



The International Health Security and National Parliamentary Election: The COVID-19 Elections in Southeast Europe and their Outcomes

Boško Picula^(✉)

Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia
boskopicula@yahoo.com

Abstract. In many respects, the year 2020 is unique in human history. The global crisis caused by the spread of the Sars-CoV-2 virus put almost every country on the planet in an unimaginable situation of combating the pandemic and reasonable attempts to preserve the entrenched models of living and working. This also applies to holding elections in democratic political systems whose terms are usually predetermined by constitutional norms. A democratic multi-party election – viewed as an act of free and fair decision-making by voters about who is to lead certain bodies of government and take certain positions of power – presupposes, overall, usual election circumstances, especially in terms of health and life safety of the participating voters and candidates. South Korea was the first country in the world to hold a parliamentary election amid the first wave of the coronavirus spread in April 2020, whereas in Europe, the four successor states of the former Yugoslavia did so. Serbia held its parliamentary election after an initial postponement in June, Croatia and North Macedonia in July, and Montenegro in August 2020. Held in unprecedented epidemiological conditions, the parliamentary election in each of these states amounted to a test of voters' attitude toward the respective government heading the state during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the most-similar method of comparative analysis, this paper defines the term 'pandemic election' and analyses whether coping with the current crisis based on the election results benefited the current government or the opposition and why. When human health is at risk, is democracy at risk as well? Specifically, did the Covid-19 pandemic impinge on the process of parliamentary elections and their results? If it is the case, how did it affect them? Who won these elections: the parties in power faced with the crises amid the pandemic or the opposition parties that criticized their respective governments for their actions.

Keywords: health security · parliamentary elections · Southeast Europe · Serbia · Croatia · North Macedonia · Montenegro · 2020 · Covid-19 pandemic

1 Introduction

The year 2020 remains remembered as the time of the outbreak of one of the most severe pandemics in human history. Although the first cases of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) were recorded in December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan – the reason why the

disease was named after that year – its impact was not fully felt until 2020. After all, it was in March 2020 that the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic outbreak. It was in the context of the end of the First World War that a pandemic, i.e., a rapid and massive spread of a disease across the borders of certain world regions and continents, last endangered health, and lives of people all over the planet in such a dramatic way. Specifically, from February 1918 to April 1920, the Spanish flu infected almost half a billion people, or a third of the world's population. On the other hand, almost 620 million of COVID-19 infection cases were reported, and more than six million and five hundred thousand coronavirus-related deaths were reported in the period between the outbreak of the coronavirus disease pandemic and the beginning of October 2022. There is almost no country that has not reported cases of infection, the United States still being the leader in the number of infected and deceased. After China, where the infection broke out, the disease began to spread to East Asian countries, and then to Europe, where, at first, the most difficult situation was in Italy. COVID-19 soon spread to other continents, thus changing the way of life and work across the globe. The political sphere was not spared either, as the governments of some countries found themselves in an unprecedented health crisis, given the spread of the disease and the capacity of their own health systems. Life came to a standstill in many ways: going to work and to school in most cases was replaced by online work from home and online classes, through everyday activities such as shopping and recreation, to using comprehensive protection measures related to physical distance, wearing protective masks and gloves, and using disinfectants. Suddenly, the world found itself in a lockdown of uncertain prospects as in the first weeks of the pandemic, COVID-19 was an unknown disease that could not be countered by means of drugs and vaccines threatening the “global public health” [1] because “the concept of global health security comprises three complex and fluid terms: global, health, and security [2].

Although its causative agent – the SARS-CoV-2 virus had been isolated and identified as like the SARSCoV-1 virus responsible for the SARS epidemic in East Asia in 2002-2004, modern medicine initially had no response to the disease, apart from epidemiological measures to prevent the spread of infection in the context of its securitization and the concept of health security [3]. It should be emphasized that “part of this can be linked to a confluence of global health crises during this period: HIV/AIDS in the 1980s onward, the threat of bioterrorism highlighted by the Anthrax attacks of 2001, SARS in 2005, H1N1 in 2009, Ebola in 2014, Zika in 2016, and today, COVID-19” [4]. Faced with an unknown and lethal disease, the world confronted a dilemma between the complete cessation of normal activities and the creation of a balance between combating the pandemic and continuing the optimal number of social, economic, and political activities. Furthermore, the latter entailed holding of elections for individual bodies and levels of government, even more so as a certain number of countries had their election dates scheduled before the outbreak of the pandemic, either as prescribed by the constitution or by a legislation.

Consequently, in the early spring of 2020, some countries faced another important dilemma: whether to organize the planned election in compliance with all necessary epidemiological measures or to postpone the election until the epidemiological situation improved to some extent. Holding an election entails many procedures that cannot be

carried out without interpersonal physical contact as well as the movement of many people in a short time in a limited space, which is exactly the opposite of epidemiological measures to prevent infectious diseases such as COVID-19. A democratic multi-party election – viewed as an act of free and fair decision-making by voters about who is to lead certain bodies of government and take certain positions of power – presupposes, overall, usual election circumstances, especially in terms of health and life safety of the participating voters and candidates.

However, democratic elections have occasionally been held within or immediately after conflicts, as evidenced by the cases of Croatia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine in recent decades. Therefore, if ‘war’ elections were possible, aren’t ‘pandemic’ elections also possible? The answer to this question was first given by South Korea. South Korea entered 2020, the regular parliamentary election year, with the record of not having ever postponed an election, not even during the Korean War (1950-1953). The election date was set for 15 April 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the spread of the infection, South Korea was the most affected country after China, recording more than ten thousand cases and two hundred deaths prior to the election day. Nevertheless, the South Korean authorities responded very quickly to the pandemic by implementing a series of epidemiological measures and mass population testing to detect virus carriers. As a result, the country was among the first in the world to feel the weakening of the first wave of the infection and stood out as one of the most successful countries in the struggle against the pandemic. This was confirmed by South Korean voters in the spring of 2020. What is more, when compared to the previous parliamentary election held in 2016, the turnout in the last year’s election increased by more than 8%, which means that as many as two thirds of South Korean voters went to the polls under atypical circumstances. The April election in South Korea “resulted in the highest voter turnout in three decades, in part due to the provision of postal voting and additional voting days, during which more than a quarter of the electorate voted [5].

The incumbent government won the election. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party, with its coalition partner the Platform Party, won as many as three-fifths, i.e., 180 out of 300 seats in the unicameral National Assembly. The election was also a personal triumph for President Moon Jae-in and Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun, who took office in mid-January 2020. The Democratic Party itself won 163 seats, which was the best result of a single political party in South Korean parliamentary elections since 1960, while the opposition conservative United Party of the Future won 103 seats, thus recording the weakest result for conservatives in the last sixty years.

The first ‘pandemic’ parliamentary election in the world confirmed that voters reward successful crisis management, i.e., a quick and efficient resolution, or at least crisis management: “The prerequisite for a low number of confirmed cases to affect the results of elections positively is that the government must respond effectively and honestly to the COVID-19 crisis, which is naturally followed by increased trust in government [6]. Although the 2019 pre-election opinion polls indicated that the Democratic Party would have a difficult task of winning more than half of the seats in parliament, the successful combat against the pandemic secured the party forty new seats compared to the 2016 election and a three-fifths majority in parliament. After South Korea, parliamentary elections were held in Burundi (20 May), Suriname (25 May) and St. Christopher and

Nevis (5 June), whereas the first elections in Europe were held in the four successor states of the former Yugoslavia, the states that held their first democratic elections in 1990. Exactly three decades later, once members of a joint federation, they showed considerable differences in these ‘pandemic’ elections: “Viruses might not care about politics, but the political system in which they operate will have a direct impact on the success of a virus in multiplying and spreading through a community [7].

2 The Parliamentary Election In Serbia: The Ruling Party’s Victory – No Opposition

Among the states that were formed after the disintegration of the former Yugoslav federation in 1991, Serbia is the largest country both in terms of territory and population. While all other former Yugoslav republics - Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro - held referendums on state independence at some point, Serbia became independent by the fact that all other members of the Yugoslav federation had declared their own independence. Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina did so between June 1991 and April 1992, while Montenegro seceded from Serbia in 2006 after a fifteen-year period of forming a new two-member federation called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was officially known as the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro at the end of its existence. Serbia and Montenegro were the last two former Yugoslav republics to hold the first democratic multi-party elections in 1990, precisely in December of that year, while a common state still existed. From 1990 to 2020, the internal political situation of Serbia underwent rapid changes, and in 1999 the country experienced a NATO military intervention as a reaction to the war in Kosovo, which became independent in 2008, as a former Serbian autonomous province with an Albanian majority. Due to its responsibility for starting the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia also suffered extremely severe international sanctions.

Therefore, this combination of domestic, regional, and international circumstances greatly influenced the dynamics of political processes in the country, as well as its party system. In short, from 1990 to 2000, the country was ruled by former communists who initially changed their name to the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) under the leadership of the long-time Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, who died in 2006 as a defendant at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). From 2000 to 2012, various coalitions were in power. These coalitions were formed by opposition parties from Milošević’s time and were led by the Democratic Party (DS), whose leader Boris Tadić was President of Serbia from 2004 to 2012. After 2012, power was taken over by former radicals who renounced their former leader, war crimes convict Vojislav Šešelj, by founding a more moderate party, namely the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) under the leadership of the incumbent Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. In effect, the country went through three almost equally long periods of rule – by the former communists, by the former anti-regime democrats and by the former radicals – thus completing the cycle of political ideas and their bearers over the past three decades.

In fact, the former radicals, including the current president of Serbia, greatly supported Milošević’s policy of expansion to those parts of the former Yugoslavia where Serbs lived (within other Yugoslav republics), which ultimately led to the most severe

wars in European territory after World War II. Since Aleksandar Vučić and his party won power in 2012, in a coalition with the party of Milošević's successors, Serbia initially held early parliamentary elections every two years (in 2014 and 2016). For the first two years the Prime Minister was Ivica Dačić, the President of the Socialist Party of Serbia as a junior coalition partner, and Aleksandar Vučić was the First Deputy Prime Minister in charge of defence, whereas in 2014, Vučić de facto took over all power in the state, having been appointed Prime Minister. Under his leadership, Serbia has been slowly losing the characteristics of a consolidated democracy and has been increasingly becoming a hybrid regime with a combination of democratic and autocratic elements. After Vučić's party, together with its coalition partners, won more than 48% of the vote in the 2014 and 2016 elections, thus easily securing a parliamentary majority with the Socialists, part of Serbian society, which was dissatisfied with the autocratic tendencies, started organizing street protests. The protests particularly intensified after the attack on one opposition politician in late 2018 and continued with varying intensity until the outbreak of the coronavirus disease pandemic. At first, the Government ignored this infection, even by dismissing it as a 'ridiculous virus', but after the first death was recorded on 6 March 2020, the situation changed completely. Two days earlier, the regular parliamentary election was called for 26 April, but soon, on 15 March, due to the pandemic, a state of emergency was declared. During this period the national parliament, that is, the National Assembly of Serbia, could not be dissolved.

The election was thus postponed, and after several early parliamentary elections held from 1990 to 2016, Serbia held a 'belated election' for the first time. The first wave of infection escalated in April, but extremely strict epidemiological measures soon paid off and the situation began to improve in late April and early May. Finally, the state of emergency was lifted on 6 May, and the new date for the parliamentary election was set – 21 June. On that date, Serbia became the first European country to hold a parliamentary election after the pandemic. As early as in the wake of 2016 election, the fragmented opposition decided to boycott the election because, according to its criteria, the conditions for holding free and fair elections had not been met, especially as far as access to the media and effective monitoring of the election process were concerned. The strongest opposition group became the ideologically heterogeneous coalition 'Alliance for Serbia', which included the Democratic Party and its former president and former mayor of the capital of Belgrade, Dragan Đilas. Due to the Alliance for Serbia's boycotting of the election, the 2020 parliamentary election in Serbia turned into an 'open championship' of the Government itself, which came out with a message about victory over the pandemic. The election for the single-mandate National Assembly of Serbia was held according to the proportional electoral system, with the whole country as a single constituency, with D'Hondt's method of converting votes into seats and with a 3% electoral threshold that did not apply to ethnic minority parties.

Without most of the opposition and being completely controlled by the already autocratic government, the election resulted in an expected triumph of Aleksandar Vučić's option. His party, as the leader in the coalition called 'For Our Children', won 60.65% of the votes and 188 out of a total of 250 parliamentary seats. Vučić's partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia, and its coalition, won 10.38% and 32 seats, and the pseudo-opposition list 'Victory for Serbia' led by a Belgrade politician and former athlete Aleksandar Šapić

garnered 3.83% and eleven seats. The remaining nineteen seats were won by political parties of the Hungarian, Bosniak, Macedonian and Albanian ethnic minorities. Ana Brnabić, who replaced Aleksandar Vučić after the 2017 presidential election, remained in office as Prime Minister. Serbia thus got a parliament without real opposition for the first time since the overthrow of Milošević in 2000, and Vučić confirmed absolute power amid the pandemic.

3 The Parliamentary Election in Croatia: Coronavirus as a Game Changer

Croatia, the second largest country in terms of territory and population among the states that emerged after the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, was the first country in Europe to hold an election in 2020. It was the second round of the presidential election held on 5 January 2020. The outcome of this election heralded a change in the political mood of voters compared to the previous election cycle, thus greatly complicating the political situation in the country. The candidate of the opposition coalition gathered around the Social Democratic Party (SDP) – Zoran Milanović, who was also the Prime Minister of the 2011-2016 government which was formed by a coalition gathered around the SDP, unexpectedly won the election.

However, after one prime minister's term, Milanović lost the parliamentary election mainly due to many years of Croatia's failure to overcome the economic crisis that began in 2009. As an opposition leader, Milanović also lost the early parliamentary election in 2016, and he resigned as the president of the centreleft SDP party. His political career seemed to be over. In 2016, the government was formed by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), a conservative party that won the first democratic multi-party election in 1990 with a programme of Croatian sovereignty and only twice stepped down in the period from 1990 to 2020, ceding power to SDP coalitions.

The path to the HDZ's return to power in Croatia as a parliamentary democracy (all other successor states of the former Yugoslavia are parliamentary democracies as well) was secured a year earlier by the victory in the presidential election by their candidate Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, a former Foreign and European Minister and Croatia's Ambassador to the United States. Thus, in 2016, for the first time since the 1990s, when the country was firmly ruled by the founder of the HDZ and the first Croatian president in the years of independence, the war for independence and the post-war period – Franjo Tuđman, the HDZ had its representatives at the head of the State, at the head of the executive Government, and at the head of the Parliament. Andrej Plenković, a Croatian member of the European Parliament and newly elected president of the HDZ, became Prime Minister in 2016. He started directing the HDZ towards the centre right from the beginning of his term, and today the HDZ is the 'leftmost' since its beginnings, even though Franjo Tuđman was a Yugoslav communist who became a dissident due to Croatian nationalism in the early 1970s and was consequently sentenced to prison. In the conditions of a slow but certain way out of the economic crisis, growing income from tourism (as Croatia is a popular Mediterranean tourist destination) and the concentration of power in the hands of the HDZ, in 2019, the ruling party was supposed to confirm its dominance both in the European Parliament election and in the presidential

election. However, in the European election in May 2019, the HDZ and the opposition SDP won the same number of seats, four each, while the initial advantage of Kolinda Grabar Kitarović in public opinion polls was beginning to melt.

The reason for this was the dissatisfaction among HDZ's traditional, conservative voters with the overly 'centristic' way Andrej Plenković began to lead the party and the Government. At a certain point, he even decided to form a coalition with the strongly liberal Croatian People's Party (HNS), which had previously been the SDP's coalition partner. In addition, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, albeit with messages and actions that could be positioned to the right of the Prime Minister's, was getting weaker in the role of Head of State, making gaffe after gaffe, and the reputation of the HDZ was further compromised by an increasing number of scandals in which some ministers in the Government were involved. Therefore, the former Prime Minister Zoran Milanović felt that his chances in the new presidential election were growing. In this election, Miroslav Škoro, a popular singer and entertainer, also appeared as a candidate of the united right. The first round of the presidential election was held on 22 December 2019, and it was rather tight: Zoran Milanović won 29.55% of the vote, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović 26.65% and Miroslav Škoro 24.45%. Subsequently, in January, Zoran Milanović beat Kolinda Grabar Kitarović with a margin of five percent. Therefore, the SDP-led opposition assumed that the attitude of voters towards the regular parliamentary election that was to be held in the autumn of that year, was also changing. Indeed, after Milanović's victory, opinion polls began to indicate that the SDP had taken the lead over the HDZ, even more so as scandals with individual ministers continued in January and early February, specifically with the Minister of Health who was forced to resign over a real estate scandal.

At that moment, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković justified the change in the Government by the need to hire a new minister who would have to dedicate himself entirely to the galloping crisis caused by the coronavirus infection, now a global problem, not just East Asian. In such circumstances, the newly appointed Minister Vili Beroš turned from an almost unknown official in the Ministry of Health into a new political star and, as the parliamentary election would show, the most popular politician in the country. The Croatian government grappled with the crisis in quite an authoritative way, even more so as the seriousness of the situation was particularly evident from the situation in neighbouring Italy, which had become the first major hotbed of the disease in Europe. External and internal administrative borders were closed, all social activities were suspended, most jobs and all education were moved to the Internet, and the public began receiving instructions from the National Civil Protection Authority, headed by Davor Božinović, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, as well as a close associate of the Prime Minister. Faced with the greatest threat to national security since the war that ended in 1995, Croatian citizens recognized effective crisis management in the current government.

The HDZ regained the lost advantage as early as in the polls in March, and it confirmed the status of the most popular political party in the country at the end of April. The result of the public opinion poll that resonated the most was the one which indicated that after several years of pessimism, more than half of the respondents believed

that the country was moving in the right direction again, what is more – this perception was recorded in the middle of the pandemic. It should be noted that, unlike Serbia, Croatia did not declare a state of emergency, nor did it implement curfew measures. In such circumstances, the Government called the early parliamentary election, which was scheduled for 5 July 2020, thus making Croatia the second European country after Serbia to hold a parliamentary election during the pandemic. In this election, the HDZ achieved the best election result since the mid-1990s and Croatia's victory in the war against the secessionist forces of a part of the Serbian minority, winning 37.26% of the vote and 66 out of a total of 151 seats. The SDP coalition, on the other hand, achieved the weakest result in the last twenty years, winning 24.87% and 41 seats. The newly established Homeland Movement of Miroslav Škoro also entered Parliament with 10.89% of the vote and sixteen seats, as well as several smaller political parties and coalitions.

In the end, the HDZ secured more than half of the seats by forming a coalition again with several smaller liberal parties, including the HNS, and with representatives of ethnic minorities, the most numerous of which is the Serbian one. In its parliamentary elections, Croatia uses a proportional electoral system with ten equal constituencies and two separate ones (one for members of ethnic minorities and one for members of the Croatian diaspora), D'Hondt's method of converting votes into seats and preferential voting. Vili Beroš, the Minister of Health won the highest number of preferential votes, even more than the Prime Minister himself. That being the case, it was confirmed that managing the crisis caused by the pandemic was a key election topic, and that the 2020 Croatian parliamentary election was a real corona election in which unexpected circumstances determined the outcome.

4 The Parliamentary Election in North Macedonia: Turbulent and Tied

Compared to Serbia and Croatia, which had a stable political situation in the election cycle between 2016 and 2020 for various reasons, North Macedonia went through one of the most tumultuous periods since its declaration of state independence in 1991. It is the southernmost of the former Yugoslav republics and the only one, apart from Serbia, that has no access to the sea. Surrounded by Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and Kosovo, North Macedonia had a specific path of international recognition that included even a change of the country's official name. In time of the former Yugoslavia, its official name was Macedonia, yet already at that time, Greece denied Macedonia the right to bear the name of the synonymous Greek region in the north of the country, whose glory can be traced back to ancient history, namely to the reign of Alexander the Great and his father Philip II. After the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, Macedonia was forced to bear the temporary name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRM) due to the Greek veto. This temporary status was protracted for almost three decades, preventing Macedonia from fully accomplishing its international legal status. Consequently, due to the Greek veto, Macedonia's attempt to become a member of NATO failed in 2009, when the country, together with Croatia and Albania, was to join the organization. Aggravating foreign policy circumstances were intertwined with an unstable internal situation.

After a brief war in Slovenia in 1991, the years-long wars in Croatia (1991-1995) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), the war in Kosovo (1998-1999) followed by NATO military intervention against Serbia (1999), an internal conflict broke out in North Macedonia in 2001, between the Albanian national minority seeking expansion of its constitutional rights and the country's central authorities. The months-long conflict ended through U.S. mediation and a political compromise was reached. North Macedonia's population is ethnically heterogeneous: a little less than two thirds of the population are Macedonians (a South Slavic nation), and approximately a quarter are Albanians. Since the first democratic multi-party election was held in the autumn of 1990, during the former Yugoslavia, the two largest political parties have been alternating in power for three decades. The parties in question are the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM) positioned at the centre-left of the political spectrum and the conservative and nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - the Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DMPNE). The former is the successor to the former communists, and the latter, after the multiparty system was legally introduced, invoked the tradition of the former revolutionary organization of the same name, which opposed the authorities during the Ottoman Empire (Macedonia was part of Ottoman territories in Southeast Europe until the Balkan Wars). For the first eight years, the Social Democrats were in power in a coalition with political representatives of the Albanian ethnic minority. From 1998 to 2002, VMRO-DMPNE was in power, and the next four years again SDSM. In 2006, VMRO-DMPNE returned to power and again won a series of early parliamentary elections in 2008, 2011 and 2014. By having become Prime Minister in 2006, the key political figure until 2016 was Nikola Gruevski, who began to pursue an increasingly nationalist policy which drifted away from the previously proclaimed path of joining the European Union and NATO and got closer to the Russian Federation. This led to new internal tensions that escalated into the 2015 mass protests led by Social Democrats and their president Zoran Zaev. In this intra-Macedonian conflict, the West, namely the European Union, intervened again. This is how the Pržino Agreement was reached in July 2015. The agreement provided for the formation of a national unity government and a new early election in spring 2016.

However, the government sabotaged the agreement although Prime Minister Gruevski resigned in early 2016. After new protests, an agreement was reached on a new election in December 2016. Although VMRODPMNE won the largest number of seats (51 out of 120, with additional three for the Macedonian diaspora), in the end, the new government was formed by the Social Democrats with the support of certain Albanian parties, and Zoran Zaev became the new Prime Minister. After being charged with corruption, Nikola Gruevski fled the country, taking refuge in Hungary with the support of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Faced with a narrow majority in parliament of only 62 seats, Zaev first signed the Friendship Agreement with Bulgaria in August 2017 and then the Prespa Agreement with Greece in June 2018, agreeing on the new state's name: North Macedonia. This agreement provoked fierce opposition reactions, but after a non-binding referendum in which 91% of voters (with a turnout of only 37%) supported the Agreement, Macedonia officially became North Macedonia. According to the agreement, Greece gave up the further blockade of Macedonia's NATO membership, and North Macedonia became its thirtieth member in March 2020, right at

the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authorities responded relatively quickly to the threat and prescribed strict epidemiological measures to limit the spread of the disease, and in May 2020 the numbers of both infected and deceased began to decline. At the same time, the country faced a new obstacle in starting official negotiations with the European Union on full membership, and Prime Minister Zoran Zaev decided to call a new early parliamentary election to test the support of citizens.

The election was called for 15 July 2020 and was thus the third parliamentary election in Europe after the pandemic, after Serbia and Croatia. The SDSM, together with its partners gathered within the ‘We Can’ coalition, won the largest number of seats in an election for the first time since 2020, i.e., 46, which corresponded to 35.89% of the vote. Interestingly, despite this record, the party won three parliamentary seats fewer than in 2016. However, the VMRO-DPMNE won 34.57% and 44 seats, thus remaining in opposition. Zoran Zaev began his new term as Prime Minister with the support of his coalition and the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI), which remained to be the country’s strongest political party of the Albanian ethnic minority with fifteen seats won. Thus, the positively perceived results of the authorities in the fight against the pandemic – in conjunction with foreign policy circumstances – determined the outcome of the new parliamentary election in North Macedonia.

5 The Parliamentary Election in Montenegro: The Issue of Religion as the Decisive Issue

The smallest former Yugoslav republic both in terms of territory and population, and one of the smallest European countries, Montenegro went through the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 comparatively successfully. The country was the last European country to report the first case of the disease (on 17 March) and the first in Europe to be free of the disease after a two-month fight against the infection (on 24 May). Such a very favourable epidemiological situation was maintained thanks to the rapid implementation of the necessary protection measures and because the neighbouring countries (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo and Albania) had started the appropriate epidemiological measures themselves. Although as successful in curbing the pandemic as the Serbian, Croatian and North Macedonian governments, the Montenegrin government faced a crucial ‘extrapandemic’ political issue ahead of the parliamentary election that was supposed to be held in the second half of 2020. It was the question of the attitude towards the largest religious community in the country, the Serbian Orthodox Church, which eventually determined the outcome of the election.

As pointed out, Montenegro was the last former member of the Yugoslav federation to become independent, that is, to restore its statehood. It occurred in 2006 after a referendum in which slightly more than 55% of Montenegrin voters voted in favour of seceding from the joint state with Serbia. Until the end of the First World War, Montenegro was an independent kingdom that united with Serbia and the rest of the former Yugoslavia in December 1918. After joining the unitary state with Serbia, Montenegro not only lost its sovereignty but also abolished the hitherto autocephalous Montenegrin Orthodox Church whose members were taken over by the more populous and influential Serbian Orthodox Church. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church resumed its activities in

1993, yet it has remained unrecognized by other Orthodox churches, and its existence has been most strongly opposed by the Serbian Orthodox Church. In addition, Montenegro is an ethnically heterogeneous society in which slightly less than half of the population declares to be Montenegrin, thirty percent Serbs, while among the ethnic minorities, Bosniaks and Albanians are the most numerous.

Until the second half of the 1990s, Montenegro itself stuck firmly with Serbia's authorities and its president, Slobodan Milošević. In 1997, there was a split within Montenegro's ruling political party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). On that occasion, the then Prime Minister Milo Đukanović narrowly won the presidential election, beating the current President Momir Bulatović. Although both were staunch advocates of Milošević's policies and Serbia's role in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia at the beginning of their political careers, Đukanović decided to change his position altogether, increasingly advocating the restoration of Montenegrin statehood.

With this programme, he continued to win convincingly in the general elections with various coalition partners until the 2006 referendum and afterwards. Montenegro is the only European country in which the same political party DPS dominated in power from 1990 to 2020, and until the 2020 pandemic, a change of government through a parliamentary election never occurred. Milo Đukanović himself won the 2018 presidential election again after several prime ministerial terms, which means that his current five-year term expires in 2023. Although constantly faced with suspicions of corruption, the longest-serving Montenegrin politician skilfully always held on to power, choosing and maintaining the political ideas which guaranteed him majority public support: first, co-operation with Serbia, and then, a sharp move towards Montenegrin independence. He made a mistake at the end of 2019, when the parliament, in which the members of his party still had a majority, voted in favour of a controversial legislation according to which the property of the Serbian Orthodox Church acquired after the closure of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church should become the property of the state.

This led to massive, yet peaceful protests initiated by the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Amfilohije Radović, one of the sharpest critics of Đukanović's government and an advocate of Montenegro's belonging to Serbian national, cultural, and political unity. The protests were temporarily stopped during the lockdown, but as the election scheduled for 30 August 2020 was approaching, the question of repealing the disputed law was raised again. While in previous parliamentary elections, Đukanović's DPS always triumphed over the largely divided opposition, on the eve of 2020, three clearly profiled opposition coalitions were formed. Each of them opposed the authorities from different ideological positions, yet with the same goal of changing the DPS's 30-year dominance. The first coalition, called 'For the Future of Montenegro', was led by independent politician Zdravko Krivokapić, and included, among others, the pro-Serbian political party New Serbian Democracy and advocates of unquestionable Montenegrin independence, the Movement for Change. Another coalition, named 'Peace is Our Nation', was led by the political party Democrats, which emerged as one of the factions of the Socialist People's Party (SNP), which was founded by Momir Bulatović after the conflict with Đukanović. The third coalition, 'In Black and White' was led by a young politician Dritan Abazovic from the United Reform Action

(URA), who constantly criticized Đukanović's (semi)autocratic style of governing, but also the pro-Serbian denials of Montenegrin statehood.

This opposition organized from various political directions managed to mobilize the second largest number of voters in the Montenegrin parliamentary elections since 1990, more than three quarters. The 81 seat parliament was literally divided in half: 41 seats went to the three opposition groups ('For the Future of Montenegro' 32.55% of the vote and 27 seats, 'Peace is Our Nation' 12.53% and ten seats, and 'In Black and White' 5.54 % and four seats). Đukanović's DPS won both the highest percentage of votes (35.06%) and the highest number of seats (30), yet not enough to stay in power. Zdravko Krivokapić became the new Prime Minister, insisting on forming a government of experts, somewhat distanced himself from pro-Serbian politicians in the coalition and confirmed that Montenegro would remain a NATO member. The country was admitted to NATO in 2017, despite opposition from pro-Serbian politicians. Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović did not live to witness the coming to power of the government he advocated for as he had passed away in October, falling victim to COVID-19. His funeral turned into a new, hitherto largest hotbed of infection whose victim was the Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Irinej, who passed away a month later.

In this way, the pandemic greatly affected the post-election situation in both Montenegro and Serbia.

6 Comparative Review of the Pandemic Elections as Assessment of Crisis Management

All countries that held elections after 1 March 2020, either parliamentary, presidential, or local, faced hitherto unimaginable conditions for their holding due to the coronavirus pandemic. Some of them postponed the election, whereas most of them held it, believing that the epidemiological situation was already uncertain and that a worsening of the situation was possible because "the public discourse over holding massive, inperson elections amid the growing pandemic has been highly contentious in numerous countries" [8]. The first European states to organize parliamentary elections during the pandemic were the four states that emerged after the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, namely Serbia (21 June), Croatia (5 July), North Macedonia (15 July) and Montenegro (30 August). In the meantime, Kosovo held its parliamentary election in 2021, while regular parliamentary elections in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were held in 2022. The 2020 marked exactly three decades since the first democratic multiparty elections after the end of World War II and decades of communist autocracy were held in all republics of the former Yugoslavia.

Subsequently, the 1990 elections in the former Yugoslavia were labelled as 'pre-conflict' as the country disintegrated a year after them in a series of wars that were waged from 1991 to 2001 in different parts of the former federation. The 'pandemic' elections in 2020 in Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro largely confirmed the hypothesis that voters will reward the government that has successfully led the country in a rather unique crisis and minimized the consequences of the spread of an unknown infectious disease.

Table 1. The Covid-19 Elections in Southeast Europe and Their Outcomes

Country	Parliamentary election's date	Parliamentary election's outcome	COVID-19's influence
<i>Serbia</i>	21 June 2020	The ruling party's landslide victory	pro-government
<i>Croatia</i>	5 July 2020	The ruling party's convincing victory	pro-government
<i>North Macedonia</i>	15 July 2020	The ruling party's narrow victory	pro-government
<i>Montenegro</i>	30 August 2020	The opposition parties' narrow victory	without influence

The only precondition is that there is no crucial 'extrapandemic' circumstance that could affect the outcome of the election (Table 1).

The four countries under scrutiny differ greatly in their domestic and foreign policies. From 1991 to 1995, Croatia went through a severe armed conflict with rebel parts of its Serb ethnic minority that opposed Croatian independence. Ultimately, the Croatian authorities won the war and regained territorial integrity, but the government from the 1990s that had autocratic tendencies postponed Croatia's accession to NATO and the European Union to 2009 and 2013, respectively. During the 1990s, Serbia was under strict international sanctions for its role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in 1999 found itself during NATO's military intervention over the war in Kosovo, which has been independent of Serbia since 2008.

Despite their readiness for membership, neither Serbia, nor Montenegro, nor North Macedonia are even close to joining the European Union, while Montenegro and North Macedonia have joined NATO. Montenegro has avoided war on its territory, while North Macedonia has been constantly plagued by its neighbours since the country declared independence, either denying it the right to a Macedonian identity (Greece) or denying it the uniqueness of the Macedonian nation and language (Bulgaria). Nevertheless, all four countries, despite specific political and economic difficulties, successfully passed through the first wave of the pandemic, with significantly fewer sick and deceased than, for example, Western European countries. The reason for this is a certain level of public health services intended for the widest possible population, which is the heritage of the Yugoslav type of socialism and the policy of health and medical services available to all. Thus, before the parliamentary elections, the authorities of all four countries highlighted their fight against the spread of the infection as a key achievement, and this approach proved to be effective in most cases. However, there are also differences.

7 Conclusion

In the parliamentary 'pandemic' election in Serbia, the government literally triumphed, yet the election was held for the first time in the 21st century with a boycott of the opposition, which accused the Government of violating basic democratic principles in

media coverage of elections and their supervision. In Croatia, too, the current government won by reversing the negative trends of public opinion polls that were recorded at the beginning of the year, yet in the end, the government majority was formed with a margin of only one parliamentary seat. Just like in Montenegro, although with a different value. In fact, for the first time since 1990, a group of opposition coalitions won in Montenegro, gaining a narrow advantage for an ‘extrapandemic’ reason, namely an earlier dispute over a law that de facto confiscated the property of the Serbian Orthodox Church, that is, the country’s most powerful religious community. In addition, opposition voters were motivated by the possibility of removing a government that was constantly suspected of corruption. In North Macedonia, the incumbent government that tackled the pandemic won, but also with a minimal margin of parliamentary seats. This victory would have surely come into question if the Government had not managed the crisis successfully.

Thus, in most of these countries, the pandemic, i.e., the results of crisis management, affected the results of the parliamentary elections. In Serbia, it strengthened the already dominant government, in Croatia and North Macedonia it was a kind of game changer, while in Montenegro it would have ensured the continuation of the same government for thirty years if there had not been emotionally more saturated reason for a different election outcome. In short, successful crisis management pays off in elections provided there is no ‘mother of all crises’ (such as the issue of religion and national identity in case of Montenegro), compared to which the issue of the virus does not seem to be a matter of ‘life or death’.

References

1. Aldis, W. (2008). Health security as a public health concept: a critical analysis, *Health Policy and Planning*, Volume 23, Issue 6, November 2008, Pages 369–375.
2. Bouskill, K. E., & Smith, E. (2019). *Global Health and Security: Threats and Opportunities*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation
3. Duarte, D. E., & Valença, M. M. (2021). Securitising Covid-19? The Politics of Global Health and the Limits of the Copenhagen School. *Contexto int.* 43 (2) • May/Aug 2021, 235–257.
4. Kirk, J., & McDonald, M. (2021). The Politics of Exceptionalism: Securitization and COVID-19, *Global Studies Quarterly*, Volume 1, Issue 3, September 2021, ksab024
5. Casas-Zamora, K., & Cliffe, S., Noel, N. (2020). COVID-19, Election Governance, and Preventing Electoral Violence. New York: Center on International Cooperation (CIC)
6. Yu, S., Yoo, E. J., & Kim, S. (2022). The effect of trust in government on elections during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Korea. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 14(2), 175–198.
7. Davies, S. E., & Wenham, C. (2020). Why the COVID-19 response needs International Relations, *International Affairs*, Volume 96, Issue 5, September 2020, 1227–1251.
8. Paľguta J., Levínský R., Škoda S. (2022). Do elections accelerate the COVID-19 pandemic?: Evidence from a natural experiment. *J Popul Econ.* 2022;35(1):197–240.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

