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Southeast Europe - COVID-19 Bulletin No 4

Pandemic politics

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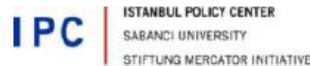
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Making existing democratic weaknesses worse

In this 4th and final Bulletin before the summer, we focus on the latest developments with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic in the region, and the impact it has had on the overall political environment within each country, many of whom are facing impending electoral challenges.

The deterioration in democratic standards and delays in EU related reforms as the pandemic unfolded throughout the region, in countries where institutions were already weak, should be a cause for concern for the EU as it pursues its enlargement agenda.

With the postponement of the European Commission's annual enlargement communication with accompanying country reports to the autumn, this deterioration is likely to continue unchecked without more rigorous monitoring and enforcement actions from the European Union. In this respect, the forthcoming rule of law monitoring reports from the European Commission will be a useful indicator.

Epidemiological evolution

There has been a marked increase in the infection rate in almost all the countries of the region, with the most alarming being in North Macedonia, where testing capacity also remains limited. The main exception is Montenegro where the situation remains stable despite two new cases of infection after some weeks without any.

Unwinding strategy

Despite the increase in infections, the restrictions and other exit strategy measures continue to be eased or lifted. However, increasing criticism has been leveled at governments for failing to exercise proper controls in social distancing and hygiene rules, and in some cases allowing large gatherings to take place, such as a football match in Serbia attended by 25,000 people. Undue speed in lifting restrictions such as in Kosovo and in Turkey has also been the subject of criticism.

Table: Infections and deaths, as per 15 June 2020

	No. of infections	Infections per 100,000	No. of deaths	Deaths per 100,000	Population (Mio)
EU/EEA + UK (since 7 June)	1,477,474 (+41,867)	291.4	171,500 (+2,801)	33.8	507
Albania	1,590 (+450)	55.6	36 (+3)	1.25	2,86
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3,040 (+530)	92.7	165 (+12)	5.0	3,28
Kosovo	1,615 (+532)	89.2	33 (+3)	1.8	1,81
Montenegro	326 (+2)	51.7	9 (=)	1.4	0,63
North Macedonia	4,289 (+1,974)	206.4	201 (+61)	9.7	2,08
Serbia	12,367 (+955)	177.2	255 (+12)	3.6	6,98
Turkey	179,831 (+15,889)	213.2	4,825 (+285)	5.7	84,34

Authors' compilation, based on figures from the ECDC and national authorities of SEE-7. Compared to 31 May.

Domestic politics

There is no doubt that the coronavirus pandemic has had dramatic consequences for the countries of the region, not only in terms of devastating economic impact but also in relation to a serious deterioration in proper functioning of the institutions and democratic standards.

Even allowing for the weak institutional system in place in most of the countries prior to the pandemic, as reflected in international indicators such as Freedom House, with Turkey being the worst case, the unfolding pandemic has seen a further decline in democratic standards and an increase in authoritarian behaviour of the political leadership.

With the exception of North Macedonia where a technical government is in place and Parliament suspended due to early elections, decision making in relation to the pandemic lacked transparency and democratic accountability. Parliament was often ignored as was predictably the case in Turkey, or only consulted after decisions were made, as was the case in Serbia. In Albania, a worrying practice of adopting tailor-made laws continued.

Lack of transparency in public procurement of medical equipment and other expenditure relating to the pandemic has increased the potential for corruption in a number of countries.

Both media and civil society organisations have suffered from this deteriorating climate, with harassment and even detention of journalists in Serbia, fines against an opposition figure in Bosnia and Herzegovina for publicly speaking out on the lack of personal protective equipment, and the withdrawing of funds already allocated to civil society organisations in the case of North Macedonia.

The impending elections in several countries (Serbia on 21 June, North Macedonia on 15 July, Montenegro in early autumn), not to mention the political uncertainty in Kosovo following another change in government, have also played their part in exacerbating domestic political tensions with governments being criticized for prioritising electoral considerations instead of managing the health crisis.

Progress in EU related reforms has inevitably suffered. However this rather bleak picture is brightened somewhat by success in Bosnia and Herzegovina in finally resolving the long standing dispute over elections in Mostar, thanks to EU/US mediation, and the appointment in Albania of the chief negotiator and the negotiating team for the future EU accession negotiations.

	AL	BiH	KS	MNE	MK	SB	TR
Public gatherings	<u>Restrictions</u> on public gatherings remain in place until further notice.	All public gatherings above 100 persons in closed and 400 in open spaces (Federation) and 50 (RS) banned until further notice	Social Distancing rules apply; within 8 square meters only 1 person is allowed.	Allowed outdoors and indoors, with a maximum of 200 people (plus other protection measures)	<u>Banned</u> until further notice; <u>protocols for political rallies</u> for the electoral period are unchanged.	Gatherings restricted to 500 people indoors, no restrictions on outdoor gatherings; this could be tightened again due to uptick in cases.	Allowed since 1 June; curfew on people above 65 and below 18 was lifted
Places of worship	Open under strict rules of social distancing and hygiene	Open since 6 May; social distancing, face masks and hygiene rules apply	Open; social Distancing rules apply; within 8 square meters only 1 person is allowed.	Open (with protection measures)	Open, religious gatherings discouraged	Open; social distancing measures and protective equipment encouraged	Allowed under rules of controlled normalisation
Personal movement	Personal movement is <u>allowed</u> for all citizens in all cities, respecting rules of social distancing	Curfew lifted in entire BiH: in Federation (24 April), in RS (22 May) and Brcko District (22 May). Federation lifted its ban of all outdoor activities for <18 and >65 (15 May)	Allowed with face masks and other protection measures.	There are no longer restrictions on freedom of movement. Social distancing rules apply.	Social distancing rules apply; when not possible wearing protective equipment is <u>obligatory</u> .	Entirely unrestricted	Allowed wearing face masks since 1 June; people above 65 are allowed to go out every day between 10:00 to 20:00
Public transport	Remains <u>suspended</u> until further notice	Until further notice allowed with social distancing measures and hygiene rules	Allowed with face masks and other protection measures; within 8 square meters only 1 person is allowed.	Allowed (with protection measures).	<u>Allowed</u> under specific conditions.	Operating normally; distancing measures apply	Allowed wearing face masks only
Intercity travel	Allowed for personal vehicles and for taxi services. <u>Since 1 June</u> , all intercity travels with private vehicles are allowed with no restrictions	Allowed	Allowed with face masks and other protection measures.	Allowed.	Allowed; distancing rules and limited capacity up to 50% remain in place.	Allowed	Allowed all over the country on 1 June after taking a code from "Hayat Eve Siga (life fits inside the home)" mobile app from the Ministry of Health
Shops and markets, basic services	Shops, markets, outlets offering basic services are open with no time limits, under strict protocols	Open; social distancing rules apply, face masks and hygiene rules	Open; social distancing rules apply.	Open.	Shops, markets and malls are <u>opened</u> as of 13 May.	Open; cautionary and hygiene measures apply	Allowed, social distancing rules apply

Schools & universities	Schools closed except third year of high school (18 May / 5 June only for subjects of State Matura exams). Universities closed for rest of academic year. Students back in classes for a few weeks ahead of final exams in July/August. Kindergartens open since 1 June, following strict hygiene protocol	Partially resumed; kindergartens are open (except in Tuzla where since 10 June the number of confirmed cases increased)	Closed until further notice. Exams in higher education; matura and other achievement tests to be held in late June/early July. Reconsideration based on the evolving situation.	Closed (except kindergartens).	Distance learning and online examination applied for primary and secondary education. The state exam has been cancelled for 2019/2020 students only. <u>Universities</u> allowed to resume in-person activities, but most faculties continued online.	Remain closed until further notice; School trips permitted; The state exam (Matura) to be conducted in June, under strict rules and precautionary procedure	Education at universities began under special conditions on 15 June, primary/secondary education will begin in September
Outdoor sporting activities	<u>Since 1 June</u> , parks open without restrictions. Outdoor sport activities resumed without public, following strict hygiene measures	Allowed	Allowed for individuals; selective opening of group sporting activities; social distancing rules apply.	Allowed (with a maximum of 200 people)	Allowed, under specific protocols as of 13 May.	Allowed	Allowed since 1 June, with three rules: mask, distance, hygiene
Bars, restaurants, hotels, attractions	<u>As of 1 June</u> , all open (except night clubs, cultural centres, theatres, cinemas, pools) but social distancing & hygiene measures apply. Private beaches in hotels open since 1 June; public beaches on 6 June	Opened (15 May); Strict social distancing, face masks and hygiene rules apply	Open; within 8 square meters only 1 person is allowed.	Opened on 15 May	Opened as of 28 May for outdoor attendance until 22:00 with <u>lowered capacities</u>	Bars, restaurants and hotels open; cautionary measures apply	Open since 1 June
International borders	Remain closed for all citizens except for repatriation. <u>As of 1 June</u> , all land borders are open and two-week quarantine rule lifted, unless health authorities claim otherwise.	Opening of borders to citizens of all three neighbouring states and business travels from 1 June; 14-day self-quarantine for incoming passengers lifted (20 May); airports open 1 June	Land borders open from 01.06.2020; Air Borders remain <u>closed</u> .	Opened on 1 June, 14-day quarantine for incoming passengers from countries with more than 25 infected per 100,000 population.	Open; 5 hours <u>transit</u> are allowed; 14 days <u>self-isolation</u> with negative PCR test (t - 72h), otherwise 14 government issued quarantine for arrivals.	Borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, Greece and Bulgaria open as of 1 June; air traffic remains reduced.	International flights resumed to four countries in Europe and will gradually be expanded; the 14-day quarantine rule for those coming from abroad was lifted

ALBANIA

1. General overview: Since 9 June, Albania has experienced an increase in the number of infected people and of fatalities. The number of tests has increased as well. The Prime Minister has warned about the need to respect the social distancing rules, otherwise the country might return into quarantine again. **Status: rebound of infections; debate about re-introducing preventive measures.**

2. Unwinding strategy: Apart from the public transport and mass gatherings that continue to be prohibited, the rest of businesses and activities have reopened without restrictions other than keeping social distancing. Changes to the Criminal Code and some lockdown measures taken without a legal base are currently fuelling the debate about alleged violation of fundamental rights. **Status: exit strategy is currently maintained.**

3. Domestic politics:

Pre-Covid: According to the Freedom House, Albania is considered as a partially free country scoring 67 out of 100, with political rights scoring 27/40 and civil liberties 40/60. While general elections aren't foreseen to take place until 2021, the country is in the middle of an electoral reform process spurred by EU conditions for opening accession talks.

State of emergency: The state of emergency in Albania was declared by Council of Ministers Decision No. 243 of 23 March and approved by parliamentary consensus. The state of emergency will remain in place until 23 June 2020. Contested lockdown measures and changes to the Criminal Code were not checked by the Constitutional Court, which remains dysfunctional due to the ongoing reform of the judicial system. However, the government decided to retroactively pardon the administrative fines imposed for not respecting the lockdown measures that were issued prior to the approval of the normative and legal acts.

Institutions: The Inter-Ministerial Committee for Civil Emergencies (*Komiteti Ndërmintëror i Emergjencave Civile - KNEC*), is the highest body in charge of coordinating the actions of state institutions and private entities. But with the judicial branch undergoing deep restructuring and the opposition parties boycotting Parliament, the Government has had the upper hand in all Covid-19 decision-making procedures. A typical tailor-made law adopted in this period was the decision of the government to transfer the ownership of the land on which the National Theatre stood to the Municipality of Tirana.

In addition, concrete examples of authoritarian tendencies have been most visible in the daily communication on the crisis, carried out through the profile of the Prime Minister on Facebook, rather than through official information channels.

Two cases of corruption linked to the pandemic were denounced and are being investigated by SPAK (Special Structure for Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime), i.e. the tender of masks (\$ 3.5 million) procured from the Ministry of Health and Social Protection

and the tender of 1.5 million euros for the provision of food for families in need procured from the Ministry of Defence.

Parliamentary commissions have resumed their activities, which now take place online. The National Council for European Integration had its first meeting during the pandemic, over the government action plan on the 15 priorities set by the European Council prior to convening the first Intergovernmental Conference. The Chief Negotiator and the Negotiating Team have been appointed.

Political parties: The polarisation between the Albanian political parties remains very high, exacerbated even more by the debate on the lockdown measures of the government, the demolition of the National Theatre, and now by the political negotiations on electoral reform.

Regarding the political rights and civil liberties, the debate has focused on the freedom of movement. Reputable CSOs have argued against the recent amendments of the Albanian Criminal Code, such as the proposed penalties in case of violation of confinement and other security rules related to Covid-19 pandemic, are “repressive, not proportional and violate the basic rights and freedoms of citizens”.

Media: After an initial overbearing role of the PM in daily management and communication, the Institute of Public Health has re-assumed its role in the management of the official press releases and other public updates on the situation of the pandemic in Albania. The role of the media has mainly been on reporting the official data coming from the government. During the pandemic, one TV media has been fined for not-respecting social distancing rules in its programmes. Although disinformation campaigns are otherwise active in Albania, such practices weren't noticed during the pandemic.

Civil society: After a positive reaction following the earthquake, trust in government has suffered due to the continuing economic crisis, the exposure of the poor state of the public health system, polarising decisions such as the demolition of the National Theatre, and most recently an uptick in the number of infections. There has been a massive protest against the demolition of the National Theatre and smaller demonstrations from grass root movements on the violation of human rights.

The role of religious communities during the pandemic has been constructive, especially in relation to the management of religious gatherings.

While key think tanks and other CSO like Albanian Institute of Science, Institute of Political Studies, Albanian Helsinki Committee, Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, etc. have contributed to the monitoring and reporting on Covid-19 related actions by the government, grassroots movements and organisations like *Hashtag Initiative, National Youth Congress, Coalition Woman, Peace and Security, etc.* have helped groups of vulnerable citizens.

Overall assessment: An incandescent political scene and signals of democracy backsliding were present in Albania before the pandemic. Trust has dwindled as a result of the lingering justice reform process, the perceived hijacking of electoral reform by the big parties, the slow reconstruction after the November 2019 earthquake, and the impact of Covid-19 on the socio-economic fabric of the country. This has darkened the mood of the population and further dampened the country's growth prospects for 2020.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

1. General overview: By 15 June authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported 3,040 cases, of which 165 died and 2,162 recovered (713 active cases). The total number of performed tests was 77,494 (data for the number of persons tested is not available). Since 31 May authorities reported 12 deaths, which is less compared to 25 deaths in the 15 days before. However, the number of new cases increased by 530 compared to 274 during the 15 days before. **Status: Despite an increase in the number of confirmed cases, the doubling of cases continued to slow down from every 41 days on 31 May to 49 days on 15 June.**

2. Unwinding strategy: The rise in the number of confirmed cases in BiH's entity Republika Srpska and Tuzla Canton, the largest of the ten cantons in the Federation, provoked a state-wide debate on the (lack of) responsibility of citizens and businesses to observe rules on social distancing, wearing face masks and hygiene rules. The authorities repeatedly stated their opposition to the re-introduction of measures, at either country or entity level, that would limit movement and close businesses, but expressed their readiness to pursue such measures at a municipal/local level where outbreaks take place. **Status: Rising numbers in confirmed cases raised concerns among the public and led authorities to increase the monitoring of mask wearing and hygiene rules.**

3. Domestic politics:

Pre-Covid: According to the European Commission's assessment from May 2019 "Bosnia and Herzegovina has a complex system of executive power, which is broadly functioning", with the legislative bodies being "generally in a position to adopt legislation and exercise democratic control and oversight on the executives". The report also noted that "governments' capacities for policy planning and coordination across all levels of government are still insufficient." Freedom House has, both in 2019 and 2020, assessed Bosnia and Herzegovina as "a partly free transitional or hybrid regime." The last general elections were held in October 2018 but several of BiH's 14 governments have not yet been formed, including the government of the BiH entity Federation. The constitution, however, does not recognise the concept of a caretaker governments so until new ones are formed the old governments continue to govern in their full capacity. Municipal elections are expected to take place in November 2020 and the next general elections in October 2022.

State of emergency / curfews: Following declarations made at sub-state levels (District Brcko already on 11 March and both entities, Republika Srpska and Federation, on 16 March), the country-level government declared a state of natural disaster on 17 March 2020. Without any serious debate in parliament, the authorities in Republika Srpska went on to decide on 28 March to introduce the state of emergency, after which parliament was suspended and President Zeljka Cvijanovic was able to rule by decree.

Institutions: Other parliaments in the country continued to function albeit at a slower pace. The state of emergency in Republika Srpska was lifted on 21 May, while in the Federation the state of natural disaster was lifted on 31 May. The Constitutional Court has reviewed and ruled against some of the measures adopted by authorities, e.g. the total ban of all outdoor activities for those younger than 18 and older than 65 in the Federation as not proportional. The authorities have accepted and implemented the Court's ruling.

In the midst of the pandemic, the BiH Presidency adopted an initiative to start the implementation of priorities that the European Commission set in May 2019 as conditions for (candidate status and) the start of the accession talks. Several meetings of other institutions working on implementing this initiative took place. The Head of the EU Delegation, Johann Sattler and the US ambassador, Eric Nelson, facilitated an agreement between the two largest parties in the Federation, signed on 17 June, that if supported by a majority in the state-level Parliament could pave the way to holding the first elections in Mostar since 2008. Holding elections in Mostar is one of conditions on the path towards the EU. But whether the Mostar agreement will be implemented and open space for other concrete outcomes on the EU path will depend, in part, on the interest shown by CSOs and the wider public in BiH.

Political rights and civil liberties: On 7 April, the President of Republika Srpska adopted a decree aimed at preventing the spread of disinformation. Legal experts warned that it could be misused to curb people's freedom of expression. Maja Dragojević Stojić, a doctor and opposition politician from Prijedor, was fined EUR 500 for speaking in public on the lack of medical protective equipment in hospitals. Due to pressure from journalists, civil society organisations, opposition politicians and international organisations the decree and all fines issued pursuant to it were revoked on 17 April.

Authorities across the country tried to limit or suspend public procurement rules by engaging in direct and possibly overly priced purchases of medical equipment. Investigative journalists and media played a key role in reporting on individual cases, including the one where the Federation authorities awarded a raspberry farm with a contract to purchase medical ventilators. This provoked an outcry among the public, triggered parliamentary oversight of the purchase and pressured police and judicial authorities to start an investigation. One of the key suspects in this case is Fadil Novalic, the prime minister of the Federation and a member of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the largest party in the Federation. The SDA has defended Novalic and blamed Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb

politicians for using their links in the police and the judiciary in order to gain political leverage over the SDA. Opposition parties in BiH have called for Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb politicians to also be investigated and prosecuted for alleged violations of public procurement rules, including the purchase of a mobile hospital in Banja Luka. Most citizens shared such expectations.

Most economic measures were adopted at the sub-state level. In Republika Srpska the main legal basis for such measures was the President's decree of 10 April, while in the Federation an act was adopted by the Parliament on 4 May. Both acts came under strong attack from the opposition, experts and businesses, which the authorities mostly disregarded. Fuelled by dissatisfaction over the substance of the socio-economic measures themselves and the corruptive practices that they spurred, several opposition-led protests were organized in May and June. There is a growing fear that authorities in both entities would use the distribution of financial support for business, via Solidarity Fund in Republika Srpska and Development Bank in the Federation, to further capture BiH's economy and society, as well as the distribution of social welfare support for citizens.

Civil society: Despite limitations put on their movement, civil society and journalists played an important role in keeping citizens informed. In mid-March, the largest political parties in BiH demanded from governments to publish the personal data of individuals coming from abroad. This followed the (social) media framing of such individuals as carriers of the virus into the country. Some local and cantonal authorities followed suit but a group of citizens led by CSOs lodged a complaint to the Personal Data Protection Agency. On 24 March the Agency decided to ban public disclosure of these data. Since then all institutions have complied with the decision.

Religious communities called on citizens to observe all measures introduced by the authorities but individual cases were reported where measures were not observed during the major holidays of all three major religious groups in BiH (Catholic and Orthodox Easters and Muslim Eid).

Overall assessment: The pandemic has further exposed the many institutional, political and legal weaknesses from which BiH's federal system of governance suffers, as well as the corrupt practices in the system. At the same time, the coronavirus crisis has also emphasised the importance of investigative journalism, opposition parties, citizens and civil society organisations in revealing, halting and reversing negative tendencies.

KOSOVO

1. General overview: Until 15 June, 1,615 citizens had been infected and 33 fatalities recorded. The number of recovered had risen to 963 persons. Since lifting restrictions, Kosovo has been experiencing an upward trend of infections. To date, 18,915 tests have been conducted. **Status: The number of cases is rising very fast; the government warns that some restrictions may return back should the numbers continue to increase.**

2. Unwinding strategy: Phase III began on 01 June. Unfortunately, citizens are not respecting social distancing rules. The debate is that the government has started phase III too soon. The need for normality and the re-launch of economic activities was very pressing. The National Institute of Public Health of Kosovo has announced that they will only ask for re-confinement if a large number of citizens are admitted to hospital. **Status: Citizens are not respecting the confinement rules; there is a chance of re-introducing some restrictions.**

3. Domestic politics:

According to Freedom House, Kosovo's global Freedom score is 56 out of 100. The methodology of the score is derived by assessing the real-world rights and freedoms enjoyed by individuals, rather than governments or government performances. The report highlights that Kosovo holds credible and relatively well-administered elections, yet its institutions remain weak, and widespread corruption has given rise to deep public distrust in the government. Kosovo continues to have unstable institutions.

Pre-Covid 19: In July 2019, Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj resigned and the parliament dissolved. Snap elections were held on 6 October 2019. It was the third election in the last five years. No party won the majority, and the government was formed only on 03 February 2020. The same LVV-LDK government fell in the middle of Covid-19 crisis. The government is elected for a four-year term by simple majority of the Assembly; the new government was elected on 03 June 2020. The president is elected for a five-year term; his mandate ends in spring 2021.

State of emergency / curfew: President Thaçi proposed for the Kosovo Assembly to declare a state of emergency in response to the coronavirus outbreak. The government denounced the proposal considering it as an extreme and unnecessary cause of panic. On 23 March, the government imposed a curfew from 10:00 to 16:00 and 20:00 to 06:00. The President opposed the government's decree and challenged it before the Constitutional Court, which on 12 April found the decision to be in violation of the Constitution. The government has since introduced other decisions aimed at avoiding constitutional scrutiny, imposing curfews which began on 16 March and ended on 28 May.

Institutions: Following the Constitutional Court's ruling, and pursuant to the Law for Prevention and Fighting against Infectious Diseases, the Ministry of Health was the only institution competent to take decisions on cautionary measures to fight the pandemic. The enforcement authorities imposed fines for failing to comply with the measures. Penalties ranged from EUR 1,000 to EUR 2,000 for individuals, and EUR 3,000 to EUR 8,000 for legal entities. Until 01 June, courts worked only with essential staff and on urgent cases. Those cases involved domestic abuse, appointment, or the continuation of security measures.

Political Parties: On 25 March 2020, the parliament passed a vote of no-confidence against the Government, less than two months after it was formed. President Thaçi proposed a new nominee from LDK to form the government. The party of Prime Minister Albin Kurti took the President's decree to the Constitutional Court, which then approved the President's decree to form the new government without snap elections.

On 03 June, Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti formed the new government of a coalition between LDK, NISMA Social Democratic, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) and minorities. It earned just 61 out 120 votes in the Assembly.

Political rights and civil liberties: The pandemic has restricted rights such as the freedoms of movement, religion, and association. It could be argued that people's rights to privacy were restricted since they were obliged to quarantine for two weeks at the allocated government facilities. However, citizens largely complied and did not protest the restrictions. As the government lifted restrictions four days ahead of schedule, thousands of Vetëvendosje supporters held a protest rally in Prishtina to demand elections.

Media: The Constitution guarantees press freedom. Yet, due to the pandemic there have been some constraints on media reporting. During the pandemic, the use of social media increased. As a result, there was a surge in the number of fake news and hate speech. The European Federation of Journalists called on media in Kosovo to refrain from raising tensions during a health crisis. Likewise, the OSCE urged the media to respect the privacy of patients and not disclose their identity.

Overall assessment: Before and during the pandemic, Kosovo continued to experience an unstable political system and institutions. The support from the EU has been duly noted, yet there are no changes in the route towards EU accession for Kosovo. The tense political situation has removed some of the limelight from the pandemic. Citizens feel uncertain for the future.

MONTENEGRO

1. General overview: By 15 June, due to the opening of borders, two new cases had been recorded, bringing the number of infected since the beginning of the epidemic to 326, of which 9 died and 315 recovered. The number of tested per day varied, with the highest recordings at 394 per day, and 34 as the lowest. **Status: Two new cases have been recorded, but the situation remains stable.**

2. Unwinding strategy: The relaxation of measures was welcomed in the country. Most of the public controversy is currently about the limitation of the number of people present at public gatherings (200), given that protests have continued regarding the 'Law on freedom of religion or belief and legal status of religious communities', as well as about the limitation of quarantine-free entry to countries where less than 25 are infected per 100,000 inhabitants. **Status: There is dissatisfaction with the remaining measures but given that new infections have been recorded precaution should be taken.**

3. Domestic politics:

Pre-Covid: According to various reports that monitor the state of democracy in the country, Montenegro is either stagnating or backsliding in all respects. Thus, in the latest Freedom House report from April, Montenegro is no longer considered a semi-consolidated democracy, but a hybrid regime. The government was elected in 2016 and the next regular parliamentary elections will be held in October 2020 at the latest. The Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), independently or in a coalition, has formed all previous governments since the establishment of the multiparty system in 1990.

State of emergency / curfews: No state of emergency has been formally declared in Montenegro, but the measures introduced were extremely rigorous, mostly in accordance with the Law on Protection of Population from Communicable Diseases (Article 54) and the Criminal Code (Article 28). However, the decision from 21 March 2020 to publish the list of persons who were ordered to self-isolate for 14 days violated the Constitution, which specifies that human rights and freedoms may be restricted only to the extent permitted by this legal act and if proportional to the objective to be attained. The act also violated the provisions of the Law on Personal Data Protection and the Law on Health Care, as well as Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees the right to protection of privacy and family life. This right may be limited for the purpose of health protection, but only in accordance with the law and to the extent necessary in a democratic society. Neither of these two conditions was met in the present case. The Constitutional Court of Montenegro was asked to assess the constitutionality and legality of the act. A ruling is still pending.

Institutions: Montenegro was the last country in the region to announce a registered case of a new coronavirus on 17 March and the second to announce the end of the epidemic on 3 June. Crisis management is entrusted to the National Coordination Body for

Communicable, with the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Policy and Financial System as its president. However, the Government initially did not inform the public about the legal basis for the establishment of this body, or even its composition. That information was only published on the Government's website on 14 April 2020 after public pressure. However, it did not contain details when the National Coordination Body was established while information "leaked" to the public shows that this body functioned without a legal basis for two weeks.

Although there were certain violations of the ban on religious rites during the crisis, there were no major incidents until 12 May, when the bishop and clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church were detained after a public gathering in Nikšić, but the same measure was not applied after the mass celebration of the Independence Day on 21 May, which indicates the selective application of measures. A recent survey shows that 68.9% of citizens believe that the law in Montenegro is not equally applied to all. In addition to the selective implementation of measures, the practice of arrest on suspicion of committing the crime of causing panic, which was frequent even before the epidemic, accelerated during the epidemic.

Similarly, parliament's oversight role has been neglected even in regular circumstances. There exists no proper system of checks and balances between the different branches of power. Moreover, since the 2016 parliamentary elections, part of the opposition has boycotted the work of the national assembly. Given that even a state of emergency must be carried out under parliamentary scrutiny, there is no justification for marginalizing the role of parliament during the epidemic. The Government involved the parliament in the final stage of the crisis to adopt some controversial legislative changes. In late April, members of the ruling majority passed amendments to the Law on the Financing of Political Entities and Election Campaigns to "mitigate the effects of the epidemic on the social status of the most vulnerable" and thus allow social benefits from the budget reserve to be paid in an election year "during a state of war, state of emergency, epidemic or pandemic of infectious diseases". This possibility may be abused for electoral purposes but an amendment by an opposition MP which proposed the establishment of a special body composed of representatives of the government, the opposition and the civil society to control the allocation of assistance from the budget, was rejected. Also, amendments to the Law on Local Self-Government were adopted, which enable the extension of the local parliaments' mandate in case it expires during the emergency situation, no longer than 90 days after the circumstances that caused it stopped.

Overall assessment: The ruling party continued to pursue common undemocratic practices during the epidemic.

NORTH MACEDONIA

1. General overview: The number of registered cases and Covid-19 related deaths kept increasing significantly in the first half of June. On 13 June, North Macedonia registered the highest number of infections per 1 million inhabitants in Europe. Testing also increased, with an average of 21,773 tests per 1 million inhabitants. Targeted screening continues in kindergartens only. With 14% of patients hospitalised and many doctors in self isolation, medical staff was transferred to intensive care units following a government decree for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic. **Status: The coronavirus rebound has more severe impact than the initial outbreak of Covid-19 in the country.**

2. Unwinding strategy: The exit strategy remains unchanged, but the public is critical towards the government's approach. The Commission for infectious diseases' recommendation for a night curfew was rejected. Instead, the technical government ordered rigorous control and sanctioning for non-compliance, which were increased in the second week of June. **Status: Belated controls and sanctioning added credibility to the exit strategy prior to elections.**

3. Domestic politics: After years of political crisis, the December 2016 parliamentary elections and the formation of the new government on 1 June 2017 eased political tensions and paved the way for greater focus on the country's democratic development. The European integration process that had stalled for several years was restarted after the conclusion of the good neighbourly agreement with Bulgaria and the Prespa Agreement with Greece. Although the latest Freedom House report recorded one of the biggest jumps in democracy consolidation compared to last year's report, the country still retained the epithet "partly free" country. There are multiple reasons and some of them can be found in the electoral process, where reports of intimidation and vote buying remain common and corruption a serious problem, with widespread impunity for corrupt government officials, including members of the parliament and the judiciary.

State of emergency: North Macedonia entered the Covid-19-crisis with a dissolved parliament and one month away from holding early elections. In line with national legislation, a 'technical government' composed of both coalition and opposition ministers has been in place since 3 January. When the crisis erupted, the only option for Covid-19-related legislating was for the President to declare a state of emergency, giving the Government the power to adopt legally binding decrees, which he did.

The President did not prolong the state of emergency further, and from 14 June the third consecutive state of emergency has ended. Following a cross-party agreement, the election date was set on 15 July. For that purpose, the Government has asked the President to declare another eight days of state of emergency (from 15 to 22 June) to organize the upcoming elections, to which he agreed. In that regard, the Government has passed a decree with legal force during the elections, after which the President of the Parliament has called the elections.

The Constitutional Court did not assess the constitutionality of the first state of emergency. For the other declared emergencies, the Court stated that report is being prepared and will be proposed for consideration at a session of the Court.

Institutions: More than 1,500 citizens have been found to be in violation of the curfew regulation since its introduction. The Public Prosecutor's Office has initiated a misdemeanour procedure for all of them and it is estimated that at least two million euros will flow into the state budget.

The largest opposition party has accused the Government of irregularities in the procurement of respirators, after which the Government annulled the tender.

The Constitutional Court overturned several of the government decrees, including the one introducing a minimum wage for officials, judges and prosecutors as a saving measure.

Political parties: Opposition parties have not unified on any issue. The opposition is comprised only from the coalition of Macedonian political parties led by VMRO- DPMNE.

Political rights and civil liberties: Apart from the freedom of movement, other human rights have been restricted, such as education, private and family life, freedom of assembly and association. In relation to these rights, the country also derogated from the European Convention of Human Rights. Considering the re-organisation of the work of health system, one might claim that the right to health is also brought into question. Reports already show that some groups have been affected by these restrictions in a particular way, for example Roma. The pre-existing inequalities have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, furthering their already vulnerable position, especially of Roma Women. Most recently, the privacy and data protection rights have been put into question, with the announced intent for mandatory use of a Covid-19 tracing app for persons that have received a self-isolation order.

After creating the app 'StopKorona!', and discussion about the possible security issues related to its use, the Government has now decided that anyone with an isolation order will have to install the StopKorona application.

Media: There were no explicit constraints on media reporting. The Association of Journalists of Macedonia objected to Government permits allowing only traditional media registered in the Media Agency to move around, as well as for online media part of the Register of Professional Online Media published on the platform www.promedia.mk. The Association considers that permits should be issued to all media workers. Objections also came from the Radio stations, saying that the decree to help only the TV stations is discriminatory.

Troll farms were detected by Facebook as originating in Macedonia and the Philippines; they were shut down by the company. The most significant influence of disinformation in the country came from the biggest Macedonian opposition party, whose officials, such as the former Minister of Transport and Communications, shared fake news about Government activities.

Public opinion and civil society: In the most recent poll (from 28.04 to 05.05) citizens said that they are pleased with the Government's overall handling of the situation, but in terms of economic measures, only 20% of citizens are satisfied with the economic crisis measures.

As part of the economic measures for re-directing state funds towards activities for dealing with the crisis, the Government cut funds already allocated and awarded to CSOs in a non-transparent manner. A reaction by CSOs ensued, but to no avail. CSOs are likely to be significantly affected by this decision.

The role of the religious communities was somewhat ambiguous. On one hand, the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) has come up with its own recommendations for health protection, as well as the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) has appealed to believers to abide by the government's measures and recommendations. On the other hand, the MOC has organized a litany (in the Orthodox Church a procession of priests with the priesthood as a ceremony of piety) contrary to the health recommendations, while the leader of the IRC threatened the Government that if it would withdraw the ban on rallies "then there will be no force that can fight the coronavirus epidemic, so we will become Bangladesh". These actions most probably encouraged religious family gatherings, which were identified as the main cause for the current resurgence of the infection.

The CSOs that played a prominent role during the pandemic were all acting according to their target group: Workers' rights CSO (Glacen Tekstilec, Helsinki Committee), Support for vulnerable groups (Red Cross; KHAM Delcevo; Ambrela; HOPS) Gender-based violence (National Network to End Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence) LGBTQ rights (Coalition Margini;) Childrens rights (Megjashi – First Children's Embassy;)

Overall assessment: After the announcement of the pandemic, the Macedonian authorities have managed the health crisis surprisingly well in the first three months. However, as the peak of the crisis was overcome and restrictive measures were reduced, the impression was that the crisis had been overcome and the government began to focus on organizing the postponed early parliamentary elections. As the focus shifted to managing elections instead of managing the health crisis, the number of newly infected began to rise again.

SERBIA

1. General overview: After the initial slowing down of the rate of infection, there has been an upturn in the number of cases. By 15 June, a total of 308,013 tests had been conducted; 11,561 persons had recovered. On 15 June, 551 active cases were reported. The cause of the growth is assumed to be due to an excessive relaxation in the cautionary measures among the general populace since the start of the exit on 7 May. **Status: Noticeable increase in the rate of infection.**

2. Unwinding strategy: The recent growth in the rate of infection has prompted debate among experts and authorities on potentially re-introducing some cautionary measures, e.g. tightening the previously relaxed limitations on public gatherings. One controversial event, in this light, was a football match attended by almost 25,000 spectators – a huge health hazard that was nevertheless allowed to take place. Therefore, while the upcoming elections still dominate daily debate, there is a return of the debate on health issues. **Status: Possibility of re-introducing some restrictive measures; daily politics still dominant.**

3. Domestic politics:

Pre-Covid: In the period before the outbreak, Serbia was continuing down the long established path of democratic backsliding and drift into authoritarianism. The latest *Freedom House* report shows Serbia dropping in both the overall score, as well as in the democracy percentage score, placing it in the categories of “Partly Free” and “Transitional or Hybrid Regime” respectively. The incumbent government, headed by Ana Brnabić as Prime Minister, was formed after snap elections in April 2016. The next regular elections are to be held Sunday, 21 June.

State of emergency: Following the outbreak of Covid-19, a nation-wide state of emergency was introduced, lasting from 15 March to 7 May. This brought with it very rigorous restrictions and measures: restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly, curfews, cessation of travel and public transport, closure of non-essential businesses, imposition of social distancing measures etc. From the outset, the legality of the declared state of emergency had been brought into question – it had been declared by the President and the Prime Minister, rather than the Speaker of the National Assembly, while the Assembly itself would not ratify the respective declaration until late April. All this was deemed to be in breach of the Constitution of Serbia by some legal experts. Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court has ruled the declaration to be legal.

Institutions: The state of emergency saw significant power concentrated in the hands of the President of the Republic. Conversely, the capacity and power of the National Assembly has only further weakened over the course of the state of emergency. Prevented from convening, first due to a government decree restricting public gatherings, and then by the declaration of the state of emergency, the Assembly had become redundant for the

majority of this period. It would first convene only on 28 April to retroactively rubber stamp the declaration of the state of emergency and all subsequent government regulations. Even this initial session was not announced by the Speaker, despite this being solely his capacity, but rather by the President. Some argue that the President has assumed full control over the decision-making process during the crisis, without any checks and balances by other institutions. It can be argued that, if anything, the crisis has laid bare the continuous democratic backsliding.

To date, there is no publicly available information regarding the procurement of medical equipment (such as ventilators) during the crisis – the exact numbers, their origins, and how much they were purchased for, all remain unknown. Representatives of the state refused to provide such information, stating that it would be given only “after the epidemic is over”. This gives serious ground for suspecting corruption.

The role of the law enforcement bodies, such as the police, was to ensure compliance with the measures introduced for the duration of the state of emergency, which for the most part it did adequately. A significant exception was the incident whereby law enforcement failed to adequately respond to a gathering of activists of a government-organised ‘NGO’ on multiple rooftops in Belgrade, lighting torches in a coordinated show of support for the government. The judiciary, meanwhile, adapted to the new circumstances by enforcing the decree through so-called “Skype Trials”, which were held via video call – a clear violation of the right to a fair trial, as well as the laws and Constitution of Serbia.

Political parties: The opposition in Serbia had been divided and fractured even prior to the epidemic. While there is a multitude of parties that are labelled as “opposition”, many of them tend to be critical of the ruling opposition in words only. Other parties more robustly opposed to the ruling coalition showed continued unity primarily in their criticism of the regime and its handling of the crisis. The principal divisive issue during the state of emergency – and after it – is the question of boycotting the upcoming elections, as some opposition actors chose to participate, thus dividing the “genuine opposition” into “boycotting” and “non-boycotting” camps. The decision of the President to lower the electoral threshold from 5% to 3% for the upcoming parliamentary elections has further divided the opposition, with some parties choosing to abandon the boycott and participate in the controversial elections. The lowered threshold furthermore paves the way for emerging extreme right-wing parties to use the vacuum left by the boycott and enter Parliament.

Political rights and civil liberties: The measures introduced by the state of emergency severely impacted the citizens’ freedom of movement and assembly, which could be justified to an extent by public health considerations. However, this period saw severe limitations and breaches of the right to be informed, freedom of expression (see next section) and, as mentioned before, the right to a fair trial. There was no significant discussion of Covid-tracking apps, nor has there been any organized Covid surveillance mechanism in place.

Media: There has been a continued crackdown on media and freedom of expression. Initially, a ban on dissemination of Covid-related information was introduced, leading to a journalist being detained for 48h for reporting on shortages of medical equipment – the ban was lifted after outcry at home and abroad. The major national TV channels were, and continue to be, dominated by representatives of the ruling coalition, – one report suggesting their presence on these channels reaching between 92% and 99% in the first 1,5 months of the state of emergency, the most prominently featured figure being President Vučić.

Public opinion and civil society: The measures introduced during the state of emergency were supported by 92% of the population, according to polls. Furthermore, the crisis has seen the popularity of President Vučić rise significantly, according to the same polls. That said, there were clear signs of protest and opposition – most notably, a coordinated initiative was launched, aptly named “Noise against dictatorship”, calling citizens to make noise from their windows, by banging pots and pans on a daily basis. Furthermore, opposition politicians staged protests and two engaged in a short-lived hunger strike. A number of civil society organisations (CSOs) played a crucial and active role in providing aid to vulnerable individuals and groups, offering legal aid, providing information and oversight. Nevertheless, the already disabling environment for the CSOs, coupled with the expected cuts in funding due to the pandemic, will likely further aggravate the position and sustainability of the CSOs in Serbia.

Overall assessment on impact of pandemic: Overall, the pandemic has served only to exacerbate existing division, tensions and tendencies within Serbian society and politics. As the democratic backsliding of Serbia continues, coupled with increasing authoritarian tendencies and a shrinking public space for ‘free’ media and CSOs, there can be no talk of progress in this regard. Meanwhile, reform in the context of EU membership talks has been uneven and overall unsatisfactory. EU accession takes a backseat to internal politics, as Serbia braces for very controversial parliamentary and local elections on Sunday, 21 June.

TURKEY

1. General overview: Turkey is adopting a policy of “normalisation with caution” with a controlled social life following three rules: mask, distance, and hygiene. According to the official figures, on 15 June Turkey had 179,831 (163,942) known cases, 4,825 (4,540) deaths, and 152,364 (127,973) recovering from the virus. Over 2,674,203 (2,039,194) tests have been completed, with an average of some 42,000 (31,000) tests per day in the first half of June. Yet, the number of active cases has increased since 13 June. The need for intensive care and respiratory equipment is increasing, and the Minister of Health has said that Turkey is moving away from the target. **Status: the number of deaths is decreasing, but the number of active cases has been increasing since 13 June.**

2. Unwinding strategy: Taking economic factors into account, the government decided to start the normalisation process at the beginning of June, two weeks earlier than expected. On 5 June, President Erdoğan cancelled a weekend curfew, pointing to the impact of the outbreak on the economy. As of 8 June, the curfew imposed on people under 18 was lifted, and senior citizens were allowed to go out between 10:00 and 20:00 every day. After the reopening of domestic flights, international flights to and from Istanbul were gradually reopened to certain countries, and the 14-day quarantine rule for those coming from abroad was lifted. Football matches started on 12 June. Yet, the increase in the number of new cases in some Anatolian cities triggered new complaints about “early normalisation”, and the warning by members of the Turkish Science Academy and the Turkish Medical Association about the high number of active cases and the possibility of a stronger second wave. The Health Minister himself criticised people sitting together in parks without wearing masks or paying attention to social distancing guidelines. The government decided to expand audit measures on “compliance with social distance, hygiene and closing hours” in 42 cities. The Science Academy published a statement on 16 June, highlighting the importance of accurate information, scientific research and transparent discussion based on public participation and trust. **Status: early normalisation for economic reasons, with the danger of a second wave.**

3. Domestic politics:

Pre-Covid: Turkey has been drifting away from democracy for some time, with the erosion of political rights and civil liberties visible since 2011. The country adopted the presidential system in 2018. Since then, the executive branch has been gaining more power, pushing more restrictions on individual liberties, limiting the playing field of opposition parties and CSOs, and deepening polarisation in society and politics.

Turkey’s place in international indices has been sharply decreasing over the last ten years. According to the Rule of Law 2020 Index, Turkey ranked 107th out of 128 countries. The Freedom in the World Index downgraded Turkey’s overall status from “partly free” to “not free” in 2018; Turkey’s place in the Freedom of Press Index has been ranked “not free” since 2013. According to the report by Pew Research Center, released on 27 February 2020, 50% of the respondents are not satisfied with the way democracy works in Turkey.

The next general elections are expected to be held in 2023; however, many analysts claim that early elections are possible due to the economic emergencies that the pandemic has created and the threat from newly founded political parties by former members of the AKP.

State of emergency / curfews: The Turkish government did not officially declare a state of emergency in the fight against the pandemic. However, it imposed a partial curfew, which allowed citizens aged between 20 and 65 to continue their daily routines except during the weekends and holidays, rather than putting the country in a total lockdown. This policy was enacted through different presidential decrees intended to avert a high death rate, blunt

the economic repercussions of the curfew, and increase healthcare capacities for citizens. Yet, certain legislative issues sparked a big dispute in the parliament. The opposition parties criticised the government for imposing a partial curfew, especially as the minister announced the first curfew just hours before its implementation, causing people to panic and go out immediately to buy necessary supplies for the quarantine. Apart from that, the joint AKP/MHP law which introduced temporary amnesty for prisoners in order to diminish the spread of the virus among the prison population has also drawn criticism for its exclusion of political prisoners.

Institutions: While the government discourse has been polarising and damaging the sense of solidarity among citizens during the crisis, Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca, who is himself a medical doctor, and the ministry's Advisory Board have gained the trust of citizens across party lines. Yet, as a reflection of strong centralisation, weakening institutionalisation, and deepening polarisation in Turkey, the Turkish Medical Union was excluded from the Board, showing the tendency of the government's will to monopolise the country's response to the coronavirus. The government decided not to announce a total curfew at the beginning of the outbreak and started normalisation processes two weeks earlier than expected, while the opposition parties, the Science Academy, and many civil society institutions warned the government of the potentially devastating impacts of these policies. These decisions were made by presidential decrees which by-passed parliament. Furthermore, the central government has excluded local governments from the national response. There has also been an ongoing debate over who is allowed to distribute aid, as the Ministry of the Interior has opened investigations against the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara for organising local relief initiatives.

The government has also further limited individual rights and civil liberties during the pandemic. In early April, the Ministry of Interior announced that more than 200 social media users had been taken into custody because of coronavirus-related posts. To limit speculative acts, the Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency issued a decree on the regulation on manipulation in financial markets in May, increasing control and censorship in social media channels.

Political parties: Increasing elite polarisation over the course of the last years has undermined the country's efforts to effectively address the Covid-19 crisis. Most of the cases in Turkey were reported in the three largest cities, Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, where the municipalities have mayors from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). In March, the Interior Ministry of Turkey opened criminal investigations against the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara for launching Covid-19 relief efforts. This action caused unrest among opposition parties and their voter bases. Yet, local governments continue their fight against the virus: Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality launched a campaign for interested third parties to directly and anonymously pay the gas and water bills of citizens in need; Izmir Metropolitan Municipality published its own Covid-19 Resilience Action Plan.

According to a survey titled “Turkey’s Pulse,” President Erdoğan’s approval rating is currently 50.7%, which shows a seven-point decline in the last two months, while the popularity of the mayor of Ankara rose to 49.6%. Furthermore, two newly established parties by former AKP elites, the Future Party founded by former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) founded by former Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan, pose increasing threats to the AKP’s power.

On 4 June, three opposition deputies were stripped of their parliamentary seats. The Turkey Rapporteur of the European Parliament immediately condemned the act. This opened up a new constitutional debate over the powers of the Court of Cassation. The pro-Kurdish opposition party HDP challenged the decision before the Constitutional Court and started “democracy marches” on 15 June, despite facing a heavy police presence and the risk of detention. The government recently banned meetings and demonstrations in some cities, pointing to the risk of the spread of coronavirus.

Political rights and civil liberties: The outbreak of the pandemic has exacerbated the restrictions on civil rights in Turkey. It has been argued that the government is using Covid-19 as a pretext to limit rights and freedoms, as seen in the banning of the democracy march led by HDP. In April, parliament passed a law to grant amnesty to one-third of the country’s prison population. Thousands of prisoners were freed, but jailed human rights activists, journalists, judicial officials, and opposition politicians were not among those considered for early release.

Moreover, the lockdown has led to a rise in domestic violence. In Turkey, women’s rights advocates argue that the government has failed to provide assistance and create alternatives for women who have experienced physical violence during the lockdown.

The government’s use of electronic data has also been mentioned as a cause for concern, since its misuse has the potential to undermine individual rights and freedoms. The “Hayat Eve Sigar (life fits inside the home)” mobile app, created by the Ministry of Health to monitor the movement of the citizens, has raised new concerns about government surveillance.

Media: Amnesty International claims that the pandemic has exacerbated the climate of fear for journalists in Turkey, indicating that most journalists face severe repercussions based on strict laws that limit the right to freedom of expression. Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkey 154th out of 180 countries in its 2020 report on press freedom. For the centralised control of digital platforms, the head of media and communications of the Turkish presidency published a Guidebook for Social Media Use, which outlines the “correct, healthy and secure use” of social media. According to a recently published report on “Turkey’s Changing Media Landscape”, the percentage of Turkish citizens who do not trust the media has reached 70%.

Public opinion and civil society: Compared to neighbouring countries, Covid-19 cases were diagnosed rather late and Turkey had been coping relatively well with the outbreak in terms of preventive measures and its health system. Yet, the devastating impact of the outbreak on the already fragile Turkish economy is a litmus test for the government. The level of anxiety across society is high because of the anticipated long-term socio-economic consequences. According to the Covid-19 Public Perception Survey, released in May, only 39% of the respondents evaluate the government's performance against the Covid-19 pandemic as successful.

From the start of the outbreak in Turkey, there has been a number of campaigns organised by civil society supporting doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers who have been working long hours under stressful conditions, including initiatives such as collecting needs on social platform cooperatives. Yet, the outbreak has had a huge impact on CSOs; 29% of NGOs stopped their activities due to the epidemic, according to a report published by the Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (TUSEV) released in April. As part of the government's measures, the Ministry of the Interior announced that the general assemblies of associations and foundations are to be temporarily postponed until 7 July; only online activities are allowed. Nevertheless, many CSOs have been actively using online platforms to reach more participants than they normally would by hosting physical meetings. The European Union Think Civil Programme announced a short-term grant programme that aims to quickly and flexibly provide the different tools that CSOs in Turkey need during the outbreak.

Overall assessment on impact of pandemic: Turkey has been experiencing an erosion of political rights and civil liberties, and the outbreak further threatens the country's democracy because of "growing authoritarianism and centralization" also displayed during the management of the pandemic.