

# **Lockdown Diary - The Coronavirus Crisis in Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo**

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# Introduction

Though it arrived in our region later than in other European countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a once in a generation crisis for Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo, as well, threatening to collapse their already precarious healthcare systems, budgets, and policy capacities.

In Serbia, a total of 11.381 cases have been recorded, of which 4.576 were still active at the time of writing, with 242 virus-related deaths. Montenegro has seen 324 recorded cases, with 0 active cases at the time of writing, and 9 virus-related deaths. Kosovo has had a total of 1.070 recorded cases, 199 still active at the time of writing, and 30 virus-related deaths.

This report is a contribution to a wider effort by the Heinrich Böll Foundation to utilise its international network of offices in order to produce global, values-based insights into the way various governments and political and economic systems have handled the crisis, and what its consequences might be.

To that end, this report will cover the Coronavirus outbreaks and immediate responses by our programme countries, the measures to suspend social contacts and political life, as well as measures to help their economies recover. Emphasis will be placed on the position of vulnerable groups - women, elderly citizens, and migrants in particular, in the midst of the pandemic.

# The Coronavirus Outbreak and Initial Responses

As experts have warned since at least January, and as has been subsequently proven in practice, a timely and energetic initial response to the outbreak of the new Coronavirus makes the difference between success and failure in dealing with the ensuing pandemic. In fact, by studying our countries' initial responses, we can discern much more than just the epidemiological implications - we can also see how seriously the authorities take public health, how robust the rule of law is (or isn't), and what the capacities for good governance (especially crisis management) are.

Before there were any registered cases in the region, the Serbian authorities seemed to believe that the pandemic would simply skip Serbia, with high-ranking officials callously dismissing concerns raised by reporters about the virus. In what would become the most notorious episode in the crisis, on February 26th, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić held a press conference with several medical experts, including dr. Branimir Nestorović, a prominent pediatric pulmonologist.

The doctor, an oxymoron - simultaneously a physician and a quack, laughed off the notion that Serbia was at risk of a Coronavirus pandemic, calling it "the silliest virus". He even went so far as to advise Serbia's women to go shopping in Italy to take advantage of the discounts, saying that their estrogen would protect them. President Vučić merely stood to the side and laughed.

The first registered case of the Coronavirus was confirmed on March 6th, even though it would turn out that the virus was present in Serbia much before that time, perhaps even as early as January. The first real measures to slow the spread of the virus were only introduced five days later, on March 11, with indoor public gatherings of more than 100 people being banned. However, as the number of cases kept mounting, the President finally declared a nationwide state of emergency on March 15th.

In Kosovo, the first Coronavirus case was registered on March 13th, with the nascent pandemic having been overshadowed by local political concerns up to that point. The Government's initial response was to quarantine the two cities where the infected persons had travelled to, and this was followed by more local lockdowns at the municipality level as more cases were discovered. Prime Minister Albin Kurti favoured this approach because it allowed him to avoid declaring a nationwide state of emergency, in which case President Thaci, Kurti's fierce political rival, would be handed extraordinary powers. This precipitated a political struggle which culminated in a motion of no confidence against Prime Minister Kurti, as will be expounded in the following sections.

Montenegro was the last country in Europe to register its first case of Coronavirus, on March 17th. The first lockdown was instituted in the Albanian-majority town of Tuzi, which borders the capital Podgorica. However, the Montenegrin approach is generally characterized by a light touch, with no state of emergency declared, no national lockdown, no complete border closure for foreigners, etc. This is due to the fact

that Montenegro has seen relatively few registered cases, and hasn't had a single new registered case since May 6th.

These examples of initial responses show that, in our programme countries, more often than not, decisions on measures to prepare for possible crises are made based on political cost-benefit analyses, rather than expert advice and public health considerations. In fact, this principle has extended beyond the initial responses, and has shaped the overall discourse as well as the subsequent measures for the duration of the pandemic.

# Suspension of Political Life(?)

In times of crisis on a global scale, it is often the case that a sort of political cease-fire is agreed upon between the government and the opposition(s), at least for the duration of the crisis, providing the comforting appearance of national unity to a worried public, and empowering the government of the day to manage the crisis more effectively.

Due to the specific nature of this crisis, which necessitates social distancing measures, the cessation of political activities should be even more pronounced. However, in our programme countries, not only have petty politics not been put aside, but the apolitical has been politicized in the most profane sense of the word.

## Serbia

In Serbia, this means, *inter alia*, that a state of emergency was promptly declared by President Vučić on March 15th. The state of emergency allows for a temporary suspension of civil liberties and minority rights, and is ordinarily declared by the National Assembly and signed by the President.

However, the government opted for a different, seldom used mechanism to declare the state of emergency - the Constitution provides for having the declaration signed by the President, Prime Minister, and President of the National Assembly, if and only if the National Assembly is unable to meet. The need for social distancing was used as an excuse to employ this method. Several parties have reported this as a violation of the Constitution, but the Constitutional Court, famous for its inaction and irrelevance, has recently dismissed the case, declining to rule on it.

Even though it may seem at first glance that a state of emergency was necessary to help protect citizens, the fact is that most of the same measures could have been adopted without resorting to it. Namely, Serbian law provides for a much more moderate option - an “emergency situation”, in accordance with the Law on Infectious Disease Protection. This does not allow for a full suspension of civil liberties and minority rights, but it would, for example, allow for a mandatory curfew and quarantine.

The National Assembly was prorogued for the duration of the state of emergency (another extremely questionable decision from a constitutional standpoint), and all emergency measures were introduced by the President and the Prime Minister. These would later be rubber-stamped at the first session of the Assembly following the end of the state of emergency.

The prevailing impression was that President Vučić was relishing the opportunity to effectively rule by decree, even though he has no constitutional authority to do so. Even though the President and the Prime Minister appeared in tandem at press conferences to announce a dizzying array of new measures almost every evening in April, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind who was solely in charge, with the Prime Minister even going so far as to repeatedly refer to President Vučić as “Boss”.

This one-man Savior of the Nation routine is already well-known in the Serbian public, since President Vučić had already famously employed it during the disastrous floods of May 2014. In this situation, much like in 2014, he took the opportunity to be in the news on every national TV channel every day, for example having his picture taken while personally delivering respirators and personal protective equipment (PPE) throughout Serbia, as though he were donating it himself. Pictures emerged on social media where it was obvious that reporters and supporters were all crowded together around the President, without wearing masks or gloves, in direct violation of government regulations.

In effect, the President took the opportunity to kick off his party's pre-election campaign in the midst of the crisis. Some commentators assume that the state of emergency was only introduced in order to allow for the Parliamentary elections, which were supposed to take place on April 26th, to be moved to a later date. Though this was certainly justified, as soon as the state of emergency was terminated, the government hastily announced elections for June 21st, even though there is still a considerable number of new cases of the Coronavirus being discovered every day.

This decision may have less to do with the overall epidemiological situation, and more to do with the fact that, as a result of the crisis, the government has enjoyed an approval rating of 92% at its peak. Thinking in very political and pragmatic terms, the President has decided to act quickly in order to capitalize on the ratings, and before the voters can feel the full economic effects of the crisis.

Before the pandemic, the dominant topic of debate in Serbia were the electoral conditions in the run up to these elections, and the decision by a majority of the opposition to boycott them. However, the crisis took the opposition completely off guard, and it has struggled to find a meaningful role for itself during the state of emergency.

The *Ne davimo Beograd* movement (Don't drown Belgrade) was at least partially successful in this regard, coming up with a novel way to protest the government's policies during curfew. Every evening at a few minutes after 8 o'clock, *Ne davimo Beograd* invited citizens from all over Serbia to take to their balconies and "Make noise against dictatorship", by shouting, playing music, and most notably, banging on pots and pans.

As part of its already established playbook, the ruling SNS responded to this novel pan-based mode of protest by appropriating the general idea, and doing it much bigger and louder, by sending its (most likely remunerated) volunteers to building rooftops, where they set off flares, as well as professional sound systems blaring offensive phrases against opposition leaders.

This in spite of curfews, fire safety regulations, city noise ordinances, and social distancing rules. So widely criticised was this action that the ruling party was forced to abandon it, with high ranking officials taking turns to wash their hands of the whole affair. To date, no one has been sanctioned for any of these infractions.

The ruling party's response simultaneously illustrates the success and weaknesses of this approach to protesting. Success, because it rattled the ruling party to such an extent that it had to respond, and failure because of how easy this method can be co-opted by anyone, regardless of political position or affiliation.

Indeed, even from the opposition side, the pan-based protests were used as a springboard for far-right leader Boško Obradović of Dveri, who enthusiastically embraced

them, only to put his own spin on it. Thus, he led a few in-person protests, breaking curfew (but not social distancing regulations), and clashing with ruling party protestors who were returning from the rooftops several times. This culminated in a scuffle at the opening session of the National Assembly after the end of the state of emergency.

He then started a hunger strike on the steps of the National Assembly building, demanding, among other things, that elections be postponed. Naturally, this led to a counter-hunger strike by members of the ruling party, who demanded that the prosecutor's office charge Obradović and others in the case of the National Assembly scuffle. After President Vučić publicly called on his fellow party members to stop their hunger strike, Obradović called off his strike as well.

This has made Obradović the most recognizable of the boycotting opposition, especially at a time when its unity has started to fray quite seriously. For example, the Free Citizens' Movement (Pokret slobodnih građana, PSG), led by popular actor Sergej Trifunović, has announced it would be taking part in the elections, after having vowed to boycott. Even the supposed mastermind of the boycott, Dragan Đilas, has been quoted as privately saying that it no longer makes sense.

The issue of the boycott threatens to rip apart the already ailing Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka, DS), with a significant faction within the party demanding that the DS take part in elections, against the party leadership of Zoran Lutovac, who is steadfastly against it. This has led to the expulsion of several prominent party members, who have joined a nascent list of pro-European candidates who will take part in the elections.

## Montenegro

As previously mentioned, Montenegro has not instituted a countrywide lockdown in response to the Coronavirus outbreak, with only pensioners and citizens who had come back from abroad or were suspected of carrying the virus ordered to quarantine, instead opting for a ban on large public gatherings.

Like other countries in the region, Montenegro closed its borders, except for shipments of essential goods. Parliament was not officially prorogued, but all activities were suspended for the duration of the crisis. Regular parliamentary elections, which were to take place in May were postponed, most likely to take place in the fall, October at the latest.

Due in large part to the relatively minor impact of the pandemic on public health as a whole, the political battles which had been raging before the crisis began were allowed to continue practically unabated. The most prominent of these is the one between Montenegro's government on one side, and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) in Montenegro on the other.

Though they had been simmering for years, tensions between the Government and the SPC exploded in the run-up to the adoption of a controversial Law on Religious Freedom, which stipulates (among many other things) that religious communities would have to register with the state, and prove their ownership of land and real estate before 1918.

This came as a particular blow to the SPC, who has decried the Law as an attempt to expel Serbian Orthodox priests from their churches and monasteries, and replace



them with clergy from the ecumenically unrecognized Orthodox Church of Montenegro. The SPC points to a video of President Milo Đukanović speaking at his party's congress, where he says that creating a Montenegrin Orthodox Church will be one of his strategic priorities.

In protest of this Law, the SPC has organized a series of street Litys - religious processions which have turned out to be the most massive protests ever seen in Montenegro. Due to government measures to halt the spread of the Coronavirus, the SPC was forced to suspend the Litys, but religious services in places of worship were allowed to continue with up to 20 people, while respecting distancing regulations.

However, the SPC clergy has been quite lax in obeying these restrictions. One famous example of this was the huge ceremony at the Ostrog Monastery in celebration of St. Vasilije Ostroški Day, when large numbers of believers gathered to receive the eucharist, using the same spoon. In response to criticism, Metropolitan Amfilohije has said that this was perfectly safe, since God would not allow anyone to be infected while receiving eucharist.

This idea of disinfection through faith was taken even further on St. Vasilije Ostroški Day, when Metropolitan Amfilohije, and Bishop Joanikije of Nikšić along with other priests led a procession of thousands of believers through Nikšić, in violation of the ban on public gatherings. Joanikije and seven other priests were arrested and detained for 72 hours for violating the measures. Although police stopped short of arresting the Metropolitan, he had been summoned to a police station to answer questions about leading a funeral procession earlier during the crisis.

The arrest of the clergy drew the ire of SPC believers, who even clashed with the police in violent protests calling for the priests' release, throwing stones at officers and injuring 22 of them. Serbia's President Vučić and SPC Patriarch Irinej also called for the clergy's release, characterizing their arrests as use of excessive force by the authorities.

Serbia and Montenegro's bilateral relationship has been deteriorating rapidly since the introduction of the Law on Religious Freedom, albeit with a curious implicit non-aggression pact between the two presidents, Vučić and Đukanović. In a more recent development, as Montenegro started suspending its border closures with several countries, it chose not to include Serbia on that list, which was seen as an affront by authorities in Serbia. In retaliation, the Montenegrin national airline was banned from landing at the Belgrade Airport, but the border remained open for Montenegrin citizens.

## Kosovo

Unlike in Serbia, the matter of declaring a state of emergency was the subject of vigorous legal debate in Kosovo. The dispute began when President Hashim Thaçi demanded that the government introduce a state of emergency, in order to be able to impose social distancing measures, including a ban on public events, enforced quarantine, etc., which Prime Minister Kurti's government had been loathe to do, as this would provide the Security Council, chaired *ex officio* by Thaçi, with significant powers.

Kurti's team argued that these measures did not derogate from civil liberties enshrined in the Constitution, but merely limited them for a finite period of time, which meant that no state of emergency was required to implement them. In its ruling on the matter, Kosovo's Constitutional Court agreed that in principle the Government's reasoning was correct, but that the measures would have to be adopted by the National Assembly in the form of a Law, not as a decision by the Government, and gave the Government two weeks to adopt such a Law before the measures would automatically become void.

This legal and political question has had a very real impact on the balance of power in Kosovo. Before the matter was referred to the Constitutional Court, Kurti's Minister of Interior, Agim Veliu, had publicly called on the Government to introduce a state of emergency, leading Kurti to dismiss him from the Cabinet. As per the coalition agreement signed between Vetëvendosje and LDK, Kurti had no right to dismiss an LDK Minister without consulting the junior partner. This was used as cause for LDK to initiate a motion of no confidence against Kurti in the National Assembly, which was successful.

The no-confidence vote has precipitated another constitutional crisis, based on the question of what happens after such a vote is passed. Article 95, Paragraph 5 of the Constitution<sup>1</sup> states that "If the Prime Minister resigns or for any other reason the post becomes vacant, the Government ceases and the President of the Republic of Kosovo appoints a new candidate in consultation with the majority party or coalition that has won the majority in the Assembly to establish the Government."

It has been clarified that Vetëvendosje could still form a government, as long as it is not headed by Kurti, which the party has found to be unacceptable. Instead, Vetëvendosje has insisted on holding snap general elections after the crisis is over, in which it would most likely improve its electoral result.

Therefore, President Thaçi has argued that Vetëvendosje had in effect refused the invitation to form a Government, which means that the mandate is to be offered to another party or coalition with enough votes in the National Assembly. Thaçi did this by offering Avdullah Hoti from the LDK the chance to form a Government. Vetëvendosje appealed to the Constitutional Court on this matter, which ruled that President Thaçi acted in accordance with the Constitution. At the time of writing, a coalition government consisting of LDK, NISMA, AAK and the Serb List, led by LDK's Avdullah Hoti had just been elected. This marks a return of the wartime leadership to power after a brief sojourn in opposition.

Sadly, it is also safe to say that this entire power struggle was not based on principles and respect for the rule of law, but merely served as an excuse to do away with Kurti and his

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.kushtetutakosoves.info/repository/docs/Constitution.of.the.Republic.of.Kosovo.pdf>

reformist Government. Analysts agree that the real reason for the no-confidence vote was Kurti's unwillingness to immediately lift the 100% tariffs on Serbian goods levied by his predecessor, Ramush Haradinaj, in spite of insistence from the U.S. administration, which had been the primary topic of political contention before the COVID-19 crisis started.

Even more broadly, the no-confidence vote was ultimately about which framework would be used to reach a comprehensive and legally binding normalization agreement with Serbia - the European approach based on difficult negotiations and incremental progress, or the one offered as an alternative by the U.S., based on quick solutions with only a passing regard for principles and precedents, which could include the dangerous land-swap agreement said to have been secretly reached by Presidents Vučić and Thaçi. As time goes on, it seems that the latter approach is gaining ever more traction in both Belgrade and Prishtina.

In practice, this has meant that both sides have seen fit to violate the Brussels Agreements, which were supposed to be the foundation for a normalization agreement. The COVID-19 crisis has provided another example of this, especially with regard to the provisions on dismantling Serbia's parallel institutions in the north of Kosovo, and the formation of the Association of Serb-majority municipalities with certain executive powers.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Belgrade has activated its parallel healthcare institutions in the north of Kosovo (though it is questionable whether they had ever truly laid dormant), with testing handled according to Serbian standards, and tests sent to Central Serbia for analysis. Patients diagnosed with the virus were in many cases also sent to hospitals in Central Serbia for treatment.

In addition to performing these vital healthcare services instead of Kosovo authorities, the parallel institutions, openly coordinated by the Office for Kosovo, also refused to share information, which means that the numbers of infected and deceased due to the virus do not include the Serbian minority in Kosovo.

The Serbian authorities found the pretext to re-activate these parallel institutions in Serb-majority communities in the fact that Kosovo has failed to establish the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities, as agreed upon in the Brussels Agreement. Under the Agreement, the Association would "have full overview of the areas of economic development, education, health, urban and rural planning".<sup>2</sup>

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These examples from all three of our programme countries show that political life was never truly suspended in any of our programme countries during the COVID-19 crisis, and that political elites are more than willing to subordinate expert medical advice, as well as legal principles and procedures to the achievement of their short-term political goals.

All of these societies are deeply divided along ethnic and political lines, due to a complete lack of trust in the other side, based on decades of hostility and acrimony. Not even a global pandemic has been able to inspire any party to extend an olive branch to their opposition for the greater good. The most important question is - what will?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/cinjenice/en120394/>

# Economic Consequences and Measures to Mitigate Them

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global and systemic economic crisis, projected to produce recessions greater than the global economic crisis of 2008 in many countries, but the degree of exposure to this global downturn in our programme countries varies.

In its *World Economic Outlook* for April 2020, the IMF forecasts recessions in all three countries, with Serbia's economy contracting by 3%, Montenegro's by 9%, and Kosovo's by 5%. It also forecasts that all three economies will rebound in 2021, with Serbia's growth projected at 7.5%, Montenegro's at 6.5, and Kosovo's at 7.5%<sup>3</sup>.

It is obvious that there is a not-insignificant difference in the forecasts between our three countries, with Montenegro being hit hardest. Like Croatia, whose economy is expected to contract by roughly the same percentage, Montenegro's tourist industry is being particularly affected by the pandemic. This has had ripple effects throughout the economy, which will continue at least until next year's tourist season.

On the opposite end, Serbia's economy seems to be somewhat structurally resilient to the recession, since it is not export-dependent, and its nascent service industry, especially in the IT sector, is not susceptible to disruption by social distancing measures and border closures. To a certain extent, this is true of Kosovo as well, but for different reasons - a large portion of Kosovo's economy is based on remittances from relatives working in the West, as well as on donations by the international community. Though remittances and donations/investments will likely decrease, unlike the tourist industry, they will not be completely eliminated.

All three governments have taken extraordinary fiscal measures to help combat the economic consequences of the pandemic. In Serbia, the government suspended loan repayments and public utility bills for private individuals and companies for the duration of the state of emergency (with an opt-out available to those who could afford to pay), paused enforced debt collection, deferred tax payments for businesses, and offered a financial support package in the form of direct transfers or low-interest loans for businesses, provided they keep all their employees, in addition to paying out the minimum wage for all SME's, and 50% of the minimum wage for large companies.

In addition to these structural measures, Serbia's government has also adopted a range of social-economic measures designed to help citizens get through the crisis, especially with regard to the need for self-isolation and social distancing. The salaries of all public sector medical staff were hiked by 10% at the very beginning of the crisis, and the prices of basic goods, such as flour, milk, sugar, eggs, etc., but also face masks and disinfectants, were capped. After public outcry, the City of Belgrade offered a support programme for independent artists working in the city, whose livelihoods were completely wiped out by the crisis.

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3 <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>

However, one measure in particular has drawn the vast majority of attention and a fair amount of outright derision - the stimulus package in the form of “helicopter money” to be paid to every citizen of voting age, in the amount of €100. No doubt inspired by the U.S. stimulus package, this measure’s objective remains unclear.

Namely, after having casually announced the measure on television, President Vučić backtracked significantly in the following weeks, saying that the measure would be opt-in, and that he personally would not apply, asking all patriotic citizens who could afford it to do the same. It appears as though the Serbian Government doesn’t have a clear understanding of what a stimulus package is, since it seems to treat the payment more like a social security or unemployment payment than a stimulus payment designed to help boost demand for goods and services and restart the economy. Like a vaccine, a stimulus package only works if everyone (or nearly everyone) gets it.

Montenegro’s government has taken a different approach to dealing with the economic effects of the crisis - targeted austerity measures. In order to help finance tax deferrals for businesses, the government has frozen all non-essential procurement, abolished bonuses paid to public servants for work on boards, in working groups, etc, and reduced high-ranking officials’ salaries.

It has also established a special low-interest credit line at the Investment and Development Fund for businesses, as well as a subsidy scheme designed to keep jobs and companies open. Rent payments for all publicly-owned spaces were deferred, and a bonus was paid to pensioners with the lowest monthly incomes. Large public projects were continued to the extent the epidemiological situation allowed, and many contractors were pre-paid in order to ensure their liquidity.

In spite of its political instability since the beginning of the crisis, Kosovo’s economic response to the crisis has been robust. The government’s focus has been on trying to help the population through the crisis by means of targeted payments. Medical staff have received €300 on top of their regular monthly salaries, payments to welfare recipients have been doubled, all citizens who have lost their jobs due to the crisis have received €130 per month, loan repayments and bill payments to public companies have been deferred.

The government offered tax deferrals for businesses, and relaxed certain administrative procedures (deferred submission of financial statements, management reports, audits, etc.). It has also promised a salary top-up of €170 for employees of eligible businesses, as well as a €200 top-up for all new employees hired on a minimum one year contract.

Even if most of the governments’ policies seem sensible and necessary, the key question is how the crisis will affect these three countries in the long term. It is estimated that the Serbian government has allocated more than 11% of GDP for relief measures, whereas Kosovo’s government has only allocated around 3% of GDP to direct relief efforts.

This percentage is difficult to ascertain in the case of Montenegro, since it has mostly opted for tax deferrals. However, Montenegro’s already high public debt (around 80% of GDP in 2019) is set to rise even further, with the budget deficit for 2020 standing at more than 7%.

The COVID-19 crisis and the accompanying financial crunch will likely lead to an increase in the cost of borrowing for all three countries. In fact, the Serbian government 10-year bond yield has already climbed to 3.350% in the wake of the crisis, with the debt-to-GDP ratio set to stay below the 60% threshold agreed with the IMF. The National Bank of Serbia has dropped its key benchmark rate, and the dinar (RSD) has devalued by about 3% since the start of the pandemic. Kosovo and Montenegro, which use the euro, may have fewer monetary tools at their disposal, and may be adversely affected by certain ECB decisions, especially if the euro slides against the dollar.

Structural weaknesses combined with questionable policy choices and priorities may hamper these countries' ability to cope with a prolonged pandemic. If the governments introduce too many fiscal measures too quickly, it may drain their coffers and render them less able to deal with future economic troubles without taking on significant debt. If supply lines collapse for an extended period, Montenegro and Kosovo may even be at risk of food shortages, since they are dependent on food imports.

The degree to which the economic fortunes of these countries are tied to the world at large can hardly be overstated. That is why a coordinated international effort is crucial, in addition to material and/or financial aid, whether from individual countries, the EU, or international institutions.

## International Relations and Aid

As the seriousness of the Coronavirus crisis began to dawn on governments in our programme countries, it became clear that they could not hope to weather it without international help. Two major players have stepped up to support the region in its response to the public health crisis, as well as its economic fallout - the EU and China, along with international institutions.

At the beginning of the crisis, it seemed as though the EU was too preoccupied with its own response to be able to help the Western Balkans. That led to certain missteps which threatened to damage the EU's track record of solidarity with the region. The most egregious of these was the export ban on PPE to non-EU countries, which included the Western Balkans.

Scrambling to put together a strong response after having joked about the seriousness of the crisis, Serbian President Vučić made overtures to Chinese President Xi Jinping, asking for China's help in dealing with the virus, and China obliged, sending a few medical experts, tests, protective equipment, etc. China has even set up two complete Coronavirus testing labs, capable of testing up to 3.000 people per day.

In appreciation for its help, China was presented by media outlets close to the government as Serbia's saviour, as being there for Serbia when the EU abandoned it. Following the President's lead, one tabloid took out several now notorious billboards featuring President Xi's picture with a Chinese flag in the background, captioned "Thank you, brother Xi!" The billboard was used by publications around the world to illustrate China's so-called "mask diplomacy."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For example: <https://www.economist.com/china/2020/04/16/chinas-post-covid-propaganda-push>

EU representatives, the most prominent of whom was Josep Borrell, were rightly infuriated by the valorization of Chinese help, while EU help, which had quietly ramped up substantially, was largely ignored. This has led to speculation that Serbia was preparing to depart from its EU course, and completely submit to China as its international patron. However, most analysts agree that Vučić was merely (and successfully!) trying to induce some geopolitical jealousy in the EU, hoping to receive more aid.

This geopolitical battle between the EU and China in Serbia has produced some paradoxical situations, most notably the fact that the EU was asked to pay for Chinese aid and purchased equipment to be flown into Serbia, to which the EU acceded. The fact remains, however, that the EU could not provide this equipment for Serbia itself, which raises interesting questions about global reliance on cheap Chinese manufacturing, especially when it comes to products of strategic importance.

The EU has, however, provided the region with sorely needed funds. It has set aside €3.3 billion in economic aid for the Western Balkans in total. Serbia has received €15 million in immediate assistance for medical equipment, with a further €78 million set aside for economic recovery<sup>5</sup>. Montenegro has received €3 million for medical equipment, with €50 million more for financial recovery<sup>6</sup>. For Kosovo, these figures stand at €5 million and €63 million, respectively<sup>7</sup>.

In line with its flagship European Green Deal initiative, the EU could and should provide the region with further funds to help promote economic recovery and progress in a forward-looking and sustainable way. Including the Western Balkans in its planned €750 billion recovery package would be a start, with the funds used to support energy transition, efficiency, and alleviating energy poverty, among other issues.

In addition to direct EU aid, the EBRD has substantially increased the funds available to the Western Balkans for 2020, while the Council of Europe Development Bank has approved loans to Serbia and Kosovo in the amounts of €200 million and €35 million respectively, and the European Investment Bank has made available funding up to €400 million to help Serbia's SMEs weather the crisis. The IMF has offered Kosovo \$56.5 million in assistance, with the World Bank offering another €46 million to Kosovo, and €20 million to Serbia<sup>8</sup>.

On top of EU, Chinese, and aid provided by international institutions, there has also been a fair amount of bilateral aid. Hungary and Turkey both donated a substantial number of masks, tests, and other equipment to Serbia, Russia has contributed PPE through the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš, while the U.S. donated 6.000 test kits. In turn, Serbia has donated 1.000 test kits to the Institute for Public Health in Prishtina. Montenegro has received support in the form of medical equipment from NATO ally Poland, as well as from Austria, and a handful of individual businessmen of Montenegrin origin.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Serbia.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Montenegro.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Kosovo.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> *op.cit.*

Though its response may have been delayed, the EU has demonstrated its solidarity with the region through its robust framework of financial and other aid during the Coronavirus crisis. When it comes to fostering geopolitical alignment, however, it would be a mistake for the EU to insist on the fact that it has provided the region with by far the greatest amount of funds, and expect overt shows of gratitude. Its argument should rather be that this aid is provided on the principle of solidarity, with no strings attached, and with a view toward a democratic transformation of the Western Balkans, which cannot be said about aid from other parties, no matter how prominent it may be.



# Social and Gender Issues

The Coronavirus pandemic has served to intensify problems vulnerable groups had already been facing in our program countries. A spike in cases of domestic violence, sexual violence, and gender-based violence has been recorded, and the labour rights of low-income and precarious workers have deteriorated even further. In this context, migrants and elderly citizens constitute particularly vulnerable groups, in addition to citizens suspected of carrying the virus, whose fundamental civil liberties have been threatened.

In our programme countries, it seems as though governments are not particularly interested in dealing with the problems faced by these groups during the pandemic. Campaigns, promises, and statements by authorities merely serve a cosmetic purpose, rather than being put into practice. Instead, the brunt of the burden of helping vulnerable groups has been born by civil society organizations and individuals.

## Women in Crisis

Looking back at previous crises, women were particularly vulnerable during the Ebola and Zika virus pandemics, and this is true of the present Coronavirus pandemic as well. Some of the problems women have faced during this time include layoffs, an increase in the burden of unpaid labour, exposure of healthcare workers to the virus, in addition to various forms of violence.

Women make up around 70% of the workforce in healthcare and social work around the world<sup>9</sup>, and this is true in our programme countries as well, and this makes them particularly at risk of infection. According to a paper by SeConS and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation<sup>10</sup> on the effects of the state of emergency on employment, women made up a staggering 86% of frontline workers.

Over the last decade, there has been a massive exodus of medical personnel out of our programme countries and into rich countries, Western Europe in particular, because of perpetually low salaries and terrible overall working conditions. Since the start of the crisis, these overworked and underpaid workers have received nightly rounds of applause from citizens, in addition to promises of higher wages, modern hospitals, and better working conditions. Some authorities have implemented measures that go in that direction, for example, Serbia has instituted a permanent 10% salary increase for medical staff right at the start of the crisis, but these don't go nearly far enough.

There has been a global shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), which includes masks, gloves, visors, and other equipment, and medical staff in our countries have been heavily affected by this. Healthcare workers on one side, and hospital ad-

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<sup>9</sup> <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311314/WHO-HIS-HWF-Gender-WP1-2019.1-eng.pdf?ua=1>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.secons.net/files/publications/113-publication.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1DXccFO4W5AGFqVsW3eHPWq9E9z05f70lprhLxBDScaOE9P\\_g-Fm0WmZk](https://www.secons.net/files/publications/113-publication.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1DXccFO4W5AGFqVsW3eHPWq9E9z05f70lprhLxBDScaOE9P_g-Fm0WmZk)

ministrators and public authorities on the other, have been giving conflicting statements on the availability of PPE.

Healthcare workers have repeatedly said that the reaction to the virus was delayed, and that most healthcare institutions lack clear guidelines and protocols for employees on treating patients with COVID-19. Furthermore, many have said that they were forced to provide their own PPE, by sewing masks themselves, washing and reusing masks, and even resorting to using beekeeping equipment. This renders the disproportionate number of medical staff who have been infected completely unsurprising.

Perhaps the best illustration of the precarious position workers (and especially female workers) have found themselves in was reported by Ana Lalić, who discovered that the Clinical Center of Vojvodina forced medical staff to work without PPE. In reporting on this case, Lalić was accused of spreading panic and disinformation by tabloids close to the government, and, pursuant to regulations instituted as part of the state of emergency, she was arrested.

This led to an abortive attempt by the government, led formally by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, to centralize all reporting on the pandemic to the state crisis committee. After a significant outcry by civil society organisations, foreign embassies etc., which were adamant that this constituted an unconstitutional abridgement of media freedoms and the freedom of expression, this regulation was withdrawn. While on the topic of the position of women in the pandemic, it may be illustrative to point out that Prime Minister Brnabić was asked to suspend this decision in a particularly patronizing way by President Vučić, thus in effect laying the blame on her.

Though the journalist was subsequently released, she is awaiting trial for spreading misinformation, which is an offense punishable by 6 months to 5 years' imprisonment. This in spite of the fact that her reporting has turned out to be factual, with the Clinical Center of Vojvodina providing no evidence to the contrary in its denial and condemnation of this piece.

This is not by any means the only example of media violence against women during the pandemic. In late April, there was a prominent case of clear-cut sexist treatment of epidemiologist Dr Darja Kisić Tepavčević, one of the two most visible members of the Serbian state crisis committee. During an interview on a national broadcaster, the interviewer asked her how it was possible that a lady such as herself was on the front line of the battle against the virus, when it could just as easily have been a male colleague. Her response - "I don't understand the question" became something of a feminist rallying cry in the subsequent weeks.

Though public authorities in all three programme countries have asked people to stay home during the pandemic, the home is not a safe place for everyone. The rise in violence against women has become the most notorious social consequence of the crisis all around the world, and a focal point of gender-related reporting on the pandemic. However, in our programme countries there is no lack of violence against women even in normal circumstances.

The Autonomous Women's Centre in Belgrade has reported receiving three times as many complaints of various forms of violence against women during the crisis, compared to regular circumstances. In addition to cases of physical violence by abusive

spouses, which are unfortunately a fixture of the Serbian social landscape, a new form of violence specifically tied to the pandemic has arisen - the matter of visitation rights.

The Centre has received calls from parents concerned about visitation and split custody during the state of emergency, which could lead to children being quarantined with the parent who was not given custody, or extending split custody beyond the court mandated time. Furthermore, with parents whose relationships ended due to a history of domestic violence, court mandated visitation rights have been used as a weapon against victims, who have struggled to organise visitation due to curfews and quarantine measures. With chronically ill or disabled parents or guardians, mandatory visitation poses a significant health and safety risk. The Center has contacted the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs asking for clear guidelines, but this problem has remained unresolved to date.

Having in mind the fact that various vulnerable groups require help during the crisis (victims of violence, victims of human trafficking, LGBT+ individuals, disabled individuals, pensioners, etc.) the Centre has compiled a list of free services available during the state of emergency, with many organizations, safe houses, and even private clinics offering free assistance<sup>11</sup>.

In Montenegro, domestic violence has also been the primary gender-related topic in the wake of the pandemic. As part of its *Ostani Doma* (Stay Home) campaign, the government has started a sub-campaign entitled *Bezbedna Doma* (She is Safe at Home), implemented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Police, and NGOs which are part of the Operational Team for Fighting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. This will serve as a campaign to make contacts for the Police department, the national SOS line, local safe houses, etc., available to those in need of assistance.

In the context of this campaign, Maja Raičević from the Women's Rights Centre in Podgorica has called on the police and social services to pay regular visits to families with a history of domestic violence, adding that the campaign has to be accompanied by a swift and professional response by institutions, especially the police and the prosecutor's office, which are at the front line in the battle against violence. She has also pointed out that three-day restraining orders against violent offenders, which are the primary measure designed to protect victims, are not being used sufficiently.

Nataša Međedović, executive coordinator at the national SOS line for domestic violence victims has said that her organization received a significantly greater number of domestic violence complaints since government measures to combat the virus were introduced, with the number of complaints in March being 27% higher than in February, and 10% higher than the same period last year.

In Kosovo, the Kosovo Women's Network (KWN) has remarked that, considering the fact that Kosovo was one of the last countries in Europe to be infected, more could have been done to foresee and prepare for the social and economic risks, especially risks to women. However, there has been no gender impact assessment conducted by the government, even though, according to the Law on Gender Equality, the government is obliged to conduct an *ex ante* impact assessment to help prevent gender discrimination.

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.womenngo.org.rs/images/vesti-20/Besplatne\\_usluge\\_tokom\\_vanredne\\_situacije\\_zbog\\_pandemije\\_COVID19\\_15042020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2d18oqPcpIcVy\\_SbR-S07p9vMPqfAz1mTgvY8\\_JYhiA3ux-pU-C1JA69w](https://www.womenngo.org.rs/images/vesti-20/Besplatne_usluge_tokom_vanredne_situacije_zbog_pandemije_COVID19_15042020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2d18oqPcpIcVy_SbR-S07p9vMPqfAz1mTgvY8_JYhiA3ux-pU-C1JA69w)

Domestic violence has been the biggest concern in Kosovo, as in the rest of the world, especially with regard to the availability of help for victims, seeing as though shelters' capacities and budgets have been strained by an influx of victims, though for now they seem to be managing the crisis well. The lack of access to appropriate psychological support and assistance is an additional problem, as is the closure of social centers. According to shelter representatives, social workers will not be working with victims in shelters due to social distancing regulations.

The KWN has also pointed out that women's participation in shaping policies and measures designed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic has been negligible, which could lead to the implementation of policies without a gender perspective. That is why the organization has called on Kosovo's government to conduct a gender analysis which would serve as a basis for all further measures, in addition to including women in the policy-making process.

The important work of these civil society organizations during the pandemic illustrates a lack of capacity or desire on the part of public authorities to deal with these topics, considering matters like the state of the economy and public health as being far more important at the moment. However, public policies aiming to preserve public health and the economy cannot accomplish their goal without taking into account their effect on human rights and basic civil liberties, and civil society organizations alone cannot bear the burden of providing vital services which the public authorities have refused to provide.

## Labour rights

Labour rights are now particularly under threat, especially in women-dominated fields, where precarious contracts and threats of termination because of sick or pregnancy leave abound even in regular circumstances. However, the callousness of employers in low-paying fields has reached a peak during the crisis, which has made workers of all genders pay a terrible price.

Based on the aforementioned report by SeConS and FES, "the increase in domestic labour and care for family members has fallen to women (in 70% of households), who had also been doing this work before the crisis". A significant contributing factor to this increase has been the sudden and chaotic move to homeschooling via the National Broadcaster and private Viber and WhatsApp groups of teachers and their students.

This has impacted women who had been housewives even before the crisis, in addition to women who have had to work from home while taking care of their children at the same time. The move to homeschooling has also had an impact on teachers' workloads (the vast majority of whom are also women), since coordinating lessons and individual students' questions and progress has proven particularly time-consuming, especially in the absence of clear guidelines from the Ministry of Education.

One of the most serious concerns has been the loss of jobs in women-dominated professions - service sector jobs, tourism, retail, etc. This trend will impact Montenegro particularly, since its economy is based in large part on tourism and hospitality. However, workers in all our countries, both female and male, are in precarious positions.

A salient example of the further deterioration of labour rights during the crisis is the case of the Olimias factory from Niš, where the employer insisted that workers come to work even while public transportation was suspended, forcing workers to go to the factory on foot for as much as 10 km in one direction every day, under threat of termination.

Furthermore, the Yura factory, already notorious for having abysmal working conditions and flouting its employees' labour rights, received media condemnation for becoming a local hotbed of the Coronavirus, with more than 100 of its workers being infected. Workers had complained about the lack of PPE and inability to respect social distancing regulations, which the management denied. On top of that, it has been recorded that workers under mandatory self-isolation were called to come back to work under threat of termination. This has led the Minister of Labour to announce(!) an unannounced inspection at the factory, which at no point operated under 50% of capacity.

## The Wretched of the Earth - Elderly Citizens, Citizens Living in Poverty, and Citizens Infected with COVID-19

No matter their particular identity and affiliations, the COVID-19 crisis has taken the greatest toll on those least able to pay it - elderly people and people living in poverty, as well as those who have been diagnosed with the virus. In our programme countries, old age and poverty often go hand in hand, along with homelessness.

All countries in the region have introduced strict measures on isolation and prohibition of movement, which have had a particular impact on elderly citizens. They were required to stay home at all times, except at short designated slots when they could leave to buy groceries, and even then, only within a set distance from their home. The most extreme measure instituted in our programme countries were Serbia's complete lockdowns instituted over weekends for a few weeks in a row, and even extended over Easter holidays.

These measures have presented a significant challenge to many people, especially those who have difficulties carrying a few days' worth of groceries by themselves. Family members were not allowed to visit them, and even the practice of family members going to get groceries and leaving them at the door was foiled by public transportation closures. The only help elderly citizens could get was from the Red Cross and other organizations, including religious communities, which organized deliveries of vital supplies. There was no coordinated state effort to provide this service in any of our programme countries.

As was the case all over the world, people living in retirement homes were particularly at risk of infection.

In Serbia, the City of Niš was at one time a hotbed of the infection, and its Gerontological Centre found itself in the midst of an elderly care scandal. By not following prescribed procedures, the management allowed more than 150 occupants and staff to be infected with the virus. The government reported that occupants were allowed to leave the Centre and receive visitors, and that symptoms resembling those of CO-

VID-19 were being covered up. This led to the Director of the Gerontological Centre being arrested for reckless endangerment of public health.

In the wake of the pandemic, it is crucial that we stand up for the human and civil rights of the people who have been diagnosed with the virus, and who have in many cases been treated abominably by public authorities. One example of this from Serbia are the various makeshift COVID-19 facilities, of which the one at the Belgrade Fair is the most famous. Everyone diagnosed with the virus was remanded to one of these facilities, hastily put together by the Army. People who were there report terrible conditions, from a lack of showers and toilets, to inadequate sleeping arrangements and food. Once details of living conditions within these facilities reached the public, it produced something of a counter effect, as people would avoid being tested lest they land in the facility at Belgrade Fair.

A strong sense of paternalism prevailed the public discourse around the pandemic in Serbia throughout the crisis. Citizens were told that the lockdown measures were being introduced for their own good, because they were undisciplined, and weren't taking the situation seriously. In reality, lockdowns were necessary because the Government lacked the capacity to track contacts, and the healthcare system lacked the appropriate equipment and staff to deal with a potential influx of patients.

In Montenegro, those suspected of being infected were ordered to go into self-isolation for 14 days, as was the standard in all countries in the region. However, at one point, Montenegro's crisis committee, ostensibly with permission from the Agency for Data Protection, published the names of those ordered to self isolate, so as to prevent them going out.

This was met with universal condemnation from civil society organizations, which decried the violation of the right to privacy and data protection, but the damage goes even further than that - it can also be seen as an implicit threat of violence should those quarantined venture outside. There was another breach of privacy and data protection by a lone individual who published a list of names of people infected with the virus in Podgorica at the time. The man has been arrested and is awaiting trial.

It is also important to point out examples which illustrate solidarity with the most vulnerable citizens during this crisis. The most prominent example is the grassroots movement *Krov nad glavom* (lit, "A Roof over One's Head"), which has organised to help prevent enforced evictions, and to help poor and left-behind citizens. During the state of emergency, *Krov nad glavom* raised funds from citizens to organize a great number of free meals for homeless citizens and citizens living in poverty, and especially Roma citizens, who are socially ostracised and living in precarious conditions - in unhygienic informal settlements, often without electricity or running water.. This organisation has appealed to citizens who can afford it, to donate the stimulus payment they will receive from the government, to help pay for even more meals, in addition to other forms of aid.

This may be one way to make good use of the ill-conceived stimulus package put together by the Serbian government, since those who need the funds the most are exactly those who are least likely to get it. Namely, in order to receive the stimulus payment, citizens must be of voting age, possess a valid ID card, and apply for it over the

internet or by calling a dedicated phone line. There has been no effort to make it easier for people who have no access to the internet, a telephone, the news, or personal documents to receive this state aid. In the first few hours of the applications opening, more than a million people applied to receive the stimulus payment, which paints a grim picture of poverty in Serbia.

## Migrants

Serbia is known as a transit country, with a large number of migrants passing through every year on their way to Western Europe. Since the beginning of the migrant (or refugee?) crisis, Serbia was seen at home and abroad as having kind and welcoming citizens ready to help these people in trouble. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems as though the bulk of public opinion has started turning in the other direction, with anti-migrant sentiments flaring up.

Fear and paranoia are being stoked primarily through fake news on social media, where the Facebook group *STOP naseļjavanju migranata* (STOP letting in migrants) is particularly notorious. According to BBC Serbia, “the number of members is growing each day, and an analysis using the tool CrowdTangle shows that, from the end of March to the beginning of May, there have been over 1.000 status updates, photos, links and videos published and shared, with over 2.2 million interactions, with [almost a million] likes and [over 500.000] negative reactions.”<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, migrants and refugees have been stripped of their freedom of movement since the beginning of the crisis, ostensibly to prevent the spread of the virus. According to the A11 Initiative, “refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers who were forbidden to leave asylum centres based on this Decision were unlawfully and arbitrarily stripped of their freedoms, based on discriminatory criteria related to their legal status, place of origin, and place of residence. A11 also points out that “the living conditions in these facilities are in direct violation of WHO guidelines, the principles of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, as well as guidelines from local medical experts, including those based on the prohibition of large numbers of people sharing an enclosed space.”<sup>13</sup>

Simmering tensions escalated on May 6th, when a member of the far right faux animal protection group known as *Levijatan* and activist for the ruling Serbian Progressive Party crashed his car into the migrant reception centre in Obrenovac, shouting “I don’t want a muslim state, I won’t take this anymore”, along with similar racist outbursts, while recording on his phone and live streaming on Facebook.

Naturally, he was welcomed as a hero by like-minded people, and *Levijatan’s* leader publicly praised this act, saying that the man couldn’t take migrants’ bullying anymore, so he decided to do something about it. The man was taken into custody and released after 48 hours, charged with violent behaviour, a regular driving offense, and not a hate crime.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-52524776>

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.a11initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Li%C5%A1enje-slobode-izbeglica-tra%C5%BEilaca-azila-i-migranata-u-Republici-Srbiji-u-vreme-vanrednog-stanja\\_final.pdf](https://www.a11initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Li%C5%A1enje-slobode-izbeglica-tra%C5%BEilaca-azila-i-migranata-u-Republici-Srbiji-u-vreme-vanrednog-stanja_final.pdf)

The government has resorted to violent means to control the migrants as well. Shots were fired into the air by military guards at two reception centres, to prevent migrants leaving the premises. The Minister of Defense has said that the soldiers were forced to fire warning shots in order to calm the situation down. Furthermore, there have been reports that the military has put out a call to procure large amounts of barbed wire, aiming to deploy them at borders, copying the notorious Hungarian method of preventing illegal entry. Civil society organizations have characterised these incidents as scandalous from a humanitarian standpoint, leading the military to cancel the call.

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The COVID-19 pandemic did not create these inequalities, but has served to deepen and highlight already existing problems in political and economic systems. The way forward in the wake of this crisis is to work on integrating human rights and gender perspectives in all policy areas, and proactively include women, minority, and other vulnerable groups in the decision-making process.



# Crisis as a Time for Decisions

At the height of the pandemic, an air of desperation and helplessness threatened to take hold of the regions most affected by it, as the international public looked on, largely powerless to help. The insidious nature of the Coronavirus has forced us to battle an invisible yet potent enemy, with the only viable weapon at our disposal being to recoil from one another at exactly the time when we needed to come together most.

There is no doubt that the Coronavirus pandemic has caused an unprecedented global crisis, leading to countless deaths, exacerbating already existing inequalities, and further inflaming political divisions. However, we would do well to remember that the Greek root for the word crisis actually means *decision*, an opportunity to choose what happens next, an opportunity for change.

In our programme countries, things have not been changing for decades, and the bracing lesson of the crisis has been just how much things have remained the same even in the face of a global pandemic. The same nationalistic and tribal clashes were continued unabated, those who needed help the most were largely left behind, and expert advice was warped to serve political aims.

Nevertheless, opportunities for change have presented themselves. For example, as lockdowns took hold of our cities, it became clear that the stunningly high levels of air pollution throughout the region were not caused by better living standards and citizens who could afford to drive cars, but rather by the burning of low-quality lignite to produce electricity, and the burning of various, often toxic materials by energy poor households trying to keep warm.

With such clear argumentation and irrefutable evidence, will our governments be persuaded to bring change not only to this, but a myriad other problems which have been similarly laid bare by the pandemic? Only if citizens are inspired to steadfastly insist on it. If not, a promising opportunity to effect lasting change will be wasted, and this crisis, like many others throughout history, will be forgotten.

