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Opportunities for Political Gain: The Instrumentalization of Covid-19 in Four Balkan Countries

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLITICAL GAIN: THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF COVID-19 IN FOUR BALKAN COUNTRIES

Introduction

“A growing number of leaders in Central and Eastern Europe have dropped even the pretense of playing by the rules of democracy.”

NGO Freedom House¹

There are fewer democracies in Central and Eastern Europe in 2020 than at any point since 1995. On top of the current democratic erosion, the spread of COVID-19 poses another threat to the stability of the remaining democracies. This paper will focus on the question if, and how, the COVID-19 crisis has been instrumentalized for political gain, be it, for example, in the form of increasing authoritarian power, electoral benefits or ideological wins. Moreover, the previous months have shown that citizens have become particularly vulnerable in the midst of the chaos the pandemic created.² We will therefore also focus on the ways in which the instrumentalization of the pandemic has affected human rights in the respective countries.

To do so, we analyse the political exploitation of the coronavirus pandemic in four Balkan countries: Kosovo, North Macedonia, Slovenia and Serbia which, based upon their most recent political developments, provide cases worth exploring. After introducing the latest happenings in each country, we delve into four different interpretations of *political gain*. First, we will observe if and how the pandemic has been instrumentalized for political gain in the form of power concentration. This is followed by the achievement of political gain as a rhetorical victory in the field of the domestic political debate. Linked to this is the political gain through electoral profitability, aiming to instrumentalize the virus to build a front of supporters for upcoming elections. Lastly, COVID-19 clearly affects the adherence to human rights; this is analysed as political gain through control over the social agenda, whereby the social agenda steers and affects the respect of civil rights and freedoms.

Kosovo

Key dates

- 13th of March: Lockdown introduced: pubs, schools, etc. closed
- 14th of March: First case detected
- 23rd of March: Night curfew introduced
- 4th of May: First phase of de-escalation strategy starts

11th of June: 1,298 cases (31 deaths)

¹ Csaky, Z., 2020. Dropping the Democratic Facade. *Freedom House*, [online] Available at: <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

² Ibid.

Background

On the 3rd of February 2020, in Europe's youngest –and not fully recognized– country, a new dynamic prime minister began his term. Since its declaration of independence twelve years ago, Kosovo has been dominated by former wartime leaders, many of whom have been accused of allegations of war crimes and corruption.³ One of these former wartime leaders is Hashim Thaçi, Kosovo's current president and head of State. The establishment of the new government, headed by prime minister Albin Kurti, represents a significant change in the political scene of Kosovo.⁴ After his nomination, he promised to “liberate the state from within”.⁵ From its early start, the coalition government –made up of Kurti's party, Vetëvendosje, and its junior partner, the Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK–, faced abundant dilemmas at the helm of a young democracy, when an unprecedented crisis arose mid-March: the COVID-19 pandemic. If this were merely a question of dealing with the threat of a nationwide epidemic, there would have been no direct issue for the government's stability. However, it quickly became clear that the opponents to the political change that Kurti represents seized the spread of COVID-19 as an opportunity to gain back their diminishing power.

Political games

The Kosovo government had been hailed for taking quick actions to counter the spread of COVID-19. Even before the first case was officially announced on the 13th of March,⁶ measures were already imposed to close schools, ban public gatherings, and restrict incoming European flights. While the situation appeared to be under control, a dispute within the government arose on the 18th of March. Seemingly not satisfied with the decisions imposed by the government, president Thaçi, prime minister Kurti's political rival, announced his intention to declare a state of emergency as a means to tackle the spread of the virus. After the Minister of Internal Affairs Agim Veliu, from LDK, publicly supported this idea, Kurti dismissed him on the grounds of spreading unnecessary panic.⁷ A second, deeper layer of politics becomes clear here, as declaring the state of emergency would imply a power shift to Kosovo's Security Council, chaired by president Thaçi himself. Through its formulation, Thaçi would effectively draw the country's executive power towards himself. In line with this, Kurti later proclaimed the president's effort as an attempted coup.⁸

However, the dismissal of the Minister did not end this tale, as a day later, the leader of junior coalition partner LDK Isa Mustafa argued the following at a press conference: “We don't see

³ 2020. Kosovo ‘enslaved from within’ by corruption, says incoming PM. *Financial Times*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.ft.com/content/ddc2f794-060e-11ea-a984-fbbacad9e7dd>> [Accessed 25 May 2020].

⁴ Lumezi, A., 2020. Talking Kurti and Dialogue with everyday Serbs. *Kosovo Two Point Zero*, [online] Available at: <<https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/talking-kurti-and-dialogue-with-everyday-serbs/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁵ 2020. Albin Kurti's new start in Kosovo: Can the new prime minister end the stand-off with Serbia? *The Economist* [online] Available at: <<https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/02/13/albin-kurtis-new-start-in-kosovo>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁶ 2020. Kosovo confirms first COVID-19 cases, Montenegro last virus-free country in Europe. *Daily Sabah*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.dailysabah.com/world/europe/kosovo-announces-first-coronavirus-cases>> [Accessed 26 May 2020]

⁷ Bami, X. Kosovo's Crisis-Hit Govt Threatened with No-Confidence Vote. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/19/kosovos-crisis-hit-govt-threatened-with-no-confidence-vote/>> [Accessed 25 May 2020].

⁸ KOHA, 2020. Kurti: If I had the secret agreement among Thaci and Vucic, it wouldn't be a secret anymore. *KOHA* [online] Available at: <<https://www.koha.net/arberi/214752/pak-para-se-te-filloje-seanca-ambasadori-kosnett-largohet-nga-kuvendi/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

a possibility or reason to co-govern with Vetëvendosje”. As a result, the LDK threatened to initiate a motion of no confidence against the government if the prime minister did not reinstate Veliu. A week later, the lingering threat of no-confidence was topped by further political turmoil. On the 23rd of March, Kurti announced new measures restricting the freedom of movement between specific times, after a relatively small surge in COVID-19 cases.⁹ Despite imposing stricter measures, the prime minister did not declare a state of emergency. This announcement was met by president Thaçi, who organized a press conference the same night, urging citizens and police forces to disobey the newly-approved government measures. Thaçi argued that “Kurti and his government have flagrantly violated the Constitution of Kosovo”.¹⁰ While representatives from the civil society sector trusted on the constitutional nature of the measures,¹¹ Thaçi submitted the case to the Constitutional Court which unanimously ruled that the Government had violated the Constitution by imposing a curfew.¹² As a result, the curfew measurements had to be retracted on the 13th of April. Far from ending the constitutional battle, Vetëvendosje submitted a request to the Constitutional Court to review Thaçi’s call to disobey the imposed rules. With a battle ongoing, political actors in Kosovo were using the implementation of measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 in an attempt to discredit each other.

A pots-and-pans protest demonstrated how the political tensions had mounted in the country and evidenced the citizens’ fatigue.¹³ With the population unable to take to the streets under curfew, they resorted to a political protest from their balconies. For several evenings in a row, Kosovo citizens used pots and pans to protest the lingering political debacle that was threatening to bring down the government – right in the middle of the pandemic. On top of this, online outcry ensued. The Facebook group “Support the prime minister” was erected, garnering over 200,000 members in only a few days.¹⁴ In a last attempt to protest the imminent fall of the government,¹⁵ a handful of people demonstrated in front of the parliament building on the day the no-confidence vote took place. After a tumultuous 12-hour debate, the motion was passed by 82 votes to 32, with one abstention.¹⁶ The government fell on the 25th of March.

While Kosovo is no stranger to political turmoil, as not a single government has finished its full term since its independence twelve years ago, the ongoing situation was unprecedented. The political and constitutional dispute seemed to be only deepening, as Kurti had indicated his wish

⁹ Robinson, J., 2020. President calls on citizens to disobey government measures. *Prishtina Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://prishtinainsight.com/president-calls-on-citizens-to-disobey-government-measures/>> [Accessed 25 May 2020].

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ KOHA, 2020. GLPS: Government Decision for Movement Restriction is not unconstitutional. *KOHA* [online] Available at: <<https://www.koha.net/arberi/214678/glps-vendimi-i-qeverise-per-kufizim-te-lirise-se-levizjes-nuk-eshte-antikushtetues/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

¹² Robinson, J. and Travers, E., 2020. Government decision restricting movement ruled unconstitutional. *Prishtina Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://prishtinainsight.com/government-decision-restricting-movement-ruled-unconstitutional/>> [Accessed 28 May 2020].

¹³ Travers, E., 2020. Prishtina protests from its balconies. *Prishtina Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://prishtinainsight.com/prishtina-protests-from-its-balconies/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

¹⁴ Public Facebook Group #meKryeministrin. *Facebook*, [online] available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/514061489305891/members/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

¹⁵ 2020. Coronavirus row helps topple Kosovo government. *BBC News*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52044136>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

¹⁶ Walker, S., 2020. Kosovans look on aghast as government falls while coronavirus bites. *The Guardian*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/26/kosovo-government-falls-in-vote-of-no-confidence>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

to organise new elections once the COVID-19 crisis had settled down, while Thaçi opposed this idea by proposing the creation of a new government without elections – the favored option by a majority of assembly members from opposing parties. As per Kosovo’s Constitution, Thaçi requested Vetëvendosje to nominate a new candidate for prime minister in order to initiate the formation of a new government; however, since no deadline was envisaged, the party showed no intention of following up. In the meantime, Kurti remained the acting prime minister.

Upon Vetëvendosje’s silence, President Thaçi moved forward with the creation of a new government, stating that it was his right and duty to do so in accordance with his constitutional mandate. On the 22nd of April, he announced to grant the mandate to any new government that would obtain a parliamentary majority – a move deemed illegitimate and unconstitutional by Kurti’s loyalists but endorsed a month later by Kosovo’s Constitutional Court. In the light of this decision, Thaçi finally awarded the government-forming mandate to LDK official Avdullah Hoti, who was voted into office as new prime minister on the 3rd of June.¹⁷

What’s next?

While some reports¹⁸ interpret the current situation to be the result of the crisis that COVID-19 has brought along, this conclusion seems too simplistic. In a feat of political opportunism, Kosovo’s opposition has successfully used the pandemic as a means to sabotage the progressive political agenda set forth by Kurti’s government. As a result, the deep-seated obstacles to change, such as nepotism and corruption, seem to triumph once more. As the battle has not come to an end, now with LDK’s Hoti as prime minister, there is still hope that the political change initiated by Kurti’s nomination is resilient enough to sustain the ongoing challenges.

North Macedonia

Key dates

- 26th of February: first case detected
- 18th of March: State of emergency declared
- 21st of March: night curfew introduced
- 15th of May: State of emergency extended

11th of June: 3,364 cases (164 deaths)

Background

At a European Council (EUCO) meeting in October 2019, European leaders failed to agree on opening European Union (EU) membership negotiations with North Macedonia. This led to the resigning of then Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, in power since early 2017, calling for

¹⁷ Bami, X., 2020. Kosovo MPs to Vote on New Govt Led by Avdullah Hoti. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/02/kosovo-mps-to-vote-on-new-govt-led-by-avdullah-hoti/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

¹⁸ Kingsley, P., 2020. Coronavirus Helps Bring Down Kosovo’s Government, With Nudge From U.S. *New York Times*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/world/europe/kosovo-serbia-coronavirus.html>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

snap parliamentary elections to be held on the 12th of April 2020. As a result of Zaev's stepping down, a caretaker government made up of members from both the ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the rival Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO-DPMNE) was appointed and would run the country until election day.¹⁹ However, the hastiness of the COVID-19 crisis avoided these elections from happening and, to this day, no new date has been agreed upon.

A pandemic amid a campaign

The state of emergency in North Macedonia was declared on the 18th of March, three weeks after the first case of COVID-19 was detected. It was followed by the implementation of a Monday-to-Friday 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew, full lockdown on weekends and an 86-hour outdoor ban during the Orthodox Easter celebrations. In spite of a significant decrease in the number of daily cases, the state of emergency was extended for another two weeks on the 15th of May²⁰ and, in light of a considerable upsurge in recent days, extended yet again until the 13th of June,²¹ while a parallel de-escalation plan devised by the government entered into force.

The Macedonian political scenario prior to the irruption of the pandemic has, to a major extent, played in the country's favour as far as national –as opposed to party– interests are concerned. North Macedonia has remained in a state of executive transition since the first week of January 2020, when a technical caretaker government including representatives of different parties was formed. While the foremost assignment for this new administration, led by SDSM official and former Interior Minister Oliver Spasovski, was to pave the way towards ensuring transparent and fair elections in April, the COVID-19 outbreak came at a time when decisions within the executive branch had to be reached through inter-party negotiations and wide consensus. In this light, many rulings of national scope, such as the postponement of the snap elections, were agreed upon in a context of unity and accord.²²

The existence of a technical transitional administration in North Macedonia contributed to the reinforcement of national unity, albeit not without its caveats. VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski delivered a statement against the government's intransigence concerning the acceptance of proposals submitted by his party via their representatives in the caretaker Cabinet of Ministers: "Every proposal that VMRO-DPMNE will give to them is a proposal of an enemy."²³ Along this same vein, rival SDSM levelled strong accusations against Mickoski and his party.²⁴ This

¹⁹ 2020. Caretaker Government of North Macedonia appointed ahead of elections. *European Western Balkans*, [online] Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/01/06/caretaker-government-of-north-macedonia-appointed-ahead-of-elections/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

²⁰ 2020. North Macedonia extends state of emergency for two weeks. *IntelliNews*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.intellinews.com/north-macedonia-extends-state-of-emergency-for-two-weeks-183392/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

²¹ U.S. Embassy in North Macedonia, 2020. *Country information on North Macedonia* [online] Available at: <<https://mk.usembassy.gov/covid-19-information/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

²² President of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2020. *Leadership meeting at President Pendarovski: Joint consensus on election postponement*. [online] Available at: <<https://pretsedatel.mk/en/leadership-meeting-at-president-pendarovski-joint-consensus-on-election-postponement/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

²³ 2020. Мицкоски: Се што ќе предложиме владата одбива. *MKD*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/mickoski-se-shto-ke-predlozhime-vladata-odbiva>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

²⁴ 2020. СДСМ: Мицкоски е поголем лажго и од Груевски. *MKD*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/sdsm-mickoski-e-pogolem-lazhgo-i-od-gruevski>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

revealed that, in spite of the unifying ambitions present in the conception of a caretaker government, party interests still remained in place and were not bound to disappear, let alone amid the ideologically-conducive scenario the management of the pandemic brought along. In a short- to medium-term, political parties have sought a benefit from the COVID-19 crisis to capitalize on once elections can be held. The electoral campaign was never over, and the instrumentalization of the management of the pandemic for electoral gains was therefore a cornerstone of the strategy of Macedonian political groups.

The most recent episode of inter-party quarrel in the Macedonian political arena arrived during the country's de-escalation period. Parallel to a significant decrease of active cases and a loosening of restrictions, parties were to agree on a new date for the snap elections – until now, to no avail.²⁵ While SDSM is pushing for a date in July, which would arguably play in its favour, VMRO-DPMNE and other minor parties are supportive of holding the elections once the health crisis is under control – mulling over the possibility of boycott²⁶ should they ultimately take place in July.

What's next?

At a time when countrywide restrictions are loosening and both political and social stakeholders are gearing up for a post-pandemic order, North Macedonia's main challenge will be holding free and fair elections without putting its population at risk. Political party games will most likely continue to take place amid a context of uncertainty and caution, within which the technical caretaker government will have to remain the main moderator. The tight race between the country's two main parties, SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, might drag on until election day and political groups will have to artfully juggle between reacting swiftly to the latest COVID-19 developments and meeting the expectations of the Macedonian electorate.

Slovenia

Key dates

- 4th of March: First case detected
- 12th of March: Epidemic officially declared
- 13th of March: New government took office
- 16th of March: Restaurants, public spaces and schools closed
- 15th of May: Pandemic officially declared over

11th of June: 1,488 cases (109 deaths)

²⁵ Marusic, S J., 2020. North Macedonia Parties Deadlocked Over Date of Elections. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/20/north-macedonia-parties-deadlocked-over-date-of-elections/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

²⁶ 2020. Мицкоски: Ако СДСМ одлучи да оди на избори во јуни, нека му е со среќа. *MKD*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/mickoski-ako-sdsm-odluchi-da-odi-na-izbori-vo-juni-neka-i-e-so-srekja>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

Background

In the midst of the spread of COVID-19 through Slovenia,²⁷ the country's democratic stability became challenged with the installation on the 13th of March of a new government led by veteran Janez Janša.²⁸ Janša's centre-right government came into power after the previous centre-left prime minister, Marjan Šarec, resigned. Just three days after the new government was established, much of Slovenia was put in full lockdown. As a result, the already existing fear that Janša would use COVID-19 to implement a more authoritarian regime quickly spread²⁹ and the reference of Janša *Orbanising*³⁰ Slovenia became widely understood.³¹

Slovenia is generally portrayed as a success story, rapidly leaving the troubled past of the ten-day Independence War in 1991 behind.³² Already in January 1992, Slovenia was formally recognized by the European Commission (EC), and became the 176th United Nations (UN) Member State in that same year. Twelve years later, Slovenia officially became part of the EU in 2004,³³ after which its image as a stable and progressive democracy developed further. During the short time that Prime Minister Janša has been in power, signs of declining democratic freedom have unfortunately already presented themselves.

National protests: 'You Won't Take Our Freedom'

While a state of emergency has not been declared in Slovenia since the Ten-Day War, a number of strict measures were adopted aiming to stop the spreading of COVID-19. More specifically, a number of Janša's early political decisions confirmed the feeling that the prime minister was aiming to rapidly increase his power. As Zagorc and Bardutzky explained, the government seems to be creative in finding techniques, even extra-legal, to halt further spread of the virus and increase their control.³⁴ It seemed to be easier, a lot safer, to do so without declaring a state of emergency.

²⁷ Kukavica, J., 2020. (Rule of) Law in the Time of Covid-19: Warnings from Slovenia. *Verfassungsblog*, [online] Available at: <<https://verfassungsblog.de/rule-of-law-in-the-time-of-covid-19-warnings-from-slovenia/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

²⁸ Vladislavljec, A., 2020. New Slovenian Government Raises Fears of 'Orbanisation'. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/17/new-slovenian-government-raises-fears-of-orbanisation/>> [Accessed 25 May 2020].

²⁹ Vladislavljec, A., 2020. Slovenia's Cycling Protesters Try to Push Jansa off Course. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/15/slovenias-cycling-protesters-try-to-push-jansa-off-course/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

³⁰ Reference to the extreme-right Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

³¹ Vladislavljec, A., 2020. New Slovenian Government Raises Fears of 'Orbanisation'. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/17/new-slovenian-government-raises-fears-of-orbanisation/>> [Accessed 25 May 2020].

³² Declaration of Independence. Republic of Slovenia: 10 years independence, [online] Available at: <<http://www.slovenija2001.gov.si/10years/path/documents/declaration/>> [Accessed 28 May 2020].

³³ European Union, 2020. *Slovenia: Overview*. [online] Available at: <https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries/slovenia_en> [Accessed 26 May 2020]

³⁴ Zagorc, S and Bardutzky, S., 2020. Business as Usual, but to the Unusual Extremes: Slovenia and Covid-19. *Verfassungsblog*, [online] Available at: <<https://verfassungsblog.de/business-as-usual-but-to-the-unusual-extremes-slovenia-and-covid-19/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

As a result, the “interpretations and amendments of the existing statutory framework have also caused concerns from the constitutional point of view”.

Initial measures against the spread of COVID-19 were in line with the majority of other countries worldwide, including closing or restricting the use of the hospitality industry, schools, sports, non-essential shops and public transport. Social gatherings were prohibited and people entering the country were forced to self-isolate. Besides that, indications of increasingly-limited civil rights started to mount quickly: on top of the more common measures, some parts of the strategy were less conventional.³⁵ In line with his ally and prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, Janša arguably took measures aimed at silencing the voices criticizing his strategy. He threatened journalists from the public television station RTVSLO for ‘spreading lies’,³⁶ on top of that he referred to critical journalists as “presstitutes”.³⁷ The only television network that Janša does have faith in, the far-right Nova24, has contributed to spreading this repressive rhetoric. The network is moreover financed by Hungarian figures close to Orbán, and the head of the network has been appointed as Slovenia’s new Minister of Interior.³⁸

In his short time in power, Janša has moreover limited the rights of non-governmental organisations and environmental groups. As explained above, and in line with the argument made by Zagorc and Bardutzky, the government used the creation of the new anti-coronavirus law to push for a number of new regulations. It was, for example, made almost impossible to obtain the status of nature conservation. A statement issued by non-governmental organisations concerning article 42 of the new law claimed that the government set “almost impossible conditions for public-interest NGOs to participate in construction permit procedures, through which environmental impacts are assessed”.³⁹ According to activists, this decision was an indication that the government wants to open up the country’s natural resources for sale, and therefore used COVID-19 to seize the opportunity to do so.⁴⁰

The government, moreover, has attempted to invoke article 37a of the Defence Act as part of the anti-coronavirus law, aiming to increase the power of the army to protect the borders and to stop migrants from entering the country.⁴¹ While the act has been invoked previously, such as in 2015 during the peak of the migration crisis, the fear is that the law would now be enforced for an indefinite amount of time. While it is no secret that the new executive is openly anti-immigration, and has even been referred to as racist, the attempt to invoke article 37a provides another

³⁵ Roberts, R., 2020. Slovenian Bicycle Protests Against Authoritarianism As Concerns Over Democracy In Eastern Europe Grow. *The Organisation for World Peace*, [online] Available at: <<https://theowp.org/slovenian-bicycle-protests-against-authoritarianism-as-concerns-over-democracy-in-eastern-europe-grow/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Walker, S., 2020. Slovenia's PM Janša channels Orbán with attacks on media and migrants. *The Guardian*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/04/janez-jansa-new-pm-slovenia-in-mould-of-orban>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Krog, E., 2020. Slovenia: Thousands protest & environmental organizations denounce 'government's declaration of war on nature' to facilitate investment. *Business & Human Rights Resource Centre*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/slovenia-civil-society-denounces-government-using-anti-covid-19-law-to-facilitate-investments-in-environmentally-damaging-projects>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁴⁰ 2020. Slovenian Left protests amendments to Nature Conservation Act. *Peoples Dispatch*, [online] Available at: <<https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/05/14/slovenian-left-protests-amendments-to-nature-conservation-act/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁴¹ STA, 2020. Municipalities on Croatian Border Call for Army to Prevent Covid-19 Migrants. *Total Slovenia News*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.total-slovenia-news.com/politics/6104-municipalities-on-croatian-border-call-for-army-to-prevent-covid-19-migrants>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

example of how the pandemic has been used to increase the power of government, risking democracy to crumble further.⁴²

What's next?

On the 15th of May, Janša stated Slovenia had successfully defeated the pandemic as the first country in Europe. Five days later he moreover tweeted that “we are among the most successful countries in the world and the best in Europe in terms of our results in the fight against the coronavirus epidemic”.⁴³ Despite this, protests against his government had been taking place for several weeks in a row⁴⁴ and were rapidly increasing in size⁴⁵. On the 8th of May, it was reported that up to 10,000 protesters took the streets on bicycles⁴⁶ to protest against the increasingly authoritarian inclinations of Janša’s government.⁴⁷ In response to these actions, the prime minister stated that the protesters were violating the legislation on infectious diseases, as the people were not keeping the legitimate distance from each other.⁴⁸ Government and parliament buildings were fenced off as result of the protest, but no violence was reported at that time. Now that the country is declared pandemic-free and most of the restrictions have been lifted, social distancing practices are still in place.⁴⁹ In spite of this, new protests are still planned and it is highly unlikely that the anti-government sentiments will decrease once all measures are lifted.

Serbia

Key dates

- 6th of March: first case detected
- 15th of March: State of emergency declared
- 17th of March: night curfew introduced (8 p.m. to 5 a.m.)

⁴² 2020. States of Emergency in Europe: Slovenia. *Transform! Europe*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.transform-network.net/es/blog/article/states-of-emergency-in-europe-slovenia/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁴³ 2020. Tweet from Janša, [online] Available at: <<https://twitter.com/JJansaSDS/status/1263123121848176643>> [Accessed 28 May 2020].

⁴⁴ 2020. Slovenia cyclists hold anti-government protest. *BBC World News*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52597748>> [Accessed 29 May 2020].

⁴⁵ Vladislavljec, A., 2020. Slovenia’s Cycling Protesters Try to Push Jansa off Course. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/15/slovenias-cycling-protesters-try-to-push-jansa-off-course/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁴⁶ Slovenia is considered a real ‘cycling country’.

⁴⁷ Roberts, R., 2020. Slovenian Bicycle Protests Against Authoritarianism As Concerns Over Democracy In Eastern Europe Grow. *The Organisation for World Peace*, [online] Available at: <<https://theowp.org/slovenian-bicycle-protests-against-authoritarianism-as-concerns-over-democracy-in-eastern-europe-grow/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁴⁸ Novak, M., 2020. Slovenia anti-government protests continue as country calls an end to epidemic. *Reuters*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovenia-protest/slovenia-anti-government-protests-continue-as-country-calls-an-end-to-epidemic-idUSKBN22R38R>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁴⁹ 2020. Slovenia Lifts Many of Its COVID-19 Restrictions. *Voa News*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/slovenia-lifts-many-its-covid-19-restrictions>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

- 6th of May: State of emergency and curfew lifted
- 11th of June: 12,031 cases (251 deaths)

Background

Serbia is the largest country in the region in terms of both surface and population. Since 2014 it has been foremostly led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in coalition alongside other minor parties, being the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) its most notorious partner. Incumbent prime minister Ana Brnabić assumed office in June 2017 after former premier Aleksandar Vučić stepped down in order to run for president, a position he holds to this day. Since then, the Vučić-Brnabić tandem has been accused of corruption and growing authoritarianism leading to a tightening of SNS's grip on power. In response to this, several opposition parties in Serbia called for a boycott of the parliamentary and local elections bound to be held on the 26th of April 2020.⁵⁰ However, due to the disruptiveness of the COVID-19 crisis, these elections never took place and were accordingly rescheduled to the 21st of June.⁵¹

Authoritarian advances and declining freedoms

Measures in Serbia aimed at containing the spread of the virus were swift, following lines of action similar to those in other neighbouring countries. The declaration on the 15th of March of the state of emergency,⁵² made without prior vote in the National Assembly, was succeeded by strict curfews. First, an all-out 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. restriction was accompanied by a ban on people older than 65 –and older than 70 in rural areas– from leaving their dwellings, in an attempt to prevent the higher-risk population from coming into contact with potential carriers.⁵³ Several 48-hour weekend curfews ensued, reaching its peak during the Orthodox Easter celebrations with the establishment of a 3-and-a-half-day outdoor ban.⁵⁴ The state of emergency was ultimately lifted on the 6th of May, parallel to a decrease in the infection rate.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ 2020. Elections in Serbia to be held on 26 April, biggest opposition parties boycotting. *European Western Balkans*, [online] Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/02/03/elections-in-serbia-to-be-held-on-26-april-biggest-opposition-parties-boycotting/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁵¹ Kojadinovic, D., 2020. Serbia postpones April 26 elections as part of response to coronavirus outbreak. *Reuters*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-serbia/serbia-postpones-april-26-elections-as-part-of-response-to-coronavirus-outbreak-idUSKBN2133M1>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁵² The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2020. *State of emergency declared throughout Serbia*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/151398/state-of-emergency-declared-throughout-serbia.php>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁵³ Vasovic, A., 2020. Serbia imposes night curfew, orders elderly indoors. *Reuters*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-serbia/serbia-imposes-night-curfew-orders-elderly-indoors-idUSKBN2143XR>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁵⁴ Ozturk, M., T., 2020. Serbia adopts new curfew for Easter weekend. *AA*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/serbia-adopts-new-curfew-for-easter-weekend/1805096>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁵⁵ The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2020. *Serbia lifts state of emergency*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/155727/serbia-lifts-state-of-emergency.php>> [Accessed 28 May 2020].

In political terms, many voices have accused the Serbian government of taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis in order to advance its political agenda and strengthen SNS's power grip, not least given the upcoming elections. The fight against the virus has been politically stained throughout Vučić's actions, oftentimes acquiring the shape of an electoral campaign and awarding the Serbian president the starring role in the management of the crisis. It is through his heroic portrayal, alongside a rhetorical villainization of the EU, Serbia's closest major ally, that Vučić has established himself as the country's saviour in a hostile regional environment – where Brussels is a weakening ally that can no longer be trusted.⁵⁶

Instrumentalization of the pandemic for political gains likewise reached the media sector. Besides compulsory filtering of virus-related information by the national Crisis Staff led by premier Brnabić⁵⁷ –an order later revoked–, the arrest and detention on the 1st of April of journalist Ana Lalić constituted an alarming example of how the authorities had been curtailing the freedom of information. Lalić was detained, held in custody overnight and charged for allegedly spreading information that could lead to panic after she published a report on the poor conditions of the Clinical Center in Vojvodina, in northern Serbia, where doctors and nurses lacked appropriate protocols and materials for facing the virus safely.⁵⁸

New social movements sprung up and old ones reinvigorated in the light of the Serbian government's management of the COVID-19 crisis. Mirroring many countries throughout Europe, citizens protested the strict measures⁵⁹ by banging pots and pans from their windows and balconies. The message swiftly transformed into an expression of overall discontent and anger about the government's policies, its oppression against political opponents, its corruption and its curtailment of civil liberties and freedoms over the years. These protests were spearheaded by the platform Noise Against Dictatorship (*Bukom protiv diktature*) and were registered across major cities in the country.⁶⁰ Counter-protests supportive of SNS likewise ensued.

Political quarrel has predominated during the de-escalation period in Serbia. Several opposition parties maintained the intention of boycotting the parliamentary and local elections after their postponement was announced, and one of its leaders, Boško Obradović, even started a hunger strike in an attempt to achieve their further rescheduling until the end of the health crisis. Two government MPs quickly followed suit and initiated a hunger counter-strike against the lack of action taken by the prosecution surrounding a recent altercation that had involved the Serbian

⁵⁶ Evans, Z., 2020. Serbian President Labels European Solidarity 'Fairy Tale', Says Only China Can Assist in Coronavirus Response. *National Review*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.nationalreview.com/news/coronavirus-outbreak-serbian-president-aleksandar-vucic-labels-european-solidarity-fairy-tale-says-only-china-can-assist-in-coronavirus-response/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁵⁷ Stojanovic, M., 2020. Serbian Govt Takes Control of Information Flow About Pandemic. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/01/serbian-govt-takes-control-of-information-flow-about-pandemic/>> [Accessed 28 May 2020].

⁵⁸ Mong, A., 2020. Serbian reporter Ana Lalić on her arrest and detention over COVID-19 report. *Committee to Protect Journalists*, [online] Available at: <<https://cpj.org/blog/2020/04/serbian-reporter-ana-lalic-on-her-arrest-and-deten.php>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁵⁹ Vasovic, A., 2020. Serbs bang pots to protest government and strict coronavirus measures. *Reuters*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-serbia-protests/serbs-bang-pots-to-protest-government-and-strict-coronavirus-measures-idUSKBN22B2H2>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁶⁰ 2020. Tenth noise protest across Serbia, no counter-protest by SNS supporters. *N1 News*, [online] Available at: <<http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a596399/Tenth-noise-protest-across-Serbia-no-counter-protest-by-SNS-supporters.html>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

Minister of Health and opposition protesters.⁶¹ The escalation of the situation led to two parallel rallies –one in support of the government and one in support of Obradović– taking place in front of the Parliament building on the 11th of May and gathering over a thousand attendees.⁶²

What's next?

Vučić's tight control over the management of the pandemic crisis, in stark contrast to the weakness of the opposition parties, is tilting the scale towards yet another electoral victory for the SNS, latest polls show.⁶³ It is yet to be seen in what conditions these elections will take place, and how the National Assembly will look like in terms of political diversity. Political quarrel is bound to settle in the Serbian post-pandemic scenario amid accusations of authoritarian behaviour and corrupt practices by the government, which are undermining the rule of law and the yet fragile liberal-democratic institutional system in the country. Vučić's villainization of the EU as a disloyal and untrustworthy partner might shift the public opinion's support for Brussels, turning towards China as a new potential major ally.

Breaking down the political instrumentalization of COVID-19

The latest political developments in the four countries discussed above have shown how, to a greater or lesser extent, the COVID-19 crisis has been utilized by leaderships and parties to advance their agendas and consolidate their interests. This part of the paper provides an in-depth analysis on how and to what degree the most recent events in Kosovo, North Macedonia, Slovenia and Serbia demonstrate a deliberate instrumentalization of the pandemic for political gain.

Acknowledging the multi-dimensional nature of *political gain* as a concept, four different interpretations of this notion have been brought forward:

- A. *Political gain* as concentration of power
- B. *Political gain* as rhetorical victory
- C. *Political gain* as electoral profitability
- D. *Political gain* as control over the social agenda

By drawing on these four different –yet narrowly interrelated– interpretations, this analysis aims to highlight and identify patterns of political conduct in relation to the use and misuse of the COVID-19 crisis. To do this, we will pinpoint and discuss both common traits and divergent features among the four countries addressed.

A. *Political gain* as concentration of power

When observing in what ways COVID-19 has been instrumentalized by the political actors to gain and concentrate political power, an interesting picture becomes clear. In North Macedonia, the

⁶¹ Dragojlo, S., 2020. Serbian MPs Vow to Continue Rival Hunger Strikes. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/11/serbian-mps-vow-to-continue-rival-hunger-strikes/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁶² 2020. Tensions between political foes outside Serbia's Parliament; man arrested. *N1 News*, [online] Available at: <<http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a598405/Vucic-s-supporters-gathered-outside-Serbia-s-Parliament-to-support-striking-MPs.html>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁶³ Jasnic, I. M., 2020. OTKRIVAMO Rejtinzi stranaka posle vanrednog stanja: SNS I ŠAPIĆ NAJVIŠE OJAČALI, Sergej vodi PSG preko tri odsto, GUŽVA NA IVICI CENZUSA. *Blic*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/otkrivamo-rejtinzi-stranaka-posle-vanrednog-stanja-sns-i-sapic-najvise-ojacali-sergej/2xh002p>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

COVID-19 crisis came at a time when the checks-and-balances dynamics of the transitional government made it difficult to accumulate power and resources in the hands of one party, let alone one personality.

In contrast, Kosovo depicts a different narrative, one of aiming to grab power back. With the new government installed just before the spread of COVID-19, there were clear signs that Prime Minister Kurti wanted to politically sideline president Thaçi.⁶⁴ While logically more factors played a role, COVID-19 provided Thaçi with a clear opportunity to gain back his diminishing power. After attempting to declare a state of emergency, which indirectly meant shifting the power back to Thaçi, the president undermined the curfew restrictions imposed by the executive by calling on people to disobey the measures. Kurti's governing coalition party, LDK, as part of Kosovo's old political regime alongside president Thaçi, set the perfect scene to further destabilize the government. After just over 50 days, the prime minister's cabinet had successfully been removed from power. In the words of Kurti, "the treatment of the government and the prime minister by the president and the old regime is unfortunate and shameful".⁶⁵ In addition, the Constitutional Court ruled Thaçi's mandate decision to be rightful.⁶⁶

While in Kosovo there was a clear attempt to grab back seemingly diminishing power, in Slovenia a different power play presented itself. The new government, formed in the midst of the pandemic, appears to have benefitted from the chaos created by the spread of the virus. According to thousands of protesters that have taken to the streets, the government quickly tightened its grip on political power, be it in the form of limiting media freedom or embodied in an open hostility towards migrants. Along this same vein, Serbia has hinted at tightening Vučić's dominance of both the public sphere and State resources, in addition to utilizing them in his party's benefit. The COVID-19 crisis has but made more evident what was already taking place and, if anything, it has contributed to the increasing speed of Serbia's institutional dismantling. The further damages to the freedom of information and the declaration of the state of emergency being carried out without prior vote of the National Assembly are two of the myriad significant signs that reveal Vučić's tightening grip on power, de facto transforming Serbia into a one-man show.

B. Political gain as rhetorical victory

In the political arena, discourse and rhetoric play a critical role. Parties and officials construct their own narratives based –frequently but not exclusively– on ideological grounds, in an attempt to differentiate themselves from their opponents and to, ultimately, obtain social leverage and political advantage. It is within these narratives in the political debate that heated wars of words and episodes of finger-pointing usually thrive, to which the COVID-19 crisis has been no stranger.

Political rhetoric in Serbia and Slovenia has drawn on *grandeur* depictions of their leadership. In Serbia, president Vučić has actively pushed forward a heroic portrayal of his figure. The increasing development of Serbia's relations with China as an alternative major partner –in conjunction with a discourse of villainization towards the EU– has managed to take root in the minds of the Serbian population, a major part of which believes that Beijing is Serbia's biggest aid

⁶⁴ Bami, X., 2020. Kurti Seeks Kosovo President's Sacking Over 'Secret' NATO Deal. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at:

<<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/26/kurti-seeks-kosovo-presidents-sacking-over-secret-nato-deal/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁶⁵ 2020. ACTING PM KURTI SPEAKS ABOUT HIS 100 DAYS IN POWER. *RTK Live*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.rtklive.com/en/news-single.php?ID=16669>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁶⁶ 2020. Constitutional Court approves Hoti nomination. *Prishtina Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://prishtinainsight.com/constitutional-court-approves-hoti-nomination/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

donor⁶⁷ – something far from true.⁶⁸ Open displays of gratitude towards China could be observed in public spaces, including advertising boards that read “Thank you, brother Xi” (“Hvala, brate Si”) in reference to Chinese president Xi Jinping. Vučić’s efforts to win the rhetorical battle at a domestic level have, to a great extent, managed to further strengthen his image as a powerful and competent leader. De facto, however, this achievement can be considered far from necessary, inasmuch as Serbia lacks any significant opposition forces that may stand a chance against SNS.

In Slovenia, in strong resemblance to Vučić, the government of Janša has likewise portrayed its handling of the crisis in heroic terms. The prime minister declared Slovenia as pandemic free on the 15th of May, treating it as his first big domestic win at the helm. This victorious rhetoric was directed towards both the national electorate and the rest of the European continent, arguing that Slovenia was “the most successful country in the EU in dealing with the pandemic”.

In stark contrast to the opportunity for self-veneration seized in Serbia and Slovenia, the realm of political rhetoric in North Macedonia and Kosovo has, by and large, become a battlefield. Inasmuch as North Macedonia is awaiting elections, the rhetorical fight is substantively more critical and stakes are higher for the country’s political contenders. Unlike the uneven party spectrum in Serbia, where Vučić’s SNS reigns supreme, either of North Macedonia’s two largest political parties –SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE– does stand a chance to overcome and win the elections by just a handful of votes, a proof of high political polarization that depicts how tight the race is. This explains the recurrent episodes of intense accusations and finger-pointing between representatives from both sides, since both SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE are aiming at benefitting from a mostly uncertain situation – which forces them to play along and adapt their narrative as events unfold.

In Kosovo, even though elections were held only a few months before the irruption of the COVID-19 crisis, a dynamic similar to that in North Macedonia can be traced. Back-and-forth accusations of poorly handling the crisis, mostly stoked by president Thaçi against Kurti and his government, have led to a deepening of the political impasse the country has been trapped in since the successful no-confidence vote in March – not least after the inauguration of Avdullah Hoti as new prime minister. In the light of the strict measures established by the executive aimed at containing the spread of the virus, Thaçi openly and outspokenly engaged in undermining these decisions and claiming against their lack of legitimacy, alongside the support of a sector of veteran LDK officials.

C. Political gain as electoral profitability

In tight relation with the political rhetorical battle, elections can be observed as one of the most visible outcomes of a party’s campaign and, in all, of a party’s political strategy. Among the four countries analysed in this paper, several representations of different stages in the electoral cycle can be identified. Whereas Kosovo recently came from holding a parliamentary election in late 2019, North Macedonia and Serbia were just about to hold theirs. Slovenia, on the other hand, was only halfway through the legislature when Janša was sworn in as the new premier and is not expecting parliamentary elections until 2022.

Kosovo’s government coalition was formed as a consequence of the tight results yielded after the October 2019 parliamentary elections. Junior coalition partner LDK took advantage of its

⁶⁷ 2020. Stavovi građana Srbije prema Rusiji. *Institut za evropske poslove*, Research no. 21. Belgrade.

⁶⁸ Ministry for European Integration of Serbia, 2019. *Evropska orientacija građana Srbije*. [online] Available at: <https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/ijm_dec_1_9.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

privileged position in the government to blow it from within and make it effectively collapse in late March at their own behest – providing proof of how its parliamentary leverage, obtained as a result of the last election, was utilized and taken advantage of under the pretext of the COVID-19 crisis. Since the passing of the no-confidence vote, LDK has waged a war against Kurti and Vetëvendosje over measures that have been protested as “legal and constitutional violations”.⁶⁹ In an uncertain scenario that only reached its outcome after Avdullah Hoti’s swearing in as new head of the Kosovo executive, LDK and the rest of the opposition maximized their efforts to undermine Kurti’s legitimacy and growing popularity.

In North Macedonia and Serbia there is no doubt that it is all about the race towards the upcoming elections. While substantive differences in terms of multi-party competitiveness can be appreciated between both countries, all contending sides are attempting to capitalize on the management of the COVID-19 crisis in order to further their electoral profit. This is perceptible to a greater extent in North Macedonia, where SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE are running tight and thus tilting the balance to their favour presents itself as a critical juncture. The uncertainty regarding the date of the elections is but one of the many symptoms that reveal parties’ aspirations, including risking public health to secure a victory at the polls.⁷⁰ In contrast to North Macedonia’s close race, Serbia’s incumbent SNS is not menaced by political opposing forces inasmuch as they either are residual or have stated their intention to boycott the elections, which effectively will pave the way towards another comfortable SNS win.

In Slovenia, where parliamentary elections should, in principle, not be held until 2022, it is not unexpected that Janša will campaign on his government’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis and benefit from presenting the country as the first “corona-free” success in Europe. However, the instrumentalization of the pandemic might not come at zero cost for the prime minister – a clear example being the street protests and the public outcry, which could grow and derive in social and political polarization in the months to come.

D. Political gain as control over the social agenda

The political gain that offers the opportunity to steer the social agenda is effectively limiting a large number of human rights. Despite the similarities identified among these four countries, the level in which these rights are limited vary significantly – all four having in common, however, the enforcement of certain restrictions to freedom of movement. From the countries examined, Slovenia is the only case that did not impose a strict curfew, only restricted movement through the prohibition, for instance, of gathering in public spaces.⁷¹ In Kosovo, on the contrary, a strict 90-minute curfew that heavily limited freedom of movement was installed despite the Constitutional Court’s ruling that such measures “infringed people’s human rights”.⁷²

⁶⁹ Bami, Xh., 2020. Kosovo Govt Tightens Freedom of Movement Restrictions. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/14/kosovo-govt-tightens-freedom-of-movement-restrictions/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁷⁰ Marusic, S. J., 2020. North Macedonia Party Accused of Playing With COVID Restrictions. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/27/north-macedonia-party-accused-of-playing-with-covid-restrictions/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁷¹ Mazzini, M., 2020. Lockdown has split Slovenia in two: those safe at home, and low-paid workers. *The Guardian*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/16/lockdown-has-split-slovenia-in-two-those-safe-at-home-and-low-paid-workers>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁷² Bami, X., 2020. Kosovo Govt Tightens Freedom of Movement Restrictions. *Balkan Insight*, [online] Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/14/kosovo-govt-tightens-freedom-of-movement-restrictions/>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

Situations similar to Kosovo's presented themselves in the two other cases, where strict curfews were in place. Through the announcement of state of emergency in North Macedonia, freedom of movement was also suspended⁷³ through the establishment of strict curfews, even weekend-long bans from Friday afternoon until Monday early morning. In line with Serbia,⁷⁴ North Macedonia⁷⁵ also declared a 86-hour curfew over the course of Orthodox Easter. Besides imposing lockdown or curfew, all countries made it mandatory to go into a 14-day quarantine upon entering the country from abroad. While this measure has been introduced in one form or the other, some countries imposed far-reaching consequences that arguably violated human rights. In Serbia, for example, a 38-year-old man was sentenced to three years in jail after breaking the self-quarantine rule.⁷⁶ More arrests on curfew violations are awaiting a sentence.⁷⁷

Media freedom was equally limited over the course of COVID-19. While according to the World Press Freedom Index all Balkan countries fall into the category of territories with 'problematic media freedom',⁷⁸ a number of worrying events took place in relation to the spread of the pandemic.⁷⁹ Serbia has become specifically a notoriously unsafe place for critical journalists, of which a large number have been jailed on the basis of spreading fake news – such as publishing about the unsafe working environment for nurses in the main hospitals.⁸⁰ The Serbian Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV) later argued that such arrests are "the best example that the democracy and freedoms in Serbia are on their deathbed".⁸¹

Slovenia featured a real smear campaign against critical journalism aiming to delegitimize critical viewpoints on Janša's government. Slovenian journalist Blaž Zgaga received numerous death threats after requesting the government to provide more information on the COVID-19 approach.⁸² In Kosovo, too, questionable events took place: Kossev journal editor Tatjana

⁷³ Popovic, S., 2020. COVID-19 pandemic: How are the Western Balkan countries dealing with the disease? *European Western Balkans*, [online] Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/20/covid-19-pandemic-how-are-the-wb-countries/>> [Accessed May 26 2020].

⁷⁴ Retamal, H., 2020. States react to Trump's plan to reopen U.S. while some hear a call to arms. *NBC News*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/live-blog/2020-04-17-coronavirus-news-n1185971/ncrd1186066>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁷⁵ 2020. COVID-19 Impact: What we know so far – North Macedonia. *International Planned Parenthood Federation*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.ippf.org/blogs/covid-19-impact-what-we-know-so-far-north-macedonia>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁷⁶ Djurica, M., 2020. Serbian man jailed 3 years for breaking self-isolation rule. *New Straits Times*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.nst.com.my/world/world/2020/03/578922/serbian-man-jailed-3-years-breaking-self-isolation-rule>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁷⁷ Ozturk, T., 2020. COVID-19 violation: Serbia sentences man to 3 years. *AA*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/covid-19-violation-serbia-sentences-man-to-3-years/1782134>> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

⁷⁸ 2020. 2020 World Press Freedom Index. *Reporters Without Borders*, [online] Available at: <<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁷⁹ 2020. Reporters Without Borders: North Macedonia surpasses Serbia on media freedom index. *European Western Balkans*, [online] Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/21/reporters-without-borders-north-macedonia-surpasses-serbia-on-media-freedom-index/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁸⁰ 2020. Serbian journalist arrested for reporting on difficult working conditions of medical staff in COVID-19 pandemic. *European Western Balkans*, [online] Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/02/serbian-journalist-arrested-for-reporting-on-difficult-working-conditions-of-medical-staff-in-covid-19-pandemic/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² 2020. Media and journalists under threat due to measures against COVID-19. *Free Press Unlimited*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/news/media-and-journalists-under-threat-due-to-measures-against-covid-19>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

Lazarević was arrested for breaking the curfew while on duty and, although released later the same day, this evidenced the obstacles to performing journalistic duties. North Macedonia, on the contrary, seems to have improved over the years; however, last April the Association of Journalists of Macedonia expressed concern that the Ministry of Justice may amend the Criminal Code in such a way that published information could be considered fake, offering the authorities to punish this by imprisonment.⁸³

Conclusions

With the general observation that many of the young democracies in Eastern and Central Europe are eroding, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a further threat. The four Balkan countries discussed in this paper evidence the different ways in which leaderships, parties and personalities have deliberately instrumentalized COVID-19 for political gain.

Breaking down the concept of *political gain* has yielded four different interpretations. **Political gain as concentration of power** reflects to a large extent in both Serbia and Slovenia, where their leaderships have benefitted from the COVID-19 crisis through exerting tighter control over State resources – albeit, of course, to different degrees. In Kosovo, the struggle for a power shift between former prime minister Kurti and president Thaçi revealed how both sides pushed for increased leverage, including through delegitimizing each other's views and, in the case of Thaçi, utilizing the State's institutions to wage a purely political war. In stark contrast, North Macedonia's transitional status ahead of elections and the presence of a technical caretaker government has not allowed for a particularly blatant power grab.

In terms of **political gain as rhetorical victory**, both Serbia and Slovenia have developed unipolar approaches and offered heroic depictions of their leaders in the light of the handling of the COVID-19 crisis as part of a strategy to silence and weaken the opposition. In North Macedonia and Kosovo, on the contrary, intense ideological and rhetorical battles have been fought, including accusations and finger-pointing, in order to tilt the public favour towards either side. In tight relation to this, **political gain as electoral profitability** reflects how the COVID-19 crisis has been instrumentalized ahead of elections – a more pressing issue in North Macedonia and Serbia, where citizens are soon to cast their votes. While stakes are higher in North Macedonia than in Serbia, political decisions are either way made with a clear electoral perspective. A similar move can be observed in Slovenia, where elections are not expected until 2022, but where its new leadership will capitalize and campaign on its successful handling of the crisis. In Kosovo, where elections were recently held, the government's junior coalition member took advantage of its parliamentary leverage and blew the executive from within – triggering a tense impasse to the despair of its citizens.

Approaching **political gain as control of the social agenda**, whereby civil rights and freedoms can be manipulated, offers a striking difference between Slovenia, where freedom of movement in the form of a curfew was not curtailed, and Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia, where strict curfews, even several days long, exerted heavy limitations on physical displacements. Nonetheless, a common trait to all four countries has been, to different extents, the undermining actions taken against freedom of the press and persecution of journalistic activities.

The reflections in this paper have attempted to contribute to shed light upon the instrumentalization of the COVID-19 crisis for political purposes and have aimed to garner useful insights into common features and divergences among the four Balkan countries selected. As the

⁸³ 2020. COVID-19: MEDIA FREEDOMS UNDER THREAT? *Safe Journalists*, [online] Available at: <<https://safejournalists.net/covid19-media-freedoms-under-threat/>> [Accessed 27 May 2020].

analysis has shown, leaderships and political parties in Kosovo, North Macedonia, Slovenia and Serbia have sought benefits from the utilization of the pandemic in one way or another in order to advance their ambitions in terms of power concentration, ideology, electoral gain and domination of the social agenda.

Policy Analysis

Policy Analysis in general is a policy advice paper which particularly aims to influence the key means through which policy decisions are made in both local and central levels of government. The purpose of Policy Analysis is to address, more in-depth, a particular problem, to examine the arguments related to a concerned policy, and to analyze the implementation of the policy. Through Policy Analysis, Group for Legal and Political studies seeks to stimulate wider comprehensive debate on the given issue via presenting informed policy-relevant choices and recommendations to the key stakeholders and parties of interest.



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