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POPULISM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Abstract

This paper aims to develop an analysis of how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced populist trends in the Western Balkan countries. Covid-19 pandemic impacted many sectors within the states themselves including health, economy, education, etc. and it produced even greater challenges at an international level. By focusing in the Western Balkans area, the paper focuses on the political system, and more specifically on how the political leadership through specific decision-making processes during the pandemic affected the presence or increase of populist trends. Thus, by focusing into specific decision-making dynamics of the political leadership in the Western Balkan countries, through the use of qualitative and secondary quantitative data, the paper develops an in-depth elaboration on the presence of populism in this area. What is more, the paper addresses the general Covid-19 situation in these countries along with how the political leadership has dealt with the pandemic by further shedding light on the presence of populism and how the handling of the pandemic through specific political decisions emphasized these populist trends.

Keywords: Covid-19, Western Balkan, populism, political leadership, political system

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INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkan countries, as most part of Eastern Europe come from a difficult nondemocratic past. Their efforts in undertaking the democratization processes in the last decades haven't proved sufficient enough for the achievement of consolidated democracies by thus being often labeled as "hybrid regimes", "nonconsolidated democracies", "malign democracies" etc., or as Bieber describes them "stabilitocracies" a term referring to 'governments that claim to secure stability, pretend to espouse EU integration, and rely on informal, clientelist structures, control of the media, and the regular production of crises to hang on to power' (Kemp 2021, 195).

In the last two years, the Covid-19 pandemic has been the focus of all the national and international actors by bringing along with the health crises many other challenges for all the European countries and especially for the Eastern Europe including the Western Balkans. The latter have faced multiple challenges including the economy, the political system, and the society at large. The crisis has also given greater visibility to many structural weaknesses in the region, from the weak health care systems, low trust in the state, to weak democracy and state capture, while at the same time awakening civic consciousness and serving as a backdrop for increased solidarity among citizens (Bieber *et al.* 2020, 3).

After the countries "officially declared the epidemic, various epidemiological measures were imposed i.e., the ban on movement, social distancing, and suspension of certain activities, which resulted in the deterioration of almost all economic indicators" (Bodroža & Lazić 2021, 33). According to the International Monetary Fund, all the Western Balkan countries' economies were hit by the pandemic which resulted in a considerable decline of the GDP. "Declining economic activity is also complicating public finances and expanding the financing needs of governments. And nonessential consumption and investment are delayed until the uncertainty linked to the crisis is resolved" (Svrtinov *et al.* 2021, 11). What is more "the effects of the pandemic in Western Balkans countries are already severe, but economic support packages will continue to be relevant in order to limit negative effects of the pandemic on labor market, businesses and households" (Terziev *et al.* 2021).

What is more, as a region hardly hit and humbled by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Western Balkan countries' political systems have witnessed an escalation of political tensions among different political actors addressing the pressing issues that the pandemic caused and the solutions to overcome the crises. The way the political leaders of the

Western Balkan countries have dealt with this situation has raised special interest among scholars. The introduction of the state of emergency due to the pandemic has been considered as a focal point for the researcher community to further evidence a growth of authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. During the pandemic, most executive branches of government in the region took on extraordinary powers at the expense of legislatures (Tzifakis 2020, 199), by thus acquiring more decision-making powers at the expense of democratic procedures. Along with the rise of authoritarian trends of the political leadership in the Western Balkan countries, populism also seems to have gained considerable ground because of the specific political discourse that addresses the uncertainties and fears of the populations towards Covid-19. As Bieber *et al.* (2020) put it “the coronavirus might strengthen the strikingly close relationship between authoritarianism and nationalist populism in the region and beyond, based on a dichotomic and moralistic understanding of the world (‘good’ vs ‘bad’ people) and a trend to politically capitalize upon artificially incited fears” (Bieber *et al.* 2020, 1).

Having in consideration the above, the paper tries to further exploit the question on the relationship between authoritarianism and populism in times of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Western Balkan countries. In trying to answer the above, methodologically, the paper focuses on an in-depth analysis of the qualitative data as well as secondary quantitative data with regard to this region. The main assumption that we make is that the closing of the borders along with the declaration of the states of emergency in the WB6 provided fertile ground for an increase of authoritarianism and populism in the region.

The paper continues with the analysis of how the Western Balkan countries handled the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of the measures taken to properly address the situation, and it continues with a specific focus on the political leadership. The latter is further elaborated in the lenses of authoritarianism and populism and how both these trends have manifested themselves in the region.

WESTERN BALKANS AND THE HANDLING OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a difficult test for all the countries worldwide from the most developed countries of the west to the less developed ones. The Western Balkan region makes no exception. With the declaration of the pandemic from WHO, all the states started taking measures with regard to the health of their citizens and the protection of life. These new measures included the wearing of the mask, social distancing, the closure of the most part of public institutions and the transition to online work, etc. What is more, “international airports in all countries were closed for passenger traffic, travel and social gatherings have been restricted or banned, and schools and universities have been closed” (Svrtinov *et al.* 2020, 11).

The most part of the countries of this region declared the curfews with the exception of Serbia and North Macedonia which declared a state of emergency. “Within a month, the circumstances created during the COVID-19 pandemic have further contributed to the overall trend of democratic erosion reversing two decades of reforms in the Western Balkans. The semi-authoritarian regimes in the Balkans have used the emergency situation to achieve almost unlimited power” (Bieber 2020, 9).

What is more, a weak health infrastructure, the low level of investments in health, the emergency of the situation, etc. brought about even more serious consequences in terms of the number of deaths from the Covid-19 in proportion to the overall population.

What is interesting in this regard, is the fact that the political leadership despite the efforts to manage the pandemic took advantage of the situation in the short-term for political credits. “Each ruling elite seems willing to take advantage of the situation in order to gain politically, despite denunciations of such moves as not quite democratic by political opponents, and an unsafe environment for the voters” (Vankovska 2020, 82). “The calculation is simple: the costs of the pandemic and ‘stay-at-home’ practices will soon prove too high – recession is on its way and political elites have no clue how to deal with it” (Vankovska 2020, 82).

In terms of the measures taken by the governments of the six Western Balkan countries, in response to the managing of the pandemic, different scenarios can be evidenced. On March 15th, Serbia introduced a ‘state of exception’, with no legislative approval. On the other hand, North Macedonia, three days later, declared a state of emergency with no legislative approval, and which concentrated the decision-making power in the executive branch. Meanwhile, the caretaker government has been

criticized for having overstepped its mandate, as, allegedly, only one-third of its decrees have been related to the pandemic (Markovikj 2020, 67). The state of emergency was also declared in Bosnia Hercegovina by limiting the legislative powers of the parliament in both levels. The legislative decision-making power was also limited in the case of Montenegro during the first months of the pandemic. Despite not having declared the state of emergency, the legislative was not convened until the end of April (Uljarević et al. 2020, 12).

In the case of Albania, no state of emergency was declared. Instead, the government declared a state of natural disaster which was extended by two months which has been criticized by constitutionalists. “The extension of the state of natural disaster in abusive ways prolongs the possibility for eventual abuse of power, to the detriment of the constitutional freedoms of citizens” (Dule 2021, 3). In Kosovo*, the Prime Minister Kurti was against the declaration of the state of emergency, because it was considered as a tool to the extension of the president’s executive powers.

AUTHORITARIAN AND POPULIST TRENDS DURING THE PANDEMIC IN THE WESTERN BALKANS COUNTRIES

The transition processes that have taken place in the Western Balkan during the last few decades haven’t proved successful enough especially in terms of achieving consolidated democracies. Despite the countries’ efforts to further push the processes of democratization, authoritarian trends also seem to have gained considerable ground alongside democratization. Different indicators which measure the democratic performance of the countries in the region have shown lower ranks for several years for the most part of the Western Balkans. The following tables evidence such trends.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on the status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. This remark is added by the Editorial Board, and is applicable to all further mentions of Kosovo throughout the paper.

Table 1: Western Balkans' Democracy Score History, Freedom House

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Albania	3.86	3.75	3.82	3.86	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	3.75	3.75
BiH	3.64	3.61	3.57	3.54	3.50	3.46	3.36	3.32	3.32	3.36	3.29
Kosovo*	2.82	2.75	2.86	2.86	2.93	3.04	3.07	3.11	3.18	3.14	3.25
Montenegro	4.18	4.18	4.14	4.11	4.07	4.11	4.07	3.93	3.86	3.82	3.82
N.Macedo- nia	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.71	3.57	3.64	3.68	3.75	3.82	3.82
Serbia	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.32	4.25	4.18	4.04	4.00	3.96	3.89	3.79

Source: Nations in Transit, Freedom House, 2022

Table 2: Western Balkans' score on EIU Democracy Index 2020, 2021

Country	Overall score 2020	Overall score 2021	Regime type
Albania	6,08	6.11	Flawed democracy
BiH	4.84	5.04	Hybrid regime
North Macedonia	5.89	6.03	Flawed democracy
Montenegro	5.77	6.02	Flawed democracy
Serbia	6.22	6.36	Flawed Democracy

Source: Democracy Index 2020, 'In sickness and in health?', EIU 2021, 2022

Table 3: Worldwide Governance Indicators for the Western Balkans, 2020

Country	Voice and accountability	Political Stability	Rule of Law	Control of Corruption
Albania	51.21	49.53	40.87	31.73
BiH	36.71	27.83	43.27	28.85
Kosovo*	39.61	36.79	38.94	36.54
N. Macedonia	50.24	50.47	52.40	37.98
Montenegro	48.79	47.17	55.29	56.25
Serbia	40.58	43.87	47.60	37.50

Source: Worldwide Governance indicators, World Bank, 2020

As the above latest reports on democracy indicators show, the countries of the Western Balkan have experienced progress in some aspects and setbacks in others. The Economist Intelligence Unit shows that most of the countries of this region experienced a fall compared to 2019, with the exception of Albania which seems to have achieved a slight improvement. A slight positive improvement for all of these countries is achieved in 2021 according to EIU. However, as a matter of fact “the annual index, which provides a measurement of the state of global democracy, reveals an overall score of 5.28, down from 5.37 in 2020” (Economist Intelligence Unit 2022). If we consider a more specific dimension of the democratic performance, the one concerning civic liberties and political rights, the last Freedom House report shows that for “the first time in the 21st century, the prevailing form of governance in the Nations in Transit region is the hybrid regime...and four democracies have fallen into this gray zone since the unbroken period of democratic decline began in 2004: Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia” (Freedom House 2022, 4). According to the same report, in terms of political developments which triggered and led to such scores we can mention, “the parliamentary elections in Serbia dealt a blow, the ousting of Prime Minister Kurti and the formation of a short-lived government”. On the other hand, in Montenegro elections paved the way to a new government, and North Macedonia’s government was reelected.

However, with the coming of the Covid-19 crisis, there is a general expectation that authoritarian trends in political leadership will

be even stronger among countries of this region. “Obviously, the current Covid-19 pandemic presents a new challenge to regimes across the globe. Especially younger democracies, which are characterized by relatively less rigorous checks and balances’ mechanisms found themselves in a dare situation, in which the Covid19 crisis could (and was) misused by illiberal ruling parties to fortify their rule” (Petrović 2020, 52).

The following table shows Bieber’s categorization of authoritarianisms in the Western Balkan countries.

Table 4: Bieber’s types of autocratic rule in the Western Balkans

Country	Type of rule
Montenegro	Continuing change from within
Serbia	Return to semi-authoritarianism
North Macedonia	New semi-authoritarianism
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Ethnocratic authoritarianism
Kosovo*	Authoritarianism under international tutelage
Albania	Structural polarization

Source: Bieber (2020, 33-35)

Along with the authoritarian trends which as shown above have gained more ground, populism also seems to be on the rise in this region. Authoritarianism, populism, and exclusionary nationalism have been closely interlinked and often mutually reinforcing (Bonikowski 2017; Jenne 2018). “At the same time, the term populism is almost universally employed to describe a large number of different political phenomena, political actors, policy decisions and regimes that often have little more in common than the label. The growing attention to populism has also increased the pressure on social scientists to come up with clear and easily communicable answers that satisfy the curiosity of people trying to understand the political changes unfolding from the Americas to Europe and beyond” (Heinisch *et al.* 2021, 6).

By referring to the people, populist movements distance themselves from the “old regime” and an interesting such development is with “Self-Determination Movement” (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, LVV, in Albanian) as the main overwhelming political force in Kosovo*. Kurti and the LVV have branded all opposing political parties as “the

old regime” (sometimes “the old guard”) also publicly using terms as “criminals” and “traitors” for their leaders (Hamiti 2021, 153).

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about new challenges and insecurities for whole region by thus creating a new environment of the ‘political decision-making’ in conditions of emergency. On the other hand, “emergency politics is a central theme of authoritarian rule. Emergencies have given autocratic leaders the opportunity to destroy or suspend democratic institutions and their checks and balances” (Bieber 2020, 5). With the Covid-19 pandemic which still seems to be pressuring the economic and political systems of the countries worldwide, authoritarianism seems to be on a growing curve in the Western Balkan. “Rosanvallon considers populism as a symptom of the intrinsic malaise of democracy, a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of democracy and a response to the failure of democratic representation and the transformation of modern society. For all that expressing indignation, denouncing and opposing may make sense, what matters more is to give an answer on the merits. To denounce the authoritarian and illiberal trends of populism convinces only those who are already convinced” (Solios 2020, 203).

In this authoritarian manner of governance is viewed populism in the Western Balkan countries. “The regimes of President Vucic in Serbia, Prime Minister Rama in Albania, until recently Prime Minister Gruevski in North Macedonia, and President (previously PM) Djukanovic in Montenegro, have been classified by many researchers and scholars as clean-cut populism ranging from illiberal democracy to authoritarianism” (Hamiti 2021, 163).

CONCLUSIONS

In the last two years, the Covid-19 pandemic has been the focus of all the national and international actors by bringing along with the health crises many other challenges for the Western Balkans. The latter have faced multiple challenges in managing the crisis including the economy, the political system, and the society at large.

What can be evidenced from the analysis of the Western Balkan region in terms of democratic performance along with the behavior of the political leadership in managing the health crises during the covid-19 pandemic, is an emphasis of authoritarian and populist trends. Authoritarianism and populism seem to have gained more terrain in this region due to the specificities of power concentration in the executive branch of power.

The political leadership of the six countries of this region took advantage of the emergency measures in the fight against the virus to further concentrate its powers by thus ignoring the democratic decision-making processes and institutions. In the first months of the pandemic, the emergency measures taken strengthened the executives by thus sidelining the legislatives.

“At first glance, it seems as if the weak Western Balkans countries dealt rather successfully with Covid-19 but fell victim to authoritarian tendencies induced by the pandemic. According to a number of think tank and watchdog organizations, crisis management modalities showed serious problems there (including Croatia, a former member of this artificial region)” (Vankovska 2020, 83). The concentration of power with the executive across the region might be temporary, but long-term effects are likely. Firstly, with no clear end to the pandemic in sight, emergency powers might be extended considerably. Secondly, even if this is not the case, there is a risk of the crisis being used by incumbents to consolidate their power and marginalize the already weak opposition in several countries of the region (Bieber *et al.* 2020, 11).

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