



COVID-19 in the Danube Region – resilience or reversion of European integration?

SEBASTIAN SCHÄFFER – DANIEL MARTÍNEK – BABRIK KUSHWAHA

Mag. **Sebastian Schäffer**, MA, Managing Director at the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM); Secretary General of the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC); Founder and CEO of SeminarsSimulations-Consulting (SSC) Europe

Mag. **Daniel Martínek**, Research Assistant at the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM); PhD Student at the Department of Historical Sciences, University of West Bohemia, Pilsen

Babrik Kushwaha, BA, Graduate student of European and International Affairs and European Management at the University of Lille/TH Wildau, Trainee at the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM)

By now the coronavirus pandemic has influenced the life in each and every country in the world. In the Danube Region, the emergency measures against a further spread of the COVID-19 disease are, however, producing mixed results. The current crisis shows a diversity of approaches that the countries have undertaken, as well as different capabilities in coping with the invisible danger. We have arrived at the historical crossroads, where not only our immune systems but also our very foundations of democracy as well as tools for cooperation are challenged. We will provide an overview on the different reactions by governments in the Danube Region to the outbreak of the virus and offer recommendations for future political developments resulting from these initial observations.

Given the emerging clusters of viral contagion in Northern Italy in February 2020, the following spread of the coronavirus to countries of Central Europe was not surprising. Both the daily movement of residents across the Italian-Austrian border and the return of skiers from the Italian and Austrian Alps turned soon to be the triggers of the inexorable dissemination of the virus. Differently adopted measures taken by the Central European countries in mid-March 2020 could not prevent the virus' relentless spread in Europe. Within two weeks, the disease has reached Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where governments are currently implementing different restrictions in response to the pandemic. Owing to the pre-crisis conditions in the region, e.g. illiberal tendencies (Central Europe) or fragile democracies (Western Balkans), the crisis together with establishment of state of emergency have implicated serious socio-political consequences. What chances and challenges did this global pandemic bring to the Danube Region and how will this unprecedented situation affect the region and the European Union?

National governments as the driving force of the measures to contain COVID-19

Although it is evident that the spread of the disease is not limited by national borders, due to the gradual dissemination of the virus across the continent, the initial reactions were mostly carried out at the local governmental level. To this moment, all countries of the Danube Region have taken to a certain extent similar radical measures impinging on the everyday life of citizens. All countries are facing high shortage of medical supplies, particularly face masks, respirators and lung ventilators. The situation consequently serves as a catalyst for solidarity among people with the production of homemade face masks to be the most common manifestation of mutual assistance.

The measures taken have not only affected civil societies, but have also deeply frozen the state economies by closing down factories and enterprises together with significant reduction of transport possibilities. One thing is certain: the COVID-19 crisis' damage to national and global economies will be enormous, resulting in a huge burden on state budgets. The longer production remains suspended, the greater the economic impact on individual economies can be expected. In addition, the current crisis shows us all

the shortcomings of individual governments, be it the mal- or dis-functioning of the parliament or the crisis management, the lack of communication strategy or, equally importantly, the poor assessment of the situation and the resulting chaotic issuing of government regulations. On the other hand, considering the gradual spread of coronavirus, the CEE and SEE countries have generally responded quickly and drastically to the invisible threat. Nevertheless, in certain cases the measures in place seem to go beyond the limits of necessity, giving the impression of intentional exploitation of the crisis and of bending the laws in favour of the ruling elites.

State of emergency or a threat to democracy?

Probably the most serious case offers the socio-political situation in Hungary, where Viktor Orbán's government submitted a bill which calls for a "state of danger" to be prolonged, which in practice, entrusts power to the government in the form of rule by decree without appropriate parliamentary approval indefinitely. Hungarian response to the corona crisis is not the only attempt to use the pretext of the containment of COVID-19 to consolidate power in the state. Similarly, Poland's presidential election scheduled for 10th of May will not be postponed. Despite the opposition of the majority of Polish population, the ruling party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), wants to uphold the date in order not to threaten the re-election of their candidate, current president Andrzej Duda. In contrast to Poland, parliamentary elections in North Macedonia (scheduled for 12th April) and Serbia (26th April) were postponed due to the corona pandemic, while for the very same reason the Kosovo parliament has been dismissed in a no-confidence vote, which appears to be another misuse of the emergency state, not allowing oppositional voices – neither in the parliament nor on the streets. Besides the xenophobic and racist attacks accusing foreigners of disease transmission by leading politicians from CEE such as Viktor Orbán, discrimination against domestic residents returning home or Asian citizens in Europe has become part of daily discussions personally as well as online. Shrinking democratic spaces are also fuelled by fake news, disinformation and targeted propaganda, both internally and externally. Throughout the region, cyber attacks, surveillance and misuse of data protection rights are further limiting and eroding civil liberties.

The lack of a common approach and the resulting consequences

By assessing the developments of recent weeks, it can be identified that, from the outset, a clear joint action by European countries was missing, which would certainly ensure a much more coordinated and thus more effective response against COVID-19 outbreak. In this sense, the European Union and its institutions could have played a decisive role. Unfortunately, the EU did not seize the opportunity and was caught unprepared. First, the Commission underestimated the spread of the virus and the severity of the situation in Italy. Second, its initial reaction of addressing only the economic impacts of the crisis without expressing European solidarity and cooperation has disappointed many people. The lack of an EU strategy to combat the virus was justified by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, as an underestimation of the situation by non-experts in the field. Despite dozens of simulations undertaken in the last decades and warnings of many virologists all over the world, there is apparently a lack of science-based strategic foresight that would contribute to – if not prevent – a containment before an epidemic becomes a pandemic.

Taking advantage of the EU's early failures, the national political elites across the region have started blaming the EU, consolidating their domestic positions and, particularly in the case of the non-EU member states, benefitting from geopolitical imbalances. Above

all, China exploited the weakness of the EU. With the so-called “face mask” diplomacy and delegations of Chinese doctors landing in different European countries China effectively polished its image from being the source of the pandemic to the saviour of the old continent. Also, the Russian Federation, while domestically dealing with the COVID-19 disease very drastically and non-transparently, is exploiting the situation rather for propaganda than providing real relief to the countries in the Danube Region.

How will the post-corona world look like?

Even though it is too early to assess the full global impact of the COVID-19 disease, there are already several ideas discussed. An optimistic take assumes a situation – to put it mildly – similar to the recovering after World War II, but without the damage to infrastructure and catastrophic destruction of society caused by warfare and the holocaust. In the best case, a common recovery programme would be able to foster European integration. On the contrary to 1945, where a broad alliance was fighting a common enemy, we do not see any of this now, not even within the EU. Furthermore, what followed was the Cold War and not everyone experienced the economic growth and enjoyed freedom to the same extent. The current situation has a more comparable historic predecessor. During and after World War I, the so-called Spanish Flu was the last major outbreak of a global pandemic. It spread in three waves and has ultimately also led to the rise of nationalism and fascism. While we do not face a comparable tendency to violence and enmity among nations today, we might experience a global economic depression much sooner than we did a century ago. We have already observed tendencies to revert to national and isolationist approaches in the last years, with measures against the spread of COVID-19 strongly strengthening this trend.

Realistically, history will not repeat itself exactly. We will probably witness a major disruption, not only affecting supply chains throughout the global economy, but also within political systems. The EU will most likely stagnate both economically and politically, while there are attempts from the European Commission to find a common approach, especially to prevent the looming recession from turning into a depression. However, we already see that there are certain solutions, e.g. establishing so-called “corona bonds”, which are, however, considered by some member states – including Austria and Germany – a threat to sovereignty. The current de facto suspension of the Schengen zone – ironically almost to the date 25 years after it was implemented – as well as socio-economic challenges for the Danube Region such as brain drain and a high dependency on remittances, will further drive the divide within EU member states. Existing minilateralisms like the Visegrád Four once again proved to be futile in coordinating even among a fewer number of countries. Furthermore, despite the positive signal towards Albania and North Macedonia in finally opening membership negotiations, we run the risk of neglecting the Western Balkans again, as it has been the case when the EU was occupied with other (mostly internal) crises in the past.

PS: Recommendations

1. A unified EU approach might have set incentives also for non-EU countries to react faster, a better coordination is definitely necessary in the future. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) is one aspect, however, an establishment of a European civil defense, as proposed by President of the European Council, Charles Michel, could possibly contribute to a quicker reaction on the supranational level. For now, the EU member countries should at least find a common solution how and especially when to lift the lock-downs. It should get as many non-EU countries on board as possible to prevent a second wave of spreading. This will be a major challenge, given the different start and scale of the adoption of measures to contain COVID-19.

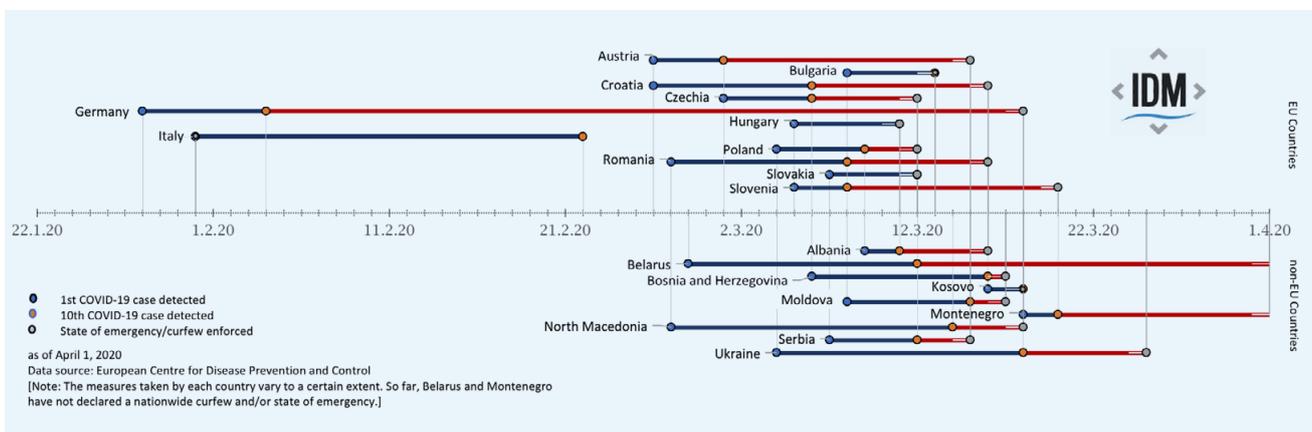
2. While autocratic regimes exploit the situation in strengthening their grip on democratic institutions and weakening the rule of law, we see that populist parties in opposition are losing support in opinion polls, for instance in Germany or Austria. However, this is to a certain extent based on the current distraction from migration/asylum discourses. Furthermore, during a crisis the population temporarily unifies behind its government. This will change once the situation normalizes (or the death toll severely rises and the government loses support) and an economic crisis ensues. The EU (and its member states) needs to be prepared for this changing atmosphere, especially since Eurosceptic parties, regardless if in government or not, have started to blame Brussels. The different approaches on how to stabilize the economy will make it difficult for the Commission to be proactive.
3. The challenges arising from different measures taken by the individual countries at different times and shortcomings in coping with the crisis on the ground demonstrate once again the lack of cohesion, particularly among social systems. These limitations could provide an opportunity to further strengthen EU integration among member states. Furthermore, they could even serve as an incentive for accession for non-EU countries in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership. Given the nature of the impacts resulting from the adopted measures, the crisis might create a chance to foster regional cooperation.
4. Due to the high shortage of medical equipment experienced by both the EU and non-EU countries and the subsequent supplies of this material and medical workforce by China, there is a high risk of increasing China's influence not only in the Western Balkans, but also in CEE. This may ultimately lead to an internally increased support for certain political parties and groups inclined to China, as well as externally, a country-by-country approach to this power and a significant shift in relation to the EU. This also will be to a lesser extent valid for the Russian Federation and should be considered by EU decision-makers.
5. Civil liberties and democratic rights as well as the Schengen agreement are (necessarily) suspended at the moment. It will be paramount for the civil society and all citizens to be ready to react, if this will not be taken back once the situation is under control. Especially the worrisome disproportionate measure taken by Viktor Orbán in eliminating the parliament and ruling potentially indefinitely without democratic control needs observation and should already now have evoked an appropriate response from the EU and its member states.

Redaktion:

Dr. Erhard Busek
 Dr. Silvia Nadjivan
 Mag.(FH) Daniela Neubacher, MA
 Mag. Sebastian Schäffer, MA
 Institut für den Donauraum und Mitteleuropa (IDM)

A-1090 Wien
 Hahngasse 6/1/24
 Tel.: +43 1 319 72 58
 Fax: +43 1 319 72 58-4
 idm@idm.at
www.idm.at

PPS: Timeline of 1st and 10th case of COVID-19 identification and introduction of state of emergency/curfew



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