BEHIND CORONA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: FIVE MONTHS IN

July 2020

The crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the surface and highlighted all the weaknesses in the Western Balkans. Mutual intolerance has, often, outweighed solidarity, the distributed aid used to be linked to nationality and not to those most in need; confusion and manipulation by the governments in some countries increase the discontent that escalates in the streets. Despite the coloring of the results, economies are suffering, and unemployment and poverty are rising.

This is what the Western Balkans looks like 5 months after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Does this development go hand in hand with the European aspiration of the region? Of course, there are many in the Western Balkans whose beliefs and actions give hope and oppose those who paint the region in such dark colors. Among them are the authors of the following articles.

COVID-19 HAS NO NATIONALITY

*Although the virus affects everyone, aid to the multiethnic B&H has been very much linked to the national emblem.*

By Aida Čerkez, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Tired of pandemic restrictions, Bosnians have emerged from their homes and have filled streets, cafes and restaurants to see friends, discuss vacation plans and briefly go back to their pre-corona problems like unemployment, brain-drain and discussions over whose leadership stole the most.

This, however, did not last long, as the number of infected started growing rapidly and the pandemic was again used in tit-for-tat political games and mutual destabilization efforts.

July saw another anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre and renewed quarrels over what had happened there in 1995 - was it a genocide or not. The conflicting narratives continue even after a quarter of a century to hinder reconciliation in the country.

The anniversary itself saw the funeral of nine newly found victims and no organized visits to the Potocari Memorial Center, where only dignitaries and representatives of victims’ families attended the ceremony, listening to over 40 foreign leaders pledge that something like Srebrenica should never happen again.

The ceremony was also marked by local and international warnings of increased genocide denial among Serbs who feel that the UN war-crimes tribunal in The Hague was anti-Serb bias and that their own suffering during the 1992-95 war has remained unrecognized and unpunished.

The conflicting narratives over the past usually culminate ahead of the Srebrenica anniversary and die down after July 11.

This year arguments over the past were quickly taken over by discussions about the selective approach governments have when distributing coronavirus aid, thus deepening ethnic divisions in the region.

Just after Serbia began sending aid to Bosnian Serbs in late March, Sarajevo started worrying about Muslims in the Serbian province of Sandjak.
When the first contingent of ventilators, masks, protective suits and medications arrived in Banja Luka in March, the Serb member of Bosnia’s tripartite Presidency, Milorad Dodik, said that the shipment was more than a donation and that it represented an important message to the citizens of Republika Srpska that Serbia cares for them.

“As long as there is Serbia, there is going to be Republika Srpska,” he said, as he praised Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.

Already in April, Sarajevo appears to have retaliated with a similar message to Serbia, when it donated 25,000 euro for a hospital in the Muslim-majority Serbian province of Sandjak.

The donation “means a lot to us,” the grateful major of the city of Novi Pazar, Nihat Bisevac, said during a meeting with the prime minister of the Sarajevo Canton with whom he spoke also about further economic, cultural and tourism cooperation - subjects discussed by Serbian and Bosnian Serb leaders when they announce closer ties.

The care for “their kin” continued in July when Sandjak started experiencing a drastic increase of coronavirus cases and fatalities. Sarajevo and Tuzla sent teams of medical professionals to Novi Pazar, where a crowd had just booed a visiting delegation from Belgrade that included Prime Minister Ana Brnabic.

On July 5, Sarajevo displayed the Sandjak coat of arms at the facade of its landmark City Hall with a text above that said: One heart, one nation.

Meanwhile, Croatia sent in April 5,8 million euro to Bosnia Croats to help them in the battle against COVID-19. Among the Bosniaks this was seen as another attempt to create more ethnic divisions that would eventually lead to a separate Croat entity in Bosnia with the help of Croatia.

It is this context in which Zagreb’s decision to impose a 14-day quarantine for Bosnians and the EU’s decision to ban Bosnians from entering the Union was interpreted in Sarajevo.

By default, Bosnian Croats have Croatian passports and are therefore EU citizens, which means that the restrictions the EU and Croatia imposed affected only Bosniaks and Serbs.

“Croatia found a cure against COVID-19,” Bosniaks and Serbs cynically joked. “It’s the Croatian passport.”

This measure left many Croatian beaches empty in the middle of the summer season but filled the capacities of Bosnia’s only coastal town of Neum, where it remains a problem to find any accommodations until the rest of the summer.

Meanwhile, enough time passed since Bosnia lifted restrictions for its own people and coronavirus cases started multiplying rapidly.

On July 22, the country hit its daily infection record of 324 cases, with officials using expressions like “chaos” and “collapse” for the first time when speaking of the situation.

Sarajevo became one of the major hotspots, prompting city authorities to reintroduce some measures, including reduced working hours for cafes and restaurants, limiting the number of people and mandatory masks in closed spaces and ensuring social distancing, and limiting the number of people in public gatherings.

Political bickering continued to threaten the forthcoming local elections that were first scheduled for October but then postponed until November because the country never adopted the 2020 state budget from which elections could be financed.
The budget adoption got stuck mostly thanks to obstruction from Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat parties who opposed the composition of the new Central Election Commission.

The state budget was finally adopted on July 21, allowing very little time for the vote to be organized, although the pre-election campaign is heating up with all the usual seeds of nationalism being thrown into Bosnia’s fertile soil.

**ON THE BRINK OF DISASTER**

*Kosovo’s economy is in great danger. Private business is to its knees; unemployment and poverty has been raising.*

*By Lavdim Hamidi, Kosovo*

For several days now, Kosovo has been on the top of the European list with the newest cases of COVID-19, calculated with the average of new cases of people infected with the deadly virus per 100 thousand inhabitants.

Even worst, the top three places on “Coronavirus Top List” from 9-17 of July 2020, were reserved for the Western Balkans countries: Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, countries with undeveloped health and economy.

To focus on the case of Kosovo, the average number of new daily cases of COVID-19 during the first half of July is around 200. This is a frightening number, especially for a country with no more than 1.8 million inhabitants.

To understand even more clear how dramatic the situation with COVID-19 in Kosovo is, on July 13 of this year 187 new cases of the virus were recorded, while in Italy 169 new cases were registered, although Italy has over 60 million inhabitants, or 33 times more than Kosovo.

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Since 13 of March 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 was presented, in just four months Kosovo has reached a total of about 6000 positive cases with 3000 of which are still active with the virus.

Many wards within the University Clinical Center of Kosovo in Prishtina are filled with patients infected with COVID-19, while due to overload they also go to regional hospitals. While the number of infected patients is increasing day by day, the number of hospital staff on the "front line" is decreasing, as they are constantly being infected with Coronavirus.

There is no hospital ward in Prishtina without staff infected with COVID-19, while currently 10 percent of the general medical staff are infected and are in self-isolation.

If this trend of increasing cases of COVID-19 continues, at a time when hospitals are overcrowded and medical staff are constantly infected, then the health collapse will occur at the most critical period for the country, when the infection curve has reached a peak.

Kosovo ended the whole month of March with a total of 108 cases of COVID-19, while on July 12 a record was set, 216 new cases per day, or twice as many as there were new cases throughout the third month of the year.

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Besides the serious epidemiological situation, the country's economy has also declined, despite the fact that it is the most underdeveloped in the region and Europe, with a very high unemployment and poverty rate, around 30%.
The "hand of the state" of Kosovo in this difficult economic situation has stayed far away from local business and over 220 thousand employees in this sector.

For four months, the Government of Kosovo has not managed to distribute even 80 million euros to help all businesses, although under normal conditions such financial assistance would not be enough even for a large manufacturing business, and not even for over 100 thousand private businesses operating in the country.

The Central Bank of Kosovo has predicted that the country's economic decline, as a result of the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, will go to about 4%, while the opposite has happened over the last decade, where the average economic growth has been 4%.

This is in fact the most optimistic prediction, as according to international institutions the worst-case scenario of the pandemic impact would be an annual decline in the economy of Kosovo of about 10%.

A scenario as such, which is likely to be realistic in less than 6 months, is really scary, as it will eventually bring private business to its knees and at the same time further increase unemployment and poverty, as the most vulnerable in pandemic period. Therefore, all the energies of the institutional leaders would have to be spent in the health and economy sectors, temporarily putting aside the ended political battles with the opposition, which did not happen.

As long as the Government of Kosovo does not raise the issue of this health, economic and social collapse as a priority, then the catastrophe that awaits the country is on the brink. In fact, it is only a few weeks, or a few months away!

PROTESTS IN TIME OF CORONA

Serbian citizens find it harder to bear distrust of government than fear of infection. Do sports and election gatherings carry less danger than civil protests? Apparently, this is not a rhetorical question for everyone in Serbia.

By Insajder/Nataša Bogović, Serbia

Distrust is the key word that marked Serbia after the lifting of the state of emergency. Decisions of the Crisis Staff are perceived as dubious; motives for the introduction and abolition of epidemiological measures and the state of emergency, official information and otherwise insufficiently transparent institutions. Distrust is not a consequence of an infodemia to which Serbia is not immune, but of deep divisions in society that have led to an electrified atmosphere like a coronavirus pressure cooker which when exploded leaves nothing but a new wave of contagion.

The fight against the common enemy also failed to unite the citizens of Serbia in their efforts to defeat the virus as soon as possible. Instead, the divisions deepened and the accusations intensified, leaving citizens doubting the motives and every information coming from the official place - the national crisis headquarters for the fight against coronavirus.

The lifting of the state of emergency made it possible to hold mass events. Serbia is the first country in Europe to host a football match for more than 15,000 people, but also the organized Adria Tour – regional tennis tournament which ended ingloriously - several participants, including the organizer, tennis player Novak Djokovic, were infected with coronavirus.

Some citizens of Serbia suspected that all obligatory measures of protection against coronavirus and the ban on gatherings were actually lifted so that the general elections could be organized. Government denied this. Due to conflicting statements and suspicions that the decisions on epidemiological measures were made in accordance with political needs, the distrust of the citizens
towards the national Crisis Staff grew. At the same time, the suspicion in the official data on the number of infected and deceased from the coronavirus added to that.

Immediately after the election, the number of infected began to grow. Among them were those who celebrated the election victory at the headquarters of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party - without masks or social distance, which once again upset the public.

The consequences were visible a few days later, when the presence of coronavirus was determined in many of those who attended the celebration. The fact that they themselves did not adhere to the measures they imposed on the citizens, that they claimed that the elections and the football match did not pose an epidemiological risk, additionally instilled distrust in the public.

The announcement of the reintroduction of curfew was the trigger after which the citizens took to the streets and demonstrated the accumulated dissatisfaction. However, from the beginning, it was strange that among the protesters were representatives of various profiles - civic-minded, nationalists, hooligans, supporters of the Serbian Orthodox Church, anti-vaxers - without clear demands and organizers. It was also noticeable that individuals gathered in groups caused incidents, attacked police officers, and stormed the Assembly…

Police responded brutally with tear gas, arrests, beatings and, in several cases, unjustified and disproportionate force, as some of the demonstrators were violent.

While some citizens suspect the “secret service” being behind such "organized" protests since the result is just another failed opposition protest thanks to the thugs; government officials claim that there were indeed services in the background, but of certain foreign countries. Consequently, the protests ended a few days later.

Distrust deepened; the gatherings undoubtedly created the conditions for further spread of the virus. In such an environment, with numerous media in service of the government, the voices of civil society are weak, appealing to the European Union to remain true to its values and rules and demand concrete results in applying the rule of law and basic democratic principles in Serbia where democracy is threatened.

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

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