



Containing Covid-19 in Bosnia and Herzegovina – a Sisyphian task?

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In early March 2020, I was in the peculiar situation of having to travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina to take care of administrative issues that could not be postponed. I left France, whose government was still promulgating a “normal life”, and spent some days in two Bosnian cities, Banja Luka and Tuzla. Banja Luka is situated in the northern entity of the Republika Srpska and is inhabited by mostly Serbs. Tuzla lies in the mostly Bosniak and Croat Federation of BiH. While I was in Banja Luka, on March 5th the city confirmed its first two cases. A truck driver who had come back to Bosnia from Italy had infected his son. The two patients were identified and isolated very quickly, but the virus continued to spread.

Citizens immediately started to prepare for the worst-case-scenarios, uncertain about how the pandemic would affect the city. They followed the news from neighbouring countries closely. Long queues were visible in front of pharmacies, with people trying to buy masks that were no longer readily available. Foreigners had to report at their local medical centre if they experienced the slightest symptoms and a hotline was set up. When I travelled on to Tuzla, although no cases had been confirmed preparations were well in hand. The first case was confirmed on March 27: a health worker in the medical centre.

During the early management of the pandemic, recurrent structural problems that mirror Bosnia’s political situation resurfaced. The first was the accusation that the FBiH government was corruptly funding a private company to purchase of respirators from China (that would later turn out to be inappropriate for hospitals in BiH).¹ Another was the allegation that international aid was delivered selectively to the various ethnic groups.² Nonetheless it is fair to say that this western Balkan state, despite all its divisions and troubled history, reacted rapidly and proactively to the crisis. Like Vietnam (discussed in the recent post by Kirsten Endres), the authorities implemented strict measures as soon as the first cases were confirmed.

It took only seven positive tests for the government to close schools and universities, not to

mention restaurants and cafés. A curfew for people under 18 and over 65 was imposed. Airports were closed and foreigners were not able to enter the country. The Ministry of Health in the Tuzlan canton took expert advice seriously and succeeded in containing the spread of the virus through systematic testing, cooperating with the cantonal police and with civic organizations which disseminated public awareness.³ After an initial burst of panic purchasing in Sarajevan supermarkets, the food supply too was efficiently managed.

The Bosnian reaction to Covid-19 supports the argument presented recently in this blog by Sam Williams: that it is often specific, localized uncertainties that shape a country's reaction to a pandemic, rather than scientific facts per se. Bosnia simply had to respond rapidly, given its recent political history, extremely weak health infrastructure, ageing population, and economic fragility.

One central aspect of everyday life was thrown into relief by the crisis, namely dependence on economic migration. Many Bosnians work temporarily abroad, especially in Germany, Slovenia, Austria and Italy. Since the first Covid-19 cases were "imported," many Bosnians had difficulties returning home when, in line with the strict policy of containment, the frontiers were closed and no means of transportation were available. As I write in July, the country's borders remain closed to foreigners, and there are no plans to reopen them soon.

The irony is that the virus has not been contained. On the contrary, it circulates more strongly than before. Like Sisyphus' boulder, all efforts to gain the high ground fail. This cannot be attributed to a weak or absent state. On the contrary, there has been an abundance of regulation. One of the most important was the decision of the Constitutional Court, after a month of lockdown, that restricting freedom of movement for persons under 18 and over 65 was illegal. This in turn contributed to the lifting of protective measures on 24th April, when curfew and quarantine regulations were relaxed.

According to media reports and my informants, many citizens have stopped complying with the basic protective measures still in force. Experts conclude that the message that the virus had been defeated was sent too early. As of July 6th, Bosnia, with a population of 3,3 million people, has confirmed more than 5200 cases and 191 deaths. New cases are being documented in companies and even a kindergarten, making Bosnia one of the riskier countries in the region to visit this summer. Austria, for example, with a large population originating in the western Balkans, has issued a travel warning. Since the borders to neighbouring countries remain closed, access to the sea is only possible at Neum, where the beaches are dangerously overcrowded.

What will happen in the coming months, if foreigners cannot visit and diaspora members abstain from spending their summer at home as usual, thereby supporting the economy and

their families? More importantly, when will Bosnians, many of whom highly depend on work migration, be able to leave? Although the Bosnian government reacted faster to protect its population than most EU states, the course of the pandemic seems likely to exacerbate this semi-peripheral country's dependence on the international community.

Notes

¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-ventilators-scandal-covid-19-raspberry-farm-multimillion-deal-procurement/30594315.html>

² <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/16/hungarys-medical-help-divides-bosnia-once-again/>

³ <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/30/nailing-the-virus-how-one-bosnian-canton-halted-a-pandemic/>

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