

PANDEMIC DIPLOMACY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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 Analysis

The effects of Coronavirus, which started in Wuhan, China at the beginning of 2020 and spread to the whole world in a short time, are also felt intensely in the Western Balkans. The virus entered almost all Balkan countries through people coming from Italy, causing the countries to take various steps. West Balkan states first declared a state of emergency and then increased their measures in parallel with the increasing daily number of case.

Following the rise of infection cases, schooling was interrupted and substituted with distance education model, elections scheduled in spring were postponed, and collective activities were canceled. Due to the significant increase in infection cases, governments initiated harsh measures such as closing border gates, stopping airline transportation, activating economic packages, prohibiting mass worship, and declaring curfews in the last instance.

And later with fewer new cases being recorded, measures have also been alleviated. Deferred elections were held in Croatia, Serbia, and Macedonia, borders reopened, and curfews were lifted. However, the mitigation of measures for the sake of political purposes has caused the coronavirus cases increased yet again. It should be said that this spike, which can be described as the second wave, is more serious and bigger than the first.

When the first Coronavirus cases were recorded in the Western Balkans in mid-March, many western European countries were highly exposed to the disease; therefore the European Union (EU) decided to restrict the export of certain medical supplies to countries outside the union. The absence of aid from the EU, of which the Western Balkan countries - with undeveloped health systems and weak economies - needed assistance, has turned the region once again

into an arena for rising non-western political, economic, and military powers seeking to extend their influence.

After the initial struggle to handle Coronavirus on its territory, China has played the role of the global actor in the fight against the pandemic. The outbreak has inflicted damage on China's international prestige, prompting it to engage in a global public diplomacy campaign aimed at repairing its image and improving its soft power credentials. This policy became known as "mask diplomacy" in which China acts as a donor and, more frequently, a paid supplier of medical equipment to the countries hit with the outbreak. Western Balkans countries were not left out in those efforts.

China first donated a significant amount of protective equipment and medical instruments to Serbia and deployed a group of medical experts to help it better manage the Coronavirus crisis. China has also sent some of its medical aid to the Balkans through the Silk Road project it has built-in recent years.¹ With this step, China tried to show that the investment in question was meaningful not only for China but also for local countries.

But China is certainly not the only country to have helped the Western Balkans in this time of crisis. Russia also sent its aid. Back in Moscow, opposition figures have griped that the Kremlin has been sending equipment abroad for propaganda gain, while doctors at home lack basic supplies. In Serbia, the help was welcome, though there was a sense that the fanfare around the deliveries may outweigh their actual use.

After the EU left the Western Balkans alone in the early stages of Coronavirus, and after Chinese and Russians aid arrived early in the region, Serbian Presiden Aleksandar Vučić stated that "European solidarity does not exist" calling it "a fairy tale on paper". Even if Vučić did not believe in his own words, his main purpose was to activate the EU. With this step, he managed to reach his goal.

While Brussels maintained hurdles to the export of medical supplies to the Western Balkans, after Vučić's words, the EU started providing valuable support to Serbia and the region. EU's aid stands at \$38 million in immediate assistance for the Western Balkans to tackle the health emergency and the reallocation of \$374 million to mitigate the economic fallout of Coronavirus.²

Although the EU has provided much more assistance than Russia and China, it did not provide assistance in the first periods, when the public was almost panicky. This led to the perception that the EU did not provide enough assistance compared to other countries. At the same time, the EU's recommendations not to open borders also negatively affect the views of the EU in the countries of the region.

While China, the EU, and Russia prioritize their political interests in their aid to the region, Turkey set aside their political goals and helped all Western Balkan countries. At a time when other countries stop sending help after reaching the political objective, Turkey continues to deliver medical supplies for Western Balkans. After Turkey's medical supplies aid were sent in early April to almost all Balkan countries, it also sent medical supplies needed to Sandzak, a region that has been neglected lately.³ In response to the poor quality of aids sent by China, not to mention other countries' restrictions of exporting medical supplies in such a period, Turkey started to produce their own respirators, which are vital for Coronavirus treatment. Soon after, Turkey began sending to countries in need the said device.

As stated at the beginning of the article, the importance of economic aid after the pandemic to the Balkan countries with weak economies should not be ignored. Although China and Russia came to the fore in the beginning of the outbreak, the impact of the actors in the region, which is to make economic investments after the pandemic, will increase.

Endnotes

- ¹ Локално, ВОЗОТ ОД ВУХАН ПРИСТИГНА ВО СРБИЈА: 300 ТОНИ МЕДИЦИНСКА ОПРЕМА, (26.05.2020) <https://lokalno.mk/vozot-od-vuhan-pristigna-vo-srbija-300-toni-meditsinska-oprema-foto/>
- ² European Commision, EU mobilises immediate support for its Western Balkan partners to tackle coronavirus, Press Release, (30.03.2020), ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_561
- ³ Medin Haliloviç,Sanela Crnovrsanin, Anadolu Ajansı, Türkiye'nin gönderdiği tıbbi malzeme yardımı Sancak bölgesine ulaştı, (04.07.2020), <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/turkiyenin-gonderdigi-tibbi-malzeme-yardimi-sancak-bolgesine-ulasti/1899961>

