

# COVID-19 AND SEE6 REFORMS

*HOW COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS TESTED THE  
RESILIENCE OF SEE6 INSTITUTIONS AND  
THE PROGRESS OF REFORMS*



**EVENT REPORT  
JUNE 2020**

## **COVID-19 AND SEE6 REFORMS**

*How COVID-19 pandemic has tested the resilience of SEE6 institutions and the progress of reforms*

### **Report prepared by:**

Ardian Hackaj, Research Director, Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI)

### **Reflecting the contribution of, and following the debate with:**

Klaus Fiesinger, Regional Director for Southeast Europe of Hanns-Seidel-Foundation

Maja Kocijancic, Spokesperson for EU Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Brussels

Donika Emini, Executive Director of the Civikos Platform

Dušan Reljić, Head of Office at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Simonida Kacarska, Director of the European Policy Institute in Skopje (EPI)

Srđan Majstorović, Chairman of the Governing Board of the European Policy Centre (CEP)

Steven Blockmans, Director ad interim, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Enlargement, SEE6

Tirana, June 2020

Cooperation and Development Institute

“Milto Tutulani” Street, Building No. 6, Entry 8, 3 & 4, 1019, Tirana, Albania

E-mail: [info@cdinstitute.eu](mailto:info@cdinstitute.eu)

Website: [www.cdinstitute.eu](http://www.cdinstitute.eu)

This Event Report was prepared in the framework of the Webinar “COVID-19 AND SEE6 REFORMS | how COVID-19 pandemic has tested the resilience of SEE6 institutions and the progress of reforms”, supported by Hanns Seidel Stiftung.

*Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in the Report may include a transformative remix of publicly available materials, as provided by applicable laws. The opinions, conclusions and recommendations by the author(s) are their own, and do not reflect the views of any other party.*

*This publication is under Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-  
No Derivates 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).*



*"When disasters hit us, we see with new clarity the systems – political, economic, social, ecological – in which we are immersed as they change around us. We see what's strong, what's weak, what's corrupt, what matters and what doesn't"*

R. Solnit, The Guardian, 7 April 2020

## **The context**

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced direct consequences on the economy, political context, social climate and overall welfare of WB6 citizens. The SEE region is projected to enter a recession in 2020, whose magnitude depends on the duration of the COVID-19 outbreak in Europe. The main risk is that a prolonged pandemic, as well as a deeper recession in the EU, could make the unfolding economic crisis difficult to handle.

The incandescent political situation in the Balkan countries and their weak institutional governance will act as magnifying factors. Moreover, the pandemic caused delays in the implementation pace of engaged reforms. In some cases it provided the spark that enflamed the political conflict. In general the democratic legitimacy of SEE6 institutions has worsened.

## **The economic shock**

The economic impact will be devastating (especially for Albania which was hit by an earthquake in November 2019), and is foreseen to widen the gap with EU average. Growth, unemployment and poverty rate indicators are hovering in red zones; while an even increasing public debt, lower remittances and unstoppable emigration rates are reducing the endogenous resources of the region. Pandemic has led to return of large numbers of emigrants to their home countries in the region. The lack of job opportunities will initially lead to an increase of social handouts adding up to rise of public deficit.

To start recovery WB6 countries have adopted some form of temporary compensatory measures, mainly focused on easing tax burdens, loan repayments, bankruptcy proceedings and support of SME-s. But after a strict and extreme lockdown, the process of lifting the restrictive measures has been uncoordinated. The economy is in a coma. The EU support will be of critical importance for the recovery, with special focus on provision of grants.

## **A litmus test for democracy**

The pandemic exposed and amplified the structural weaknesses of SEE6 democracies. Even if WB6 remained disproportionately lightly affected compared to the EU average both in numbers of infections and deaths, the reaction of SEE6 authorities made visible the state and the quality of governance, and the urge to use the coronavirus for political gain.

Ultimately, COVID-19 pandemic has served as a litmus test for the state of democracy in SEE6. Curbing of individual freedoms, obedient Judiciary, continuation of the assault on the media, adoption of tailored made laws for personal gains through a rule by decree obtained from a rubber stamp parliament, illustrate the acceleration of democratic backsliding.

## **Amplification of political fight**

The pandemic became an arena of political fight, with upcoming elections becoming the main subject of the political debate. Happening in the middle of a potential health disaster, it exposed the dichotomy between political elites and their loyal supporters and the rest of population. The hijacking of the electoral reform in Albania or the displacement of executive powers to President's office in Serbia underlined the role of political elites in the design and implementation of reforms.

The emergency measures stopped the reforms and prevented local CSO and citizen to participate in public debates. The pretext of disaster management consolidated the power shifting towards the executive and monopolisation of decision-making by the "strong man", reminiscent of not a very distant past.

In Serbia the pandemic uncovered a much clearer picture of the already authoritarian, hybrid regime that was additionally boosted with the state of emergency measures. Judiciary remains tightly under the control of the executive branch; the supremacy of executive power over legislative powers became clear same as the ongoing centralization of the political powers in the hands of the President. The general electoral conditions were far from a level

plain field. Media freedom is under serious threats after numerous intimidations and attacks against journalists.

In Kosovo the country was thrown into political crisis from the old political elite trying to come into power again. Notwithstanding a good management of the health crisis, the newly elected government did fall because of the *uber*-polarization between the old and new political parties, and of the position of the old elites with regard to the dialogue with Serbia.

In Albania, the electoral reform was affected through the modification of negotiation context (shortened time available, no face-to-face negotiations, impossibility to adopt certain laws, lowered public participation), resulting in a “window dressing” agreement rather than a real reform. More specifically it: i) compressed the face-to-face negotiation time window among political parties; ii) shortened the time available to implement changes; iii) ruled out public manifestations – in favour or against changes -, so penalizing the system outsiders (i.e. CSOs and grassroots organisations petitioning for open lists)

### **Tottering institutions**

The social distancing delayed reforms in progress and shifted the focus towards health issues. In Albania and North Macedonia it delayed the judicial reform. In NM the public focus is redirected towards bread and butter issues, and away from the EU issues. The easing of the measures has been gradual but not coordinated, fuelling tough debates on the role of the Ministry of Interior in this situation. The direct result was the many glitches in the inter-institutions' cooperation.

In Albania, the justice reform was affected mainly through the delay of certain administrative procedures, resulting in postponement of respective outputs. The establishment of new institutions, already suffering delays because of institutional clashes, slowed down due to postponement of all procedures requesting physical presence: from 13th of March the Vetting hearing sessions were suspended; Justice Appointment Council postponed the nomination of the Constitutional Court members; most of the High Court positions are vacant; staff recruitment in established structures slowed down impacting the National Bureau of Investigation and High Justice Inspector.

### **EU is challenged**

In an era of heightened geopolitical competition, the EU has seen its position in the region challenged. The initially EU slow response in assisting SEE6 to face the health crisis, was overcome by a show of solidarity underwritten by a solid support package (in Albania this came on top of assistance for earthquake). It was the first time that SEE6 were treated as Member States. Better focussed regional cooperation – such as the establishment of Green Corridors - helped in tackling the health emergency.

However geopolitical competition became visible in Serbia (through the emulation of Chinese help on medical supplies and equipment) and in Kosovo (by the role of Trump administration in shaping the dialogue with Serbia). In Kosovo, the EU has been marginalized by the President by publicly stating his preference for the US mediation in the dialogue with Serbia, and heavily criticising the visa non-liberalization. The new government has not set up an EU Integration Ministry giving the message that Kosovo may not be as interested in the integration process as before. This has left EU with a declined leverage in Kosovo.

### **In conclusion**

Covid19 has taken off the veil of interpretation from SEE6 situation and its progress towards EU. It has shifted of focus of population and of governments away from reforms and towards health and economy.

Regardless of initial slow reaction, EU proved to be major partner and provider of support. Nevertheless, with regard to Enlargement, it appeared clearly that:

- Pandemic exposed structural weaknesses on the fundamental areas of the EU integration process. WB6 needs to step up their efforts when it comes to respect of democratic principles and rule of law in order to build up their own systemic resilience for the next crisis.
- Pandemic has shown how WB6 regional cooperation and coordination of public policies are important for security and wellbeing of citizens of the region. More efforts in building joint capacities, pooling and sharing human and technical resources are needed. This will not be easy to materialize if WB6 Governments fail to resolve remaining bilateral issues in the region.
- WB6 economies are closely connected and dependent on the EU economy. Any EU economic recovery plan has to include WB6 as a partner, especially when considering bringing production of critical products and strategic supply chains closer to the EU.
- WB6 will need additional structural support from the EU in order to boost their own economic recovery and development after the pandemic. The announced Economic and Investment Plan for the WB6 will have to be connected to the WB6 individual performance concerning the democratic legitimacy of their institutions, not only their efficiency.



## COVID-19 AND SEE6 REFORMS: HOW COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS TESTED THE RESILIENCE OF SEE6 INSTITUTIONS AND THE PROGRESS OF REFORMS

©Cooperation and Development Institute. All rights reserved.  
Tirana, June 2020

Cooperation and Development Institute  
"Milto Tutulani" Street, Building No. 6, Entry 8, 3 & 4, 1019, Tirana, Albania  
E-mail: [info@cdinstitute.eu](mailto:info@cdinstitute.eu)  
Website: [www.cdinstitute.eu](http://www.cdinstitute.eu)