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Serbia's authoritarian turn

Western Balkan countries are Europe's new corona hotspot. In Serbia, state repression of citizens' anger is turning violent

Read this article in German.

The epidemiological situation in Western Balkan countries has deteriorated rapidly since mid-June. The number of new infections has risen to a level that at times exceeds the worst periods in April. Back then, efforts to contain the spread of the virus had been successful. The increasing number of infections was kept within the limited capacity of the weak healthcare systems of the states in the region. The limited number of respirators available, the inadequate financial resources and staffing of the hospitals, as well as the fact that health offices lacked experienced specialists because of political patronage, were all factors that provided a potential gateway for the corona pandemic in Southeast Europe.

However, the fact that the region initially avoided a situation like in northern Italy and Spain was because of to the rigorous, restrictive and repressive actions of governments in the region. On the one hand, it was clear to those responsible that only an early, drastic crackdown would protect the healthcare system from collapse and force people to comply with regulations enforced by severe penalties. On the other hand, the authoritarian fantasies of those in power broke out into repressive measures and total control over conditions, rather than transparent procedures and an increase in individual responsibility. Instead of focusing on raising awareness, changing behaviour, tracking cases of infection and isolating infected people, the harshest of all measures was taken very quickly: lockdown.

There was far too little appeal to citizens' sense of responsibility to protect themselves and others. As soon as the number of infections dropped in early May, the restrictive measures were reduced. The population that had been locked-in now felt that everything is over and forgotten. Not only could cafés and restaurants open again – night life, family celebrations, and sporting events now went on as before. The

Orthodox Easter and the Islamic Ramadan Bayram gave rise to religious and family holiday gatherings – traditions that do not provide for social distancing.

Finger-pointing and political enemies

The rise in the number of infections then quickly led to finger-pointing and accusations along the deeply buried fault lines in the societies. In Southeast Europe, these lines of confrontation have always run along religious and ethnic borders and are exploited for nationalistic purposes. For example, communities in North Macedonia accused each other of being responsible for the disturbing spike in infections in early June.

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Orthodox Easter celebrations in the region include the beautiful tradition that all believers take communion with the same spoon that the priest holds out to them – which may strengthen the cohesion of the community, but was not very helpful this year from an epidemiological point of view. Large family celebrations to break the Ramadan fast, known as 'Bayram', and the gathering of extended families for the Orthodox All Saints' Day festival in the cemetery were also possible catalysts for the spread of the coronavirus.

These social divisions along ethnic and religious boundaries have also been transposed onto the party spectrum in Southeast Europe. The political actors therefore often do not see each other as competitors, but as enemies who accuse each other of being traitors and criminals. This toxic polarisation prevents any search for compromises and the functioning of checks and balances. From the perspective of the various governments, power must not fall into the hands of the enemies of the people – ergo, every measure seems justified.

Falsified corona statistics

Because of the pandemic, the parliamentary elections in Serbia could not take place in April as planned and, after a slight easing of lockdown measures in early May, were quickly set for 21 June. The government evidently wanted to be rewarded for its successful crisis management and called for elections before economic signs of the crisis-driven slowdown became too noticeable. The opposition decided to boycott the elections because of the undermining of democratic institutions and the control of the media by the party apparatus of President Aleksandar Vučić.

Consequently, his populist conservative SNS party was able to achieve a 'total' victory. The mandates of the previous coalition partners add up to an unbelievable total of 93 per cent of the seats in the new parliament – in which a critical democratic opposition is no longer represented. The election turnout was below the 50 per cent mark.

Perhaps the exuberantly proclaimed victory was a little bit too much after all. Part of the visible success of crisis management in Serbia for campaign purposes was that the football fans – and hooligans – of the two rival Belgrade clubs 'Red Star' and 'Partizan' could watch their clubs' local derby on the crowded stands. Moreover, the national hero and world ranked number one Novak Djkovic was allowed to present an international tennis tournament to an audience – although shortly afterwards he himself tested positive for the virus.

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Soon after election day, the research network BIRN revealed that the corona statistics in Serbia had apparently been manipulated and there were probably more deaths than had previously been announced. In this context, the revision of the statistics that took place on 6 June and involved 4,000 active cases also seems questionable. After these developments, the people's confidence in the protective measures, the government's communication policy and the independence of the administration have completely collapsed. Some may close their eyes to the entire calamity, while others believe that it is all far worse than feared, while yet a third group seems to be seized with anger.

Violent police repression

After the 7 July announcement by President Aleksandar Vučić that the deterioration in the health situation made it necessary to take the country back into lockdown, several thousand young people, mostly students and activists, spontaneously met in front of the parliament building in Belgrade, Serbia's capital. The protesters are a wild mix, covering all shades of the political spectrum, including nationalist agents and provocateurs. What unites them is that they consider the announced curfew from Friday evening to Monday morning to be excessive. They made their resentment known by a defiant stance of resistance and deep-seated frustration with the government's deception and lack of guidance. Early in the evening, they forced their way into the National Assembly building, which was only lightly guarded at that hour, before the police

moved in with force. The protesters could hardly do anything against the brutally severe intervention of the police intervention. Peaceful demonstrators were also beaten up in the clashes.

While the police blanketed the forecourt of the parliament in a cloud of tear gas, the demonstrators set fire to rubbish bins. The spectacle repeated on the following evening, 8 July. This time, however, the police presence was active right from the start with closed ranks, mounted police, armoured personnel carriers and a plan to clear out and drive away the protesters. Even though more demonstrators had shown up, it was made absolutely clear who controls the streets in Belgrade. The military demeanour of the police and their excessive, violent crackdown on the protesters is a clear sign of the increasing authoritarianism and the lack of transparency and rule of law in Serbia.

While the Serbian government is now backing down and de-escalating the announced drastic measures, the virus continues to spread. It is feared that the capacity limit of the fragile health systems in the Balkans can hardly withstand any further increase. Aid supplies of masks and medical devices are certainly helpful and welcome. The problem, however, lies in managing the crisis. The European Union and its member states must clearly draw attention to blatant undesirable developments in democracy and the rule of law – as in Serbia – as much as they should support the epidemiological management of the crisis with advisory services and deliveries of aid. The EU accession process, in which Serbia and Montenegro have already moved forward, and which is now beginning for North Macedonia and Albania, offers the framework not only to help in the short term, but in the long term to call for a strengthening of the rule of law, democracy and a sense of responsibility.



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