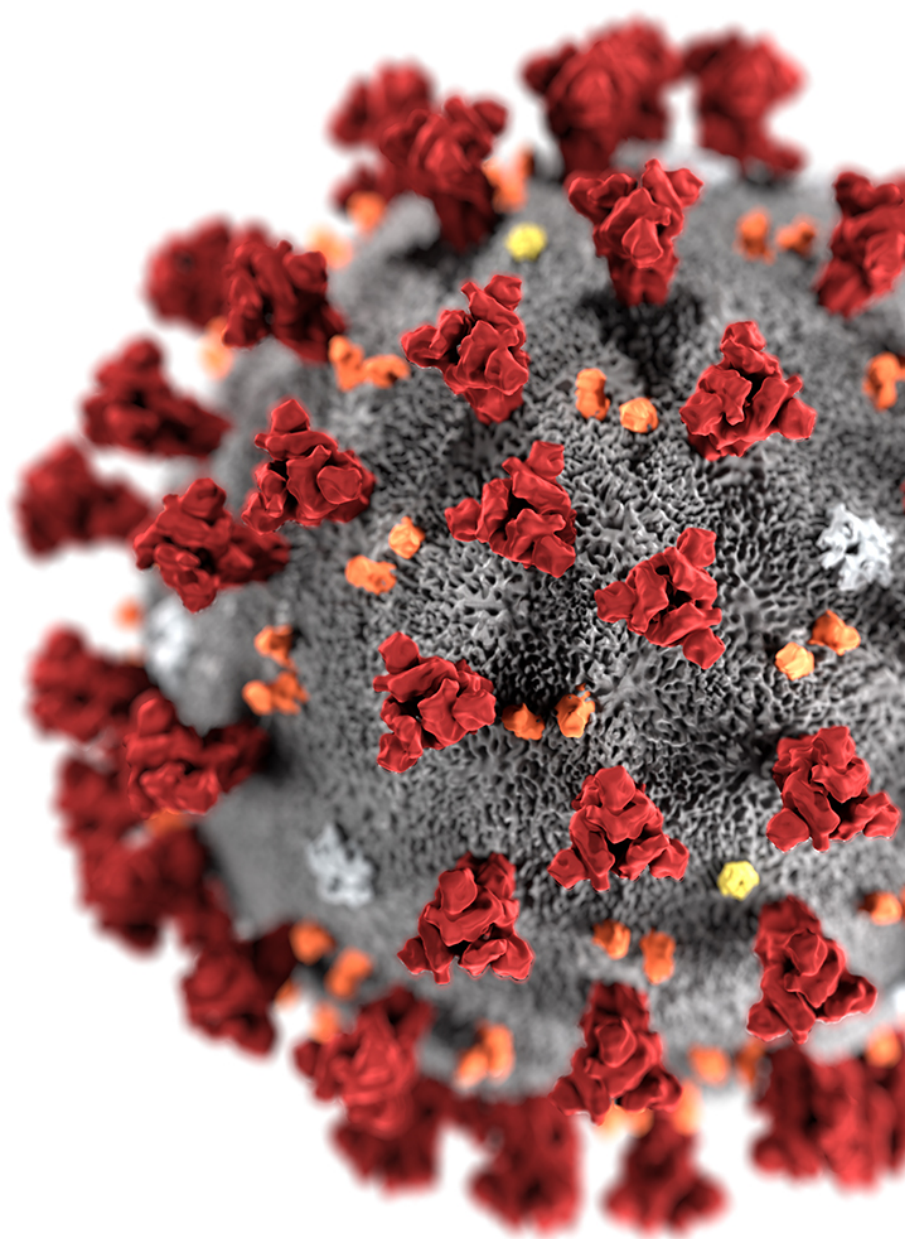




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# Kosovo during pandemic COVID-19: Effects and expectations

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Generally, the situation of the pandemic COVID-19 in Kosovo was associated with increased levels of fear and anxiety at the individual and societal level. Part of the feeling this way derived by poor information health professionals had on the new virus. Another part of it came by the requirements to be respected by the citizens, which seemed to be very restrictive, which fact, in turn, raised questions of their legitimacy imposing by the government. Last, but not least, the diminished, minimal public trust over the years on the healthcare system, and the lack of needed supplies to face the pandemic raised also doubts of efficiency, and efficacy of the institutions to respond promptly to the emergency.

### ***Managing the pandemic: The war with the invisible enemy***

Kosovo is one of the countries with the lowest numbers of deceased by COVID-19 worldwide. In terms of numbers, the number of cases is 1032 (approximately 0.057 % of the population), 782 recovered, and 29 persons have died (0.016 per 1000). During the third week of May 2020 it seems that the situation is under control with few cases per day.

The government took immediately several measures to prevent the big number of infections. Schools were closed (online teaching started for all the levels of the education, where e-learning platform for the pre-university level was organized and sponsored by the government), businesses were closed, and social distancing, isolation, and quarantine measures were taken. The restrictive measures taken aimed at keeping low flat the curve of daily infections a longer time possible. This strategy was chosen due to a lack of a large number of tests, which imposed not particularly aggressive testing policy. The strategy to keep the numbers acceptable for the situation levels to enable the healthcare system not to be overloaded with cases, facilitating the day-to-day management of the pandemic. The global lack of supplies, and also considering the financial resources of a poor country such as Kosovo, the strict restrictive measures imposed were the only successful strategy to be followed, apart from the discussion of the argument from the legal and political point of view.

The citizens, communities, and institutions showed great dedication in respecting the guidelines given, and the decisions taken by the government, despite the restrictive of social distancing and other measures were new and somewhat contrary to the social nature of humans. Healthcare institutions were very responsive to the needs of the population, informing them accurately, adequately, and continuously, but also offering generally without delays the medical services needed. The experience of respecting the regulations and institutions have certainly created a positive feeling of the society and its cohesion to work together for every citizen, and towards big goals. This situation should be analyzed, and draw some conclusions that might be of help on facing societal challenges in the future.

### ***The pandemic of COVID-19: The perfect argument for political disagreements***

Kosovo held parliamentary elections on October 6, 2019. The new government was voted by the parliament on February 3, 2020. The government was formed by a coalition of two opposition parties that got the best voting result Lëvizja Vetëvendosje and Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës, with the former having 26,2 %, and the later 24,5 % of votes. The World Health Organization announced on March 11, 2020, declared the new coronavirus a global pandemic, a little bit more than 5 weeks from the date the new Kosovo government came into power.

The measures taken by the government were opposed by many political actors. The President recommended the announcement of the national state emergency during a National Security Council meeting, which found the disagreement of the Prime Minister. A statement by the Minister of Internal Affairs (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës) supporting the initiative of the President caused his dismissal by the Prime Minister. The dismissal of its minister, and the request to abolish the 100 % tax imposed by the previous government on goods from Serbia, became the main reasons for the coalition partner, Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës, to initiate at the parliament a trust vote to the government, which happened on March 25, 2020. The government was dismissed with at least 82 votes out of 120. Thus, Kosovo became probably the only country in the world to dismiss a government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Obviously, despite the parties' different stand on who is to be guilty of the

situation, one might conclude once again that the fierce political struggle in Kosovo often becomes a purpose in itself.

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to be an argument on the political mainstream of Kosovo. Following the decisions for the restrictive measures on the movement of the citizens taken by the government, the President of Kosovo contested such a right by the government at the Constitutional Court, which found that the government had not acted according to the constitution.

The pandemic was used as an argument for political debate and benefit from all the political parties. However, they failed to be united during the pandemic. It is generally accepted that the health and economic measures, would have been much more efficient, had there been a political consensus not to turn the managing of the pandemic into a political battle.

#### ***Government financial & economic measures: Can Kosovo do more and better?***

The effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the country's economy are immediate. It is expected that the recession of the economy will be at least 4.5 %, and even more if the restrictive measures will still be in force. Private consuming, government investment on capital projects, exports, direct foreign investments, and remittances are expected to be lower during the year 2020 influencing fewer revenues for the government. The fiscal deficit is expected to be higher. The government has already started reviewing the public expenditures

At the end of March 2020, the government has introduced an emergency package to support citizens, businesses, and professions. The package of €180 million or 2.8 % of GDP aims in decreasing the burden of the crisis for different beneficiaries. Specifically, the package helps those categories with less than €100 month such as retired, and social assistance beneficiaries, or people that lost their jobs during the pandemic. The package also helps public companies, trading companies, and the employment sector to cope better with the effects of the pandemic. Moreover, the government has announced that businesses can delay their tax payment.

The government has been criticized for not announcing the package earlier. It seems that the emergency package will not be enough to soften the negative effects of the pandemic firstly because there are different delays in implementing it, secondly because its value should be higher to meet the increasing needs for help, and thirdly because other measures to boost the economy should be taken as we are slowly opening and going back to normality. The government has planned another emergency package to focus on the economy, but the political crisis, which is also being reflected at the performance of the parliament, prevents its approval.

***The future: Is there going to be a second wave of the pandemic?***

The statements of the health officials claim that we are approaching the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The question everyone is asking is whether we will have a second wave of it in fall 2020. This is one of the unknowns related to this particular coronavirus. The government of Kosovo as well as health officials have declared that will take particular measures in case there will be the fearful second wave of COVID-19. The government has announced a €70 million extra budget to fight the pandemic as well as increasing the capacities to face the second wave. There will be added another five regional laboratories for testing (currently there is only one such), the number of respirators will triple (currently there are less than 100 such), and there will be an increase of the equipment for monitoring and treatment at all the hospitals and family medicine centers.

***Conclusion***

Despite the good management of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Kosovar society and institutions, there are a lot of questions to be raised for the future. Mainly they have to do with the economic situation. Will Kosovo be able to take necessary adequate measures to have a substantial after-crisis economic growth for the recovery of the economy? It is hard to say given that Kosovo is in a middle of institutional political crisis along with a pandemic crisis. The new government should focus its efforts on poverty reduction, creating a better climate of doing business,

rule of law, and investments on the human capital given the young population Kosovo has.