

KOSOVO

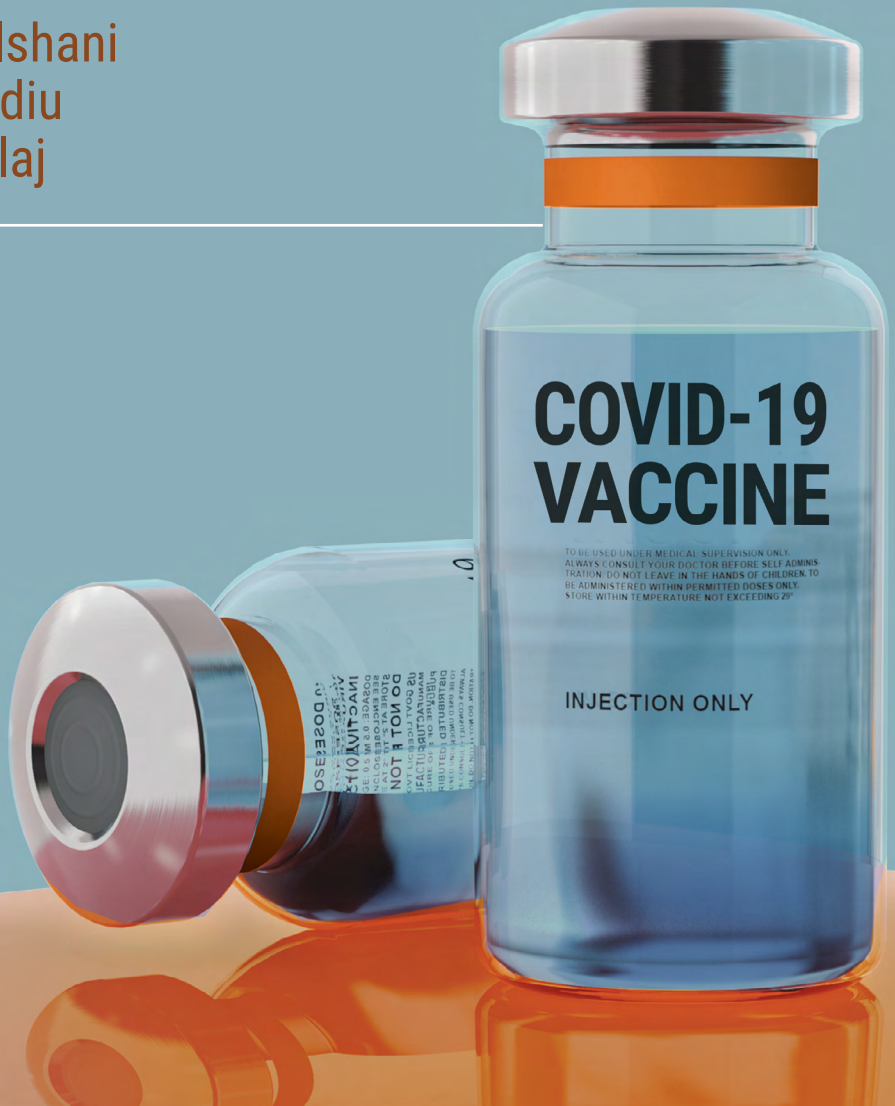
---

# COVID-19 MANAGEMENT

---

Donika Elshani  
Plator Avdiu  
Shpat Balaj

---



# COVID-19 MANAGEMENT

## KOSOVO

**Publisher:**

Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS)  
Str.Sylejman Vokshi Block B, Entry 2, No.1, Prishtina, Kosova  
[www.qkss.org](http://www.qkss.org), [info@qkss.org](mailto:info@qkss.org)

**Authors:**

Donika Elshani, Plator Avdiu and Shpat Balaj

**Design:**

Srđan Ilić

March 2023



This report was made possible with support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF).  
The opinions and views of the authors do not necessarily state or reflect those of the RBF.



**KCSS**  
Kosovo Center for Security Studies

## Introduction

The purpose of this research is to provide a general overview of the manifestation of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kosovo and the overall management of the pandemic by relevant institutions. The analysis is based on data collected through publicly available information, national statistics, news articles, as well as research reports by local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations and missions in the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic of the novel coronavirus was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. It quickly spread to other parts of the world, leading to the World Health Organization declaring a pandemic on March 11, 2020<sup>12</sup>. Countries across the globe implemented various measures to control the spread of the virus, including lockdowns, travel restrictions and mask mandates. The COVID-19 vaccine was soon developed, and the vaccine roll out began in the first months of 2021, with many countries still being in the process of vaccinating their populations<sup>13</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on Kosovo, as it has had in many countries around the world. The first cases of COVID-19 in Kosovo were reported in March 2020<sup>14</sup>, and since then the country has implemented measures such as lockdowns, mask mandates, and travel restrictions to try to control the spread of the virus. Kosovo faced many challenges in its efforts to control the spread of the virus, including limited healthcare resources, vaccine hesitancy, political instability and economic hardship, to name a few.<sup>15</sup> The COVID-19 vaccine roll-out in Kosovo began in the first months of 2021<sup>16</sup> and was implemented with a phased approach, whereby some groups, such as healthcare workers, the elderly, and persons with underlying conditions, were given priority, before vaccinating the rest of the population<sup>17</sup>. AstraZeneca and Pfizer BioNTech were the two vaccinees administered in Kosovo<sup>18</sup>. These vaccines were secured through various sources, including through the COVAX facility<sup>19</sup>.

## Analysis

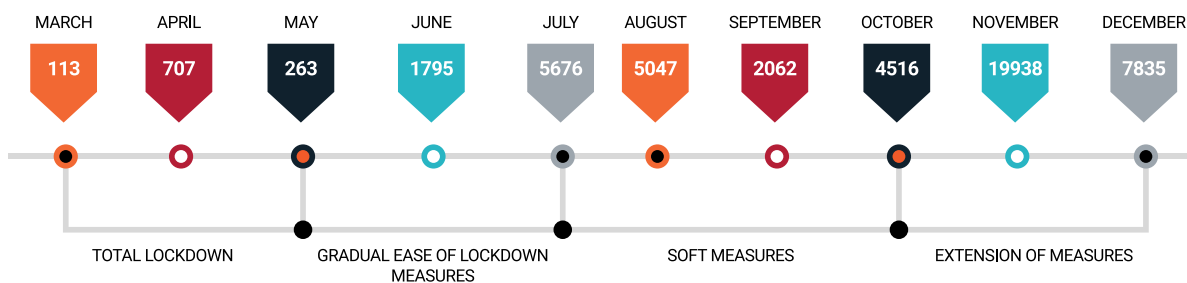
Almost three years since Kosovo registered its first case of COVID-19, the country is still suffering the economic, social and health-related consequences of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic plunged the country into an economic recession, contributed to political instability, but most importantly, it took the lives of 3200 people, as of March 2023,<sup>20</sup> and left countless others suffering the long-term effects of the virus, including severe mental health problems.

Kosovo registered the first case of COVID-19 on March 13, 2020<sup>[1]</sup>. Only two days later, on March 15, the country declared a state of public health emergency, which was followed by a number of restrictive measures being undertaken by the government to control the spread of the virus<sup>[2]</sup>. The restrictive measures included the strict implementation of the mask mandate and physical distancing, the shutting down of public institutions and private businesses, and the limiting of people's free movement<sup>21</sup>. Given the higher risk of contracting the coronavirus, the government imposed a special measure for persons over the age of 65 restricting their freedom of movement: they were only permitted to leave their houses between 6:00 and 10:00 in the morning, and between 16:00 and 19:00 in the evening<sup>22</sup>. The government also prohibited large gatherings, including wedding and religious ceremonies, while funerals were permitted to be held only in the presence of immediate family members<sup>[3]</sup>. A measure that received a lot of public attention in the first four months of the pandemic was the scheduling of the time slots when people were allowed to leave their homes, based on the last digit of their personal identification number. If one's personal ID number ended between 0-1, he or she was permitted to leave the house between 7:00 and 8:00 in the morning, whereas those whose ID number ended in 9, whereas allowed to leave the house between 21:00 and 22:30 in the evening<sup>[4]</sup>.

Despite the above-mentioned restrictive measures, the death toll from COVID-19 in Kosovo is nevertheless high. As of March 1, 2023, a total of 3211 COVID-related deaths have been recorded in the country, whereas 272,578 confirmed cases of COVID infections have been registered<sup>[5]</sup>. August 30, 2021 was the day with the highest number of COVID-19 deaths, with a striking number of 36 deaths recorded. In a country with a population of not more than 1,7 million, these figures are indeed worrying.



Figure 1: A monthly timeline depicting number of COVID-19 infections per month in 2020, and the different lockdown phases and measures imposed:



The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the systemic deficiencies and inefficiencies in Kosovo's preparedness to respond to a crisis. Although the pandemic was primarily a public health crisis, its impact trickled down across different spheres in society. With limited resources and capacities, the institutions of Kosovo faced numerous challenges to respond to the growing need for preventive measures such as adequate personal protective equipment for the frontline workers and the public, medical equipment, medicines, and treatment facilities for COVID-19 patients. International cooperation and assistance relieved some of the challenges faced by Kosovo in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. The European Union, as the largest donor in the fight against COVID-19 in Kosovo, allocated a total of €168 million in support, including €5 million for the health sector and €63 million for social and economic recovery.<sup>23</sup> Other countries have also provided bilateral support, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and Turkey.<sup>24</sup>

While Kosovo has benefited from the 5 million Euros from the EU to buy equipment, including tests and masks since March 2020<sup>[7]</sup> challenges with the bureaucratic procedures of the public health institutions as well as insufficient personnel resources continued to put a strain on the response to the pandemic. The government struggled to implement the testing of the citizens for COVID-19. The Ministry of Health in 2020 conducted emergency procurement contracts to buy medical equipment in an attempt to cope with the pandemic demands. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Ministry of Health conducted ten emergency procurement contracts from March-April 2020 which cost 7,128,901.77 Euros<sup>[8]</sup>. Kosovo faced severe challenges with regards to the availability of medical specialists within the public health system in 2020, not only among epidemiologists, virologists and anesthesiologists, but also other medical staff in the central and regional hospitals in Kosovo<sup>[9]</sup>.

## COVID-19 vaccines

Pfizer/BioNTech and Oxford/AstraZeneca were the two COVID-19 vaccines approved by Kosovo's public health institutions. Kosovo's National Institute of Public Health (NIPH) stated that Kosovo is the only Western Balkan country to have provided its citizens only with EU and US approved vaccines<sup>[6]</sup>.

There is no available information whether Kosovo is officially part of the COVAX initiative, although it received support and donations from COVAX. In addition, no data is available nor exists whether Kosovo contributed to the COVAX initiative. While the precise number of vaccines is not publicly available, it is considered that around 1.3 million vaccines were donated to Kosovo from the COVAX system<sup>[10][11]</sup>. The United States in 2021 and 2022 donated more than one million vaccines (in total 1,054,170 vaccines from the US within COVAX)<sup>[12]</sup>. The EU donated 95,000 vaccines<sup>[13]</sup>, other countries, such as Norway donated above 180,000 vaccines<sup>[14]</sup>, Croatia donated 30,000 vaccines in different stages, etc.<sup>[15]</sup>. On the other hand, Kosovo has not donated any vaccines to third countries and to date no data is available on whether Kosovo donated vaccines to third parties. As to the reasons for requesting donations of vaccines, Kosovo's state institutions have officially requested assistance from the EU to provide support in order to secure vaccines for the Kosovo citizens. More precisely, Kosovo asked from the EU Civil Protection Mechanism to assist in donating vaccines<sup>[16]</sup>.

Kosovo's Ministry of Health and the National Institute for Public Health (NIPH) have been key institutions in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic within the country. Since the beginning of pandemics in Kosovo, NIPH communicated on daily basis with the public most commonly by publishing brief reports on its social media platforms on the COVID-19 situation in Kosovo with respect to the testing results and number of deaths. There were also press conferences held jointly by Minister of Health and Director of NIPH on informing audiences and citizens the state of play of COVID-19. There were no major issues when it comes to communication public health institutions with the public during the pandemic crisis. The legal framework in Kosovo with reference to the pandemic management is as follows: Law No. 02/L-78 on Public Health<sup>[17]</sup>, Law No. 08/L-048 on Amending and Supplementing the Law No.02/L-78 on Public Health<sup>[18]</sup>, and Law No. 07/L-006 on Preventing and Combating COVID-19 Pandemic in the Territory of the Republic of Kosovo<sup>[19]</sup>.

The key institutions in Kosovo which communicated to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic were Kosovo's Ministry of Health and NIPH through media appearances and press statements, press conferences, and daily social media posts to report on COVID-19 infectious cases.

Cooperation between national and international relevant institutions has been good during the pandemic. Even though Kosovo is not a member country of WHO<sup>[20]</sup>, there is a WHO Office in Prishtina at the NIPH which operates within the UNSCR 1244<sup>[21]</sup>. Based on PIPS' report about Kosovo's aim towards the WHO membership, the WHO Kosovo office has been given the opportunity to participate in international and regional conferences of the organization, and the WHO has also cooperated with the Ministry of Health, especially during the pandemic, to prevent the disease and receive donations as well.

In the context of Kosovo, there was no notable connection between international relations and the availability of vaccines or medical equipment. However, one instance where the concept of "Vaccine Diplomacy" became relevant was when the Kosovo government declined to accept vaccines produced in China due to China not recognizing Kosovo's independence; the government of Albania had offered Chinese vaccines to Kosovo, but they were rejected on this basis<sup>[22]</sup>. On the other hand, the Serbian government made Chinese vaccines available to the Serbian community residing in the north of Kosovo through informal means, which was seen as a politically provoking act by the Kosovo institutions<sup>[23]</sup>.

## Political instability during COVID-19 in Kosovo

The start of the pandemic in Kosovo was characterized by the politicization of its management. In early 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread in Kosovo, the country's President and Prime Minister were engaged in a disagreement over the introduction of measures to contain the virus. The President called the measures unconstitutional and asked the citizens to ignore them, while the Prime Minister implemented the restrictions<sup>[24]</sup>. Another instance that negatively impacted pandemic management as a result of political matters was the claim by a Kosovan parliamentarian that the government received an outdated shipment of 130,000 Astra Zeneca vaccines from Norway.<sup>25</sup> This resulted in the vaccines being rejected by the public during the peak of the second wave of the pandemic in 2021, leading to their waste due to non-utilization. This constituted one of the major scandals in pandemic management in Kosovo<sup>[25]</sup>.

Furthermore, Kosovo faced a changing political environment, which had an effect on the approach to the pandemic management and the measures implemented. Kosovo institutions organized elections twice (parliamentary and local elections) during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Early parliamentary elections were held on 14 February 2021<sup>[26]</sup>, which resulted in changing governing parties. Whilst local elections (municipal assembly elections and municipal mayor elections) were organized in two rounds - 17 October and 14 November 2021<sup>[27]</sup>. Amid the pandemic crisis in late March 2020, the Kosovo Government's coalition between Vetëvendosje / Self-determination Movement and LDK/ Democratic League of Kosovo was toppled through a no-confidence vote in the Kosovo Assembly supported by LDK and opposition<sup>[28]</sup>. A new government was formed

in early June 2020 led by LDK and its coalition partners<sup>[29]</sup>. In terms of the pandemic management, the new government eased the measures against COVID-19 and showed more flexibility in this regard.

While the pandemic situation in Kosovo had limited impact on the rule of law, the increased use of online platforms during the pandemic led to an increase in cybercrime. Criminals took advantage of online vulnerabilities to carry out illegal activities for profit, which posed challenges for institutions, companies, and organizations to secure remote work practices. There was a notable rise in fake profiles on social media spreading disinformation and fake news, along with an increase in hacking and identity theft. The KP identified cyber threats such as ransomware, scams targeting businesses, and scams through websites or social media platforms, where criminals steal personal data and use it in dark web marketplaces.

Despite the strict measures implemented to combat the spread of the pandemic, which prohibited large gatherings of people, reports emerged of a party attended by senior officials of the Kosovo Police and Kosovo Correctional Service, as well as family members of influential politicians in 2020. The event was reportedly characterized by gunfire, a practice considered a celebration tradition in some circles<sup>[30]</sup>. In response to this apparent disregard for the pandemic measures, disciplinary actions were taken against some of the officials involved, although they were eventually reinstated to their positions<sup>[31]</sup>.

## The threat of fake news and disinformation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic

KCSS's work on disinformation during the pandemic period identified two categories of individuals and groups who spread false information about COVID-19 in Kosovo. The first group denied the existence of the virus, while the second group acknowledged it but downplays its threat. These groups indicated similar narratives with different global movements that promote conspiracy theories about the origin and purpose of COVID-19 by drawing anti-Semitic tropes among others. Some narratives include the idea that COVID-19 is a tool of the West to depopulate third world countries, and that the risk from the virus is no different from other viruses and does not cause death. In general, that anti-vaccination advocates are more prevalent than those disputing the existence of the virus, leading to a frequent narrative undermining the licensing process of vaccines and their reliability in general<sup>[32]</sup>.



## Conclusion and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on Kosovo, exposing the lack of proper readiness in the institutional system in Kosovo to prepare for and respond to the crisis. Although the pandemic was primarily a public health crisis, its impact trickled down across different spheres in society. COVID-19 has taken the lives of 3,211 Kosovo citizens, while countless others who have survived it are still suffering the long-term effects of the virus. With limited resources and capacities, the institutions of Kosovo faced numerous challenges to respond to the growing need for preventive measures such as adequate protective gear for the frontline workers and the public, medical equipment and medicine, and treatment facilities for COVID-19. International cooperation and assistance were crucial for securing a minimum standard to manage the COVID-19 response in terms of the needed equipment and vaccines. The start of the pandemic in Kosovo was characterized by great political instability and politicization of the pandemic management. Fake news and disinformation constituted an additional challenge during the pandemic, whereby a growing group of citizens began denying the existence of the virus or downplaying its threat.

Kosovo institutions should establish and implement a clear and thorough centralized communication strategy for the risks to national security, natural disasters, and health crises. Additionally, a comprehensive and centralized communication strategy should foresee the latest technological developments and make use of various internet platforms, as well as produce counter-narratives to counter misinformation and disinformation. The emergency response strategic framework in Kosovo should be updated to reflect the changing risks and needs for ensuring the safety and security of the population. By investing in local resources and standardizing emergency management procedures for enhanced cooperation, Kosovo institutions should give participation in international organizations for disaster prevention and response priority.

Kosovo's public health institutions and executive institutions (the Government and its Ministry of Health) should jointly work on increasing the number of medical professionals in dealing with infectious diseases and pandemics. As Kosovo is having limited human resources in terms of epidemiologist and virologists, the relevant institutions should implement comprehensive incentives in the education and employment sectors aimed at Kosovo's new generation to study and specialize in these medicine fields to fill the gap. Furthermore, there should be some incentives by the Ministry of Health and the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Prishtina to establish some scholarship schemes in medicine, thus encouraging students to study / specialize in the field of infectious diseases and increasing Kosovo's professional human capabilities in the field.

As the risk deriving from infectious diseases (endemics/pandemics) is frequent in the coming years, Kosovo's state institutions should allocate some state emergency funds available to be utilized for medical purposes, particularly aimed at emergency readiness and response or airborne diseases, whilst purchases of new and modern equipment to examine infectious diseases should be among key priorities of public health institutions.

- [1] World Health Organization, "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)", available at: <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/xk>
- [2] "COVID-19 Pandemic Case Study: Kosovo", Jeta Krasniqi, Heinrich-Boll-Stiftung Washington DC & Heinrich-Boll-Stiftung Brussels, available at: <https://us.boell.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/20201209-HB-papers-kosovo-A4-01.pdf>
- [3] "COVID-19 Pandemic Case Study: Kosovo", Jeta Krasniqi, Heinrich-Boll-Stiftung Washington DC & Heinrich-Boll-Stiftung Brussels, available at: <https://us.boell.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/20201209-HB-papers-kosovo-A4-01.pdf>
- [4] "Orari për qarkullim të qytetarëve në bazë të numrit të parafundit personal", Drenushë Ramadani, available at: <https://kallxo.com/lajm/orari-per-qarkullim-te-qytetareve-ne-baze-te-numrit-te-parafundit-personal/>
- [5] World Health Organization, "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)", available at: <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/xk>
- [6] World Health Organization, "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)", available at: <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/xk>
- [7] "Teste për coronavirus e paisje të tjera do blihen me 5 milionë euro të BE-së", Drenushë Ramadani, Kallxo, 30 March 2022, available at: <https://kallxo.com/lajm/teste-per-coronavirus-e-paisje-te-tjera-do-blihen-me-5-milione-euro-te-be-se/>
- [8] "Tenders during the pandemic: analysis of emergency tenders of the Ministry of Health", Liridona Behrami, Kosova Democratic Institute, June 2020, p. 8, available at: <https://kdi-kosova.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/31-TENDER%C3%8BT-N%C3%8B-PANDEMI-ENG-04.pdf>
- [9] "Raporti i auditimit të performancës: optimizimi i resurseve njerëzore dhe pajisjeve teknike mjekësore për t'iu përgjigjur nevojave të pacientëve me COVID", National Audit Office, December 2021, p. 1, available at: <https://zka-rks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Raporti-auditimit-Covid19-pjesa2-Shqip.pdf>
- [10] "Kosova ka pranuar mbi 1 milion doza të vaksinës anti-COVID nga SHBA-ja", Koha.Net, 11 February 2022, available at: <https://www.koha.net/arberi/310464/kosova-pranon-mbi-515-mije-doza-te-tjera-te-vaksines-pfizer-donacion-nga-shba-ja/>
- [11] "Sa vaksina bleu Kosova e sa iu dhuruan donacion?", Valon Fana, Kallxo, 15 September 2021, available at: <https://kallxo.com/lajm/sa-vaksina-bleu-kosova-e-sa-iu-dhuruan-donacion/>
- [12] "Kosova ka pranuar mbi 1 milion doza të vaksinës anti-COVID nga SHBA-ja", Koha.Net, 11 February 2022, available at: <https://www.koha.net/arberi/310464/kosova-pranon-mbi-515-mije-doza-te-tjera-te-vaksines-pfizer-donacion-nga-shba-ja/>
- [13] "EU Donates 95,000 Pfizer Vaccine Doses for Kosovo", Die Morina van Uijtregt, Exit News, 20 April 2021, available at: <https://exit.al/en/eu-donates-95000-pfizer-vaccine-doses-for-kosovo/>
- [14] "Norvegjia i dhuron Kosovës 180 mijë doza të vaksinave AstraZeneca", Antigona Isufi, Kallxo, 22 June 2021, available at: <https://kallxo.com/lajm/norvegjia-i-dhuron-kosoves-180-mije-doza-te-vaksinave-astrazeneca/>
- [15] "Kroacia i dhuron Kosovës 20,000 vaksina", Radio Free Europe, 1 July 2021, available at: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/kroacia-i-dhuron-kosoves-20-000-vaksina/31336009.html>
- [16] "COVID-19: EU helps deliver vaccines to Kosovo", European Commission, 29 June 2021, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_3300](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_3300)
- [17] Law No. 02/L-78 on Public Health, available at: <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2573>
- [18] Law No. 08/L-048 on Amending and Supplementing the Law No.02/L-78 on Public Health, available at: <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=57851>
- [19] Law No. 07/L-006 on Preventing and Combating COVID-19 Pandemics in the Territory of the Republic of Kosovo, available at: <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=30819>

- [20] "Kosovo's membership in the World Health Organization (WHO), Prishtina Institute for Political Studies, September 2020, p. 4, available at: <https://pips-ks.org/en/Detail/ArtMID/1446/ArticleID/4172/Kosovos-membership-in-the-World-Health-Organization-WHO>
- [21] World Health Organization, "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)", available at: <https://www.who.int/serbia/about-us>
- [22] "Kosova Refuzon Vaksinimin e Mësuesve Në Shqipëri Me Vaksina Kineze." RTK Live, April 5, 2021. Available at: <https://www.rtklive.com/sq/news-single.php?ID=513730>
- [23] Ramadan Ilazi and Teuta Avdimetaj. "Beyond Economic Considerations: New Frontiers of Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans". Sbunker, 2021. Available at: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/10JTfTtOituhs\\_eUQPLQrlwEwPjPpP7dW/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/10JTfTtOituhs_eUQPLQrlwEwPjPpP7dW/view).
- [24] Bekim Bislimi and Mimoza Sadiku, "Presidenti Thaci kundërshton masat e qeverisë për kufizimin e lëvizjes së lirë," Radio Evropa e Lirë, March 23, 2020. Available at: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/hashim-thaci-masat-qeveria-kufizimi-ilevizjes-/30505139.html>
- [25] "Kosova heq nga përdorimi mbi 133,000 vaksina AstraZeneca", Evropa e Lirë, September 1, 2021, Available at: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/vaksinimi-kunder-koronavirusit-ne-kosove/31438911.html>
- [26] "Early Elections for Assembly of Republic of Kosovo 2021", Central Election Commission, available at: <https://kqz-ks.org/an/kosovo-assembly-elections/elections-for-kosovo-assembly-2021/>
- [27] "Municipal Mayor Elections 2021", Central Election Commission, available at: <https://kqz-ks.org/zgjedhjet-per-kuvende-komunale/per-kryetar-te-komunave/zgjedhjet-per-kryetar-komune-2021/>
- [28] "Kosovo's Parliament Topples Government In No-Confidence Vote", Radio Free Europe, 25 March 2020, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-parliament-dismisses-government-no-confidence-kurti/30509600.html>
- [29] "Kosovo Parliament Confirms New Govt Under Hoti", Arta Sopi, Taulant Osmani and Xhorxhina Bami, Balkan Insight, 3 June 2020, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/03/kosovo-parliament-confirms-new-govt-under-hoti/>
- [30] Zyrtarë të hetuesisë, të afërm të politikanëve e të dënuar, bashkohen në kohë pandemie". Gazeta Express, April 21, 2020. Available at: <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/zyrtare-te-hetuesise-te-aferm-te-politikanëve-e-te-dënuar-bashkohen-ne-kohe-pandemie/>
- [31] Saranda Ramaj. "Komandanti i Njësisë Speciale, i suspenduar për ahengun në pandemi, të enjten kthehet në punë". Koha.NET, May 27, 2020. Available at: <https://www.koha.net/arberi/223582/komandanti-i-njesise-speciale-i-suspenduar-per-ahengun-ne-pandemi-neser-kthehet-ne-pune/>
- [32] Ibid.



**KCSS**

Kosovo Center for Security Studies