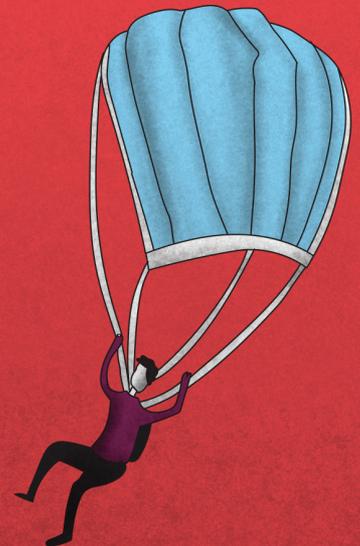
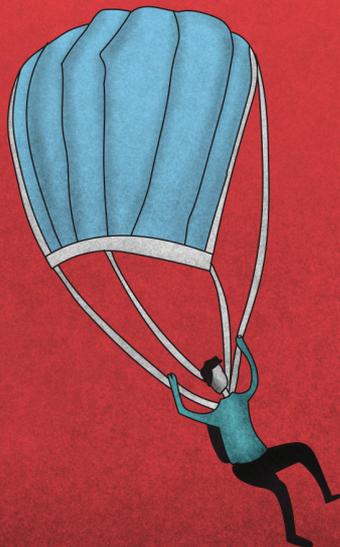
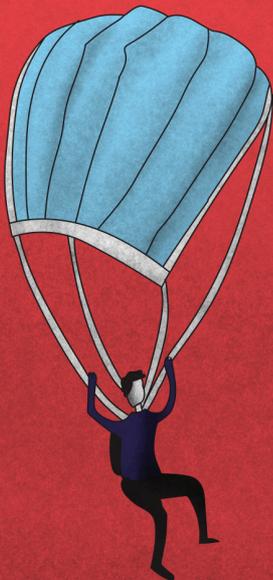


REFORMING OR RECONCEPTUALISING POST-PANDEMIC EDUCATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS? AN ANALYSIS OF ALBANIA, KOSOVO AND SERBIA

Francesco Trupia & Gentiola Madhi



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An analysis of Albania, Kosovo and
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Introduction

A large, bold, red graphic of the letter 'W' is positioned on the left side of the page. The letter is stylized with a thick stroke and a slight shadow effect, giving it a three-dimensional appearance. It is centered vertically relative to the main text area.

While expected to have a major impact exclusively on the healthcare system worldwide, the Covid-19 pandemic has exceeded by far the public health sphere and has hit all aspects of people's everyday life. In general, the epidemiological crisis has laid bare stark disparities within the poorest segments of societies and particularly in war-torn populations (Lokot and Avakyan 2020). Implementation of mechanisms of surveillance and control aimed at minimising the risk of contagion and mitigating the spread of the virus appeared insufficient for flattening the curve and properly tackling the pandemic. As currently unfolding, the latter is leading to significant economic disruption, large drops in economic output, higher levels of unemployment and underemployment (UNESCO 2020:10), worsening labour markets and vulnerable workers (Williams 2020). While the crisis is particularly having a significantly negative impact on weak healthcare and social protection systems, the social impacts in terms of increased poverty, deeper exclusion, and precarity are more likely to hit severely and have a long-lasting impact on societies.

Among others, the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on the societal role of education as never before in history. Without being an exception with other segments of the society, education inherited the structural vulnerabilities that national education systems were affected by prior to the pandemic outbreak. Many educational figures such as teachers, practitioners and school personnel became soon the most exposed to the largest disruption of the education system. Tellingly, the epidemiological crisis also revealed how the future of post-Covid-19 societies lies in the role of education. In fact, the rate of education attainment may be a potential changemaker for economic progress as well as social prosperity and political stability on both international and national level. While the rapid spread of the virus has already defied the traditional approaches to both teaching and learning process, central governments shall redirect the lenses of observation on education in light of the exacerbation of pre-existing disparities and learning gaps.

Worldwide, the pandemic has not so far acted only as a great accelerator by deepening and worsening pre-existing structural challenges. In the field of education, human conditions of a significant number of school personnel and families have largely worsened due to self-isolation and home schooling commitments resulting from the closure of schools and kindergartens (Matković and Stubbs 2020). In the Western Balkans, the pandemic began rapidly to accelerate phenomena of centralisation and ossification of power hierarchies in those semi-authoritarian regimes that used the state of emergency for achieving almost unlimited power (BiEPAG 2020).

In the given context, this policy paper aims to explore the faced challenges and policy measures adopted in the Western Balkans during March–December 2020, focusing particularly on the governments of Albania, Kosovo and Serbia in the field of pre-university education - namely, educational stages covering early childhood, primary and secondary education. With the scope of enabling a better understanding of Covid-19 impact on education, it is argued that predicting any potential development is uncertain due to consistent lack of data and impossibility to guarantee full comparability across the countries. At this stage, however, this explorative paper analyses the experiences of the given countries, which is deemed necessary for turning the national public debates into a more regional and all-inclusive discussion. With the scope of reflecting, engaging and reconceptualizing the existing education systems in the Western Balkans, it is here stated that a better quality of education in line with up-to-date modes of teaching and learning practices can widely develop a new vision for the region. At the same time, it is also noted that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the common long-lasting structural challenges present in the education systems. Hence, this paper further argues that the pandemic does not only mean a state of the emergency, but, conversely, it may also display a perspective of opportunities for rethinking or reconceptualizing national the education system, thereby pointing forward a new system of values (Dawson and Mellor 2020: 26). This paper does not only aim to simply explore the pre-existing fragmented approach and policies toward pre-university schooling, but it also attempts to galvanize the debate regarding the priceless opportunity to build a stronger, more modern and resilient education system in line with up-to-date modes of learning, combined with state-of-the-art technologies and appropriate for providing skills required in today's labour market. This policy paper addresses some limitations given by a series of rapid changes that are driven by the ongoing epidemiological crisis. The latter does not allow an examination of still lacking data and findings with regard to the education sector and its related major concerns within Albania, Kosovo and Serbia. Therefore, the paper explores a once-in-a-century health crisis in order to size such a momentum and thereby advance an

ambitious and broader vision for the public education sector. In order to do so, this paper lies in an interdisciplinary approach which involves a twofold perspective over the subject-matter this paper is concerned with. It firstly overviews the pre-pandemic scenario in the field of pre-university education in the Western Balkans. Secondly, it shifts the perspective for exploring from below (emic approach) the field of education in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia, respectively. Bearing in mind the highly dynamic phenomenon, which is still lasting and unfolding, this policy paper builds upon remote interviews conducted between September and December 2020 with NGO practitioners, teachers and experts in the field of education from the three countries. Drawing on personal takes as well as professional and daily experiences of teachers, parents and practitioners,² this bottom-up perspective does not only shed light on issues at stake on the three given countries. Rather, it also helps to envisage a way forward for rethinking a more resilient education system and stronger partnerships with a variety of actors actively engaged in the field of education. In this regard, the third section analyses the effects of technological divide in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia by paying particular attention on already-exacerbated social divisions between pupils/students and their family economic situation along with the rural-urban nexus. Assuming the high level of similarities and structural challenges that the Western Balkans have regionally faced since the Covid-19 outbreak, the fourth section puts forward a policy proposal for the region itself. With the scope of advocating a re-conceptualisation of the education system through collective participation models and engagement of different state and non-state actors, this paper concludes with a list of targeted recommendations. The latter aim at showing a potential direction along which future-oriented educational policies shall mutually strengthen regional cooperation and turn already-learned lessons into a potential empowerment for the whole education sector.

2 The interviews were conducted remotely due to Covid-19-related travel restrictions. Due to the sensitive information provided during remote interviews and future problems that respondents might face in their own school communities and places of residence, this paper does not disclose the identity of the interviewees.

1

What went wrong? The cost of underinvestment in education

Worldwide, the pandemic is displaying a degree of unpreparedness and unprofessionalism in the field of education. The Western Balkans have not been immune either. At the institutional level, countries were not only found unprepared to handle the epidemiological crisis, but were also unable to foresee the heavy toll on society and people's everyday life. This situation

does not simply stem from today's state of emergency, but also from decades of indifference on the side of national governments and local authorities. They have both paid little attention to political priorities regarding sustainable investments in key sectors such as education, public healthcare systems and digitalisation.

In general, the Western Balkans were committed on different occasions to address demands of inclusive economies and strengthen their efforts for concretising investments in the prospective development of education policy (Western Balkans Summit Poznań 2019). In this regard, the regional situation shares common features and constraints ranging from unsatisfying levels of public spending, weak governance, poor school-related infrastructures, inadequate preparation of teachers, and inappropriate teaching instruments for the practicing of the new curricula. From March 2020 onward, the pandemic has undoubtedly brought the governments of Albania, Kosovo and Serbia to face political and economic destabilisation within their societies.

Tellingly, a general absence of a strategic orientation, coupled with the lack of proper instruments, has slowed down an effective transition of the pre-university education towards the modern competence-oriented approach. As reported by the last annual progress report of the European Commission, a comparison of the public expenditures shows that in 2018 Albania devolved to education 3.2% of GDP, Serbia 3.6% and Kosovo 4.6%, all below the EU average of 5% and expectations for finding a remedy to the sector's challenges. Kosovo seems at first sight in a more comfortable position. However, if the analysis is performed on a per capita spending level, the country lags behind the Western Balkans in general and both Albania and Serbia in particular (Aliu 2019: 9).

The latest results of the 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) constitute another clear indicator of the 'long malaise' that has invaded the education systems of the region. In particular, Kosovo was amongst the worst performers, ranking third from the bottom, out of 79 countries and other entities. These results were both alarming and revelatory of the outdated education system in place (Council of the European Union 2020a: 3). Albania's struggles in education provided mixed results, with improvements for mathematics and deteriorations for science (Council of the European Union 2020b: 34). In the meantime, Serbia's situation remained broadly stable compared to previous assessments, being however the best performer in the Western Balkans.

Yet another major concern is the poor quality of staff, which is considered an essential factor for student learning (OECD 2019: 110). While systematic interventions for strengthening teachers' competences in support of the newly adopted curricula are still missing (European Commission 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Under the curriculum reform in both Albania and Kosovo, it is proven true that in-service teachers received basic training before the introduction of a new curriculum for each grade. Nevertheless, the quality of such preparation is definitely questionable since lack of ad hoc mechanisms for further training, adequate monitoring and support is more likely to impinge on the new competence-based approach. The latter, in fact, cannot only provide pedagogical skills that current teachers do

not acquire at university level. Adequate support and further ensured through an effective and meaningful implementation of the structural reform helping teachers to turn the old-fashioned memorization type of learning and teacher-centred learning into a more child-centred approach embracing the concept of formative assessment. In the case of Albania, the European Commission (2020a: 102) reports that while the review of the content and structure of the curricula for initial teacher training in higher education institutions has started, the study programmes have not been aligned with the curricula in pre-university education. At the same time, teachers and school principals go through a training of at least three days per year in accordance with the “on-demand” system, based on the needs of teachers and offers from accredited training agencies. On the one hand, it is worthy of noting that the outcomes of the training depend a lot on the motivation and efforts of the teachers themselves (Club TV 2020), as the stimuli are missing. Whereas on the other, the conducted interviews with teachers denoted also the structural problems, as the lack of provision from the competent state authorities of the teaching materials makes them unable to properly implement the competence-based approach.² The same situation is found Kosovo and Serbia, where the piloting of the new curricula in schools has not been accompanied with specific preparation of teachers or equipping them with the necessary learning materials and physical conditions (Euro-

pean Commission 2020b: 58, 84; European Commission 2020c: 61, 102).

In this vacuum, the education sector in the three countries remains exposed to political interference and sensitive to corruptive affairs (European Commission 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Focusing on Albania, education has been hindered by the political landscape and four interviews out of five with the teachers reported pressure from direct school superiors during the ongoing pre-electoral phase. On the one hand, Albania has made some efforts to address the politicisation of appointment decisions, for example by introducing open competitions for the appointment of principals to schools. However, on the other hand, the selection of school principals as well as the appointment of staff at key educational agencies reportedly remain subject to political influence (OECD 2020a: 44). Against this, teachers' appraisal for promotion and professional development is not effective. The OECD assessments on Serbia and Albania show that the respective mechanisms in place are underdeveloped. In the case of Serbia, the official external appraisal process for teacher promotion is rarely carried out and when so, the evaluators show a lack of adequate time or training to perform the duty (Maghnouj 2020b: 157). Whereas in Albania, a consistent weight of the appraisal is based on a written exam that does not authentically measure the teaching competences (Maghnouj 2020a: 135). Although Kosovo has not been included in this round of

2 Personal online interviews with five elementary and high school teachers from Albania.

OECD country assessments, it is reported that the country still does not have a functioning teachers appraisal system in place either.

Instead of being a leverage for further modernisation of the education system and enhancing both teaching and learning processes, the schools and their teachers are left alone in the management of merit-based career encouragement and related incentives. All the same, Kosovo's teachers as well as students and their parents were found sceptical about the educational system. For example, while a few teachers from Southeast Kosovo pointed out the toxic interference of local politicians on the schooling system and headteachers, students and parents complained about their voiceless condition and dissatisfaction with the educational programs.³ Likewise, a Serbian teacher confirmed how a certain dependency of schooling system on politics was salient prior to March 2020 and became even much clearer after the introduction of the state of emergency⁴.

In front of this underperforming situation, the outburst of COVID-19 pandemic and the immediate interruption of the school year in mid-March 2020 crippled the already-fragile education systems of the given countries, risking disproportionately negative impacts especially among the more vulnerable segments of the societies. In Serbia, a lack of professionalism among those appointed experts who were neither able to implement coherent safety measures and net programs for the months to come⁵, nor trusted in the wider public, came to expose students, teachers and school personnel to a higher risk of being infected (UNESCO 2020).

In foreseeing a potential scenario along a long-term perspective (Gouëdard et. al. 2020: 6), the risk of witnessing the loss of a COVID-19 generation is definitely clearer than before the state of emergency (UNICEF 2020). In fact, the temporary school closures and educational learning losses may have a further negative impact on school dropout rate and shrink further the access to facilities from pre-primary up until to tertiary education levels. All the same, extremely poor living conditions and disadvantaged home environment can impinge on the level of innovation and qualifications of the future generation in the labour market and highly required levels of professionalism and preparedness. ●

3 Personal online interviews with three teachers from Southern Kosovo, two of them also parents.

4 Personal online interview with a Serbian teacher from North Serbia, 25 October 2020.

5 Personal online interview with Ana Stefanović, member of Party of Freedom and Justice in Serbia, 20 October 2020.

2

Blended learning and teachers in 'resilience mode'

In the Western Balkans, the abrupt transition to remote schooling brought teachers, school personnel and students to improvise and quickly adapt into new teaching and learning environments. The political unresponsiveness to the new reality left school head-teachers unable to take proper countermeasures in the attempt to comply with safety protocols and guarantee education.

Between March and June 2020, teachers generally reacted spontaneously and creatively to the new normalcy. It immediately seemed, however, that home-schooling had increased workload and forced teachers to catch up with new teaching environments, tasks and responsibilities. In the attempt to ensure formative and summative assessments, feedback and information were regularly provided to students and their parents.

“Out of the blue, within 24 hours, I had to reinvent myself into a digital teacher of 20 first-grade pupils”, said a teacher from Albania. “I had to hand out materials door-to-door for those students who lacked internet connection and digital tools”, added her colleague from Serbia.

The unexpected switch to remote delivery of lessons was neither imaginable nor ready to be applied in an undifferentiated modality. Overall, teachers engaged students in different distance activities and, when possible and needed, they handed out material door-by-door in order to prevent educational losses and dropouts

amongst students from families at risk. The latter was more likely to happen on teachers’ voluntarily basis in rural areas and at-risk communities rather than in urban areas.

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In order to complement online delivery, national TV broadcasters screened educational programs in the attempt to reach those students lacking access to digital devices (e.g. computers, tablets or smart-

Parenting in time of pandemic

Many parents currently struggle in dealing with school safety measures and distance learning alike. In rural Kosovo, for example, when families manage to comply with safety measures, namely providing a daily mask and disinfectant to each student, such effort is visibly stalled and meaningless due to the poorly-maintained conditions of public school infrastructures and their surrounding areas. While social distancing and student turnover is almost impossible at school*, remote learning comes with a high cost for the family, where at least one of the two parents has to look after his/her daughter(s)/son(s). In addition, affording the costly digital devices to permit students to attend classes from home is yet another challenge that many families are not able to cope with. The situation became even more complex for those teachers, who were at the same time also parents of two or more pupils, and lacked the necessary infrastructure to satisfy the needs of all simultaneously**.

* Interview with three teachers from southern rural area in Kosovo, 10 October 2020.

** Interview with a teacher from the rural area in Albania, 31 October 2020.

phones) and filled the lacunae of the national school system accordingly. Despite this, the broadcasted lessons could only partially limit learning losses. This was particularly a sensitive issue for elementary pupils, interaction with teachers was completely absent and knowledge construction almost impossible to be committed to students themselves throughout a distance learning process.

After feeling some enthusiasm during the summertime, the school reopening in September put again pre-university education at stake. The experience of the first shock in spring 2020 did not serve as a lesson learned for the region and beyond. Rather than making room for a common ground and giving high salience to how to prevent a second shock, the new academic year found almost all governments of the region in a rush. While the Albanian Minister of Education and Sport resigned on the first day of students' return to school, Serbia was still missing the formation of the new government after the national election in June. Meanwhile, Kosovo had already changed the governing coalition in the middle of the pandemic outburst and the summer served to the new government to get integrated in office.

This high level of political uncertainty ventured the parapet of the institutional scenario, penetrating negatively the national school systems and affecting them from within. During summertime, both teachers and school personnel did not receive additional training to better

navigate between traditional and potential remote classes, or either way at once. In September, school head-teachers did not simply manage to implement any of the operational protocols because of a lack of basic healthcare tools and equipment that were not properly discussed during the summertime. In fact, the first shock-wave, which could have given enough time to institutions and authorities to coordinate themselves for developing coherent safety measures and putting them in place through action plans, turned out to be a lost opportunity. Without any doubt, there was the need to team up with various partners and donors in order to cover the local needs for portable devices and ensure access to internet coverage for the most vulnerable segments of the society. Amid uncertainties on the health protocols to be adopted by schools and effective lack of operational infrastructure to put the norms in practice, the resilience of the education system was left on the teachers' shoulders. Parents felt also abandoned, lacking not only knowledge on how to help the children but also official information on the need to financially contribute for hand sanitizers and masks for their children' attending school. The return to school exposed the community again to many weaknesses and inequities.

In light of the possibility to have another round of school closure, the latter has never meant a win-win solution in the eyes of the large majority of teachers and parents.⁶ Despite the fact that schools

⁶ Personal online interview with Dukagjin Pupovci, Director of the Kosovo Education Centre in Prishtina, 2 December 2020.

may potentially have a small-scale effect on the wider transmission of the virus and provoke contagion outbreaks,⁷ teachers are generally sceptical toward any decision of school closure. While struggling to limit educational losses, the preferred scenario adopted in the majority of cases in the three countries was that of keeping schools opened and teaching up by all

means. However, while teachers tend to replace unskillfulness in remote teaching with self-efficacy and well-being (Gouëdard et. al. 2020: 35), students are struggling to catch up with a different knowledge construction and acquisition.

In Serbia, in-class activities challenge the majority of students due to the compul-

⁷ For detailed information, visit the website of World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-schools>

Minorities and monolingualism

Distance learning is having a further impact on non-majority communities. Since they are largely characterised by a trend of monolingualism at school and disadvantaged environments at home, students from minority groups are largely excluded from watching recorded classes and educational TV programs in national languages. Kosovo's Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities suffer from already-existing structural challenges on a social level* and a pre-existing parental disinterest toward education is seemingly holding a stronger grip, while Kosovo Serbs are affected by structural challenges. Especially for those residing in the so-called south of the Ibar river, online schooling is a major concern**. Likewise, lack of engagement and scarce digital instruments are currently impeding Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities to attend school from home (Roma Veritas Kosovo 2020). This is undoubtedly adding the burden (Simic 2020) to an extremely difficult situation that was not different in the period before the pandemic outbreak***. In Serbia's southernmost Valley of Preševo, the Albanian Minister of Education managed successfully to deliver textbooks before the school reopened in the Albanian-majority areas (Danas 2020). However, a series of logistical issues, such as poorly maintained school facilities and absence of open spaces, neither permit nor help personnel as well as teachers and students to comply with safety measures and outdoor activities.

*Personal online interview with Gazi Salijevec, European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) in Kosoo, 11 December 2020.

** Personal online interviews with three Serbian teachers from South Kosovo, 10 October 2020.

***Interview with Dukagjin Pupovci.

sory mask wearing and social distancing. Those students who are forced to attend classes remotely due to an increase in the contagion rate, are either found largely unskilled to do so properly, or excluded from learning environments since classes are not live-streamed. Although teachers are eager to organize additional consultations for both students and parents, economically deprived family environments and lack of technological equipment are affecting many. This scenario parallels Albania's and Kosovo's situation. In both countries, in fact, disadvantaged family environments and low level of digital literacy are most probably deepening summer losses⁸ and exacerbating students' skills to learn and study properly. On the top of this, students are found quite outspoken to complain against the unpreparedness of official authorities. They are more likely aware than previous generations that institutions have done very little to secure the ongoing academic year.⁹ In time of pandemic, Kosovo's and Serbia's schools were found extremely challenged to adopt a suitable platform for communication with the students,¹⁰ and thereby tackling long-term effects on both school attendance and achievements. Especially among marginalized communities, education represented the only bridge for normalizing social relationships with the whole society.¹¹ For instance, in Kosovo

ethnic Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian pupils had benefited from the opening of these pre-university learning centres, which fulfilled integration and reskilled future generations of marginalised communities. Prior to the pandemic breakout, dropout rates had barely decreased. At present, a large number of such educational centres risk being closed down, affecting a larger proportion of students and lowering more, school graduation rate beyond ethnic lines (European Commission 2020b: 84).

Many students, particularly those from rural areas and non-majority communities, remain critical as well as sceptical toward today's educational curricula. Complaining about the lack of technical and vocational educational programs for those professions in demand, they thought that the pandemic circumstances would have changed such a pattern. In Kosovo, students notice that new teaching and learning environments are not helping them to get ready for the post-pandemic period.¹² Likewise, in Serbia, such dissatisfaction is deeply deteriorating citizens' attitudes toward the value of education. ●

8 Ibidem.

9 It is confirmed also by the personal online interviews conducted with Dukagjin Pupovci (on 2 December 2020) and with Caleb Waugh, Officer at NGO Aktiv in Mitrovica (Kosovo) (on 13 October 2020).

10 In the case of Kosovo, Pupovci pointed out that schools did not manage to apply Google educational toolkit during the summertime, despite the easy and quick procedure to go through. In the case of Serbia, it is reported at: [https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/responses-from-schools-in-serbia#%7B%2264727351%22:\[0\],%2264727380%22:\[0\]%7D](https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/responses-from-schools-in-serbia#%7B%2264727351%22:[0],%2264727380%22:[0]%7D)

11 Personal online interview with Dritan Nelaj, Open Society Foundation for Albania, 6 December 2020.

12 Personal online interviews with three teachers from Southern Kosovo.

3

On the edge of technology

The shortage of digital devices faced during the first shock of the pandemic has hindered the learning process. International partners, private companies and other non-state actors have given a relevant voluntary contribution by providing digital devices to schools or selected families in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia, but the statistical data at the national level are still missing and the return of such 'technological investment' remains to be assessed. Yet, such a high salience given to technology for boosting and facilitating online schooling during the lockdown may not address all pre-existing deficiencies mentioned above. In fact, the data

available in Albania show that in early December the government has distributed nearly 6000 tablets and smartphones, which however do not certainly satisfy the local need on the ground; whereas part of the targeted schools confirm that they have not received such support, thereby questioning the official declarations of state institutions (Nikolli 2020). In Serbia, foreign investments are not helping the country to bring educational reforms further and along with digitalisation (Đorđević 2020). The European Investment Bank has officialised a 65-million Euro investment plan for digitalising Serbia's primary and secondary schools

An ambitious digitalization project

The Albanian government initiated in 2015 a three-year pilot project on the digitalization of 120 classes, located in 60 public high schools, with the aim to 'radically transform' the pre-university education system. During that year, 5800 tablets were purchased and the invested amount from the state budget equaled 3.5 million dollars. The project foresaw also specific trainings for the teachers and virtual classes of the students. Although conceptualized as an innovative and ambitious educational tool, during the pandemic the digital classes and related infrastructure were not put in place. Following media pressure, the Ministry of Education and Sport undisclosed that the tablets are a property of the schools and cannot be given in use to the students, and their recharging system is permanently located in the school buildings*.

*Porta Vendore, 13 July 2020.

(Ralev 2020). Nevertheless, results are yet to be seen on the ground. At the same time, so far, it is difficult to map all the donors and trace out the amount of digital devices distributed throughout the first nine months of coexistence with COVID-19 virus. Moreover, it is almost impossible to monitor the effective use of distance learning modality by the pupils/students during the same period.

The September attempts of harmonising school calendars by shortening class hours, splitting classes in much smaller groups and alternating them according to ad hoc timetables, are definitely telling. However, the low level of digitalisation is once again displaying how little central governments had done before the pandemic outbreak. Although online teaching platforms could

have been an opportunity to rapidly rethink and reboot the entire sector of pre-university education during 2020 summertime, digitalisation has become today "an-issue-within-an-issue" and a top-priority for the Western Balkans.¹³ At this stage, reforming education and upgrading its old-fashioned schooling systems is far from the EU's suggestions. Considering the aforementioned political incapacity to respond properly to the high levels of underdevelopment in the education sector, all three different cases this paper is concerned with, confirm such a pattern.

Serbia was the country that could not decide on a coherent teaching model for the school year, thereby underestimating the heavy toll that the Covid-19 had already had on the whole society between March and June 2020.¹⁴ Only the aforementioned

13 Personal online interview with Dukagjin Pupovci.

14 Personal online interview with Ana Stefanović.

Rural/urban divide in the three countries

In high-poverty rural areas, schools are less likely to offer online learning opportunities and facilities to all students. In general, remote schooling and poor use of digital devices are not only deepening an already-existing issue, but also exacerbating disparity from within the educational systems. Within rural areas in Serbia, lower numbers of students and school personnel could have benefitted from school reopening and in-class activities since September 2020. However, high level of unprofessionalism and lack of coordination trigger a counter-effect: internet disconnection remains a major concern in these marginalised and peripheral areas, where remote teaching has been harder than in the pre-pandemic scenario*. In the same vein, in Albania many schools in rural mountain areas are struggling to meet basic infrastructure needs. In Kosovo, too, the European Commission states that low educational attainment is to some extent correlated with low inclusion of children in preschool education due to the urban-rural infrastructure (Gjokutaj 2013). In the case of Albania, the European Commission points out that pre-university provision is particularly inadequate in rural and isolated areas. School premises are often in poor conditions, where it is difficult to attract qualified teachers (European Commission 2020:120).

*Personal online interview with Ana Stefanović.

high level of resilience among teachers is a lens through which understanding how social networks make room for new teaching and learning environments. Becoming a centrally paramount means of two-way communications between teachers and students, and vice versa, social media fill de facto the policy vacuum in a twofold way. First, teachers managed to reach out easily and smoothly where online platforms are not provided by schools. This recalls many examples from rural or mar-

ginalised areas and communities. Second, teachers cooperate between each other through social media platforms by sharing good teaching practices and quickly up-to-dating their modes of creating educational environments.¹⁵

Meanwhile in North Kosovo, Belgrade-backed public schools were left without clear protocols to follow up and emergency programs to be put in place.¹⁶ In the rest of the country, school personnel

¹⁵ Personal online interview with Dukagjin Pupovci.

¹⁶ Personal online interview with Caleb Waugh.

remained highly unprepared to avoid, or at least minimise, the risks of contagion by promptly reorganising instructional time remotely.¹⁷

The situation in Albania was rather uncertain until the end of summer, but few weeks before the start of the new academic year, the ministry issued the written protocols. The conducted interviews with teachers located in different areas of the country underlined the difficulty of materializing in practice the formal procedures described in the official documents. The amount of paperwork was assessed as unnecessary and with unmeasurable indicators. In front of the lack of staff and instruments (like thermometers) the time devoted to the measurement of the temperature of the pupils went at the expenses of the teaching time. Some teachers stated that they are facing several challenges with the teaching plan that the ministry sent prior to the current academic year. This plan was meant to help teachers overcome the difficulties in a time of pandemic. However, the presence of already existing alternative textbooks made impossible the implement the plan in practical terms. While in principle the goodwill was acknowledged by the teachers, yet the situation did not change at the school level and reflexively for the more vulnerable pupils/students.

Overall, the pandemic has so far contributed to deepen the digital divide in each of these countries along the rural-urban nexus. Moreover, the mere presence of technological devices cannot ensure by default the expected performance in terms of teaching and learning outcomes. In addition, the exacerbation of the gaps between privileged and disadvantaged pupils/students stem directly from the significant negative impacts of the pandemic. In fact, the already-weak social protection systems in terms of increased poverty, exclusion, precarity and vulnerability (Matkovic and Stubbs 2020:5) marked the turning point of the role of public schools as community centres and equity. ●

17 Personal online interviews with three teachers from southern rural area in Kosovo, 10 October 2020.



Toward a Shared Vision for Education

The evolution of the pandemic in the next months is still difficult to foresee, and the schools' temporary closure remains yet a probable viable option, in the light of the containment of the virus spreading. The empirical analysis in the three countries showed that the education sector has been facing common challenges and there is a demand for aligned actions at the regional level. Therefore, this paper puts forward a policy proposal for the re-conceptualisation and deep reforming of the educational policy, in order to avoid the fragmentation in interventions in the post-Covid-19 period as well as to

contribute to mutually sustaining initiatives as well as peer-pressure among governments. The distinctive process under which education has gone through during the first year of the pandemic demands for concerted actions and mutual accountability. The acquired experience with Covid-19 pandemic should be seen in a future-oriented perspective, serving as a test-case and learning experience for the governments, so as to strengthen their capacities in dealing with large disruptions, along with reflecting on alternative ways on how to make education policy more resilient in the future.

REFORMING OR RECONCEPTUALISING POST-PANDEMIC EDUCATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?

In the Western Balkans, the interventions in the education sector require urgent attention and investments, as well as a serious long-term commitment by all governments. Sustainable and all-inclusive mechanisms need to be developed in order to allow for concerted actions regarding the improvement of educational infrastructure, strengthening of teachers' capacities and reduction of technological barriers, including access to sufficient bandwidth. The corpus of investments should be part of the wider regional development strategy, as an essential policy that allows for a conducive economic growth of the countries and as the region as a whole. Such improvements in education would certainly contribute to spill over effects in economic terms, and may serve as an instrument for the development of regional value chains, reinforcing the competitive position of the six countries in the European market. While in the pre-Covid-19 phase, the Berlin process included vocational education in the region's political agenda, in the post-Covid-19 phase education should be seen in a multidimensional perspective, and as a contributing factor in the region's economic growth.

In light of the present uncertainties and structural vulnerabilities in which education is diving, it is however difficult to quantify the level of learning losses experienced by the pre-university students, but estimations show that the negative effects can "erase decades of progress" (United Nations 2020:2), leading so to a significant economic impact for the countries of the region. Some partial estimates show that in the case of Kosovo, the reading score of pre-university students may return to pre-2015 level of PISA, while for Albania the drop may even reach 2012 level (World Bank 2020a: 6-8). The pandemic has hit noticeably the already fragile economies of Albania, Kosovo and Serbia. The forecasted annual percentage change of GDP for Albania for 2020 is -6.8%, while for Serbia -1.8% (European Commission 2020d: 143, 149). Whereas, in the case of Kosovo the contraction of the GDP is estimated to -8.8% (World Bank 2020b). In the coming years its effects will contribute to the rising of the fiscal pressure and limited space for investments in key policy areas. In realistic terms, it is even more probable to face a restraint of the level of public spending on education, increasing so even more the gap between the region and the EU member states.

However, the massive efforts and energies spent during 2020 to keep the schools open and to reduce as much as possible to learning losses show that there exists still a perspective for improvement in the education systems of the region. Despite the difficulties, the pandemic galvanized the participation of different actors around education institutions, with the teachers turning into agents of change coupled with the non-state actors' donations to reduce the inequality level between the marginalized groups and the rest of the population. Taking stock of this collaborative experience, it is important to initiate concerted actions both at national and regional level in order to shape a common vision for education policy for the post-pandemic phase. Considering that education is a public good, its re-conceptualization and the designing of a regional strategy should take place in presence of a wider stakeholders' participation, namely national

and regional institutions, educational staff, non-governmental actors and private bodies. The main entry points for such re-conceptualisation of the system have mechanically emerged from the pandemic experiences of almost all countries of the region, therefore the common efforts should target firstly the learning losses, teachers' pedagogical, teaching and digital competencies and skills, ongoing investments in technology and improvement of access to internet. While part of these entry points overlap also with the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans that is already present in the region, the focus on the human capacities should be put at the centre of the new interventions. ●

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has been not only acting as a great accelerator for the pre-existing structural challenges in the field and education and beyond, but it has also been displaying to central and local authorities a crucial phase for rethinking the future of the region. Within this, if mechanisms of control and surveillance have so far brought schools and educational centres to close down for flattening the curve, at present there exists the need to reconsider teaching and learning environments and organisation in search of a post-pandemic normalcy on a local, national and regional level.

TO REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, ASSISTED BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION:

- include education policy in the wider regional priority agenda, in the light of countries' economic prosperity and EU membership prospects;
- establish mix consultation platforms of state and non-state actors to draft an inclusive strategy and roadmap on pre-university education, building upon the lessons learned from the pandemic;
- strengthen the cooperation and systemic interventions with other regional organizations that are active in the field of pre-university education, such as Regional Youth Cooperation Office, etc;
- take initiatives in order to contribute in changing the mindset of policy- and decision-makers on education, as a fundamental human right and public good;
- encourage the organization of joint activities for teachers from the region;
- organize annual stocktaking event(s) on pre-university education in the Western Balkans.

TO THE GOVERNMENTS:

- strengthen the role of education institutions and increase the level of their autonomy on a local level;
- introduce innovative teaching methods, where technology serves as a supportive instrument for both teachers and students;
- promote ad hoc education policies for at-risk communities and families in order to contrast equity gap between rural/urban divide;
- rethink teaching and learning environments by coherently replacing class hours with vocational trainings and other outdoor educational activities;
- map ICT capacities at national level, identifying the effective needs and work to address them in the medium term;
- craft coherent responses to structural challenges on a local level, reducing fragmentation along the national/regional divide and improving coordination;
- enhance education-related consultation mechanisms with non-state actors;
- take stock of COVID-19 experience to invest on educational technology in a structured and coordinated manner;
- put teachers' capacity building at the front of the education's re-conceptualization interventions, in order to strengthen their teaching and ICT skills for pupils' learning purposes;
- increase regional cooperation to initiate concerted actions related to education and to share best practices in the field.

TO INTERNATIONAL DONORS AND NON-STATE ACTORS:

- identify good practices and support with evidence policy-making processes on education at national level;
- assist with capacity-building activities teachers and school personnel, especially in the rural areas;
- engage in activities with students for practical learning purposes;
- build coalition partnerships to enhance interactive teaching and learning methods;
- encourage public debates on education and advocate for high quality public education.

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Personal online interviews with three teachers from Southern Kosovo, 10 October 2020.

Personal online interview with a Serbian teacher from North Serbia, 25 October 2020.

Personal online interview with Ana Stefanović, former educator, MP from Serbia, 20 October 2020.

Personal online interview with Dukagjin Pupovci, Director of the Kosovo Education Centre in Prishtina, 2 December 2020.

Personal online interview with Dritan Nelaj, Open Society Foundation for Albania, 6 December 2020.

Personal online interview with Caleb Waugh, Officer at NGO Aktiv in Mitrovica (Kosovo), on 13 October 2020.

Personal online interview with Gazi Salijevic, European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) in Kosovo, 11 December 2020.

Personal online interview with five teachers from Albania held respectively on 30 October – 2 November 2020.

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