

Hundreds protest against lack of coronavirus protection measures in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Under the slogan “Fight for Life,” several hundred people protested Saturday in the capital city of Sarajevo against the Bosnian government’s murderous pandemic policy. The demonstrators demanded the resignation of the government for its failure to procure vaccines and the lack of treatment options. According to official figures, 189,000 people have been infected with COVID-19 in a country of 3.2 million inhabitants, and 7,788 have died from the virus.

Motorists blocked the capital’s train station square and demonstrators then marched in front of the Bosnian parliament. On placards and chanting they called for the resignation of the entire government and the separate administration, which rules the Bosnian Croat part of the country.

The situation in the small, impoverished country between Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro has been dramatic for months. More people have died of COVID-19 in Sarajevo every day than died each day during the Bosnian war, when the city was under constant siege and shelling. In March, an average of 18.5 people per day succumbed to the virus. Some of the deceased could not be buried immediately because undertakers were completely overwhelmed.

A vaccination programme is practically nonexistent. The few vaccine doses available come from international donations or from the COVAX vaccine programme. Most medical staff are not vaccinated, although the country’s few clinics in the main cities are bursting at the seams.

In March, several cities recorded a 14-day incidence of over 1,000, and at last count new infections were at 641 per 100,000 people. Between 80 and 100 deaths were recorded every day in March, and an average of

59 people are dying every day as of April 26. The actual numbers are certainly much higher. In many parts of the country, the authorities are completely overwhelmed with the collection and dissemination of data.

On April 6 more than 1,000 people demonstrated in Sarajevo for protective measures against the pandemic. Politico quoted one participant in the protests who, with her family, demanded her “right to life” be respected. “A month ago, maybe a thousand more people would have participated in this protest. But now these people are dead because of COVID,” she said.

“This disaster has shown that our system of government is a farce, and people are left to fend for themselves,” the magazine quotes another participant, Vedad Zuli?.

Nihad Izmirli?, a health care worker, told Politico, “None of us are complaining about working hours, conditions or overtime. We are angry at the system for not getting vaccines. I put my health and my family’s health on the line to save the lives of as many citizens as possible, and we don’t give up even when we’re tired.”

While the entire population suffers from the criminal inaction of the authorities, the most vulnerable in society are particularly affected. Refugees holding out in inhumane conditions on Bosnia’s border with EU member Croatia are defenceless against the virus.

According to the Associated Press, 147 infections have been registered in just one camp within two weeks, but this probably underestimates the real levels of infection. More than 6,000 people are waiting along the border to enter Croatia. Only some of them are accommodated in the official camps. Many live in

abandoned houses or self-constructed tent camps along the border where there are no sanitary facilities or access to medical care.

In addition to the health risk, the ongoing pandemic has massive economic consequences for the population. According to a UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) report, 24 percent of households had to live on less income last year than before the pandemic. Thirteen percent can no longer afford essential health care, and the situation has worsened for 63 percent of those who were already considered poor before the pandemic. For 20 percent of the poor, their situation has worsened considerably.

Bosnia and Herzegovina can be best described as a failed state. The state entity that emerged from the Dayton Agreement in 1995 is split along ethnic lines into the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska. In order to contain the fierce ethnic conflicts, which were largely provoked by the Western powers, both regions were granted far-reaching autonomy rights.

Both parts of the country are governed by nationalist parties that have been repeatedly embroiled in fierce conflicts. The Serbian part of the country is ruled by Milorad Dodik's SNS. Dodik is notorious for denying Serbian war crimes and regularly stirs up nationalist sentiments. Corrupt, semicriminal and deeply discredited politicians from the nationalist parties rule at all levels of government. It was only after the death toll skyrocketed in March that the first utterly insufficient measures were taken against the spread of COVID-19.

Similar conditions prevail in several other countries in the Balkans. In Kosovo, for example, only about 10,000 of 1.7 million inhabitants have been vaccinated, almost exclusively doctors and people over 80. At last count, a seven-day average of 350 infections and eight deaths per day were reported. Doctors expect that triage will have to be used if the number of patients in critical condition continues to rise. Although shopping centres and restaurants have been closed, schools and businesses remain open.

Of the two million residents of North Macedonia, just 26,000 have received an initial vaccine dose. New records were set earlier this month with over 1,300 new infections daily. The public health system is in dire straits, and health care in public clinics is no longer

guaranteed. Private clinics offer COVID-19 treatments for the country's narrow wealthy upper class for the equivalent of 20,000 euros, but the clinics refused to lower their prices to allow more people to receive treatment.

The fact that vaccines were not provided for months in many countries is due to political factors. Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and other states such as Montenegro could have obtained vaccines from China or Russia long ago. For fear of negative reactions from the EU, however, those in power refused to agree to contracts.

Only when the pressure from the population became too great and supplies from the West were not available, did some states decide for assistance from Russia. For weeks, people from Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo and other states have been travelling to Serbia in the hope of receiving a vaccination there. Serbia recently received large shipments of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V.

Apparently, political pressure from the Western powers is so intense that North Macedonia's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev explicitly apologised to its "strategic partners" for ordering the Chinese vaccine and assured that the procurement was "not a geopolitical issue."



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