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, in Džihić, Vedran & Magdalena Solska (eds): *Crisis Governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia: The Study of Floods in 2014*. (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2018), 161–165.
- 20 DW (2019): Poplave u BiH – Da se ne ponovi 2014?, <https://www.dw.com/bs/poplave-u-bih-da-se-ne-ponovi-2014/a-47346867> (accessed on 29 May 2020).
- 21 Kornfein Groš, International Financial Aid in the Postcrisis Phase in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, 165–168.
- 22 CINS (2019): Odbačen najveći broj krivičnih prijava zbog zloupotrebe pomoći posle poplava, <https://www.cins.rs/odbacen-najveci-broj-krivicnih-prijava-zbog-zloupotrebe-pomoci-posle-poplava/> (accessed on 29 May 2020).
- 23 BIRN (2020): Nakon poplava, sela u Srbiji ostavljena na milost rekama, <https://javno.rs/analiza/preview/nakon-poplava-sela-u-srbiji-ostavljena-na-milost-rekama> (accessed on 30 May 2020).
- 24 Kornfein Groš, International Financial Aid in the Postcrisis Phase in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, 158–161.

## EARTHQUAKE AMID CRISIS

Roland Lami

The Albanian democratic system has faced multiple crises in the 2019–2020 period, including the election legitimacy crisis, the representation, and institutional crises. For the first time in 29 years of political pluralism, the opposition decided to quit parliament, which according to its leader Lulzim Basha, it saw as illegitimate given the problematic elections of 2017.<sup>1</sup> The opposition also boycotted local elections in June 2019, arguing that the state failed to provide a guarantee of free and fair elections.<sup>2</sup> These moves weakened public trust in parliament.<sup>3</sup>

The crisis of electoral legitimacy further deepened after the dismissal of two newly elected mayors in Shkodra and Vlora by the Central Election Commission (CEC) because they had not stated on their decriminalization form the fact that they had been previously convicted. The non-parliamentary opposition used this matter to continue their accusations on government criminalization and on state-controlled prosecution, which has not yet investigated the electoral crime in the elections held in Shijak and Diber. The *Bild* newspaper published tapes of registered conversations where senior officials of government and Socialist Party structures are heard communicating with persons with criminal records about possibly influencing the election results in the Diber and Shijak constituencies. These wiretaps were filed by the opposition in the prosecution and have not yet been investigated.

The fall of 2019 was also marked by the decision of French President Emmanuel Macron to veto the opening of EU negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. This disappointing decision was a subject of debate between political parties in Albania, and the parliamentary majority took initiative in the tense climate to oust President Meta, also an unprecedented move.

1 <http://www.panorama.com.al/lajm-i-fundit-monika-kryemadhi-del-me-vendimin-ja-cfare-do-te-ndodhe-me-mandatet-e>

2 <https://www.trt.net.tr/shqip/balkani/2020/02/11/rreth-1-miliard-euro-eshhte-demi-nga-termeti-i-26-nentorit-ne-shqiperi-1357265>

3 Instituti i Studimeve Politike (2019) Parlamenti ne Kohe Krize: monitorim i kuvendit janar – gusht 2019, fq. 9 <http://isp.com.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ISP-RAPORT-FINAL-MONITORUES-MBI-KUVENDIT-Gusht-2019.pdf>



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It was amidst this climate of political tension, institutional crisis, the delegitimization of election results, and postponement of the opening of EU negotiations that Albania was hit by a strong earthquake on November 26, 2019. According to the Institute of Geo-Science, this was a 6.4 magnitude earthquake, and its maximum intensity was IX in Hamallaj, Jube and Rrushkull, and VIII–IX in the cities of Durres, Sukth and Kuraten. The impact was devastating. 51 people were killed, 17,000 displaced, and 913 injured. A report found that over 95 thousand apartments were damaged, 11 thousand were found uninhabitable, and about 200,000 people in 11 municipalities were affected by the earthquake in total. The Chairman of the Inter-Ministerial Committee of Civil Emergencies announced that the damages caused by the earthquake amounted to just under 1 billion euros,<sup>4</sup> while the World Bank's Commanding Director in Albania, Evis Sulko, warned that the costs of damage created by the earthquake amounted to as much as 7.5% of the GDP, and its effects would continue throughout the following year.

The catastrophic consequences of the earthquake temporarily interrupted internal political conflicts, as politicians turned their attention towards coping with the emergency situation. Despite the fact that the central government took immediate measures to execute search and rescue operations in the rubble and secure accommodation for families left without homes, key structural challenges were noticed during this emergency phase.

4 Ibidem.

Regarding the search and rescue operational forces in Albania, experts identified major shortcomings compared to those from Kosovo, Greece, Italy, Turkey, etc., including the lack of appropriate uniforms and equipment needed to carry out the humanitarian intervention. Shemsi Prenç, former Director of Civil Emergencies, noted that “when Kosovo’s operational structures arrived, we noticed that they were well-prepared and well-trained. They also used search dogs, thermal cameras, and search cameras in the rubble.” He noted that Albanian forces were far behind this level of preparation, and critiqued the emergency budget of 1.3 million euros, which he considered to be too small. These limitations were also acknowledged by the current Director of Civil Emergencies, Haki Çako. However, he claimed that it was normal that the Albanian search and rescue teams could not compare to those of other countries, because “our sector is being reformed.”<sup>5</sup>

One expert, Foto Duro,<sup>6</sup> argued that “at the municipal level, there is almost a complete lack of decision-making authority in relation with civil emergencies. The current legislation does not offer a clear definition of the size / percentage of the state budget (ministries) in cases of emergency.” In addition, by the end of 2018, the State Supreme Audit conducted an inspection of the institutions dealing with the Prevention and Protection from Disasters in Albania, and stated that “there are no medium-term or long-term policy documents providing coordinated management for all institutions dealing with the disasters risk reduction and civil protection in Albania.”<sup>7</sup>

The November earthquake highlighted the populist tendencies of Prime Minister Rama. What stands out about the behavior of the prime minister is that he was very often “on the ground” in order to be seen “responding”, but not necessarily making key decisions (a feature of Rama which has reared its head in other times as well). Journalists remarked that the PM behaved in a craven way, exploiting the political theatre of the situation and preparing for snap elections rather than truly putting in the effort to rebuild the

country.<sup>8,9</sup> According to Fatos Lubonja, “Prime Minister Edi Rama – instead of doing his job, i.e. solving problems of those affected by the quake – appears all the time on television and plays the role of the strong and powerful leader; he plays various roles, being at the same time prime minister, the chief of civil emergencies and the mayor.”

The Prime Minister’s behaviour has not been very different during the COVID-19 pandemic (March–April 2020), and a personalization of crisis management has been noted.<sup>10</sup> The prime minister has personally taken on the role of other governmental departments for giving advice to the public during the pandemic, and spending time speaking out on television and social media. For example, an audio message from the PM played on every phone call: “It’s Edi speaking: wash your hands, do not leave the house for fun, open the windows as much as you can, and beware of the media!”<sup>11</sup> The opposition considers this propaganda because in most democratic countries, health messages which are intended to raise the awareness of citizens are sent by public health institutions and not by politicians.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a significant part of the media considered the message “beware of the media” an insult and a violation of media freedom.

Indeed, the autocratic methods of Prime Minister Rama are reflected in the decisions taken by the government towards the media during the period of managing the consequences of the earthquake and that of the COVID-19 pandemic. In both cases, there was a tendency of government censorship of the media. During the earthquake, the Electronic and Postal Communications Authority closed the portal Joqalbania.al and blocked an editorial of the *Dita* newspaper. In response, the Albanian Media Council declared that such measures were illegal.<sup>13</sup> Similar behaviour on the part of the government is currently on display - the Platform for the Protection of Jour-

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5 Ibidem.

6 Duro, F. (2019) *Menaxhimi I Merngjencave civile ne Shqiperi*, Tirane, IDM. <http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Menaxhimi-i-Emergjencave-Civile-ne-Shqiperi.pdf>.

7 Revista Monitor (2020) <https://www.monitor.al/pse-nuk-funksionon-emergjenca-civile-fatale-nese-ndodh-ndonje-fatkeqesi-tjeter/> – last seen May 20, 2020.

8 Ibidem.

9 <https://opinion.al/category/opinion-web-tv/pare> – last seen May 17, 2020

10 <https://www.reporter.al/gjigandomania-e-kryeministrit-rama-ne-luften-ndaj-armikut-te-padukshem/> – last seen May 13, 2020.

11 <https://www.reporter.al/rama-pershkallezon-luften-e-tj-kunder-medias-ne-telefonat-celulare/> – last seen May 20, 2020.

12 <https://gazetasi.al/audiomesazhi-i-rames-ne-telefon-pd-papergjegjshmeri-dhe-propagande/> – last seen May 17, 2020.

13 <https://www.reporter.al/keshilli-i-medias-qeveria-po-shfrytez-on-termetin-per-censure-ndaj-medias/> – last seen May 16, 2020.

nalism and Safety of Journalists annual report has highlighted the risks posed to media freedom in Albania during the pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

During the newest COVID-19 global pandemic, conflict between the opposition and the current government has begun to make headlines yet again. The government accused the opposition of politicizing the situation and manipulating public opinion by publishing its own data and offering populist proposals such as economic aid during both the earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the opposition accused the government of an abuse of power and in the selective distribution of aid, manipulation of public opinion with fake figures, corrupt government decisions, and lack of vision toward crisis management.

Meanwhile, the process of filling vacancies for the constitutional court reopened, which was suspended due to the earthquake. As soon as the process reopened, the conflict between the President and the parliamentary majority [TH4] rekindled. The process of filling seats in the constitutional court was interrupted as the President sought an opinion from the Venice Commission regarding the procedure followed by the chair of the Judicial Appointments Council, Mr. Dvorani. At the same time, the President had filed a lawsuit to SPAK (Anti-Corruption and Anti-Organized Crime Prosecution) against Mr. Dvorani. This dispute seemed inevitable, as both the parliamentary majority and the President are seeking the best case scenario of appointing their allies to the constitutional court, as they will decide on the President's potential dismissal and the legitimacy of the 2019 local elections. In the worst case scenario, they seek to block the establishment of this important constitutional institution as this outcome is beneficial to both parties, while the constitutional court still does not have the necessary quorum to make decisions.

<sup>14</sup> <https://exit.al/midis-dy-zjarreve-media-ne-kohen-e-covid19/> – last seen May 18, 2020.

This dispute pressed President Meta to take an unprecedented act in organizing a protest against “justice Rama-form”, PM Edi Rama’s name for “justice reform”.<sup>15</sup> During this rally, President Meta hinted that if the government did not take measures to normalize the process of nominating the constitutional court judges, he was ready to take the initiative to dissolve parliament, despite not having the authority to do so under the constitution.

At this time, the Political Council, known currently as the Electoral Reform Commission, had gathered to prepare and take the further steps towards electoral reform. The opposition has offered its proposals, and insisted on the request made public a year ago for a transitional government, which will administer the elections. The opposition considers the formation of the transitional government a key condition for holding free elections. On the other hand, the government remains committed to meeting the OSCE / ODIHR electoral recommendations.<sup>16</sup> The condition reiterated by the opposition seems non-negotiable.

Under such circumstances, the presence of international organizations and representatives is ignored.

Regarding the standards of democracy, the problems identified by the opposition in the last two years are reflected in the twelve conditions set by the European Council to start the EU accession negotiation process. Among these conditions are the initiation of investigations of corrupt judges and prosecutors dismissed from the vetting process, the fight against corruption and organized crime, public administration reform, electoral

reform, the establishment of the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, etc.

These problems were also confirmed by the 2019 report issued by the State Department, stating that “corruption is widespread in all branches

<sup>15</sup> <http://top-channel.tv/video/meta-proteste-me-2-mars-presidenti-kunder-grushtit-te-shtetit-te-qeverise-rama/> – last seen May 20, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/354341>.

of government. Impunity continues to be a serious problem.”<sup>17</sup> A Transparency International report revealed that Albania has had a negative trend in the level of perception of corruption, and has dropped seven places compared to last year, down to spot 106 out of 180.<sup>18</sup> A 2019 survey organized by Institute for Democracy and Mediation demonstrates that a majority of Albanian citizens perceive low-level corruption at 87.5 % and high-level corruption at 85.2 %, meaning that they perceive corruption to be a widespread phenomenon across Albanian government and society. 48.5 % of the respondents also believe that justice reform is not being properly implemented, while 30 % believe that this reform has not had a positive impact.<sup>19</sup>

These data sets confirm that the political conflicts of 2019 have not been resolved and have therefore reappeared in 2020. The issue of the delegitimization of the 2017 general elections and local elections of 2019 is still under discussion today. Also, due to vacant positions not being filled in the Constitutional Court, the institution is unable to function, as it does not have the necessary quorum to make decisions. The earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated aspects of governance and deepened the political conflict between the majority and the opposition. As a result, democratic parameters in the country have only further deteriorated.

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 17 <https://abcnews.al/dash-korrupsioni-dhe-pandeshkueshmeria-probleme-serioze-per-shqiperine/> – last seen May 20, 2020.

18 <https://euronews.al/al/aktualitet/2020/01/23/raporti-i-transparency-international-per-korrupsionin-shqiperiahumb-7-vende> – last seen May 19, 2020.

19 Instituti për Demokraci dhe Ndërmjetësim (2020) Sondazhi I opinionin publik 2019 Besimi ne qeverisje, IDM, Tirane.



# POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS

## OVERVIEW

THIS SECTION AIMS TO PROVIDE A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS AND UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN SECURITY, WHICH INCLUDES STRUCTURAL SOURCES OF CONFLICT SUCH AS SOCIAL TENSIONS BROUGHT ABOUT BY UNFINISHED DEMOCRATIZATION, SOCIAL OR ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES OR ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES, FOR INSTANCE. THE BRIEFINGS COVER FOURTEEN COUNTRIES IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE: THE SEVEN POST-YUGOSLAV COUNTRIES, ALBANIA, GREECE, TURKEY, CYPRUS, BULGARIA, ROMANIA, AND MOLDOVA.

## THE AFTERMATH OF COVID-19

An illusive kind of normality is returning to much of Southeast Europe, more than three months after the arrival of the first wave of COVID-19 in the region. Most states have lifted the bulk of restrictions and lockdowns imposed at the height of the pandemic. In many countries, politicians – particularly those facing elections or with a more populist streak – have rushed to proclaim ‘victory’ over COVID-19.

With states of emergency, police curfews, and lockdowns largely abolished and a large degree of freedom restored for ordinary people, a sense of normality is, indeed, returning to the region. Yet in many countries, the idea that COVID-19 has been ‘defeated’, rather than just contained, seems to have been taken too literally. The *easing* of restrictions by authorities seems to have been equated by many ordinary citizens as the complete *scraping*, or *abolition*, of any kind of preventive measures or the need to take precautions, such as social distancing. This feeling has also been fed by contradictory messaging from medics and, in particular, political leaders.

A woman wearing mask is seen on a bus as public transports start to serve after Serbia lifted a state of emergency and night curfew imposed due to coronavirus pandemic in Nis, Serbia on May 8, 2020



In reality, the situation on the ground does not seem to merit such a relaxed approach, nor any premature declarations of victory. COVID-19 is still very much present in the countries of the region and, despite the low-and-decreasing number of infections in many countries in early May, it is clear that the virus is making a comeback. Serbia has seen perhaps the worst escalation in newly registered cases, with hospitals in some towns, such as

Novi Pazar, on the brink of being overwhelmed. In North Macedonia, an increase in the number of identified cases over the last few weeks has led to a return of weekend curfews in several cities, including the capital Skopje. While in North Macedonia authorities are at least attempting to take steps to halt this rise, in Moldova the government seems to be pretending that everything is fine in the face of clearly rising numbers of infections.

General view of the 3000 beds at the book fair center placed by Serbian Defence Ministry for treating the patients with coronavirus symptoms in Belgrade, Serbia on March 24, 2020



Meanwhile, governments across the region are attempting to deal with the fallout of the pandemic and get political and business activities back on track. While those who can continue to work from home, a majority of other businesses are resuming work where possible. Governments have rolled out different types of financial support packages, mainly geared towards preserving jobs in the short-term. However, budgetary resources in the region are limited. As in the rest of the world, a severe GDP contraction is expected by the end of 2020, though much of its severity will be dictated by developments in the export markets of the region, primarily the eurozone. For now, countries with large tourism sectors – such as Greece, Montenegro, Croatia, or Bulgaria – expect to be worst hit.

When it comes to the political realm, the coronavirus pandemic arrived to the region just as a number of countries – such as North Macedonia or Serbia – were embarking on campaigns for parliamentary elections. These elections had to be deferred, with governments now trying to get them back on track. Yet with an economic downturn expected, governments in other countries

– such as Croatia – which were due to hold elections later in the year have scrambled to bring them forward, before the recession bites.

Finally, many observers are also comparing how different countries in the region have fared with the virus. The most precise comparisons will not be available for some time, until a full comparison of the number of deaths compared to previous years is carried out. Yet some limited comparison is still possible. At the time of writing, Turkey had the biggest absolute number of COVID-19 deaths – 4,746, followed by Romania at 1,947. Yet in terms of deaths per million inhabitants, Moldova was in first place with 92 deaths per million inhabitants and North Macedonia with 81. Montenegro and Albania seem to have fared best with 14 and 12 deaths per million inhabitants respectively. Moldova is also the regional 'leader' in terms of total cases per million inhabitants – 2,558, followed by Turkey with 2,053.

## (RE)SCHEDULING ELECTIONS

The coronavirus pandemic has derailed one of the most important political and democratic institutions in the region – the holding of elections in a timely manner to choose the representatives of the people and those who will govern them. It is hard to recall any similar events which have forced elections to be deferred.

Most immediately affected have been North Cyprus, North Macedonia, and Serbia. In **North Macedonia**, voters had been due to go to the polls to elect a new Parliament on April 12<sup>th</sup>, in an election brought forward from the autumn. Naturally, this was not feasible amidst the coronavirus pandemic, hence the elections were put on hold. With the (seeming) cessation of the first wave of the pandemic, the country's main political parties began discussions on setting a new date for the elections. The ruling SDSM pushed for the election to be rescheduled at the end of June or early July. However, the main opposition party, the VMRO-DPMNE pushed for the elections to be delayed further. Officially, the VMRO-DPMNE based its demand for the elections to be delayed until later in the year on the argument that COVID-19 was still present in the country, but in reality it seems that the party was banking on a decline in support for the ruling SDSM once the economic effects of the

pandemic began to bite. Weeks of wrangling by the two parties were momentarily overtaken by facts on the ground – with the number of registered cases of infection rising over the last couple of weeks, there was a question mark over whether the elections could be held at all, before ultimately deciding to hold them on July 15<sup>th</sup>. With results from 3241 out of 3480 polling stations counted, the State Electoral Commission's projection, at the time of writing, showed that the ruling Social Democratic Union for Macedonia (SDSM) was slated to win 46 MPs in the new parliament, the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE 44, while the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and Alliance for Albanians / Alternative have also closely split the vote of this community, winning 15 and 12 MPs respectively. According to this result, SDSM and DUI mathematically have just enough MPs to form a majority in the parliament, which has 120 seats. Both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM obtained fewer seats for their MPs than in 2016 – VMRO won seven seats fewer, and SDSM has been reduced by only three MPs.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring **Serbia** Parliamentary elections were held on June 21<sup>st</sup>. A rather strange election campaign took place, as part of the opposition parties boycotted the polls, citing a lack of minimal democratic conditions. Meanwhile, a range of smaller opposition parties tried to exploit the boycott of these bigger opposition parties to try to enter Parliament. Not surprisingly, a 'civil war' raged within the opposition, with the boycotting camp accusing those opposition parties taking part of being 'Vučić's opposition'. In the end, turnout in the election stood at 48.9%, significantly lower than usual, but also not significantly enough for the boycotting opposition to genuinely be able to claim success. On this reduced turnout, the ruling SNS won an overwhelming 60.65% of the votes cast, winning 188 seats in the new Parliament. Their junior partner, the SPS, came second, with 10.38%, or 32 seats. Aside from these two parties, the only other party to pass the electoral threshold is the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS) of New Belgrade municipal head Aleksandar Šapić, which won 3.83% of votes cast, which translates into 11 MPs. In addition to this, four minority lists entered Parliament. Despite the SNS' overwhelming majority, the composition of the new Parliament – with almost no opposition presence – will pose a challenge for the ruling party and the legitimacy of its rule.

**North Cyprus**, which is due to hold presidential elections, has taken a somewhat different approach. Faced with the onset of COVID-19, authorities have decided to defer elections by six months, to October 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Croatia** had been due to hold Parliamentary elections after the summer holiday season. However, the coronavirus pandemic has clearly changed political calculations. Faced with the prospect of fighting an election after what will almost certainly be a failed tourist season and amidst a worsening economic downturn after the summer, the ruling HDZ has opted to bring elections forward. Thus, the Croatian Parliament was dissolved on May 18<sup>th</sup>, with elections being set for July 5<sup>th</sup>. Ahead of the election, polling suggested that the ruling HDZ and opposition SDP were closely tied, with support for Miroslav Škoro's Homeland Movement also running strong. In the end, the HDZ won a decisive victory – with 37.3% of votes cast and 66 seats in the new Parliament, leaving the SDP trailing behind with 24.9% of votes and 41 seats. With 76 MPs needed for a minimal majority, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković is set to return to power with the support of minority MPs and other individual MPs who entered Parliament. Overall, the result of the election will likely help anchor Croatian politics in the political centre.

MP's are seen after Croatian parliament dissolved with majority voting in Zagreb, Croatia on May 18, 2020



**Montenegro** has also moved Parliamentary elections in Montenegro are due to take place on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August, but may still be moved to October. There had been speculations that an early July date would be chosen, but it seems there was not enough time to organise an election by then.

Local elections have also been disrupted by the pandemic. **Romania** had been due to hold local elections by the beginning of June, but rescheduled to September 27<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, in **Bosnia** the holding of local elections – originally scheduled for October – has been delayed for a variety of reasons. While there are concerns that a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic could derail the elections, in the immediate term it is the absence of an adopted budget at the central state level which has forced the date of the elections to be pushed back to mid-November.

## GOVERNMENT (IN)STABILITY

By and large, those in power have so far fared well during the coronavirus pandemic. Polling data in most countries suggests that, in the aftermath of the pandemic's first wave, ruling parties and leaders have experienced a modest rise in support. Even the more embattled governments of the region – such as those in Albania, Bosnia, or Montenegro – have basked in a respite from regular politics.

Not so in **Kosovo** however. While the pandemic raged, political battles in Prishtina only intensified. A crisis within the Vetëvendosje (VV)-LDK governing coalition had begun to brew even before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. With the US administration of President Donald Trump keen to resume negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, Ambassador Richard Grenell, Trump's special envoy to the Kosovo-Serbia negotiations, had exerted heavy pressure on the Government in Pristina to remove tariffs previously imposed on Bosnian and Serbian goods. While then Prime Minister Albin Kurti resisted pressure to remove the tariffs unconditionally and engage in a speedy dialogue, the LDK pushed for compliance with US demands, arguing that Kosovo could not afford to alienate a key backer such as the US. Nevertheless, Kurti dug his heels in. The point of dispute between VV and the LDK then shifted to how Kosovo would handle the coronavirus pandemic. Kurti resisted President Hashim Thaçi's efforts to impose a state of emergency, which would have given Thaçi increased powers at the expense of the government. Following Kurti's dismissal of the LDK-appointed Minister of Interior in his government, the LDK finally decided to turn on the Kurti Government. On March

25<sup>th</sup>, the government was overthrown in a no confidence vote in which almost all the parties in the Kosovo Assembly except VV voted in favour of removing the government.

Yet the overthrow of the Kurti government did not bring about a quick end to the crisis of government in Kosovo. On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, President Thaçi gave the mandate to form a new government to the LDK's Avdullah Hoti, the Deputy Prime Minister in Kurti's outgoing government. However, VV challenged this decision before the Constitutional Court, arguing that Kosovo's constitutional set-up required new elections to be held after a vote of no confidence. The Constitutional Court, in turn, halted all work on forming a new government until it could consider this complaint. Finally, at the end of May, the Court ruled that Thaçi was within his rights to offer Hoti a mandate to form the next government. In due course, a new government led by Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti was elected on June 3<sup>rd</sup>. Yet the Hoti Government was elected with the tightest possible majority – 61 MPs out of a total of 120 voted in favour. The Government is backed by the LDK and the AAK of former PM Ramush Haradinaj, as well as a collection of smaller parties and minorities MPs. With such a narrow majority, most analysts believe it has a very uncertain future at best. Despite this, Hoti seems to have ambitious plans, including steering negotiations with Belgrade himself.

Kosovo's new Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti speaks to the media after receiving the vote of confidence in parliament in Pristine, Kosovo on June 3, 2020



The **Moldovan** government's fortunes also seemed to hang in the balance. At last count, the governing majority had the support of no more than 52

MPs in the 101 seat Moldovan Parliament. A steady trickle of MPs from the governing Democratic Party have been defecting to the opposition, fuelling speculation that the government may soon face a vote of no confidence. Perhaps in order to forestall such an outcome, on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, Parliamentary Speaker Zinaida Greceanii sent all MPs into a 14-day quarantine due to the fact that one of their ranks had tested positive for COVID-19. However, while the government's fate hangs in the balance, there also appears to be no alternative coalition that could be cobbled together to replace it. With presidential elections due in November, most of the parties may conclude that a simultaneous parliamentary and presidential election may be the best option.

In **Bosnia**, the Federation Government – currently functioning in a technical mandate in the absence of a newly elected government following the October 2018 elections – was rocked by a corruption scandal centered on the purchase of ventilators during the coronavirus pandemic. At the end of May, acting Prime Minister Fadil Novalić was even arrested as part of an investigation into the affair. Opposition parties demanded Novalić's removal from the Federation Government. In the aftermath of this, Security Minister Fahrudin Radoncic resigned from Bosnia's Council of Ministers, citing differences with his coalition partners in the SDA, but also the ventilator affair.

Serbian lawmakers wearing gloves and face masks and sitting behind perspex screens to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, take part in the parliament session to lift the state of emergency and curfew imposed since mid-March in Belgrade on May 06, 2020



Mass protests broke out in **Serbia** after the announcement of the introduction of new restrictive measures, following the escalation in new-

ly registered COVID-19 cases. While the violent police response and the disproportionate use of force were the main controversies during the first few days of the protests, of late the main issues have become numerous arrests, some of which have been described as completely unjustified.

Although the new lockdown announced by Serbia's government was seen as the main reason for the protests and the violent escalation that followed, protesters have pointed to far deeper motives for the unrest. Many in Serbia were appalled by what they described as the autocratic and corrupt regime of Aleksandar Vučić, and the apparent prioritization of political aims over the health of citizens. The lack of trust in the government's response to the pandemic further deteriorated due to findings that Serbia under-reported COVID-19 deaths and infections, conspicuously during an election campaign.

The number of demonstrators declined after a few days, particularly after seeing the harsh violence in the streets of Belgrade and Novi Sad in the first days of the protests. According to some commentators, the biggest weakness of the protest is the incoherence of the protesters' demands – as people of a very wide variety of political orientations gathered to protest without clear leadership.

Protests have also erupted throughout **Bulgaria** after the political leader of an opposition party attempted to access a public beach and was stopped by national authorities who were protecting the nearby mansion of a retired politician. The incident appeared to have escalated pre-existing tensions in this country.

## EU PERSPECTIVE

A much trumpeted EU-Western Balkans Summit – stewarded by the Croatian Presidency of the EU – came and went on May 6<sup>th</sup>. All in all, despite high hopes and expectations, the summit was rather anti-climactic. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the planned gathering turned into a virtual meeting. That aside, perhaps the biggest disappointment for EU hopefuls in the region was that the summit's concluding statement did not mention the word 'enlargement', instead referring to the region's 'European perspective'. This was natu-

rally seen as damaging to the EU's credibility in the region, as well as the credibility of the EU enlargement process. Those trying to put an optimistic spin on things argued that the EU had sent a real and substantive signal on enlargement in March, when it had decided to approve the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. While this argument had merit, it was nevertheless hard to escape the feeling that the EU was playing 'hot and cold' with the region, thereby damaging its own credibility and leverage.

The EU pledged assistance to the region, both to help mitigate the economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic and to boost economic development. A €3.3 bn assistance package to the region was touted, though its details are to be revealed later in the year. Yet the summit also made a clear demand – that EU support for the region should be acknowledged more clearly and that candidate countries should clearly align themselves with EU foreign policy positions. This seemed to be an only thinly veiled reference to Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's pivot towards China amidst the pandemic.

The EU now plans to publish its negotiating frameworks with Skopje and Tirana in June. However, publication of the annual 'enlargement package' – including the traditional country progress reports – has been pushed back to the autumn, due to the coronavirus pandemic.

## ECONOMIC FALLOUT

The region is bracing for an economic recession on a par with the 2008/2009 crisis, if not worse in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. The full extent of the economic downturn is yet to be seen, but the first projections are fairly grim. The IMF is projecting that the region's economies will contract by between 3% and 10% of GDP this year.

According to the IMF's World Economic Outlook published in April, the worst affected countries will be those with substantial tourism sectors. Thus, Greece's GDP is expected to contract by 10%, while Croatia's could decline by 9%. Montenegro's recession is projected to be much the same as Croatia's. Cyprus, another tourism-dependent economy, is expected to take a 6.5%

hit to its GDP. The economies of Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Moldova, and Turkey are all expected to contract by around 5%, while Bulgaria and North Macedonia could see contractions of around 4%. Least scathed are expected to be Moldova and Serbia, with contractions of around 3%. The IMF's forecast does offer a silver lining of sorts – all the countries are expected to see growth in 2021. However, as most realist observers noted, any recovery is probably conditioned on the absence of further waves of the coronavirus. Indeed, many economists fear that a return of the pandemic – and its economic paralysis – in the autumn could make the IMF's projections turn out to have been overly optimistic.

While the countries of the region brace for the full and still unknown economic impact of the pandemic, unemployment seems to be rising. Yet there is a marked difference in the availability of reliable statistics between the EU member states in the region and non-member states. EU member states such as Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania have relatively reliable unemployment figures. Thus, Romania reported that between March 16 and the end of April around 1 million workers had been laid off either permanently or temporarily – 276,000 had lost jobs permanently, while 725,000 had had their contracts suspended. In Bulgaria, just over 90,000 people had lost their jobs from the start of the pandemic in March until May. Croatia seemed to fare worse, with 290,000 people applying for unemployment benefits in March and April.

These numbers stood in sharp contrast to figures from non-member states. In Serbia, by early April only 4,300 new applications to the unemployment bureau had been reported. North Macedonia registered around 9,000 newly unemployed in March and April. Within Bosnia, there were sharp differences between the two entities, with the RS reporting only 2,400 newly unemployed by April 1<sup>st</sup>, while the Federation entity reported around 25,000 newly unemployed between March 16<sup>th</sup> and April 21<sup>st</sup>. Meanwhile, Albanian authorities estimated that 66,000 people had lost their jobs in the month to April 10<sup>th</sup>. In all likelihood – with the exception of Albania – real unemployment figures will be much higher, particularly with the large number of people employed in the grey economy in these countries, whose unemployment is unlikely to be picked up by official statistics.

## DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

The state of democracy in the region has been a matter of growing concern for some years now. In this regard, the coronavirus pandemic made some of the problems in the region only more obvious. In many countries, from Albania to Serbia, a knee-jerk instinct to control and censor the flow of information on the part of the authorities became clearly visible. Media freedoms came under (even) more pressure in nearly all the countries of the region.

In early May, Freedom House published its annual Nations in Transit reports for 2019, which caused a stir. According to this democracy watchdog's latest rankings, after many years of decline in the state of their democracies, Hungary and Serbia were downgraded from (semi-)consolidated democracies to the category of hybrid regimes. They thus joined Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro in this band. Other countries also continued to backslide, while Kosovo made some progress on the numerical indicators, albeit from a low starting base. In Montenegro, the government largely dismissed the Freedom House reports, but in Serbia the government reacted rather vehemently, with Prime Minister Ana Brnabić accusing the democracy watchdog of bias.

## RULE OF LAW

Issues related to the rule of law and corruption have also come into greater focus over the last couple of months. Although a chronic problem in the region, there seems little progress in tackling it. Freedom House's reports have noted a constant negative trend in this regard, with Serbia's deterioration on the corruption score helping to tip it into the category of hybrid regimes for example.

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, a corruption investigation from Bosnia sparked a significant amount of attention in the region. Namely, at the end of May it was revealed that authorities in the Federation entity had purchased some 100 Chinese-made ventilators for the public health system via a raspberry growing and trading company. The odd choice of intermediary and the seemingly inflated prices of the ventilators (around €5.25 million in total) had

led the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) to launch an investigation into the purchase. As part of the investigation, on May 28<sup>th</sup> SIPA agents arrested the Federation entity's caretaker Prime Minister Fadil Novalić, the head of the Federation's Civil Protection sector Fahrudin Solak, and Fikret Hodžić, a TV host and the owner of Silver Raspberry, the company in question. Although Novalić was released a few days later, the investigation was rare and notable in targeting such a high-ranking official. Novalić's own SDA reacted angrily to the arrest, claiming that it had the fingerprints of its political rivals all over it. Given the frenzy to acquire medical equipment at the height of the pandemic, other similar scandals may well come to light across the region.

In the meantime, reforms to the judicial system remained in the public limelight in both Albania and North Macedonia, helped in part by the focus put on these issues as part of the EU accession processes. Albania embarked on an EU and US backed process of vetting judicial officials back in 2016. The going has been both slow and devastating to the judicial system – many officials have still to be vetted, yet the rot exposed to date has been so extensive as to paralyze much of the judicial system, including the country's High and Constitutional Courts. Despite this, the vetting process has still been seen as a success overall. Yet in May rumours emerged that the main parties had met in secret to strike a deal on watering down the judicial reforms. That there was something to these rumours was largely confirmed when the US and EU ambassadors in Tirana tweeted warnings against straying from the course of judicial reforms. Meanwhile, in North Macedonia, the ruling SDSM pledged to implement reforms to the judicial system with more vigour if re-elected, aware that its own supporters felt let down over lack of progress in this area and that this was a key expectation of a number of EU member states.

## INTERVIEW WITH FLORIAN BIEBER

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**Q:** In 2014, when the entire Western Balkans region faced unprecedented floods, there was a spontaneous outburst of human solidarity and human interconnectedness, but not much has been translated into systematic regional and/or EU cooperation. Why?

**A:** In part, this is a common dynamic of any social movement. The solidarity was focused on the floods and it is hard to translate this cooperation into something more durable, especially when political elites are skeptical or actively work against it. While the problems in the region are similar, it is hard to work together against corruption, un-democratic rule, and disregard to citizen concern. In the end, each group and movement has to confront their own government and authorities and this is based on the right moment and circumstances in each of the countries, which might not coincide in every respect. This also explains why change in a country like Bosnia and Herzegovina is so difficult. Authorities are divided and a social movement is required that confronts both authorities in the Federation and the RS in order to succeed, which is difficult considering the different political parties and rhythms of political life. In addition, political engagement is considered to be 'dirty' and bad or at best hopeless, so many activists have often stayed away from political engagement or joining institutions. This has meant that established parties were not as threatened by social movements and could afford to ignore them.

**Q:** Still, do you think that the grassroots solidarity exhibited in times of crisis can become the seed for a future solidarity-based political culture in the region?

**A:** Yes, these networks emerge in moments of crisis or galvanize around one or related issues. Consider the many local movements against hydropower dams that have emerged, they are often local, but share similar goals and strategies. Similarly, urban movements against uncontrolled development often connect and have the potential to help and inspire each other. It is hard to imagine a regional movement, but rather a network of groups and active citizens who inspire each other and share lessons and strategies. This can help, as it is hard to see how a strategy that worked in Scandinavia would work in Kosovo,



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but if a social movement succeeds in one country of the region, it is easier to imagine it succeeding elsewhere. Even the success of transforming a group of social movements, such as *Možemo* in Croatia into a political party that gained seats in elections serves as a valuable example.

**Q:** Given the technology and resources at disposal, has the time come for the region to have organized early warning systems and emergency response tools on a regional level?

**A:** The level of regional cooperation on many of these fields is low. Clearly there is no political will to cooperate more closely or to save resources. We saw during the COVID-19 pandemic across Europe, including the Balkans, how governments were struggling to coordinate and work together. Surveys suggest that at the European level, citizens were not satisfied with this approach and prefer more EU cooperation. And indeed, from fighting pandemics to forest fires, emergencies are best faced jointly, with shared infrastructure and communication networks.

**Q:** Recent earthquakes in Albania truly exposed the level of poor governance (especially in illegal construction) and mismanagement that costs lives. What lessons should we take away from this?

**A:** This problem is not unique to Albania, we also saw this with the floods in North Macedonia a few years ago. Much of the constructions across the region built in recent decades are not up to appropriate standards. At the end of the day, it is governments that are responsible for either failing to introduce building standards and regula-

tions or tolerating its abuse. The legalization of illegal building, DIY architecture, and quick non-transparent building deals are common and it is corruption and state capture to blame for this. Governments have been catering to either powerful economic interests or buying votes by allowing negligence. What matters less are the rules themselves, for it is their enforcement for all of society equally that is key. All too often laws are not enforced, or illegal buildings are later legalized. All these measures suggest that the solution is not a particular law, but rather accountable government and citizens who expect this from governments. Expectations are so low that governments can get away with a lot.

**Q:** Why do you think there is so little talk about the risks of climate change in the Balkans? What can we expect from the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans?

**A:** Climate change and other green topics have long been viewed as classic post-material themes, which citizens care about once their other more immediate needs are taken care of. These includes salaries and welfare as well as the quality of life. This has made it hard for green parties and groups in the region, as daily survival has trumped green issues for folks in general. When green issues have arisen, they have focused on visible and tangible issues, such as small hydroelectric plants, pollution, and waste. Climate change is very abstract and thus hard to mobilize around, and the education system in most of the region does not encourage critical thinking and is very insular. It generally does not teach children to think in a global and social context, which suggests that people are without agency and decisions are made elsewhere without any ability of the citizens to control or influence them, further discouraging social engagement with big, global issues. Surely the Green Agenda is a good idea, but it is a top down initiative that is driven by states, and the EU and some donors. This helps to shift government policies, but it will be hard to

mobilize citizens over such an abstract and large initiative. I would think that the more tangible local issues are better suited to raise awareness on climate change.

**Q:** What differences do you see between the response of governments in Southeast Europe to the COVID-19 crisis and their response to past disasters and emergencies in general?

**A:** On the one hand, governments reacted with greater seriousness than they had during previous crises. The strict lockdowns and other measures, esp. in mid-March, suggested that the pandemic was taken seriously. I think this differed from earlier responses, because there was an international model to follow. As it was clear that most of Europe and the world went into lockdown, it was easy to join these measures. Knowing the fragility of local health care surely helped. However, there have been a few worrying aspects. First, the fight against COVID19 justified some authoritarian measures that suited most regional governments and opened the door to abuse and the erosion of civil liberties, beyond requirements. Second, the very rigid shutdowns might have been a failure in retrospect. I have been skeptical from the beginning about the benefit of locking people inside for days and then letting them out at the same time (although Kosovo had a more sophisticated approach). The lock up is unsustainable and also replaced educating people

on how to behave outside these restrictions so that the policy choice became either not allowing people to leave the house or anything goes, rather than the many steps in between. This means that as numbers are worsening, it is hard to find a more subtle mix that could be sustainable. Another observation is

the way in which some governments have been blaming citizens, sometimes in general, sometimes certain groups, for spreading the pandemic. This blame game was striking and reminded me of earlier natural disasters. When was the last time a government minister resigned because of a lack of preparedness for disasters?

### KEY TAKEAWAY

The global pandemic has highlighted the weakness of institutions and democracy in the Western Balkans. Whether this will translate into sustainable, regional social movements that push for change, remains uncertain at the moment.

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