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# COVID-19 PANDEMIC CASE STUDY: KOSOVO



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# 1. Introduction

The parliamentary elections in Kosovo were held on the 6 October. The opposition parties won with Vetëvendosje (VV), led by Albin Kurti winning the elections, followed by Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës (LDK), led by Isa Mustafa. The democratic transition of powers in the still young state of Kosovo was praised as happening through a process of free and fair elections. The formation of the new government took nearly four months due to delays in the election certification as well as negotiations between political parties. The government was finally formed on the 3 February 2020 by VV and LDK – the former opposition parties. Only after a month, on 11 March, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced Covid-19 a global pandemic. The first case of Covid-19 in Kosovo was registered later than other regional countries. Nevertheless, the government took numerous decisions prior to the first case by imposing a few restrictive measures and established coordinating mechanisms to handle the pandemic.

However, the government of Kosovo was not dealing only with the imminent and unpredictable Covid-19 pandemic: it already had its plate full with the negotiation process with Serbia. The process had been stalled since December 2018 due to the 100% tariff imposed by the Government of Kosovo towards imported goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The tariff was a response to the diplomatic de-recognition campaign of Serbia that was lobbying countries which had already recognized Kosovo to reverse their positions. While the previous prime minister had resigned without removing the 100% tariff, the international pressure coming from US and EU was at its peak towards the new government of Kosovo to remove any barriers and resume the dialogue process. The Kurti government proposal to gradually remove the tariff and even replace it with steady reciprocity measures was met by a stark response from the US envoy for the negotiations, Ambassador Richard Grenell, who declared that the half measures proposed by Prime Minister Kurti were not supported and stated that the tariff must be completely removed. This caused political strife between the coalition members when LDK declared that it would guit the government if the tariff 'was not revoked unconditionally' leading to the instability of the government.

Disagreements between the coalition parties, including the president of the country, on how to deal with coronavirus further shook the government. The disagreements were articulated at the National Security Council and later on publicly when the president recommended that a state emergency should be declared, which would entail shifting the government's power to the National Security Council chaired by the president — a political rival of the prime minister.

According to the constitution, the decree for a state of emergency is sent to parliament after consultation with the prime minister. President Thaçi never sent the decree to

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parliament. This option was opposed by the prime minister yet supported publicly by the minister of internal affairs — representing the other coalition member. The prime minister dismissed the minister of internal affairs precipitating arguing that he had spread panic through comments that 'the number of those affected is increasing by the hour' at a time when only 20 people were infected with the coronavirus and no death related to the virus had been recorded.

The leader of coalition member LDK — who had previously declared that a vote of no confidence would be initiated against the government after the pandemic related to the tariff — declared Kurti had breached the coalition agreement which stipulated that no minister would be dismissed without prior consultation and consent. He called upon the prime minister to annul the decision and remove the tariff until the end of the week otherwise a motion of no confidence would be initiated.

The political disagreements between the coalition parties in the midst of the coronavirus incited a popular response when people went to their balconies and protested by banging their pots; civil society organisations also called upon the political parties to reach a consensus and avoid a motion of no confidence during the pandemic period. The ambassadors of France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States called upon the institutional and political leaders to focus on Covid-19 and urged them to 'preserve and ensure the integrity and functionality of Kosovo's government and institutions ... prioritize the fight against Covid-19 in Kosovo over politics'.¹

The government was short-lived however, and on 25 March it was voted out through a motion of no-confidence with 82 votes supporting the motion in a 120-seat parliament. In the midst of the pandemic, Kosovo became a country left with a caretaker government, crippled parliamentary competencies and entered a new political crisis which unravelled over constitutional procedures regarding the formation of the new government. Vetëvendosje argued that a new government can be formed only after new elections challenging the president's decree to mandate Avdulllah Hoti (LDK) to form a government. The constitutional court upheld the president's decree and the new government was under way. The caretaker government led by Kurti went on taking measures to address the pandemic; it also lifted the 100% tariff and started to impose gradual trade reciprocity measures. Upon the arrival of the new government led by Prime Minister Hoti on the 3 June 2020, two further priorities were laid down: the post-coronavirus economic recovery and the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue process. Regarding the latter, Prime Minister Hoti revoked the reciprocity measures imposed by the previous government. An agreement on economic normalisation was reached between the parties at the White House in the presence of President Donald Trump, who witnessed President Aleksandar Vuĉić of Serbia and Prime Minister Hoti sign letters of commitment.

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# Overview Covid-19 in the Kosovo



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Covid-19 Cases
39014
WHO, November 30th, 2020
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# 2. Handling of Covid-19: Two Governments

Once Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic, the newly established government undertook immediate action. On 12 March 2020, the government established the Special Commission for the Prevention of infection from Covid-19, while the first two cases were registered a day after. A state of public health emergency was declared on 15 March and various restrictive measures were undertaken to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The containment measures were multiple, including restrictions of movement and services, suspension of education processes and the shutdown of non-essential businesses, including a lockdown period from 12 March until 31 May 2020 (except for a number of hours during the day or with a movement permit). During this period, certain municipalities were placed under quarantine to contain the spread of the virus.

The lockdown also included the closing of land borders, except to nationals of Kosovo, the restriction of transport within Kosovo, the prevention of the international flights and restriction of all sports, cultural and recreational activities, including religious ceremonies. These measures were aimed at maintaining a low level of daily infection amidst a number of already existing challenges in the health sector that were further aggravated by Covid-19 pandemic requirements. Recommendations were given to citizens on how to take care of themselves and help prevent the further spread of the virus.

These restrictions were taken on the basis of the prevention of infectious diseases and health law, which were challenged by in the constitutional court by the president on the basis of the right to freedom of movement. The court ruled that the decision of the government violated the constitution of Kosovo, adding that fundamental rights and freedoms may only be limited by law and the existing laws did not offer the needed authorization to the government to impose such restrictions. The authority of the Ministry of Health to undertake decisions to address the spread of the coronavirus was recognized by stressing that it lacked the authority to limit the movement of the people at the state level – thus a new law was needed to be adopted by parliament. Upon this decision, on 12 April, the government of Kosovo undertook new measures by taking separate decisions for each municipality in order to prevent the spread of the virus. This decision was challenged by the opposition parties again at the constitutional court.

The restrictive measures were able to control the spread of the coronavirus and keep the number of the infected people low. Citizens travelling from abroad were obliged to be quarantined for two weeks at the university campus — a location set by the government. On 30 May, the caretaker government annulled its previous decision closing the quarantine centre, and demanded that every citizen who entered the country self-isolate for a two-week period under the supervision of medical teams and other relevant units.

The relaxing of measures started in a phased process from 4 May when a few businesses were allowed to open, i.e. the construction sector, real estate, vehicle trade and small shops. The second phase started on 18 May when more businesses were allowed to open, including urban transport; while on 1 June the third phase started when almost all businesses were allowed to re-open. The new coalition government led by Avdullah Hoti (LDK) came to power on 3 June. Once the restriction measures started to lift, the situation on the ground started to change. Curfew measures were lifted and re-introduced again by the government while a rapid increase of the number of people infected by Covid-19 was recorded alongside a rise in the number of related deaths. The limited availability of mass testing and contact tracing became a challenge for the government and the relevant institutions, hindering efforts to curtail the spread of the virus. Kosovo became a high-risk destination due to a growing number of new infections. This led to criticism over the handling of the situation by the Hoti government from the opposition parties, who noted the hardships of the already overloaded healthcare system.

The government continues to monitor the spread of the virus, anticipating a second wave. Wearing masks indoors and in public placesas become mandatory during the major part of the pandemic outspread. Moreover, restrictions on public gatherings in large numbers, and the requirement to maintain a certain distance have been imposed. Measures also included reducing public administration staff. Furthermore, elections in two municipalities were postponed due to the Covid-19 crisis and are set to be held by the end of November.

#### 2.1. Parliament

Throughout this period, the role of parliament was curtailed. Once the parliament voted out the government led by Kurti, an unprecedented political situation unravelled. Kosovo is a young democracy and a newly established state thus still testing its constitution and building its democratic practices. In the past, when a motion of no confidence was voted on in parliament, political parties have expressed their readiness to have new elections, but this time around this was not the case. As a new situation, different positions were held by different political representatives over the possibilities available per the constitution. Nevertheless, until the constitutional court sorted out the situation, the role of parliament remained limited. While the caretaker government would take decisions regarding the handling of Covid-19 pandemic, parliament would not take any steps to exercise oversight over the government it had voted out.

The rules of procedures of parliament did not have any provisions for extraordinary situations like the one brought about by Covid-19, when holding online meetings became necessary. Even later, once parliament resumed its usual work, due to the lack of

political consensus the necessary changes were not made in the rules of procedure and electronic meetings are still not covered. The political polarisation reflected in the work of parliament even after the formation of the new government led by Hoti, who has an unstable majority. This was reflected in the inability of the government to adopt the budget review for two months, which hindered the execution of the emergency package as well as preventing the passing of international agreements, which included agreements for economic support.

Despite the fact that the constitutional court had ruled that a new law was needed to regulate provisions regarding the handling of Covid-19, the lack of political consensus and political fragmentation caused a delay in the adoption of this law. The law on the prevention and response to the Covid-19 pandemic was proposed by six members of parliament together with the head of the parliament, Vjosa Osmani, and was finally voted on 14 August 2020.

During the pandemic, neighbouring countries established green lanes to facilitate the transport and trade of essential goods within the region: regional organisations such as the Regional Cooperation Council, the Transport Community and the CEFTA, were instrumental in responding to the Covid-19 crisis.

#### 2.2. Health Sector

The government has adopted a quasi-ad hoc approach to addressing the Covid-19 pandemic, basing their actions on the information provided by the Kosovo National Institute for Public Health and the Ministry of Health as well as other supporting institutions. In the wake of SARS in 2013, a strategy was adopted, there were no new strategies adopted afterwards since that period. Once the Covid-19 pandemic started, the healthcare system already faced a lack of the needed human and technical capabilities. This had become evident in a 2012–14 review, which had identified issues within the healthcare system encompassing the management level, human capacities and technical capabilities.

The National Institute of Public Health announced that there were only three microbiologists capable of conducting Covid-19 testing and that around 142 respirators were available in both the public and private sector, while new ones were announced to arrive as donations from international organisations. This information was spread to inform citizens of the situation and to get them to help the government prevent the spread of the virus. The government allocated 10 million euros after the outbreak of the pandemic for the Ministry of Health, while guidelines were prepared by the Ministry that indicated rules which had to be respected by citizens in order to prevent the spread of the virus.

As in other countries, doctors and health workers in Kosovo contracted the coronavirus. In July, it was stated that around 500 health workers had been infected while a number of them had also died. This led to a fear that the health sector could collapse in the wake of large numbers of Covid-19 -affected patients to be cared for by an already limited medical staff. The minister of health took the decision to hire new medical staff to work in Kosovo's hospitals while volunteer staff were also involved.

An important element which came to the forefront during the pandemic was the dual system under which the health sector functions in Kosovo. Even after the independence, in parallel two systems co-exist in the country namely, the Kosovo system and the system of Serbia. Nevertheless, the decisions undertaken by the government would be respected both systems.

#### 2.3. Education

Part of the restriction measures included closing schools and universities, and remote schooling started for all levels. It has been argued that the latter decision could lead to a persisting gap in education. UNDP conducted a survey where the data showed that the majority of the respondents (96%) were able to attend distance learning classes regularly, but it has also been shown that the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian (RAE) communities were not able to attend online classes in bigger numbers i.e. in the municipality of Ferizaj a study showed that 52% of the 828 Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian students were not able to attend the classes.

The online programmes were prepared and delivered by two ministries due to the still-existing dual school system in Kosovo, one which functions under the curriculum of the Kosovo government and the other under the Serbian government. Nevertheless, the government of Kosovo closed all the schools in all municipalities regardless of the system they function under.

For the new academic year beginning in September 2020, the Ministry of Education developed a three-stage plan which entailed the combination of in-person and distance learning. The plan was approved by the government on 26 August, where it was emphasized that the epidemiological situation was a significant factor. Moreover, a fund of 10 million euros was allocated for education as part of the Package for Economic Recovery. Prime Minister Hoti has stated that there will be another 10 more million euros allocated to municipalities for handling Covid-19, some of which is earmarked for the education sector. On 14 September, schools were reopened. The situation is subject to change, depending on the spread of the virus in the country.

#### 2.4. The Impact on the Economy

The immediate effects of the lockdown had a positive impact in curtailing the spread of the virus, yet its impact in the already fragile market of Kosovo was negative, directly affecting the private sector's ability to operate.

The government of Kosovo made a budgetary re-allocation in response to the potential threats posed by Covid-19. The government passed the Emergency Fiscal Package on 30 March 2020 in the amount of 180 million euros, or 2.5% of the 2019 GDP. The package was intended to support affected business, including informal employment, and offer social protection for the most vulnerable households. The package was meant to help alleviate an economic downturn, rather than maintaining or inciting economic growth. The measures were thought to be an appropriate immediate response, but the private sector called for firmer support.

The cost of Covid-19 has been felt by the business sector. According to official data from the Kosovo Business Registration Agency (KBRA), between March and September 2020, 507 businesses were closed. The president of the Alliance of Kosovar Business (AKB) has stated that the number of closed businesses is much higher, since not all businesses are registered. It has been estimated that up to 1,000 businesses have closed in Kosovo in 2020.

Once businesses were closed due to the national lockdown, the unemployment rate started to soar. Many people lost their jobs, while a great number of them registered as unemployed. Nearly half of the jobseekers registered April 2020 alone were women. A nationwide survey was conducted to assess the social and economic impact of Covid-19, which indicated that 62% of the population faced a decrease in paid work hours, but also that they were still employed during the outbreak period.

The government started to reopen the economy, but things could not completely return to normal due to the remaining imposed restrictions. On 18 June, the government adopted the draft Law on the Revision of the Budget, where it also predicted a 3% shrinkage of the GDP. Nevertheless, it took two months for the budget review to pass in parliament due to a lack of needed votes, hampering the implementation of the government's fiscal package. While in August it approved a 365-million-euro package for economic recovery, which was aimed at offering financial assistance to businesses, creating jobs and stimulating aggregate demand. Despite the fact that even August was considered a delayed measure, the package made its way to parliament five times but was not passed. The draft law finally passed after its seventh review. Parliament also ratified the EU Macro-Financial Assistance load agreement worth 100 million euros on 14 August. The latter was intended to limit the economic fallout of the pandemic.

In April, the World Bank predicted that the economy of Kosovo would be contracted by 4.5% in 2020 as tourism, remittances, exports of good and FSI were predicted to

decrease due to travel restrictions and the effects of the pandemic. The IMF predicts a 7.5 % rebound in 2021. It is important to mention that the projections for 2020 were promising, with the World Bank Group forecasting 4% Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in 2020.

The first half of the year registered a change in the internal spending, where domestic consumption was oriented towards basic food products and public services, while businesses paid special focus to the digitalisation of services in order to continue work during the pandemic.

The Kosovar diaspora played an important role; they supported the domestic consumption remitting 526 million euros between<sup>2</sup> January and July 2020. This is an increase of 47 million euros from the same period a year ago.

Concerns over the potential misuse of funding and/or corruption were raised by civil society organisations, who emphasised the limited role of parliament in overseeing the decisions taken by the government. The Kosova Democratic Institute called for transparency and accountability during the design and implementation phase of the Covid-19 measures in order to avoid certain measures favouring specific sectors.

### 2.5. Judicial System

The effects of Covid-19 affected the work of the courts and the prosecution offices which functioned with reduced capacities since mid-March 2020, dealing only with urgent cases on issues related to juveniles, domestic violence, validation of detention etc. Concerns over the effects on trials was raised by the country report because the Criminal Procedure Code specifies that if no hearings are held for three months, then the related cases have to restart of the process. Emergency plans were developed by the Kosovo Judicial Council and the Kosovo Prosecutorial Council to prevent the backlog of cases and cases reaching their statutory limitations (including measures to return to work and come to virtual court hearings in individual cases). The Kosovo Judicial Council, Kosovo Prosecutorial Council, Bar Association and Justice Academy held regular online meetings and trainings.

## 3. Gender and Covid-19

The existing gender gap in Kosovo was further aggravated due to the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Prior to the pandemic, data indicated that there is no gender gap in education, in fact women register a higher level of education at the graduate level compared to men.<sup>3</sup> Yet the stark difference remains at the employment rate of women, which is 13.7%, compared to 45.9% amongst men, while the unemployment rate for 2019 was for men 22.8% and women 32.7%.

The figures showed that women represent half of jobseekers, while the pandemic was expected to affect them disproportionally due to the employment barriers and their existing economic inactivity. Moreover, a larger number of women are employed in the informal economy and it was noted that they could potentially have no access to the mitigating measures taken by the government. According to a survey conducted by UN Women Kosovo with UNDP and UNFPA Kosovo, it was concluded that the coronavirus would have major consequences in the spending power of women. The survey indicated that self-employed women and men were most affected by the lockdown measures, with 72% of self-employed women and 69% of men being affected.

According to the Millennium Challenge Corporation, women in Kosovo spend around seven hours per day on unpaid domestic work (food preparation, childcare, home repairs) compared to men, who spend one hour and 10 minutes per day on similar work. Furthermore, as schools and daycare are closed, the share of unpaid care and domestic work increased for both genders, thought affecting women more: 67% of women compared to 58% of men reported increased time spent on unpaid care work, and 71% of women compared to 59% of men reported increased time spent on unpaid domestic work. Moreover, women experienced more challenges in seeking health services, namely 58% (compared to 53% of men). Integration of gender perspective was requested by Kosovo Women's Network in order to avoid the further deepening of gender and social inequalities.

While the world closed down and decisions aimed at saving the lives of citizens were made, home became a place of greater peril for many women. Cases of domestic violence increased, and up to 550 women were reported to have been admitted to shelters due to domestic violence during the pandemic. The isolation caused by the lockdown left women trapped in their homes with their abusers, while 'access to assistance [was] hindered due to limited functioning of institutions'. The government undertook measures to protect the female victims of domestic violence, such as an institutional campaign, exempted restriction of movement and ensured shelter for new cases of domestic violence. In 2019, 1,915 cases of domestic violence were reported, out of which 1,557 were against women and girls; the challenge remains the lack or scarce availability of specialized support services and shelters for female survivors of domestic violence.

# 4. The International Players in the Fight Against Covid-19 in Kosovo

In this time of crisis, the show of solidarity and aid between countries became a necessity. EU member states which were hit the hardest, like Italy, served as an example of the severity of the pandemic and the general mobilisation required to save lives and prevent the further spreading of the coronavirus. While there were critics of the reaction of member states' readiness to assist other countries, decisions were put in place that were oriented towards the assisting Western Balkan countries.

The review of the Kosovo Economic Reform Programme during 2020 was focused on the effective and well-coordinated structural reforms aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic and to 'accelerate the post-crisis economic recovery'. In April 2020, the EU declared that it was mobilising a package of 410 million euros in reallocated bilateral financial assistance to support the Western Balkans during the coronavirus emergency. In Kosovo, it allocated five million euros for immediate support for the health sector (to procure laboratory and protection equipment, including 30 respirators, five fully equipped ambulances and 400 hospital beds) and 78.4 million euros of support for social and economic recovery. Moreover, the EU launched a social media campaign aimed at offering informative tips on how citizens can protect themselves during the coronavirus pandemic. For Kosovo, the EU is Kosovo's biggest trading partner with a volume of 1.4 billion euros in 2019 and the largest provider of financial assistance to Kosovo.

In April, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved 56.5 million US dollars in financial assistance for Kosovo's urgent balance of payments under the Rapid Financial Instrument.

Through USAID, the United States contributed 1.1 million US dollars to support Kosovo in stopping further transmission of the virus and to help mitigate its impact; USAID provided 50 ventilators to Kosovo as well.

In October 2020, the British Embassy in Kosovo announced that it had joined forced with the UN and launched a project aimed 'at a series of integrated and inclusive health and education interventions' as a recovery response to the first wave of Covid-19 and to help alleviate potential vulnerabilities connected to future waves. The project was developed in consultation with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and called 'Return to (New) Normal in Kosovo', and is aimed at strengthening resilience through a safe and inclusive return to normality in health and education, and will be implemented until March 2021.

Aid was provided by several countries and international organisations. On 29 May, Austria donated 250 thousand euros for improving Kosovo's capacity in combating the pandemic. Germany donated six thousand coronavirus tests; Italy provided protective equipment; while Japan donated 718 thousand US dollars for expanding the capacities and improving the capabilities for handling the virus. In June, the Qatar Charity (QC) provided medical aid in the amount of 300 thousand US dollars to the Ministry of Health of Kosovo containing 6,500 coronavirus test kits and six ventilators. Switzerland donated 500 thousand Swiss francs; Norway donated 450 thousand euros. Turkey donated protective masks, protective suits and one thousand test kits; UNDP donated three thousand testing kits; and UNICEF donated 1.5 tons of medical aid.

# 5. Conclusion

As predicted, a second wave of Covid-19 has begun to affect the globe. The number of people infected with the virus is increasing by the day. Kosovo is not immune to the re-emerging struggle of preventing the spread of the virus, though its medical capabilities face hardships in responding to the ever-demanding needs. Hoping to curtail the spread of the virus, the government has already started to renew some of the old measures following regional and European trends. Yet admissions to hospital are rising and fear of the impact that the new wave and restrictions will have on the already hard-hit economy is mounting. Citizens have different opinions regarding a potential full lock-down, noting its potential negative impact on the employment rate and private sector, while the government continues to face struggles in passing the needed legislation on economic recovery in parliament due to the lack of votes.

The situation posed by the unpredictable developments related to the Covif-19 pandemic are not the only concerns of the people of Kosovo. As we head towards the cold winter, the potential internal political turmoil remains a concern. A fragile government which has an unstable majority in parliament, continuous fractures within the coalition partners and the need to elect a new president are only some of the issues with which the political system will have to deal with in the coming weeks and months. The persistent demands of the citizens requires a swift economic recovery, internal political consensus and cross-party cooperation in order to overcome these turbulent times.

The European integration of Kosovo still remains a dream since five EU member states do not recognize it as a state, so the need to nurture and build strong, everlasting relations remains crucial. The path to EU integration is linked to the EU-facilitated Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, where expectations are high for a final, legally-binding agreement which will solve all outstanding issues between the two countries. The need to build trust and credibility in the process remains crucial, as does the need for clarity in the goal of the process. The citizens of Kosovo will continue to expect the long-awaited visa liberalisation alongside greater assurances that their road towards real European integration will be provided. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to persist, Kosovo will regard the EU and its member states as partners in ensuring access to the vaccines for its population.

Kosovo will also continue to nurture a close relationship with the new administration in the US which is expected to take office in January 2021, supporting its efforts in consolidating its international standing as well as the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue process.

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