

Coronavirus spreads across the Balkans

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The number of victims affected by the COVID-19 virus is rising rapidly in the countries of Southeast Europe. The rapid spread of the disease throws light in turn on the catastrophic social, economic and political conditions prevailing in the region.

The states of former Yugoslavia and other Balkan countries have tightened up border controls, ordered quarantine for those entering the region from abroad and have imposed a state of emergency in some regions. Such measures, however, have been initiated at far too late a stage and lack any coordination. In addition, the true extent of infections remains unknown. Hardly any tests are carried out in the region and the number of unreported cases must be very large.

Should the COVID-19 pandemic hit Southeast Europe with similar severity as in Italy or Spain, the region's already dilapidated health care system and social infrastructure would be threatened with collapse. Containing the virus would be virtually impossible.

Last Thursday, Croatia blocked its borders for all traffic. The state had confirmed 361 infections as of Tuesday. Over the course of a week, the number of people infected has increased more than six-fold including the first fatality, an elderly man who died a week ago.

Neighbouring Serbia has registered 249 cases, with three fatalities, and has implemented a general curfew between 8:00 in the evening and 5:00 in the morning. Parliamentary elections planned for late April have been postponed and the European Union has agreed to provide the country with €7.5 million to combat the crisis.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the number of cases has risen to 137, with one death. A state of emergency has been declared in both parts of the country.

Up until 8 days ago Montenegro was the last country in Europe to report no COVID-19 infections. Now at least 27 are infected, including two women who returned from the US and Spain, both of whom have tested positive. The state borders have been closed to foreigners and over 1,000 people are currently in quarantine. The state's total population is just 650,000. The government has also

banned all meetings.

A curfew commenced in Albania on Thursday. Most recently 104 infected and 4 deaths were registered there. The disease hotspot is the capital, Tirana, where over half of those infected live.

Twenty-seven cases were declared in Kosovo on Sunday, but due to the state's run-down public administration this number has little meaning. The majority of the working population have found employment abroad, so the real number affected is likely to be much higher.

In the EU member country Bulgaria, 202 people are infected and three have died from the disease. A state of emergency was declared a week ago. A particularly large number of cases have occurred in Slovenia. The country neighbouring Italy has reported 442 infections and three deaths.

The once relatively well-developed public health systems in the region have been systematically dismantled over the last 30 years. The introduction of the capitalist free market, wars in the former Yugoslavia and the privatizations and austerity policies dictated by the EU as a prerequisite for membership have systematically destroyed social networks. In most countries adequate health care is acutely lacking.

The situation is dramatic. The German *taz* newspaper writes, "Everything is missing in clinics, not just medication, cleaning agents and, of course, staff. ... After Germany refused to export protective clothing and face masks outside the EU, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania have been left almost defenceless against the coronavirus epidemic heading their way."

The *New York Times* describes a hospital in the Serbian capital of Belgrade, which is one of the city's "better" hospitals: "With its rundown facade, peeling walls and rooms crammed with metal beds, the downtown Belgrade clinic for infectious diseases has for decades been a symbol of Serbia's depleted health system that now has to cope with a major virus outbreak." The newspaper quotes

Bane Spasic, a newly admitted patient, who said, “If coronavirus doesn’t kill you, that hospital surely will.”

In recent years, all countries in the region have experienced a massive emigration of young doctors, well-trained nursing staff and other medical personnel. This exodus is due to the starvation wages and catastrophic working conditions in the region. It is estimated that up to 50 percent of all doctors and nurses have migrated, mainly to Western European countries where there is a chronic shortage of doctors and nurses. Serbia recently terminated a deal the country struck with Germany to prevent the further migration of nursing staff.

Now retired doctors, who themselves belong to the main group at risk, along with medical students, are being mobilized to maintain health systems. Bulgaria has increased the monthly salary for health care workers by €500. In Albania, where the average salary is around €400, the government has pledged an increase of €1,000. The right-wing government in Serbia led by Aleksandar Vucic also announced a 10 percent wage increase. In all these countries there have been repeated strikes and protests for increased wages in the health care system. These protests in recent years have been ignored and suppressed by respective governments.

In Slovenia, an organisation of young doctors has drawn attention to the precarious situation in the country. According to their calculations, the small state between the Alps and the Adriatic Sea will probably need 500 intensive care beds by mid-April. There are currently just 200 available, which are fully occupied with existing emergency cases.

The Croatian Association of Hospital Physicians declared last Friday that health care facilities in Croatia were under-equipped for a COVID-19 epidemic. According to the organisation, there is an acute shortage of protective equipment, medical supplies and staff, endangering health workers, patients and the entire health care system.

In Bosnia, the head of a Sarajevo clinic, Zlatko Kravic, told the AFP that the country was expecting an “explosion” of the infection that would be “difficult to control.” The two clinics in the capital are not prepared for such a situation. Only 70 respiratory masks are available in both facilities.

The right-wing, generally despised governments in the region have responded to the outbreak of the epidemic with a series of uncoordinated measures. In the former Yugoslavia, the various governments are at loggerheads with one another. Conflicts between Serbia and Croatia,

Albania and Kosovo—and between the rival regions of Bosnia—dominate political life. Under these conditions, coordinated measures in the densely populated region are rendered impossible, let alone mutual support that could curb the spread of the virus.

Instead, governments are trying to divert attention from their own responsibility for the crisis with racist campaigns. In Bulgaria the health system has been completely run down and a large part of the population lives in poverty and misery. Under these conditions the government is stepping up its campaign against the Roma minority in the country on the pretext of fighting the coronavirus.

“In some parts of Bulgaria, tens of thousands of Roma are already subjected to measures reminiscent of martial law,” commented the Euractiv website. Special measures apply to entire districts in Nowa Sagora, Kazanlak and Sliven, which have a total of more than 50,000 Roma. Residents are prevented from leaving the area by massive police force.

The government headed by the conservative GERB of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov is following the orders of its fascist coalition partner VMRO, which is demanding the complete isolation of all citizens who lack “discipline.” As is the case throughout Eastern Europe, the Roma in Bulgaria live under catastrophic conditions. They have no, or only an inadequate, water supply, some have no sewage system and no food supply. If the virus appears here, it will spread unhindered.

The criminal political elites in Southeast Europe are also using the crisis to intensify attacks on the working population. In Croatia, far-right-winger Miroslav Škoro, who won 24 percent of the vote in the presidential election at the end of last year and was supported by several right-wing and conservative parties, has proposed that all employees only be paid the minimum wage in order to support the economy. The minimum wage in Croatia is around €500 per month.



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