

June 2020

# Länderbericht

Country Office Bosnia and Herzegovina



## Bosnia and Herzegovina - Description of the current situation

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### A divided state - even during the corona crisis

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How is Bosnia and Herzegovina dealing with the corona crisis? There was no joint fight against Covid-19. Even now, decisions are made separately - a body for the entire country has not been formed. A coordination of measures was not noticeable. Fortunately, the number of cases remained low. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 152 people died of Covid-19, almost 2,000 people have recovered, and the number of confirmed cases is under 3,000. The number of newly infected people is very low.

### Quarreling as a way of life

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was justified fear that the country's weak health system could not withstand a wave of infected people. This is one of the reasons why very restrictive measures were introduced abruptly in both entities, including a curfew from 8:00 PM to 5:00 AM and a ban on movement for people under 18 and over 65 that lasted for weeks. In the Republika Srpska entity, a ban on leaving the residence had been issued during several weekends. A mask requirement has been introduced for all public areas. Gloves are required to be worn by workers in public areas. Schools, universities, restaurants, fitness centers and other service providers were closed. Supermarkets and pharmacies had shortened working hours. Means of public transport stopped running.

The economic consequences of the measures are already worrying. As in other countries, the corona crisis has left its mark on the labor market in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It has been estimated that 28,000 workers in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and around 2,000 workers in the Republika Srpska have lost their jobs since March. The service sector suffered the biggest losses. Although funds, decisions and laws to alleviate the negative effects of the crisis have been passed in both entities, citizens and entrepreneurs feel the impact of these measures only to a limited extent.

The country has not built up the necessary reserves for such a scenario and most citizens who live from salary to salary can hardly cope with such a break. Different branches are affected by the crisis. ArcelorMittal Zenica ceased production in May. Over 2,400 people work in the power plant. Production has completely stopped and the company announced that it ceased operations in May, June, and July due to the drop in demand caused by the pandemic. Potential salary cuts have even been announced for civil servants. In many other areas, cuts have been made already. Even though all stores have reopened, there are fewer customers. The crisis is particularly tough for tourism.

Did politics change their usual proceedings in this difficult situation? In early April, in the presence of EU Ambassador Johann Sattler, the prime ministers of both entities, the chairman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the finance minister of BiH, the chairmen of the SDA, HDZ and SNSD, after a meeting with representatives of the EU

and the IMF approved an arrangement with a loan amount of EUR 330 million to combat the corona crisis. However, the emergency aid could not be used for almost two months because the government parties did not agree on the distribution. An agreement has now been reached.

## Two months of border closure

The country's borders have been open again since June 1, after two months of border closure. In addition to Sarajevo Airport, the airports in Mostar, Banja Luka and Tuzla were closed on 30 March 2020. The airports were closed to travelers, but were still open to humanitarian and freight flights. However, the number of flights and destinations available is small, and this is set to change from June 15. Foreign nationals have been prohibited from entering Bosnia and Herzegovina since March 25. Exceptions included: medical personnel, people in need of treatment (patients), cross-border workers (commuters), members of the civil protection services and teams, members of the NATO armed forces and members of the armed forces of other countries from the Partnership for Peace and NATO headquarters in Bosnia and Herzegovina, people with a residence permit in Bosnia and Herzegovina, people in transit through Bosnia and Herzegovina, other people with special permission from the Council of Ministers, Croatian and other EU citizens in transit through the Neum corridor. Truck drivers, train drivers, pilots and cabin crews in international traffic were not affected by this decision.

For citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina who entered the country, home isolation was mandatory for a period of 14 days. In April, travelers had to undergo a 14-day quarantine in tents at the border for a period of two weeks. The abolition of home isolation and the opening of the borders followed the abolition of the state of emergency in both entities. In the two entities, these actions came into effect on different days.

## Citizens are demanding change

The country was not only plagued by the coronavirus. Corruption was and still is a focal point in Bosnia and Herzegovina at this time. Corruption also affects the procurement of medical devices. A raspberry production company was selected to purchase respirators. The purchase price was far above the usual price range and since the devices did not fulfill the necessary functions, the Prime Minister of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), Fadil Novalić, was arrested by the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA). In addition to Novalić, FBiH Director of Civil Protection Administration, Fahrudin Solak, and Fikret Hadžić, owner of FH Srebrena malina, were arrested on 29 May 2020 and handed over to the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At this point, all three have been released.

In the difficult political and economic situation, these scandals led to a well-attended demonstration in Sarajevo. The thousands of demonstrators included members of the dismissed government of the Sarajevo Canton. The demonstrators called for government changes and the fight against corruption. There was enough silence! was the motto of the demonstration. The chairman of the Platform for progress movement, Mirsad Hadžikadić, the initiator of the protest march, demanded, among other things:

- The implementation of the local elections by 15 November 2020 including the mayoral elections in Mostar
- Introduction of the electronic ballot by 2022

- Abolition of party funding by the end of this year
- Provide vital momentum to the economy, both for those who have suffered damage during the pandemic and for others
- Harmonization of salaries and allowances in the public sector with allowances in the real sector
- no tolerance for corruption - use the respirator affair as an example for other criminals
- Review diplomas from all government and judicial officials and officials in public institutions, and remove those with purchased diplomas!

"We will protest until our demands are met," said Hadžikadić.

### **Will the local elections take place in 2020?**

The law provided for local elections on October 4, 2020. The Central Election Commission Bosnia and Herzegovina proposed postponing the elections. This was justified with the corona crisis. To this end, the Central Electoral Commission adopted a decision to initiate the initiative to adopt the Law amending the Electoral Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This introduces the concept of extraordinary circumstances declared by the relevant institutions in the country, empowering the Central Election Commission Bosnia and Herzegovina to take a decision on the postponement of the convening and holding of the elections. This affects all levels of government.

The elections have now been postponed, but for a different reason. The Central Electoral Commission Bosnia and Herzegovina has decided that this year's local elections will take place on 15 November instead of 4 October 2020. The decision to postpone the elections was based on financing problems, as budgetary resources were not available due to the failure to adopt the budget of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was also intended to finance the elections. It remains to be seen whether this election date is final. At the same time, there are demands to hold the local elections in 2022.

### **Security minister resigns after seven months because of "security problems"**

In addition to complications regarding the country's elections, there is also unrest in the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Council of Ministers was formed in December 2019. Minister of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina Fahrudin Radončić resigned after seven months. Radončić explained: "The first reason is the different understanding of the migrant crisis, on the one hand, i.e. my understanding of it as Minister of Security and on the other hand of Šefik Džaferović, member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bisera Turković, who stand up for the Pakistani ambassador and do not understand the security problem of the migrants and do not identify it as dangerous." Another reason he pointed out was his personal assessment that the relationship between SDA, SNSD and HDZ is such that they will not create a good working environment in the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina for a long time.

As in the previous year, there are many migrants in the country. Most of the people originate from Pakistan and try to get to the European Union via the Balkan route. Since many of the

migrants are not accommodated and are ill, Radončić has pointed out several times that, in his opinion, they pose a threat.

Radončić had asked the Embassy of Pakistan to intervene. As Radončić explained, they stated that they cannot act on this matter. Radončić then criticized the Pakistani ambassador. The member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Šefik Džaferović and Foreign Minister of BiH Bisera Turković, however, stood up for the ambassador. Radončić's resignation came as a surprise because public offices in Bosnia and Herzegovina are very rarely given up voluntarily.

## Dispute over the consequences of the war from 1992 to 1995

The worst war crime in Europe after the end of the Second World War took place in Srebrenica 25 years ago. Over 8,300 men were murdered. They were executed individually or in groups, buried in mass graves: Bosniaks between the ages of 13 and 78. A genocide. After NATO's intervention, the war ended with the Dayton Peace Agreement in late 1995. The war cost the lives of more than 100,000 people.

To this day, the victims of the war are not commemorated together, obvious war crimes are denied, convicted war criminals are sometimes honored.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague described the Srebrenica massacre in several judgments as genocide. The International Court of Justice made the same statement in 2007. The United Nations Security Council assessment of the massacre as genocide was prevented in 2015 by a veto by the Russian Federation.

Milorad Dodik, member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and party leader of the SNSD, announced for March / April 2020 the "objective and impartial" result of the work of an international commission on Srebrenica.

In advance, the report by the Government Commission of the Republika Srpska on the investigation of events in and around Srebrenica from July 10 to 19, 1995 was rejected by the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska 2018 on the proposal of the then RS President Milorad Dodik. Dodik said at the time that the report was "not an objective document and had been adopted under great pressure from the international community".

Subsequently, Dodik set up the commission with nine members. The Israeli historian Gideon Greif heads the group, which also includes Markus Goldbach from Germany.

It can be expected that the result of the report will further complicate the handling of the historic events.

## Outlook

The corona crisis also shows the lack of willingness and ability in Bosnia and Herzegovina to jointly take the necessary solutions and measures for the country. Even urgent steps would not take place without the mediation and the suggestions of the representatives of the international community.

The deterioration in the economic situation has already reached part of the population. Public budgets are also affected. The change in the labor market, particularly in Germany,

will reduce the possibility of shaping one's own future abroad. If politicians react to the economic challenges in the usual way, the population's dissatisfaction with the situation can be expected to grow. Unlike in the past, the financial means to pacify the protest through social benefits should no longer be available today. Nevertheless, there are suggestions and offers to discuss the future together. This also includes proposals for necessary economic reforms.

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