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Interview with prof. Sead Turčalo

Geopolitics of the pandemic: Is democracy really dying in isolation?

Interviewed by Nejra Veljan

Sead Turčalo is Associate Professor, and Dean of the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Sarajevo. His research interests include critical geopolitics, contextual political analysis, and conflict management. He teaches Geopolitics, International Security, Conflict Management in International Relations, and Energy Security. He has been with the Atlantic Initiative since its founding, and is currently a board member.

In this interview for the AI Newsletter, he analyses the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on mezzo and macro geopolitical levels, and explains to what extent a state of emergency - which has been introduced by some countries – can contribute to the power consolidation of authoritarian rulers and the collapse of liberal democracy as we know it.

Let's begin with Bosnia and Herzegovina. What is your view of the responses to the Covid-19 crisis by different government levels in BiH?

Looking back at the past two weeks, and considering the extent of fragmentation in some crucial elements of the system in response to this public health crisis, from healthcare to security - which includes protection and rescue - we can say that the response has been satisfying.

The pandemic has demonstrated that the government can activate some elements of vital government functions in the initial response to the crisis. However, after only seven or eight days, certain drawbacks appeared in the functioning of governmental structures such as: considerable confusion regarding the deployment of the Armed Forces, the vertical and horizontal coordination of governmental structures and crisis teams and other specialized bodies designed to manage crises. Generally, both the media and the general public had the impression that the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina was performing inadequately.

At the lower levels, the Entities and cantons started viewing the crisis as an opportunity to further consolidate their position of power against the state. Cracks within the system that were already visible in normal political circumstances, become even more obvious in the state of emergency, providing an opportunity to widen the cracks.

We noticed this in the way that the different Entities managed the crisis. What does this disparity signify in terms of measures and differences between the RS and the Federation?

Any crisis management as regards an efficient and effective response to emergency situations requires a clear hierarchical structure and decision-making chain. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this approach requires a nationally coordinated synergetic response. In order to achieve this, the Entities must recognise that for a faster and more efficient capacity for preventative measures; measures to decrease adverse effects, normalize the situation, and eliminate negative consequences of the crisis, a state-level coordination mechanism is a necessity.

This ideal situation having synergetic response to the crisis has not, and cannot, happen. Therefore, we cannot approach the behaviour of the two Entities, particularly Republika Srpska, outside the context

of constant political pressures regarding the mere existence and functioning of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina; pressures which are present in normal circumstances but have exhibited clear signs of variation during this crisis.

That is why we have completely separate crisis management structures in the Entities, and efforts by the Republika Srpska Entity to implement international aid separately from the state, mostly from the countries whose governments affirm authoritarianism as the ruling format. They accept the aid through state-level canals only when required by international donors and partners.

Essentially, there is a deepening of *Entity-level isolation* to the point where we can encounter a *security* dilemma regarding the termination of the state of emergency. Specifically, which Entity will lift the state of emergency (RS) or the state of natural disaster (FBiH) first, and can the Serb Presidency member Milorad Dodik reaffirm the idea of deploying RS police along the imagined inter-entity line under the guise of public health and security protection?

Can you explain the existing conflict between national isolation and global solidarity? What does this mean for the future of the international order, particularly as regards the EU and the Western Balkans?

Globally, the first reactions to the crisis were almost expected. They acted as per the *realpolitik* principle of self-help, reflexively believing that it is enough to rely on themselves in order to overcome the crisis. The most efficient response, even among countries that constitute a prototype of liberal democracy and free market, involved nationwide shutdowns, stricter border controls, and other restrictive measures.

The expectations of the effectiveness of those measures results from the Chinese approach to the fight against COVID-19, which has been perceived as successful. However, one forgets that the high levels of totalitarian character of the Chinese political system contributed to the epidemic's momentum and gradual growth into a pandemic. We have seen video footage and written statements of Chinese doctors who were prevented from revealing the appearance of an unknown strain of coronavirus

when they first noticed it. When the number of infected persons started growing exponentially, full physical and technological control of the population was introduced, all forms of privacy were practically abolished, and the crisis was put under control.

The belief that only this approach can resolve the crisis negates any chance of solidarity. Totalitarian and *realpolitik* approaches by definition imply the absence of cooperation.

As the situation worsened, even EU Member States began partially accepting similar approaches. This proved to be counterproductive because the lack of response to Italy's plea for help for medical equipment, and then the decision to ban exports of such equipment outside the EU undermined not only internal EU solidarity, but also conveyed a message to the countries of the Western Balkans that they were left on their own. The Union practically forgot about the Solidarity Clause of the Lisbon Treaty, leaving its member state to fight on its own in the initial phase. At the same time, the lack of sensitivity for non-member countries was made evident when the EU banned exports of medical protective equipment, demonstrating that the Western Balkans was practically the periphery of the periphery. Some countries like China and Russia took advantage of this, appearing in Italy and some countries of the Western Balkans as friends in need, through well-staged media stints.

Since you mention the European Union in the context of a collision between national isolation and global solidarity, what kind of repercussions can this have in BiH, considering the aspirations of those "helpers," primarily Russia and China, but also the tendencies of Turkey to strengthen its influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

At the very initial stage of the crisis, the European Union took an entirely wrong step by banning exports of medical protective equipment outside of its borders. Creators of anti-EU sentiment and promoters of the Eurasian geopolitical idea in the region effectively presented such a step in the media as the EU's message that the countries on its "margins" could not expect any solidarity from its "core" countries.

Although the European Union is the largest individual donor in the fight against COVID-19, and although it found a way for Bosnia and Herzegovina to participate in the procurement of medical equipment from the EU, the initial decision echoes much more strongly than the ongoing activities of the Union what are aimed at providing support to the entire region of the Western Balkans.

Russia, China, and even Turkey took advantage of this by taking on the role of friends in need, strengthening the perception of themselves as an alternative for the region, should the region be tired of its expectations of the EU. It should be noted that while Turkey and China sent help through BiH state-level canals, Russia delivered medical aid to the Republika Srpska Entity, practically affirming the supremacy of the entity level over the state level.

The post-pandemic phase will be the crucial period when the Union should close the door to any opposition to the Euro-Atlantic integration of BiH and other countries in the region. I think that in this post-pandemic period, rather than insisting on completing their internal reconsolidation, the EU should focus on, a more efficient implementation of the enlargement policy, and abandon the preferences for stabilocracy over democratization of the countries of the region.

Otherwise, the very countries that offer their authoritarianism as a model of governance and political action will gain prominence and slowly marginalize the idea of EU integration in the region.

We can see that Eastern Europe, mostly member countries of the former Warsaw Pact, have introduced repressive measures, we can also see that the Entities in BiH adopted restrictive measures such as: curfew, ban on movement for the age groups under 18 and above 65, and a prohibition on the dissemination of "fake news." Is there a possibility that such measures may be abused as instruments of punishment for political opponents? What do these emergency measures mean for the BiH political context and the democracy ideal that we strive for?

I already mentioned that China presented its authoritarian political management as a successful model for COVID19 crisis resolution. Eastern European countries slowly started embracing this approach by introducing a series of restrictive measures. Serbia went the farthest by introducing a state of emergency, rigorous curfew, and bringing the army into the streets. Apart from physical control, President Aleksandar Vučić and his regime decided to restrict the media by deeming even a presentation of shortfalls in the public health system in Serbia as a criminal offense against public peace and order.

The Republika Srpska applied a similar model: immediately upon proclaiming a state of emergency, that gives the president of the Entity the power to make legal decisions, the RS adopted a similar decree banning of the perpetration of panic and disorder during the state of emergency. Although the measures against persons who disseminate false information on social networks may be somewhat justifiable, it is possible that such regulations could legalize media restrictions. A journalist was arrested in neighbouring Serbia for reporting on the lack of protective medical equipment, which the government interpreted as public disturbance.

You shared examples of abuse and other hidden dangers of these measures. Once the coronavirus is under control, what will happen with all these repressive measures and the political actors who introduced them? Can we expect a more authoritarian rule?

The problem with the state of emergency and related restrictions is that the longer they last the more it leads to the normalization of authoritarian practices. This is best illustrated by a comparison to the migration crisis. The behaviour of Hungary, including installing barbed wire along the borders, was initially condemned, but after a while the practice was accepted by other European countries.

In addition, extraordinary circumstances are exploited for the further delegitimization of state institutions, especially in fragile countries with strong anti-sovereignty forces such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. Decision making and operations are further transferred to the Entity level, while the state is gradually denied its coordinating role, and public healthcare becomes strongly securitized. This securitization is dangerous since security in

Bosnia and Herzegovina is extremely atomized, and securitization demonstrates that the state is unable to protect its citizens, and that only crisis managers on the Entity and/or cantonal level are able to do it.

The Central Election Commission (CEC) in BiH announced the delay of local elections in October 2020. What are their reasons, considering that October is in 7 months, and what does this mean for the political situation in BiH?

The announced delay of the local elections seems premature at this point. Besides, in view of the frictions produced by the Parliament's decision to appoint new Bosniak and Serb members of the Central Election Commission, it is unlikely that the majority of political parties which, conditionally speaking, exert influence in the state Parliament will support the proposed amendments to the Election Law that would enable the CEC to postpone the elections in this emergency situation.

Can we expect a higher voter turnout in the next elections and greater involvement of BiH citizens in political issues in general due to the current situation? Why? What implications can that have for the current political constellation?

This may sound pessimistic, but I do not see any circumstances conducive to the empowerment of civil movements and articulation of their ideas, including a greater voter turnout, that would not be hindered by ethnic issues. Even a crisis of such proportions cannot force the authorities to act outside of an ethnic framework because of a total ethno-political centralization in the country, on the one hand, and a total decentralization of the country, on the other hand. We had examples where requests for social justice grew into a public protest, and were demobilized by the rigid boundary which was produced by decentralization interpreted as ethno-territorialisation, and were practically reduced to two cantons only. Elections after those protests neither resulted in a greater turnout, nor encouraged a lasting process of the development of a more participatory political culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We mostly remained within the framework of the parochial-servile political culture. Even when citizens possess certain knowledge about the political process, due to dependence on

the will of ethno-political leaders, they are unable to reason or elect autonomously and freely. They are hindered by their collectivist ethnic attachment, leaving the impression that the BiH political process is stuck in a vicious cycle, where it is impossible to make any significant political changes. All these shortcomings have been spotlighted by the pandemic. ∎

Predrag Petrović, program director of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

A View from Serbia: Epidemic of Coronavirus, Autocracy and Chinese Iron Friendship

The first case of coronavirus in Serbia was officially registered on 6 March 2020, two days after the announcement of elections, and one day after the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) had collected signatures and submitted them to the Republic Electoral Commission (REC). When the case was publicly announced, Serbian president and SNS leader Aleksandar Vučić boasted 90,000 signatures collected for the SNS. At first, Serbian authorities not only failed to take the potential spread of the coronavirus seriously, but they publicly ridiculed the threat. At a press conference at the Presidential Office held on 26 February, pulmonologist Branimir Nestorović said: "I cannot believe that the people that survived sanctions, air strikes, and various kinds of maltreatments can fear the funniest virus in the history of humankind, which exists on Facebook." He then advised women to go shopping in Milan, since oestrogen makes them less susceptible to the infection. He continued to say that he had strongly opposed the procurement of additional masks and tests at the meeting at the Presidential Office, and that such a fuss and closing of borders in response to this virus were beyond his grasp.

However, as the epidemic spread throughout Europe and countries started introducing more restrictive preventative measures, Serbian temporary migrant workers slowly started returning home. Initial assessments indicated 30,000 potential returnees, which terrified the Serbian authorities because the majority were coming back from countries that had already been affected by the virus. In reality, over 70,000 returnees were officially registered on 20 March. Based on calculations of the virus' trajectory, it was estimated that the coronavirus epidemic would reach its peak in Serbia in mid-April, just before the recently announced elections.

The funniest virus in the world introduced the state of emergency

It became obvious that the Serbian Government could not ignore the coronavirus, and that they had to take more serious measures. On 15 March, they proclaimed the state of emergency, instead of an emergency situation, to the (partial) surprise of experts. In Serbia's legal system the distinction is as follows: an emergency situation occurs when the risk or threat is of a size and intensity that their effect cannot simply be eliminated by relevent agencies, but require special measures, additional resources and an intensified work regime. The law explicitly names pandemics and epidemics of communicable diseases among those risks. Conversely, the Serbian Constitution dictates that a state of emergency can be proclaimed when "a public danger threatens the survival of the state or citizens." This is why some of the experts believed that an emergency situation would have been much more appropriate for the circumstances.

In addition, the way in which the state of emergency was proclaimed is disputable. The President of the Republic, Assembly Speaker and the Prime Minister had made the decision to proclaim a state of emergency together because, as the President explained, the National Assembly was unable to hold a session. Although the Constitution allows for such a possibility, the reason that "the Assembly was unable to hold a session" was because the Government had banned assemblies of more than 100 people in a closed space on 12 March - rather than being factually impossible. It is important to note that the Serbian Assembly used to hold sessions in much more difficult circumstances – under the immediate war threat, during the war, and during the typhus epidemic.

According to media reports, a day before the declaration, Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin sent a letter to the Serbian President proposing the introduction of the state of emergency. According to Vučić, "The state of emergency is introduced if the defence minister sends a letter to the supreme commander, the president of the state, saying that the national security is under a threat." However, the Serbian Constitution does not recognize a "supreme commander". Considering all the presented facts, it seems that this is a case of an extraordinary enhancement of the president's role in extraordinary circumstances.

By proclaiming a state of emergency instead of an emergency situation, the Serbian authorities were allowed greater flexibility, or a "carte blanche". It allowed them to restrict certain human rights, including the electoral right, and the REC suspended all election activities in advance of the elections scheduled for 26 April. Moreover, the government introduced a curfew for the first time since the Second World War. This movement ban applies to those age 65+ in urban areas, and 70+ in rural areas. They can go out only on Sundays between 3 a.m. and 8 a.m. in order to buy groceries. For other citizens, the curfew currently applies from 5 p.m. to 5 a.m., and from 3 p.m. to 5 a.m. on weekends. It was imposed by order of the Minister of Internal Affairs, although the Serbian Constitution prescribes that the Government should introduce such measures in situations when the Assembly is unable to hold a session. Measures prescribed during a state of emergency are supervised by the army and the police, and at the beginning helicopters were supervising the curfew compliance.

Although the Serbian President admitted that "we have the most stringent measures in Europe", it is worrying that he repeatedly announced a two-week 24-hour curfew, and that one of the loudest voices behind the ruling, SNS Nebojša Krstić, also advocated for the shutdown of social networks. It ought to be noted that the state of emergency allows for the suspension of freedom of speech. The fact that on 28 March the Serbian Government adopted a conclusion on the centralisation of public pandemic-related information, with the option of sanctioning "unauthorised persons" who publish information about the coronavirus, indicates that

this suspension is not merely theoretical. This decision was not posted on the Government's website, and there has been no official information about its adoption to date. In fact, it has been deemed a secret document.

Arrests, detentions and online "courts-martial"

One of the measures prescribed by the Serbian government to fight the epidemic is the compulsory 14-day self-isolation, which was recently extended to four weeks for citizens coming from areas threatened by the virus. They are issued an oral or written order at the border, and failure to comply results in a criminal offence for violating healthcare regulations during an epidemic, punishable by a fine or imprisonment for up to three years. The authorities are rigorously trying to implement this measure, and according to information from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, criminal reports were filed against 667 persons, and 117 people were detained on this ground by 28 March.

This poses several problems. Firstly, how do the authorities supervise self-isolation compliance? Police patrols evidently visit people who were ordered to self-isolate, but the Serbian president has also been heard saying: "We track telephone numbers, primarily Italian ones. We do not eavesdrop, but we monitor if people with Italian numbers are roaming move around - and they do... Do not think that you will trick us by leaving the telephone in one place, because we found another way to monitor who violates the rules imposed by the state, and how." According to the law, access to retained data is not allowed without the user's consent, except for a limited time and based on a court decision.

Moreover, the police are detaining citizens who were not even aware of their obligation to self-isolate, because they were not informed about the measure. Jovana Popović from Kikinda is among the arrested persons. In the beginning of the year, she released the song "Bagra" (Scum) which criticizes the current government, and performed it at the opposition assembly which announced the boycott of April elections. Ivana Berić from Sombor is in a similar situation. It is highly problematic that courts have started imposing very stringent prison sanctions due to self-isolation non-compliance, conducting

summary proceedings via Skype. A resident of Dimitrovgrad, a small town in Serbia, was given a maximum three-year imprisonment sentence over Skype. Almost simultaneously, two inhabitants of Požarevac were sentenced to two and two and a half years in prison respectively, after they underwent similar "trials." Lawyers pointed out that numerous criminal procedure rights of the sentenced had been violated, and that imposing the (almost) maximum prison sentences was very illogical. In addition, the trials were extremely short which deviates from the court practice in Serbia, and lawyers believe that this is the first step in the introduction of "online courts-martial."

There are other examples of governmental abuse of the state of emergency that are not related to self-isolation measures. For example, a KTV television crew from Zrenjanin was arrested when city authorities reported them for failing to disinfect themselves when they entered the Municipality building. On that occasion, the KTV crew was trying to report on how it was possible for city authorities to announce a public bidding for the lease of national agricultural land when public assemblies had been banned. The saved video footage shows that the KTV crew was wearing protective equipment (masks and gloves), unlike the Municipality employees. Another important example is that the government is adopting many regulations on a daily basis, some of which have not been published, and even lawyers have difficulty tracking them in the current circumstances, let alone ordinary citizens, and it is actually very difficult to know "what is allowed, and what is prohibited."

Only Xi (Jinping) Saves Serbia

Apart from introducing a state of emergency, President Vučić sharply tightened his rhetoric against the EU at a press conference on 15 March, after the Union announced restrictions on exports of medical equipment from Member States. The Serbian President said that "there is no high level of international or European solidarity," calling it a "fairy tale on paper", and emphasized that only China could help Serbia, and that they pinned all their hopes on that country. The problem with the EU is that it is unable to deliver the help it is offering to Serbia. On the other hand, "there is not a single material or machine that China did not approve; (they approved) everything we asked for."

Initial aid from China consisted of medical equipment and experts and arrived as early as 21 March. Vučić extended special thanks to President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party of China for helping the small Serbia, and emphasized to his own citizens that everything China sent was free of charge. This is why, "Serbia must not forget it. China is our friend forever, for who knows how many hundreds and thousands of years… I am saying this honestly and freely. I do not care what people around the world will say." Vučić also announced that Serbia would obey and do everything Chinese experts say, which quickly proved true, when they adopted the so-called "Chinese model of fight against coronavirus." According to Vučić, they wait to hear the opinion of Chinese experts even when it comes to imposing more stringent measures and introducing a 24-hour curfew for citizens. As a sign of gratitude, Chinese flags and billboards with photographs of Xi Jinping saying "Thank you, brother XI" were posted all around Belgrade

This has made many domestic and foreign experts talk about Serbia's foreign policy turn towards China however it is still early to draw any reliable conclusions, considering the absence of western countries as they attempt to restrain the virus in their own territories. At the moment, Chinese interests and those of the ruling party are aligned. It suits China to minimize the damage on its reputation made by hiding the pace and volume of coronavirus in its territory, which resulted in the epidemic overflowing around the whole world and the inability of other countries to react in a timely manner. By helping others, it tries to present itself as a part of the solution, not the problem, while the western countries (barely) fight the epidemic. It suits the Serbian Government to have a country with experience in the suppression of the epidemic help them cope with this problem, which initially spurred humorous and belated reactions.

In other words, China can help Vučić come out of the epidemic as a leader who beat the coronavirus and saved the population, "with a strong hand" and iron discipline supervised by the army and the police. The message to citizens is clear: a country can only be run successfully with a strong hand, like in

China. This is very important, because Serbia will have elections when the epidemic stops, and the economy will inevitably suffer extensive damage. The government needs a success story to use in the campaign. Vučić announced that China would support Serbia's economic recovery, but it remains to be seen whether this will actually happen. It seems that Vučić's "Chinese manoeuvre" scared the EU with the possibility of stronger Chinese breakthrough to Serbia and the Western Balkans, and "extorted" from the Union a quick reallocation of unspent 93 million EUR from IPA funds intended for Serbia, which can now be spent to fight the epidemic. As a reminder, some of the previous Serbian governments were more or less good in tactical manoeuvring and buying time for themselves, but had poor strategic assessments and positioning of the country.

Collapsed economy undermines Vučić's rule?

The most recent economic estimates indicate that Serbia's GDP may drop by as much as 4.5% if the state of emergency continues for three months, i.e. until June, and damages may reach 900 million EUR. However, if the crisis extends until the end of the year, that number will be twice as high. Three thousand entrepreneurs have frozen operations and Serbia's imports and exports have been cut almost in half which indicates that the economy already suffered serious damage. The media is also reporting that private companies are already firing workers. This is why some economists conclude that the social and economic will be longer and more severe that the epidemic itself. The Serbian Government is aware of this, which is why it established the so-called "economic" crisis staff chaired by the Serbian President. The staff prescribed the first set of measures in the amount of around 5 billion EUR, and the money will be provided from the budget and loans, but the proportion is unknown. One of the adopted economic measures foresees that the state will give 100 EUR to every adult citizen, which amounts to over 5 million EUR. The economic logic behind this measure is completely unclear, and it can only be viewed as a populist move before the elections that will take place after the epidemic stops.

Measures focusing on businesspeople are evidently necessary, but insufficient, and a much wider spectrum of measures is necessary for economic recovery, which will be long. As well, the pace and outcome of those measures will largely depend on the situation in other countries, especially those with which Serbia has well-developed economic relations, such as Germany and Italy. Economists have announced that these countries will face a recession after the epidemic. Previous experiences with previous big economic crises indicate that countries with less knowledge and resources paid the highest price. This is why many believe that the consequences of the coronavirus in Serbia can pose a serious threat on Aleksandar Vučić's rule, if not immediately after the epidemic, then at a later time. It is uncertain if and how China will help Vučić recover Serbia's economy, and what price, economic or political, will citizens eventually be expected to pay. ∎

The view from Montenegro: from Church Processions to Coronavirus crisis

Written by: Tanja Šuković

For almost two months after the arrival of Covid-19 to Europe, not a single case of the virus infection had been registered in Montenegro, and for a whole week, Montenegro was the only coronavirus-free European country. Social networks were flooded with the message "Never say die, kid" , and a map of Europe similar to the early 16th century when Montenegro was the only free territory within the powerful Ottoman Empire, only this time they are surrounded by the coronavirus. Covid-19 crisis has stoped the Serbian Orthodox Church processions, which have been continuously taking place since the beginning of 2020. Although the formal reason for mass assemblies was to protest the Law on the Freedom of Religion, they served as a catalyser for denial of the Montenegrin state and nation, with the open support from Serbia and hidden support from Russia. Thus, in a strange way, the initial resistance to Covid-19 became part of the identity narrative of Montenegrin sovereignists in social media.

Just as many thought, for an inapprehensible reason, that this plague would bypass us, and the witty ones wondered if a hunt for Montenegrins would begin "so that they can make vaccines from us", Prime Minister Duško Marković announced the first two registered cases of coronavirus infection during a special address to the Montenegrin public on 17 March. Names were not released, but in such a small environment it took only minutes to find out who picked up the virus during their stays in Barcelona and the USA.

That the first to be infected had been in contact with their families and numerous others clearly indicated that a "cluster" was established, and that the number of infected persons would rise. The first serious disturbance took place when the municipality of Tuzi was turned into a quarantine because of several persons who had arrived from the USA infected by Covid-19. However, Nik Đeljošaj, the mayor of this majority-Albanian municipality reacted in a timely manner. He encouraged his fellow citizens to abide by the isolation rules, with the traditional Albanian "besa"- a pledge of honour, a promise that must be kept at any cost – including ones own life. Since then, with only a few exceptions, citizens of Tuzi and Malesija have respected the "besa" and, twenty days later, it seems that they managed to avoid a disaster, since the number of infected persons (34) has not changed for days.

Thus far the Montenegrin Government and all national healthcare institutions have taken the right steps. If not for irresponsible individuals, the number of infected persons would be almost negligible. However, by Saturday 4 April, 201 infected persons had been registered, and two people had died.

Let's now go back to the measures that enabled Montenegro to resist the infection for so long.

These measures primarily included preventive actions taken in a timely manner. Montenegro started preparing for the fight against COVID-19 weeks before any nationally registered cases; the government established the National Coordination Body for Communicable Diseases, which began adopting measures and issuing recommendations on 28 February, two weeks before the first registered case of COVID-19.

Travels to the most severely affected areas of Europe and Asia were banned and all passengers in transit and those returning from the affected areas were required to self-isolate. On 13 March, cruisers and yachts were banned from sailing into Montenegrin ports, and the majority of border crossing points were closed. Several other measures were implemented in the same week. Public sports events were cancelled on 11 March, and classes in primary and secondary schools and universities were suspended days later on the 16th. Discotheques, bars and nightclubs, coffee shops and restaurants, children's daycares, fitness centres, casinos, bet shops and gambling houses were also banned. The number of customers in shops, marketplaces, and counter services was restricted and lines were drawn in order to fascilitate proper distancing between individuals.

In line with these measures, city and intercity public transportation was suspended and the number of passengers was limited to two per vehicle.

With all the risks implied by these measures, the Montenegrin Government announced that they would not let a single Montenegrin citizen down. National airliner Montenegro Airlines organised dozens of charter flights in order to return Montenegrins from other countries, and to transport foreign nationals to their home countries. Upon their arrival in Montenegro, all Montenegrin citizens had to spend two weeks in designated quarantine facilities. Montenegrin media outlets published dozens of stories about life in quarantine, and often touching videos about returns to the homeland.

The coronavirus epidemic uncovered the humane side of Montenegrin society. Thus far, almost 6 million EUR has been donated to the National Coordination Body by business entities, public personalities, sportspeople and entrepreneurs.

In parallel to the increase of readiness of the health system, alternative solutions were sought for daily life under the new circumstances. In only seven days, teachers recorded lectures for elementary and secondary school students, and the classes have been broadcasted regularly on three channels. Surveys indicate that these programs have extremely high ratings. Many jobs are now performed from home,

some restaurants changed their focus to food delivery, and construction workers continue working with appropriate safety measures.

An intense everyday campaign is being run through the media and social networks, focusing on prevention measures and sharing information about decisions made by the National Coordination Body and the Montenegrin Government, designed to slow down the epidemic and minimize its impact.

The Montenegrin economy will clearly face serious consequences of the government's decision to give priority to public health. Some branches such as tourism, transport, hospitality, etc., will be affected more than others. This is why measures were adopted in order to ease the financial burden of companies; specifically as relates to their banking and tax liabilities. These measures include: 90 day postponement of loan repayment by all banks, microcredit institutions and the Investment Development Fund, applicable to citizens and companies; postponement of payment of taxes and contributions on wages; creation of a new credit line by the IDF - Investment Development Fund, intended for the improvement of liquidity of entrepreneurs, micro, small, medium and large enterprises up to the maximum amount of three million EUR per user, applying the simplified procedure, without a loan processing fee, with interest rate of 1.5%. These funds are intended for companies in the business of procuring medications, medical equipment and vehicles; tourism and hospitality; transport; services, food production and processing. Another adopted measure included the allocation of one million EUR to be divided into 50 eur per pensioner receiving minimum pensions, and social welfare beneficiaries.

A team was established with the task of preparing a new set of measures to support the Montenegrin economy. The primary goal being to preserve economic substance and prevent mass layoffs. According to the available data, there have been no layoffs in the public sector. The deadline for the submission of reports on paid salaries and contributions to the Tax Administration is on 15 April; afterwards it will be known if there were any layoffs in the private sector. Montenegrans have realized that the tourist season will be the most severely affected by the coronavirus,

and they believe that this is reflective of a serious downturn in the overall economy. Difficulties with the international trade are also expected.

Considering that this society has been deeply divided for a long time, all measures and actions by governmental institutions have received an unexpectedly high level of public support. According to a survey implemented by the Ipsos agency, citizens who believe that these institutions can successfully fight the coronavirus outnumber the sceptics. Montenegrans supported the establishment of the National Coordination Body, and as many as three-quarters fully support this activity while over four-fifths of citizens believe that the state transparent about coronavirus-related information. Sources for information on the coronavirus are the TV (87 % of citizens), online news portals (31 %), and social networks (21 %). Only 6 % of the public looks for information on the websites of relevant institutions, including the Ministry of Health and the Public Health Institute.

Domestic media outlets demonstrated an unusually high level of social responsibility while reporting on the coronavirus epidemic in Montenegro, the exceptions being "In4s" and "Borba", known as Montenegrin branches of Belgrade and Moscow. However, numerous Serbian tabloids and televisions began a media war against Podgorica which intensified after the ventilator scandal. Namely, Montenegro had ordered five ventilators from a Swedish company, two of which were in stock in Zagreb and thus immediately delivered to Montenegro. The remaining three were located in Belgrade, but Serbia refused to deliver them due to their regulation banning exports of medical supplies and other equipment used to combat the infection. When the story went public, Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia held the press conference where he accused the Montenegrin government of lying, and offered to give them five ventilators. The Montenegrin Government rejected the offer.

Montenegro's situation, caused by Serbia's decision to ban exports of basic provisions, medical supplies, and means of protection and disinfection, was solved by buying medical equipment from China, and assistance from the European Union and the UNDP.

An airplane with 17 tons of medical equipment landed in Montenegro from China on Saturday, the 4th of April. Previously an agreement had been signed between the European Union, UNDP and Montenegrin Government, which foresaw the allocation of three million EUR from EU funds as a response to Montenegro's need for immediate support in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to contribute to the mitigation of coronavirus consequences for social and economic flows, the European Union announced that it would provide short-term and mid-term assistance for the recovery of its partners on the Western Balkans. This includes support to the private sector, increase of social protection with a special focus on vulnerable groups, and strengthening the public healthcare system. 50 million EUR will be allocated for Montenegro for these purposes.

In a fake-news campaign launched on social media and in tabloids in Serbia and Montenegro, these media consistently tried to create the impression that the EU had turned its back on Montenegro and the Western Balkans, and that help could only be expected from Russia and China.

Others tried to cause panic on social networks by spreading fake news about the government allegedly lying, not only about the size of the epidemic, but also about the level of supplies of food and other basic provisions.

In the beginning of March, the Government was faced with this fake news campaign which was causing city dwellers to obsessively buy basic provisions. The Economic Minister, Dragica Sekulić announced that in just seven days, Montenegrans had bought a 4-month supply of basic provisions.

The chief special prosecutor, Milivoje Katnić said on 26 March that "the prosecutor's office pays special attention to persons who cause panic and upset the public and those who fail to respect measures of the Government and Ministry of Health aimed at suppression of the coronavirus epidemic." Three days later, Tivat police arrested a Russian citizen for causing panic and disorder by publishing on a social network account that 1000 people were infected by coronavirus in Montenegro, that six people had died, and that Montenegro was about

to become like Italy. She also noted in her post that Avala Hotel employees were infected and hospitalized with coronavirus.

Some of the Government's measures were met with controversy. For example, when the National Coordination Body for Communicable Diseases began to publish the names of people who were required to self-isolate for 14 days. The names of 62 people from Podgorica were thus made public online. This decision was made with the approval of the Agency for Protection of Personal Data and Free Access to Information. The Government condemned the publication of the list in a press release and called on competent national institutions to urgently identify the distributors of such information.

The office of the state prosecutor started an investigation in order to establish who had published the list of people infected with coronavirus in Podgorica.

Even so, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), its priests and believers were the "hardest nut to crack". The famous processions continued until 12 March, gathering tens of thousands of people. Whereas the Islamic Community and Catholic Church had announced at the beginning of March that they would suspend religious rituals during the epidemic, the Orthodox church continued their temple processions, holy communions using one spoon, and other high-risk activities despite the Government's recommendation to adapt assemblies and religious rituals to the ongoing threat of infection. SOC priests stubbornly continued preaching that nobody had ever gotten infected during holy communions which have been practiced for two thousand years.

At the time of writing this text (Saturday, 4 April), Montenegro has not introduced a state of emergency, but a rigorous movement restriction is in force. The National Coordination Body has banned people from leaving their homes between 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. during the week, and from 1 p.m. to 5 a.m. on weekends.

Finally, here is something encouraging from Montenegro.

"Today, we discharged the first recovered patient. The joy is even greater because the patient was about to be put on a ventilator for a while," director of the Clinical Centre Jevto Eraković said at a press conference on 3 April. The recovered patient is from Bar, he is a former sportsman, born in 1974.

A day later, the youngest coronavirus patient, a three-year-old from Bijelo Polje was discharged for home treatment. ∎

COVID-19 and work from home – opportunities, chances and limitations

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Before the appearance of COVID-19, the idea of working from home was fairly romanticized. Hollywood films feature girls, boys, women, men working on their computers in a relaxed home environment, balancing all their private and professional obligations without losing time on transportation, and having chats with colleagues and expensive lunches during their breaks. However, as many Bosnians and Herzegovinians are now forced to work from home during the coronavirus crisis, a realistic question is can we be equally productive working from home as we are when we work in the office?

Even before the crisis, work from home (online) was entering Bosnia and Herzegovina "through the back door", but had not been fully accepted yet among employers and employees. This is primarily because this form of work has not been fully regulated by law, but there are many other reasons making the Bosnian-Herzegovinian workforce unprepared for it. Considering that this article was inspired by personal motives and experiences, we focused on the evaluation of positive and negative aspects of working from home, and on technical opportunities for productivity improvement, including the use of new communication tools.

1. Work from home - pros and cons

Working from home largely depends on the use of modern technologies, especially those from the field of communications. Social distancing is very important during the global pandemic, and in order to reduce the interaction and possibility for spreading of the infection, a switch to remote business activities is recommended. However, not every company/firm is prepared for remote operations. They need to change the way things are done and planned which requires ideas and innovation from both employers and employees.

The issue of working from home has been a headlining topic in the past few weeks. Although it is not unknown in the business world, working from home has become the prevailing work method in some professions with the appearance of COVID-19. Globally, this form of work has been applied in some occupations ever since the 1960s, and today it accounts for a significant GDP share in many countries. Working from home is the most widespread in Northern Africa, Western Europe, Australia, India and Malaysia. Occupations that account for the largest share of this form of work are: programming, insurance, telecommunications, online sale and healthcare. Persons in the age group of 25-34 constitute the highest percentage of employees in online work – 26.5%[1].

Productivity is the key component of our engagement at work. As friendly an employee as you may be, kind and liked by co-workers and supervisors, you will hardly be able to keep your job in the long run without productivity and measurable results. Your level of productivity is measured differently depending on your profession (sales - very easily measurable, teacher – not so easy, but feasible in the long run), but it is inevitably measured through

comparison to others (how many units a co-worker sold compared to your number of sold units; how many project activities were implemented by a team member compared to another team member etc.) It is difficult to measure performance, success and ambitions without co-workers (except in some professions). Interestingly, productivity can more easily be tracked when working from home. By sending emails, analyses, and articles, we demonstrate that our level of productivity did not drop, that we keep trying, that we still care for our jobs, and that we have not become lazy or apathetic. Nevertheless, this work method has its rules, values, and communication systems that allow us to be productive, collegial and goal oriented. Of course, all of this is much easier if you find meaning in your work, if you believe that what you do benefits your community, and especially if you contribute to the common good at this time of crisis.

In the most recent study conducted by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2018, around 57% of participants followed some form of flexible working hours. The study showed that 42 million workers could do their jobs from home, and that 36 million workers partly work from home[2]. One of the most important studies on working from home "State of Remote Work 2018 report by Owl Labs" indicated that employees are willing to work from home even for a lower salary (34% by 5%, 24% by 10%, and 20% by over 10%). Employees shared several reasons why they prefer to work from home including: easier balance of private and professional obligations, increased productivity, and avoiding transportation stress. At the same time, employers can enjoy multiple benefits including lower costs of lease and office maintenance, office supplies, and utilities[3].

Fans of working from home often refer to the 2014 study by Professor Nicolas Bloom[4]. His study followed employees at a Chinese travel agency and showed that those who worked from home were 13% more productive than those who worked in offices. Nevertheless, those who oppose the idea [working from home] believe that direct productivity is not and cannot be the only measure of an employee's performance. Creativity and new ideas are developed mostly in cooperation with other team members, which can hardly be achieved without personal contact. We have all been in a situation where we resolved a seemingly impossible problem after a short conversation with co-workers.

It is a fact that working from home can be a lonely endeavor. For a while, you are happy because you do not have to pick work clothes, travel by car or public transportation, but after a few days you begin to miss seeing people on the tram or in the post office, and having coffee with your colleagues. Social interaction is very important, it has a positive impact on our mental health, productivity at work, expands our views and options, as well as contributes to our focus and orientation to results. Steve Jobs, one of the business revolutionaries of our era did not like to work from home because he believed that employees developed the best ideas when they talked to one another and socialized.

In addition, like office jobs, working from home largely depends on the individual, his/her motivation and work ethics, and on circumstances in their private life. Balancing professional obligations and home isolation restrictions is a challenging task. Private work and care for small children are not balanced easily, but it is not impossible. This is illustrated by the following example:

"I think it is harder to work from home, because I have all the necessary equipment in my office: computer with bigger desktop screen, printer, scanner, but more importantly, there are colleagues with whom I can exchange opinions, which is very important in my job. Since my company has a large number of employees and high level of competitiveness, work from home is a huge burden as requests are higher and there are more tasks to complete, because we have to justify our time and absence from offices, and the pressure is bigger than before. Also, as a mother of a school-age child, I have to balance my obligations, but I do this by inspiring him to complete his tasks independently. My business day lasts longer than usual". **Meliha, manager in a pharmaceutical company.**

Meliha believes that one of the negative aspects of work from home is the fact that all employees are not able to complete their tasks online due to the nature of their job, which results in uneven workloads, insufficient engagement of some colleagues, and frustration of those who work more. Also, too

many "conference call discussions" and Skype calls consume time which should be spend on real work, and she believes that the number of such discussions among large numbers of people should be limited.

In addition, the teaching profession has been severely affected by the virus epidemic. In only a few days, teachers were forced to switch to online classes, and to adapt their private lives to their work. Although the adjustment of students and teachers to online technologies may have positive effects, it is a fact that a genuine knowledge transfer cannot happen without in-person contact between students and teachers. Teachers' dissatisfaction with this way of organization is rising. One of the interviewed teachers in one of high schools in Sarajevo said:

"*We are unable to demonstrate many examples (tests, experiments) that are necessary for a successful education. We use Microsoft team, and define grades in this way, but it is very difficult to monitor grading. What is negative is the lack of contact, which is very important in work with young people. As far as I am concerned, balancing of my private life with classes is a bigger problem, because I have two small children who often disturb the teaching process. This situation is uncomfortable for me, but I have no other choice because my parents cannot babysit them due to health threat, and day care centers are closed.*" **Amila, high school physics teacher**

While employers should understand the private obligations of employees and their inability to concentrate fully at home, employees must find a way to adapt to the new conditions and circumstances. Although this may mean that you need to change your life pace and even work longer hours, the new circumstances require our flexibility.

At the moment, working from home for many is no longer a choice, but a reality and an obligation we must accept as part of life. If we fail to adapt to work from home, our productivity, ambitions, and chances for future progress and development will be diminished significantly, which will make it harder for us to return to business-as-usual upon cessation of the virus threat.

2. Use of software for business communication

Our current reality with its many uncertainties is such that, due to global precaution measures related to coronavirus, almost every industry must think of the best ways to conduct work remotely, in order to try to continue working with minimum levels of disruptions. To ensure the continuity of work activities, it is important to be informed about the options for working from home and required tools that can be of use (if not already) in order to maintain communication and remain equally productive.

Software for business communication represents applications that enable team members to exchange data about business activities in real time. They can be used for information transfer, exchange of files in different formats, or for the exchange of sensitive business data in a protected environment. Popular types of communication software include applications that allow for instant messaging (IM), file transfer protocols (FTP), Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP and verbal communication i.e. Internet telephony, and video call systems, all at zero or low cost.

If you are new at working from home, the software you use is as equally important as the hardware. The following are examples of a broad spectrum of software that can help you become efficient in remote work by simplifying communication and cooperation:

1. Zoom Meeting

The Zoom Meeting story began in 2011, when the video conference software market was packed. Zoom is a video conference platform which can be used for video conferences, audio conferences, and webinars,[5] with the options to record meetings and have live discussions/chats. Anyone can use Zoom Meeting free of charge. Zoom's main selling point is that you can use a very generous, free-of-charge account with plenty of options. It is very important

that the use of Zoom is simple and intuitive, and that even those who are not advanced IT users can easily create a virtual meeting. According to the 2018 survey[6], Zoom is the most popular solution for video conferences for companies with 500 employees or less, and the second most popular solution for companies with more than 500 employees, losing out to Skype (*Skype for Business*). To try this software, click: https://zoom.us
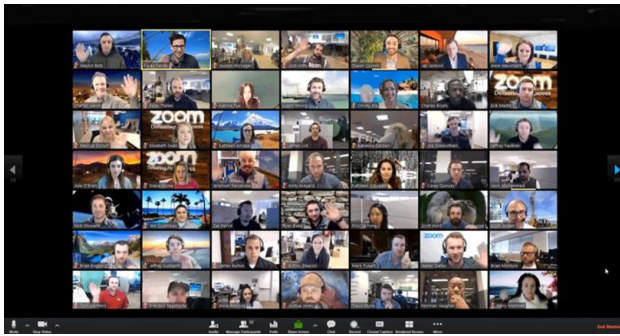

Figure 1: Zoom video conference with 50 participants

2. Google Hangouts

Another option for video meetings is the popular *Google Hangouts.* The application is similar to other communication platforms, and it is characterized by its speed and simplicity in combining the exchange of text messages and video discussions. It is a good choice for teams already using G-Suite[7] (Google Suite). Google Hangouts enables quick access to a discussion or videocalls with individuals or groups on platforms. This program **synchronizes on all devices** you use to log into your Google account, which additionally facilitates its use and accelerates communication with others. To be able to use Google Hangouts application, you need a Google account, **Internet connection,** and a computer/laptop or a telephone with camera and microphone. In the beginning of 2017 Google "refreshed" Google hangouts, adapting the platform to suit business users and became particularly useful as a place for employee discussion groups. To access this application, visit: https://hangouts.google.com/

3. GoToMeeting

GoToMeeting is becoming one of the most popular tools for teleconferences, online meetings, and even demonstration sales. It is an extremely flexible tool that can be used from any search engine, and from the majority of mobile devices, with or without camera access. GoToMeeting offers a myriad of excellent functions, even in the free-of-charge version. Professional versions offer more options and are particularly suitable for companies that have offices and employees at several locations. There are three versions of this application: GoToMeeting, GoToWebinar, and GoToTraining. All three versions are very reliable and user friendly. Each version offers a free-of-charge 30-day test trial to help you choose the one that best suits your company. It is extremely easy to create a virtual meeting, convene employees, and seminar or conference participants. You can try the GoToMeeting on this link: https://www.gotomeeting.com/

4. Skype

Skype is one of the best-known pieces of software designed to enable free-of-charge communication between two or more remote computers or smartphones. But these are not the only functions it offers. Skype also enables video calls with several participants, file sending and IM'ing, and even international calls to landline and mobile phones. A useful option is the ability to share your screen with your interlocutor during a call using the *Share Screen* option. Skype has limited the number of video conference call participants to 50 in order to preserve the quality of video calls. Skype is excellent for ordinary users, but also for businesspeople who wish to have one-on-one or group discussions. The

majority of Skype services are free of charge, the exception being calls to landline or mobile phones. Despite the expansion of other social networks and communication modes, statistics indicate that Skype has over 300 million active users per month. Skype is available at: https://www.skype.com/

3. Recommendations for successfully working from home

Based on collected experiences, we recommend the following for successfully working from home:

Wake up at the time when you usually get up when you go to work – it is very important to keep the standard biorhythm. It you want to work from home successfully, wake up on time, and perform your regular morning routine including personal hygiene activities, and donning proper clothing.

Ensure a functional working space – provide a working area where you can place your computer and other work aids. You need to create an environment similar to your workplace environment.

Talk to your household– explain to your household members that they should respect your working hours.

Reprogram your assignments – make a list of activities you can implement without personal contact with co-workers and partners.

Define your objectives and work obligations and implement them during the day – keep detailed records of planned and completed obligations.

Define break times – determine times for lunch, communication with household members, and minor house chores.

Minimize non-productive tasks – do not organize online meetings just to complete working hours.

Plan – the movement restriction will not last forever. Plan your obligations, communicate with partners and pave the road for activities you will be able to implement when you return to standard workflows.

Socialize with colleagues – organize online get-togethers once a week. No talks about work or the virus.

Develop weekly report tables – prepare a detailed report on implemented activities every week, and share it with your supervisors. ∎

ENDNOTES

1   https://www.owllabs.com/state-of-remote-work/2018.
2   https://www.monster.com/career-advice/article/the-benefits-of-working-from-home
3   State od Remote Work report for 2018: https://www.owllabs.com/state-of-remote-work/2018.
4   For more information, see: https://www.nber.org/papers/w18871
5   Webinar is an online seminar which is conducted via online applications i.e. online classrooms.
6   OWL labs - State of Video Conferencing 2018 - https://www.owllabs.com/state-of-video-conferencing
7   G Suite is toolkit for productivity and cooperation developed by Google Cloud, and it was launched for the first time on 28 August 2006.