



EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA: Investing to rebuild trust in public institutions and local and national levels

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COVID-19 has led to significant consequences to the health and economic systems in the Europe and Central Asia region, and it is also presenting unprecedented challenges to governance systems. The social contract is straining, with diminishing levels of trust in governance systems as the pandemic is used as a means of centralizing and consolidating power. Furthermore, as political polarization intensifies, the risk of violence is becoming even more apparent in a region shaped by several protracted conflicts. This policy brief highlights trends on peace, justice, and strong institutions in the Europe and Central Asia region in the context of COVID-19 and presents key policy recommendations for accelerating progress on SDG 16. Rebuilding public trust, strengthening the social contract, and improving government and institutional responsiveness are of fundamental importance for recovery from the pandemic. Furthermore, the brief shows how one key way to respond to community needs is to decentralize decision-making and strengthen local authorities. In order to build forward better from COVID-19, the protection of human rights and the rights of marginalized groups must be ensured to leave no one behind.

Introduction

The health and economic impact of COVID-19 on the Europe and Central Asia (ECIS) region⁷ also has significant political and social ramifications, as increasing inequalities are exacerbating vulnerabilities, health infrastructures are struggling to cope with the pandemic, and governance challenges are impacting the effective and responsive handling of the pandemic. As indicated in the 2021 SDG report (UNDESA, 2021), the world still has a long way to go to achieve the targets for peace, justice and inclusion by 2030, and this remains a challenge also for the ECIS region. The findings identified in this brief highlight trends on achieving SDG 16 and how the COVID-19 crisis has stalled and even reversed progress towards this goal. The findings indicate some reason for concern, with the growing centralization of executive power, legislative changes that are hampering freedom of expression, and heightening polarization that is undermining social cohesion. However, the findings also point to some opportunities arising in the current context, including widespread digitalization, a renewed focus on strengthening service delivery at

local levels, and calls for enhancing efforts towards anti-corruption and accountability to strengthen the social contract.

Europe and Central Asia is a diverse region with predominantly middle-income countries and several governance systems in transition. Stringent lockdown measures put in place at the beginning of the pandemic, while effective in lowering infection rates, have led to a significant slowing of the economy and rising poverty and inequality. At the same time, the public health infrastructure in some countries has struggled to cope with the unprecedentedly high number of infections (UNESCAP, 2020). Frozen conflicts in the region have flared up, such as Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020 (Crisis Group, 2021), and concern remains about the use of emergency powers to silence opposition and dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Reports of domestic violence have also increased, with WHO reporting up to a 60 percent increase in emergency calls by women subjected to violence by their intimate partners in April 2020 compared to the previous year, as well as a five-fold increase in online enquires and hotlines for violence prevention (WHO, 2020). The lack of representation of certain population groups,

⁷ The countries in this region include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia and Turkey. * All references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).



including women and minority groups, in designing government responses and measures has meant that institutions often do not address their priorities and needs.

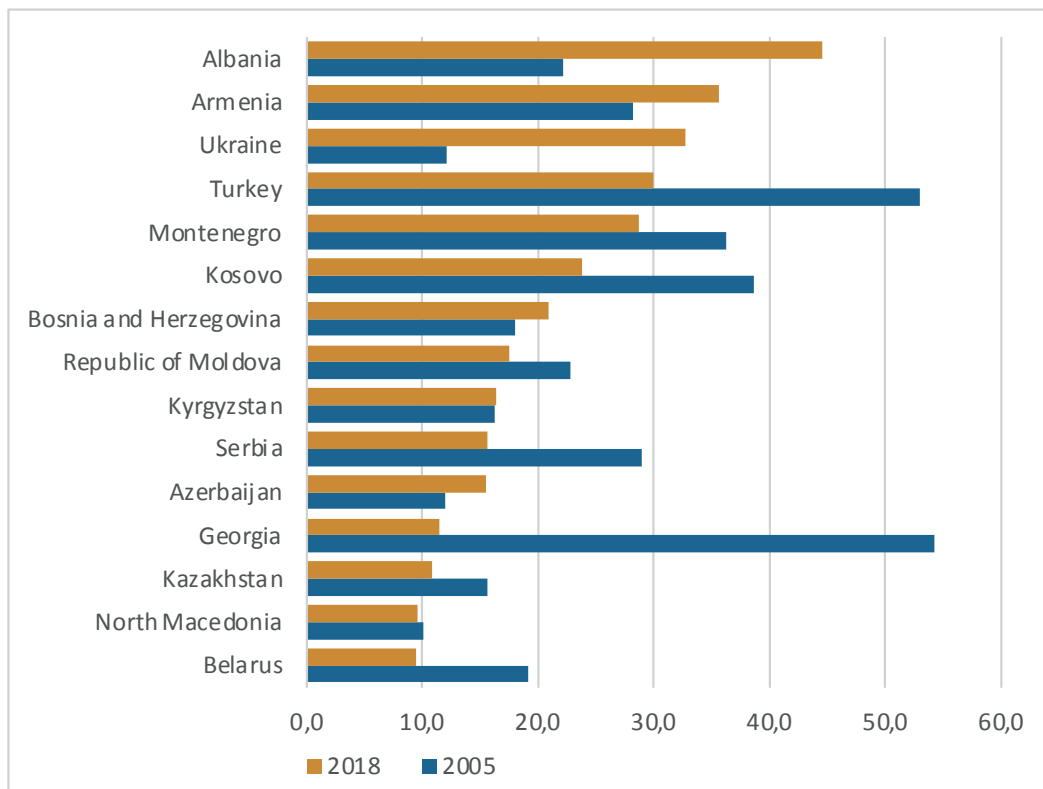
A year into the pandemic, a shrinking and more restricted civic space along with lower levels of citizen trust in the state risk increasing the spread of mis/disinformation and fake news, which could pose significant risks to the region. The role of non-state actors—journalists, activists and CSOs—is gaining in importance, as they seek to expand civic space and call for greater freedom of expression, transparency and accountability. The pandemic has highlighted both structural weaknesses in governments’ ability to respond to crises and the need for extensive efforts and recovery measures that focus on strengthening the institutional capacity to respond to citizens’ needs. In particular, the prevalence of corruption and the widespread lack of transparency in Covid-19 response measures have led to greater demand for accountability to rebuild citizens’ trust in their governments.

In many countries in the region, decision-making is centralized, and the COVID-19 response measures put in place

have often reinforced the consolidation of power in the political and economic elite at the national level. There is a growing need to re-establish the balance between the central and local authorities and institutions in recovery efforts. The decentralization of national efforts and the devolution of power to local-level decision makers can be a significant way to accelerate progress towards peace, justice and inclusion as well as to put in place more targeted and responsive response-and-recovery measures.

In the ECIS region, as in other regions, there is a risk that pandemic measures are being imposed with excessive force and used to target opposition and dissent, including through digital surveillance and the misuse of misinformation laws as a means of censorship. While many measures enacted during the pandemic (curfews, lockdowns, contact tracing) have been necessary to curtail the spread of the virus, they require constant re-examination to ensure that they meet international standards. Specifically, this includes requirements that restrictions be legal, necessary, proportional, non-discriminatory and time-bound (OHCHR, 2020).

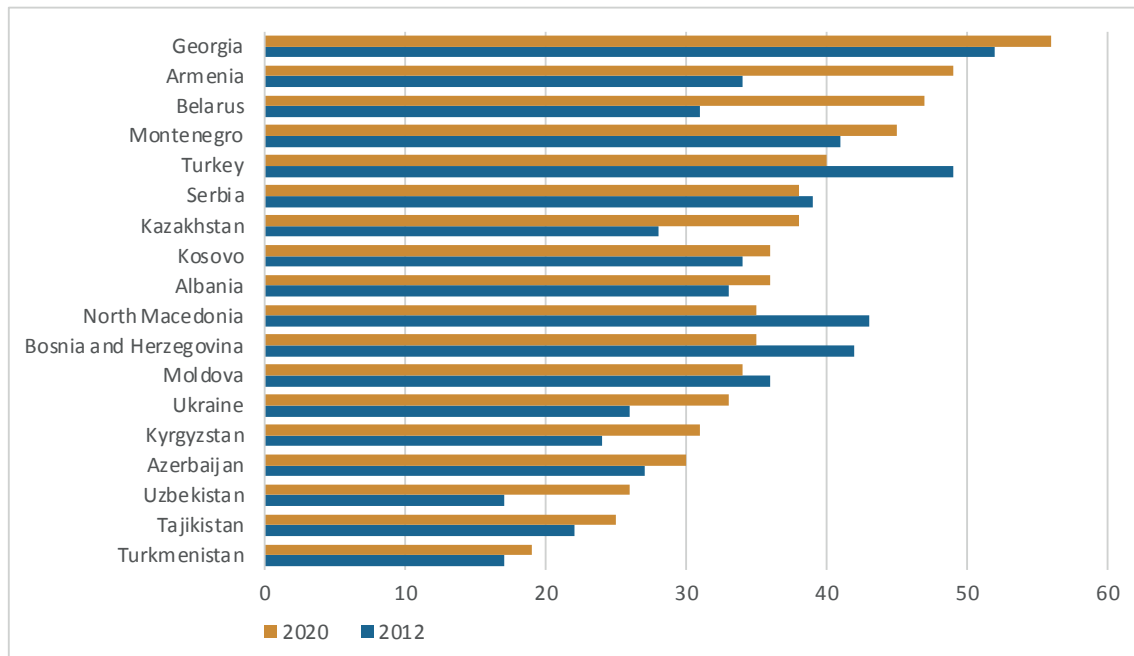
Figure 5: Unsented detainees as a proportion of overall prison population (%), 2005, 2018



Source: UNDESA, SDG Indicators Database. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/unsdg>



Figure 6: Corruption Perceptions Index (0-100), 2012, Transparency International



Source: Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (2020). <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020>

SDG 16 is a key building block for regional and national development and stability in the region. However, progress towards achieving SDG 16 was already slow prior to the pandemic, and the limited availability of data on targets and indicators remains a challenge. One of the few SDG 16 indicators where data are prevalent is on rates of unsentenced detainees (see Figure 5). Across many countries the rates of pretrial detention appear to be falling, however, there are still a few where the rates increased from 2005 to 2018, affecting progress towards SDG 16.

Over the last years, many opportunities have arisen to help promote inclusive governance and SDG 16 in the region. Transparency and access to information has been improving in many countries in the region, partly due to growing political participation and the emerging introduction of digital tools. This has in turn generated an increasing flow and spread of information, which can ultimately lead to enhancing the accountability of government institutions. However, as illustrated in the graph below, the perception of corruption remains a challenge in the region.

This policy brief summarizes key findings from the region on the impact of COVID-19 on progress towards SDG 16 and makes policy recommendations aimed at strengthening local

governance and promoting stakeholder collaboration, addressing gender-based violence and improving government responsiveness to rebuild institutional trust. The brief has been developed based on inputs from experts from the region who participated in a roundtable discussion hosted by the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre with the UNDP Regional Hub in Istanbul. The consultations were held in the context of a joint initiative with the Southern Voice network that is aimed at assessing the emerging challenges and opportunities for achieving SDG 16 in the current context of a global pandemic.

Emerging trends around SDG 16 in Europe and Central Asia since the pandemic

The following section summarizes the discussion and highlights key findings from recent studies.

Improving transparency and access to information to increase government accountability

In the Europe and Central Asia region, governments have to a large extent committed to embedding the principles



of transparency in fulfilling their obligations towards their national development action plans. Access to information laws and policies has been expanded to support transparency on government functioning. Access to information is particularly crucial during a time of crisis to avoid mistrust and the spread of false information. It helps to promote insight into decision-making processes as well as into budgets and expenditures, and it is key to enhance government legitimacy.

COVID-19 has accentuated the importance of access to information not just as an end in itself, but as a foundation for sustainable development and post-pandemic recovery. In Armenia, at the onset of the pandemic, the government posed restrictions on the publication of certain information and news articles as a measure to reduce the spread of fake news. This, however, proved to have negative consequences on the media landscape and freedom of expression overall, as it undermined the mandate of journalists to exercise the right to media freedom. A lack of transparency and insight into government pandemic response plans and measures ultimately caused growing mistrust of the government among the citizens (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2020).

Access to information constitutes a key requirement to ensure transparency, and despite the overall negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, in some countries in the region there has been an increase in the general public's access to information. In Ukraine, data on SDG indicator 16.10.2 (on countries adopting access to information laws and policies) from 2018 to 2020 indicate that the rate of proactive disclosure of official information rose from approximately 76% to 84%. The overall progress in the implementation of SDG indicator 16.10.2 (including the assessment of information request processing) increased from 70% in 2018 to approximately 85% in 2020. The results show a higher level of official information disclosure in Ukraine compared to the pre-pandemic period, demonstrating the efforts of the public authorities to ensure access to information of public interest (Oleksiyuk, 2021).

Lack of disaggregated data to understand complexities beyond national averages

The Europe and Central Asia region lacks national data registries that disaggregate information on informal, unregistered and vulnerable groups. This has particular consequences during a pandemic, where marginalized groups

have been disproportionately impacted but were largely invisible. Many countries have been attempting to set up proper mechanisms and measures to curtail the spread of COVID-19 but have been hampered by the lack of data. In addition, the absence of data on vulnerable and marginalized groups in the region has further undermined the ability to accurately respond to the needs of citizens. As a consequence, unregistered and informal workers have, like other vulnerable groups, been highly affected, as aid and services have failed to reach them.

As poor communities are being left further behind due in part to the absence of data on their specific needs, there is a growing urgency for countries to systematize data collection and further disaggregate data. For example, in Serbia, the lack of comprehensive, disaggregated data on vulnerable and minority populations is seen as one of the main reasons for the increasingly challenging environment facing Roma women and men, especially during the pandemic (OHCHR, 2020). Further work is thus needed to ensure that data on poor and vulnerable groups is registered systematically as an important step in crisis and risk management. COVID-19 has even further emphasized the need for countries to establish accurate, timely and reliable data systems that ensure systematic registries of the population, disaggregated by societal groups, including age, gender and ethnicity, among other items.

Harnessing digitalization and digital tools for ensuring transparent governance systems

Harnessing the many opportunities arising in an increasingly digital era is crucial, yet technology also presents several potential risks to inclusion. Online surveillance by governments without adequate checks in place can compromise privacy and affect freedom of expression. In Central Asia, surveillance techniques, such as facial recognition cameras, have been widely used during the pandemic as a way of tracking people's movements and monitoring breaches of lockdowns, quarantines and curfews (Clement, 2020). While such measures can be potentially effective in limiting the spread of the virus, adequate safeguards need to be put in place so that technology is not exploited to undermine human rights and freedoms. In Armenia, a controversial law was passed to allow governments to track mobile phone data on people's movement on the grounds of a state of emergency. The law is time-bound, to be valid only during the emergency period; however, there is widespread concern that the new



law could be used as a tool to exercise excessive control and power over citizens (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2020).

The digitalization of governance processes is on the rise in the region, which has helped increase overall transparency and insight into these processes. Figure 7 indicates a trend towards a significant focus on digital and technological tools for governance systems (World Bank, 2021). The South Caucasus, Eastern Europe and Turkey are at the forefront in this field in the region (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2020). Digital tools and systems for e-governance, health, education and other public services provide an efficient platform for inclusiveness for the whole population. In an era of digital transformation, and with the countries in Europe and Central Asia increasingly adapting to digital governance systems, digital tools are instrumental for accelerating efforts to increase transparency, a need that has become even more prominent in a time of pandemic.

Increased centralization of executive power

In the region many countries already have highly centralized governance systems, and the COVID-19 pandemic has served to reinforce the concentration of power in central government. This has often undermined local-level responses to the pandemic and hampered local ownership in managing community recovery processes. To recover more effectively, it is necessary to rebuild trust in local governmental institutions, in addition to ensuring a balance between central and local government structures and power. The role of the local authorities must therefore be emphasized and strengthened, in terms of both capacity and resources, in order to ensure an effective recovery process at the local and community levels.

A lack of confidence and trust in public institutions increases the pressure on local authorities to deliver aid and public services. Furthermore, existing inequalities within local communities heighten the demand to provide services by national government bodies (Chala, 2021). It is thus key to empower local institutions with greater capacity, resources and ownership to manage the local recovery process. As an example, the capacity-building of local institutions could be enhanced through establishing networks of social service providers that specifically focus on empowering vulnerable and marginalized groups. In Ukraine, a decentralization reform has increased the capacity of local budgets and “accordingly, small, financially insolvent communities were united with more powerful communities” (Chala, 2021, p. 12).

In addition, the centralized response to the pandemic up to now has often led to stringent COVID-19 lockdown measures. Critics warn that some of the measures being used to respond to the crisis can undermine the rule of law (Hoxhaj and Zhilla, 2021) and that adequate safeguards need to be in place to balance human rights principles with the health regulations enacted to control the spread of the coronavirus (Radojevic, 2020; Amnesty International, 2020b).

Combatting corruption to enhance trust for a strong social contract

Trust in government, both at local and central levels, has been shrinking as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, due partly to socio-economic issues, unemployment, and the inefficient and unequal delivery of aid to the most vulnerable groups. In the South Caucasus, as in other subregions in Europe and Central Asia, the pandemic hit at a time when governments were already struggling with geopolitical, political and economic challenges, all of which were exacerbated by the crisis (Sammut, 2020). Similarly, in the Western Balkans, the pandemic amplified existing cracks in governance and the rule of law (Dafa et al, 2020).

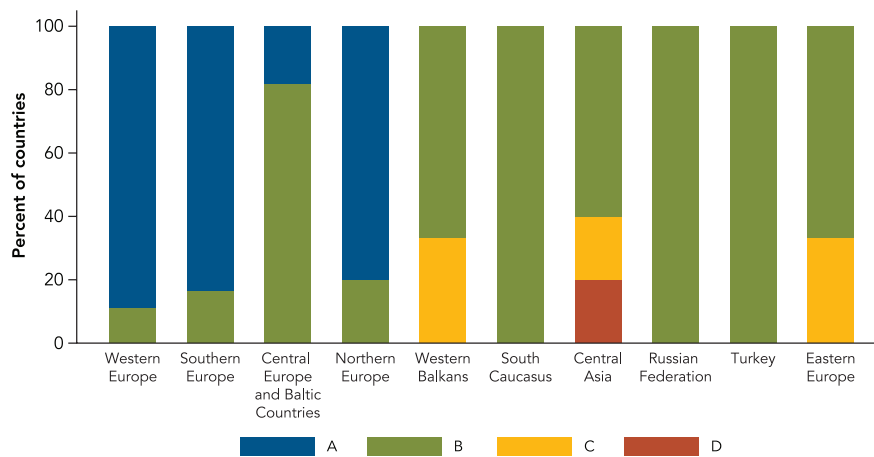
Widespread corruption in governments and institutions can partly explain the reason for the decreasing levels of trust and a weakened social contract. Transparency International found that ongoing structural governance challenges were accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic as “[s]ome political leaders used the crisis to increase their power, add restrictions to already limited access to information, eliminate transparency requirements from public procurement rules and renounce public accountability mechanisms” (2020). Rebuilding trust will require enhancing stakeholder collaboration as well as addressing a number of issues, such as increased polarization and the strain on existing resources.

In Kazakhstan, the risk of corruption has increased due to the pandemic’s impact on the accessibility of resources and services, including in the health-care sector. However, the intervention of special monitoring groups, consisting of community representatives, has helped to prevent the unequal distribution of medicine and medical supplies in the regions and remote areas. In Ukraine, a coalition of NGOs led by the Ombudsman have coordinated activities in an effort to improve public transparency, information access and trust in the authorities. This initiative, among others, can serve as a useful example for replication in other countries in the region.



Figure 7: Trends in GovTech in Countries in the Europe and Central Asia Region

Group	Description	Countries in ECA
A	GovTech leader countries that use advanced/innovative digital solutions and demonstrate good practices in all four GovTech focus areas.	Most of Northern, Western, and Southern Europe and some countries in Central Europe and the Baltic (19)
B	Countries with a significant focus on GovTech	Russian Federation, Turkey, South Caucasus, and most countries in Central and Eastern Europe (26)
C	Countries with some focus on GovTech	Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Tajikistan (4)
D	Countries with minimal focus on GovTech	Turkmenistan (1)



Source: GovTech Maturity Index (GTMI), World Bank, 2021. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/35273>

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, civil society has also proved instrumental to detect corruption in the procedures for the public procurement of ventilators. However, despite the positive role that civil society can play to increase the transparency of government institutions, which serve as one of the cornerstones for a strong social contract, its influence and its ability to hold governments to account have been weakened by smear campaigns and the threat of financial constraints, such as seen in the Western Balkans during the pandemic (Dafa et. al., 2020).

Strengthening social cohesion as a means for sustaining peace

The region has also experienced increased isolation at the national and community levels because of the pandemic, along with a rise in xenophobia and reduced levels of connectedness and trust between groups. In Bulgaria, restrictions put in place targeting the Roma community raised concern from the international community that not only do these

reinforce inequalities, but they can also exacerbate anti-Roma sentiment among the population (OHCHR, 2020). The rise of hate speech and dis/misinformation through social media has also served to lower levels of intra-group trust. However, there are also some examples of inter-community collaboration being strengthened during the pandemic. Serbia and Kosovo, for example, saw increasing collaboration between their medical institutions as the Covid-19 pandemic peaked in the two countries (Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, 2020).

At the same time, greater solidarity with friends and family and a focus on the community have strengthened intra-community bonds and improved in-group cohesion during the pandemic. This includes increased solidarity across local community groups, civil society and local governments as they have sought to devise ways to work together to respond to the pandemic. Building on this solidarity and expanding it across different communities will be critical to



enhance trust and connectedness and recover effectively from the pandemic—both to achieve sustainable development and, given the multiple protracted conflicts in the Europe and Central Asia region, to sustain peace.

Ensuring streamlined international support based on coordination with national actors

As national budgets have been increasingly strained due to the pandemic, governments in the region have been stepping up their requests for international funding for their operations and priorities. In Kyrgyzstan, international aid and support stepped in significantly when medical supplies and protective gear were lacking at the country's health care centres (Stronski, 2020). In the future, however, international support and development aid will require a firmer commitment to ensuring the achievement of the SDGs, including in relation to gender and environmental standards. Coordination and collaboration between international and national actors are crucial to avoid duplicating efforts, and a more coordinated and streamlined delivery of support is also necessary.

Addressing the increased burden of labour on women during the pandemic

In terms of gender inequalities, the region's recovery efforts should move beyond simply returning to the pre-pandemic status and seek to more fundamentally address gender inequalities (UN Women, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has caused an increase in poverty in the region, with a disproportionate impact on women and vulnerable groups, with the "risk that inequalities across the region will worsen, with women, migrants, informal workers and rural dwellers all likely to be significantly affected" (OECD, 2020). Both informal and low-skilled workers have been particularly affected by containment measures, as they have fewer protection systems and less chance of working remotely (OECD, 2020). Women have faced reduced employment as the burden of unpaid care rises (OECD, 2020). While many countries have ongoing social protection systems, limitations and cracks in these systems have surfaced during the crisis, for example in responding to the growing prevalence of informal work in the region (UNDP, 2021).

Gender-based and domestic violence peaked as restrictions were implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, including confinements, lockdowns and curfews (UNDP, 2021). In Kosovo, the lockdown severely impacted the well-being

of women. This included significantly increasing the burden of care on women, as lockdown measures, remote working arrangements and social distancing led to increasing women's responsibilities for taking care of children, the sick and elderly as well as carrying out the majority of household chores (Dafa et al., 2020). These trends reflect the heavy burden being shouldered by women during the pandemic as well as the heightened risk they face of financial vulnerability and domestic violence.

Measures to increase access to justice for gender-based violence

The increasing prevalence of gender-based and domestic violence means that the region's justice systems should be prepared to hold perpetrators accountable. However, the lack of awareness and skills needed to manage cases of discrimination as well as gender-based violence continues to be a challenge. This is compounded by the fact that access to legal services for victims of domestic violence has been reduced due to the pandemic.

Lockdown measures have meant that legal offices have shifted online, and victims are often confined to their homes, reducing their access to legal services. In addition, legal and judicial systems are not well equipped to adapt to this situation, and they have been trying to identify ways in which to support remote hearings and more sensitive and comprehensive support services for survivors of domestic violence. It is also essential to expand the capacity of legal aid workers and raise their knowledge of digital justice systems and tools. Protocols on managing gender-based violence during a pandemic or in other extraordinary circumstances exist in some countries, such as Albania, and can be replicated elsewhere. Civil society also has an important role to play to amplify the voices of survivors, share accurate information and help connect to support services, including access to free legal services.

Policy recommendations

Ensure people-centric perspectives for development

A whole-of-society approach, which includes a people-centric perspective in line with the Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) principles, is key to ensure an inclusive and participatory recovery process post-COVID-19, in an effort to "build



forward better". In addition, given the weak social protection systems and structures in the region, there is a risk that marginalized and vulnerable groups fall even further behind in development. There is therefore an emerging need to develop stronger systems and structures for social protection that benefit all societal groups. This requires promoting the representation of marginalized groups in decision-making processes, increasing the collection and use of disaggregated data and widening avenues for participation in decision-making (UNDP and UNWomen, 2020).

Address the root causes of gender-based violence

The increasing prevalence of gender-based and domestic violence is a growing concern in the region (UNDP, 2021). This requires that adequate support services be in place, including access to justice services. Legal aid providers, for example, should be better equipped to manage the growing number of cases. With the transition towards remote and digital platforms following the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is growing demand for increasing the capacities of legal aid workers and their digital skills and learning. Addressing the root causes of the rising levels of domestic violence also requires additional attention, with a special focus on how lockdown measures and the pandemic's economic consequences can drive a rise in intimate partner violence.

Rebuild trust in institutions through increasing institutional capacity, priorities and funding

The pandemic has highlighted the central role of governments in protecting and providing services for citizens in the face of a global crisis. More inclusive, responsive and effective institutions can ultimately strengthen the public's trust in government, which is a key building block in a strong social contract. In particular, the accessibility of public services, including health and education services, is crucial to increase trust in the government (see SDG 16.6.2 on satisfaction with public services). Institutional capacities to ensure that the delivery of aid and services reaches vulnerable and minority groups must be strengthened. It will also be important both to adopt a human rights-based approach to service delivery and to build the capacity of key institutions, including through technical and financial support, so as to improve their responsiveness.

Develop and implement legal frameworks that guarantee equal digital access to services

The importance of timely information cannot be overstated, and COVID-19 has reinforced this. Increasing the availability of information in many countries in the region, including through the expansion of the digitalization and automation of government services, can enhance the transparency and accountability of governments in their provision of services.

As countries adopt digitalization, digital tools are being used to modernize governance systems. However, a greater effort is needed to tackle the digital divide, which still constitutes a major issue, in order to ensure inclusive and participatory societies. Women, youth and persons with disabilities risk being left even further behind if digitalization does not become more inclusive and accessible to all.

Ensure representative, timely and credible data and expand access to information

Data serves as a key determinant for governments to comprehend the needs of their citizens. However, appropriately disaggregated data are largely absent or weak in many of the region's countries. Data that are representative, timely and credible are therefore needed for governments and institutions to accurately identify and respond to the needs of their citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly illustrated the need for timely and accurate data to better tailor responses to the pandemic. In addition, the pandemic has affected different population groups differently, with some groups more at risk (e.g. the elderly), and other factors, e.g. access to hospitals and medical services or access to information, also significantly shape how hard the pandemic hits different groups.

Prevent the exploitation of data and uphold data privacy and protection

Safeguards on data protection and privacy are necessary to prevent the exploitation and misuse of data. This is of particular importance for vulnerable population groups, whose personal data are more at risk of unauthorized use, for example, data collected on otherwise justifiable grounds of contact tracing and social distancing that are expropriated for other purposes. Using citizens' personal data as location data that are then used to track the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak could intensify the stigmatization of specific minority groups.



For example, the use of digital apps that highlight specific communities or groups that may be affected could potentially lead to further stigma and targeted violence (IHEID, 2020). Data laws that protect marginalized groups and ensure data privacy and protection need to be developed and enforced across the region.

Strengthen local government capacities and the localization of SDG 16

Since the onset of the pandemic, there has been a growing imbalance between the central and local level response-and-recovery processes. The predominant centralization of decision-making, as witnessed in most countries in the region, has ultimately weakened the position of local governments and their ownership of their own local recovery. It will therefore be important to build trust and ensure an appropriate balance of power between central and local government levels. This will require increased consideration of the decentralization and devolution of authority to local levels for more tailored pandemic responses.

In addition, increased investment in measuring progress towards SDG 16 at the local level is needed in the region to take stock and accelerate progress towards peace, justice and inclusion. A highly centralized focus in countries' plans for SDG 16 implementation has ultimately caused a greater disconnect between central and local levels. However, nationwide ownership of SDG 16 implementation, including whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches, meaning all levels of government, is key to ensure that the set targets and indicators are reached by 2030. Therefore, a greater focus on the localization of SDG 16 is crucial in order to ensure an inclusive and participatory process for sustainable development, where local and regional governments and stakeholders play an equal role.

Protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially the rights of marginalized groups

In times of crisis, upholding and safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms becomes increasingly important as the impacts of the crisis on marginalized populations are often differentiated and existing risks and vulnerabilities are heightened. Accountability mechanisms are often weakened at a time when there is a great need to respond quickly to a crisis, and the risk of an abuse of authority heightens. With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments in the ECIS

region moved quickly to put in place stringent measures to counter the pandemic and enforce public health measures to protect their citizens. At the same time, questions have been raised about whether some countries in the region have used these measures to target journalists, health-care providers and activists and curb opposition and dissent. Civil society groups have also raised concerns that some measures are disproportionately impacting marginalized populations: "Central Asian governments should ensure that citizens have access to timely accurate information about how to prevent the spread of Covid-19. They should ensure that restrictions responding to the pandemic are not carried out in ways that violate or undermine protection of rights" (Human Rights Watch, 2020). As the region considers how to "build forward better" from the pandemic, it will not be sufficient to revert to the pre-pandemic status quo; what is needed instead is to consider how respect for and the protection of human rights is a central building block for recovery.

Strengthen intra-group connectedness

Social cohesion, often referred to as the glue that holds societies together, is fraying as a result of the pandemic. Increasingly centralized decision-making has disempowered citizens, and societies are becoming introverted as social cohesion, connectedness, trust in others and institutions erode in the region. People in the region increasingly believe that their societies lack fairness and equality and that merit is not properly recognized. As a result, there is a widespread distrust and weakening of social cohesion between groups. Efforts to strengthen intra-group connectedness, trust and cohesion are needed in order to recover from the pandemic and build the foundation for stability. This can be achieved through "stakeholder engagement protocols, communication plans between government and the public, careful evaluation of government measures that affect public freedoms and local-regional context" (Jewett et al., 2021), with a particular focus on marginalized groups, in an effort to leave no one behind.

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