EU SUPPORT FOR THE BALKANS AND KOSOVO IN RESPONSE TO THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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1. Introduction

The spread of the Coronavirus was unexpected even for the European Union. According to assessments of experts and member states, European institutions were not ready to quickly and adequately respond from the very beginning.

The first EU responses, in the early outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus in European territory were of a procedural nature. The EU was unaware of the magnitude of the disease, and the risks it posed to the health, society and the economy.

The public health lies in the competence of the member states rather than the EU. Therefore, the European institutions were placed in passive, rather than active role, in the first response to this pandemic. However, over the time, with the rapid spread of the virus across EU countries, it became obvious that the common European-level response, or even wider global cooperation, was necessary.

The World Health Organization took the lead in addressing the pandemic, while consultations were launched in various international forums to coordinate the social, financial and economic responses, as it became clear that the consequences would be dramatic. Despite the many differences, consultations took place in G-20, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations.

Within just a few weeks, from several hundred infected people (first in China and then in Europe and the United States), the number surpassed one million, and tens of thousands lost their lives as a result of the virus, mainly in Western countries.

Even the most developed countries of the world, such as the United States, Italy, Spain, and France, were unprepared for this pandemic. The decease, also revealed the many weaknesses in even the most advanced health systems. It became clear that there was insufficient medical equipment for medical staff, and even more so for citizens. There was a significant shortage of equipment, such as respirators, as well as protective masks, gloves and even test kits.

The, sometimes chaotic reactions of some EU countries, which acted without coordination with other states, made the fight of the spread of the virus even more difficult.

Border closures, bans on exports of medical equipment and medicaments, restrictions of movement of people, or
flights bans were necessary measures, but when taken in an uncoordinated manner, they worsened the situation. For example, when Belgium closed its shops, cafes and restaurants, tens of thousands of its citizens went to the cities of Netherlands to spend the weekend as such measures were not in force in that country. This, too increased the risk of the virus spreading faster.

The spread of coronavirus with a speed not seen before, caused unprecedented obstacles to the functioning of international institutions.

NATO, the EU and other organizations, where the virus began to spread among the staff, were forced to switch to virtual conferences, with no physical presence.

The decision-making process was temporarily modified to enable the adoption of decisions by written procedure.

It took time to adapt, but after three weeks, the EU took the lead in action in several areas, including coordinating the provision of medical equipment, financial assistance to the member states to address the crisis, proposals for economic recovery after crisis is over, protection of jobs, protection of democratic standards, and regulation of the movement of goods.

Countries of EU were hit harder than the ones in the Western Balkans. The European Union and its member states almost forgot that part of the continent, which has traditionally been dependent on the EU. Although formally outside the EU, the Western Balkans has a large circulation of citizens and goods with EU countries. As it happened, this circulation was relevant in the case of the spread of the new coronavirus. The first coronavirus cases in all countries of the Western Balkans were from people returning from EU member states. EU’s first response was quite chaotic. Not only was it not considering helping Kosovo and other countries in the region, it even included these countries in the group of (third) countries where the ban on the export of medical supplies would apply.

These mistakes were quickly rectified, but not before the EU received its share of criticism. Both the European Union collectively, and a number of member states individually, began to help Kosovo and other countries in the region. However, this all made the EU become defensive in terms of communication.
as countries such as China and Russia used the space to present themselves as saviours of the countries in the region after the EU “had forgotten them”.

The European Union gradually included the Western Balkan countries in the emergency aid plans to deal with the crisis, as well as the future plans, as these countries would be facing significant economic and social consequences. At the same time, despite practical problems and difficult circumstances, the EU continued its political processes with the countries of the region, like granting opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania.

Solidarity was the dominant word in the public discourse of EU actions, although the term became a challenge, with accusations and counter-accusations among EU member states.

Despite all the measures to be taken individually by the EU member states and the countries of the region, a common approach will be necessary to overcome this crisis and face its consequences in the future.

This is easier said than done, as no country will emerge without consequences from this crisis.

The European Union gradually included the Western Balkan countries in the emergency aid plans to deal with the crisis, as well as the future plans, as these countries would be facing significant economic and social consequences.
2. How did the EU respond in the beginning?

This crisis came to the European Union at a very inopportune moment. The European Commission and the President of the European Council had just started their new mandates. The European Commission had not yet been fully consolidated. Moreover, the crisis began at the same time as the attempt to reach a compromise between the member states on the Multilateral Financial Framework for the post-2020 period had just failed.

The last EU summit, held on February 21, in Brussels, caused more division among member states than existed before the meeting. The Netherlands, Austria, Finland, Denmark and several other countries wanted a smaller framework, because the EU is smaller after the Great Britain left the union, while the southern member states, as well as the European Parliament, proposed a larger multi-annual budget. Other differences included divisions over the terms for the use of funds.

Moreover, in early March, began the conflict with Turkey over the refugee settlement agreement, exposing fears of a new refugee crisis in Europe similar to that of year 2015. No progress was achieved in the efforts to reform the EU’s asylum and migration systems.

The only good thing in the EU was the economic situation. No EU country was in recession; none had a budget deficit non-compliant with the European Union rules, while the unemployment rate was the lowest in history. No one was prepared for such a dramatic change. Within a few days, millions of people lost their jobs, the EU budget was very limited, and there was no agreement on the new budget. All of them were facing the biggest economic crisis since World War II.

Despite the economic damage, the priority for the EU was to first protect the health of citizens, save lives, and ensure the supply of basic food and goods.

Since public health lies on the national competence of member states and not the European level, it was initially believed that each state should act according to its own systems and traditions. However, it was quickly clear that a common response was necessary as the virus was spreading beyond national borders, and member states were not able to address the problem alone. The first response – while little was known about the virus and there was no vaccine or a proven drug – was the insistence on social distancing, regardless how difficult it may be for an open society, accustomed to its unrestricted freedoms. This precaution was also introduced on March 20 in EU institutions, where most of the staff was ordered to work from home. Larger gatherings were cancelled, while meetings switched to the virtual conferences.

Italy had started first with such measures, although many experts believe it was already too late. Italy had not made the adequate preparations.
in hospitals. Soon, the number of infected people increased, and, with this, hospital capacities were overloaded. At one point there were no hospital beds or equipment available in intensive care facilities.

The immediate lesson the EU learned was that in this fight, tasks must be divided professionally, because advice from incompetent people often led to confusion.

This meant that medical experts must deal with the medical aspects of the pandemic, ensuring that it was not politicized. In most countries, information is provided by doctors, university professors, virologists, and sometimes the Ministry of Health. Frequent press conferences of the ministers of the member states, began in the EU. Since the first extraordinary meeting dedicated to the Coronavirus on February 13, 2020, EU health ministers were regularly coordinating actions aiming at slowing down the spread of the virus, supporting efforts to discover a vaccine, and exchanging information and experiences between member states.

Interior Ministers engaged in restricting movement, border control, and the movement of goods between member states. Agriculture Ministers were committed to saving the spring season, from securing planting to harvesting of seasonal fruits, necessary to provide sufficient food even in times of crisis.

Finance and Economy Ministers began their almost daily meetings, via video-links, aiming at calming down the markets and preparing the financial measures to deal with the social and economic consequences.

In the first phase of pandemic, Western Europe was hit many times harder than Kosovo and the countries of the Western Balkans. In the beginning, Italy and Spain had the greatest consequences with a dramatic number of people who lost their lives. These two countries were economically, the most fragile. Spain had just emerged from a crisis and was marking a drop in unemployment rates, while Italy was facing an unacceptable level of public debt. By comparison, at the end of April, Belgium, a country of 11 million people, had registered over 7,300 deaths as a consequence of the virus, and over 45,000 infected, while Kosovo in the same period had registered 790 infections and 22 deaths.

The first demands from these countries for urgent financial aid, through the purchase of the shares by the European Central Bank, or joint loans at the EU level, were opposed by the richest countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Finland. They refused this manner of merging the responsibility for the loans and debts. Their main fear was that in case that any member state would fail in their repayments, they would be forced to come across, instead. Assuming joint responsibility, would allow more favourable loans than some member states could provide based on their credit rating. The EU continues to seek for a compromise by looking into a modality that would include a combination of grants (non-refundable aid) and affordable loans. This was a bitter experience in the times of crisis, where the feeling of unity and solidarity was aimed at generating the sense of big help.

At the beginning of the crisis, Europe set a bad example, giving the impression that, after all, regardless of solidarity and unity, each member state should prioritize providing for itself, or its own citizens.

Germany and France initially banned the export of masks and medical equipment, including to the other EU countries. This ban was lifted by the end of March, and the European Commission demanded that there be no discrimination in the common EU market. Member States’ governments decided to help their companies without waiting for joint EU action. Some states individually set out to as-
sist Italy, including by transporting patients to their hospitals for treatment. Germany and Luxembourg received patients from France and Italy, while several other countries sent medical teams to help.

No matter how late or slow, the EU response was in line with the possibilities, as the EU needs more powers and more funding. And that too is up to the member states to decide.

However, when member states acted together, the first results were noticeable. The EU created a shared contingent, through joint procurement, of medical equipment that would be distributed to member states as needed. At high speed, without following procedures that take up to several months, on March 20, the European Commission decided to remove the restrictive measures for state aid by member states to their companies. Under normal circumstances, such assistance is not permitted under EU competition rules. These decisions gave EU member states full flexibility, and it was decided that such aid shall not be counted when the balances of EU rule compliance are made.

The EU has proposed a 100 billion Euro fund to help member states to save jobs through temporary measures. This will be ensured through favourable loans with EU guarantees. It was decided that unused funds from the cohesion policy could be transferred for urgent needs of the health-care system in member states. Such flexibility was also planned for countries benefiting from pre-accession funding (IPA).

According to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, EU institutions mobilized 7.7 trillion Euros as response to the crisis. This is unprecedented to this date. And these are only preliminary measures. Only when there is more clarity about when the pandemic will be over, there can be more concrete long-term plans for the economic recovery. The result of this crisis is making EU to review the budget plans for the future.

In addition to the financial aspect, the EU committed to ensure that measures taken by member states to close their borders are coordinated. Initially, at the EU level, it was decided to close the external borders for third-country nationals, with the exception of EU citizens and certain categories, such as medical staff and drivers.

However, a more serious problem was the closure of internal borders, i.e. between the EU countries themselves. Lines of dozens of kilometres were created on the borders between Poland and Germany, Austria and Hungary, when these states closed their borders. It took a significant commitment from Brussels to allow citizens to cross more quickly the internal borders member states, as they were transit countries for citizens of the Baltic states or Romania and Bulgaria, returning to their countries. There were times when crossing the border was not possible, or it took over 30 hours.

The European Commission also proposed the creation of the so-called “green lanes” at borders, where vehicles carrying goods would cross with expedited measures. This was necessary to ensure the supply of goods to citizens and address the panic that began to arise from fears there would not be enough food.

Some of these EU measures came late, but they did help alleviate some of the consequences of the crisis.

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3. Kosovo’s response

Although they responded individually and with different policies, there are many similarities between the countries of the Western Balkans and their response to the coronavirus crisis. The risk from the possible arrival of citizens from western countries, where a large number of people of regional origin, or Kosovo in particular, lives and works, was detected in time. Measures were taken to control the arrival of persons from other countries, and later this was completely stopped, or citizens were forced to self-isolate or enter quarantine.

Given the difficult situation of the health-care system, this measure was necessary and appropriate.

Accustomed to difficult living conditions in the past, citizens in the Balkans experienced the beginning of the crisis more easily. The EU and member states offered lessons learned, having experience with the first cases of infections with this hitherto unknown virus, and later also assistance in this regard. However, in the first phase, the countries of the region were spared from the extent of the spread that was dominating in EU countries. This was clear when one compared figures. The first case in the EU was reported in January, then spreading widely in Italy in February, and reached a pandemic size in mid-March. In April, the western EU countries reached the peak of new cases. Relative to the number of inhabitants, by end of April, Belgium, Spain, Italy and France were the most affected countries by cases of infections and deaths. Depending on the state, there were between 2,000 and 5,000 infections per one million inhabitants, and between 300 and 650 deaths due to infection per one million inhabitants. In the Western Balkans, both cases of infections and deaths were many times lower.

Kosovo and Montenegro were among the last European countries to confirm their first cases of COVID-19 virus infection.

Kosovo authorities established a good communication with EU countries. The return of citizens of member states who were in the territory of Kosovo at the time was made possible. As coming to Kosovo implied a temporary quarantine, an agreement was reached with most EU member states that Kosovars who were in European territory, and their visas and residence permits had
expired, would be allowed to stay without being considered as violating the rules.¹.

Strict measures in Kosovo were introduced on March 13, 2020, when the first case of a coronavirus infection was identified. Social distancing, as well as restriction of entry and exit in the country, helped make the spread of the virus much slower than in EU countries. This was all an advantage which allowed for better preparations to be made, both with medical equipment and the supply of basic necessities for households. EU member states were late in this regard. Italy was the first to introduce strict measures, on March 9, 2020, but only after the infection rate in the country had reached alarming proportions. Other EU countries “shut themselves down” around the end of the second week of March 2020.

European Union member states, but also Switzerland and the United States, helped Kosovo in the first phase, even though they themselves were hit by the crisis much more than Kosovo. They provided financial aid, and donated medical equipment, masks, and ventilators.

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4. Political conflict in times of pandemic

The EU considered the political conflict which erupted in Kosovo during the pandemic was a serious threat. The Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK, as a coalition partner, filed a motion of no-confidence to the government, which was passed in the Assembly. Continued European calls not to vote to overthrow the government at a time of crisis were completely ignored by political leaders in Kosovo. There were calls from the highest level of member states, as well as from senior EU officials in Brussels for “Kosovars to join the fight against the virus and set the political conflicts aside.” This was also the message of the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Policy Oliver Varhelyi, while the Foreign Ministries of the two main EU countries, Germany and France, also addressed demarches not to vote on the motion. In this respect, Kosovo was a special example throughout Europe.

In times of pandemic, internal political strife in EU countries was halted and ideological divisions were side-lined. In Belgium, a country where the government had not been formed for over a year, political parties urgently agreed to give the outgoing government a six-month mandate with full powers to make the right decisions to address the crisis.

Overall, and despite how dangerous the political crisis had been in addressing the pandemic crisis, Kosovo authorities, in co-operation with the EU, KFOR mission and international organizations, continued to successfully respond to the crisis.

As in any country in Europe, Kosovo faced the dilemma of how logical some of the adopted measures were, especially those related to restricting the movement of people. Desperate times call for desperate measures. This is what the EU states themselves were doing. However, the EU also demanded from Kosovo, as well as from all other countries, including a number of EU member states, that the measures be temporary and proportionate and that the virus crisis not be exploited for political purposes or to strengthen power with totalitarian means. The clearest example of this was Hungary, where on March 30, 2020, the parliament passed a decree allowing Prime Minister Viktor Orban to rule for an indefinite period of time.

The restriction of movement in certain time-periods, introduced by the Kosovo government, was considered to be in violation of the Constitution of Kosovo. The EU called for the measures to strike a balance between the need to protect the health of citizens on the one hand, and respect for the Constitution on the other.
Although facing an unprecedented crisis in modern history, the EU was aware that the Balkan region needed urgent assistance.

Unprepared itself, the EU did not have the right initial response and soon faced criticism that it was neglecting the region in difficult times.

But soon, two weeks after the pandemic was announced, aid was mobilized. Priority was given to aid for the health sector. This was focused on protecting against the rapid spread of the virus, hospital assistance, supply of equipment, and then addressing the socio-economic problems regarding which the EU has decided to direct funds to Kosovo to confront such consequences after the coronavirus crisis is over. The same applied to other countries in the region, first aid as an initial measure, and then considerations for a longer-term instrument.

On April 29, the European Commission presented the 3.3 billion-Euro aid package for the Western Balkans. This package was a combination of EU financial assistance and European Investment Bank loans.

This package aims to address the immediate health and humanitarian needs caused by the coronavirus pandemic as well as socio-economic recovery. Later this year, namely in autumn, the European Commission will come up with a proposal for long-term support to the region through investments in the form of an Economic Investment Plan.

However, prior to presenting this package, and relatively soon after the outbreak of COVID-19 disease, the European Union adapted to the needs of the countries in the region and distributed significant amounts to the countries of the Western Balkans. Over 410 million Euros was the total amount allocated as an emergency aid for the countries of the region, divided into two parts: the emergency funds, addressing the current health crisis, and the rest aimed at dealing with the socio-economic consequences and post-crisis liquidity caused by the coronavirus.

The EU allocated a total of 38 million to governments in the region to cover emergency healthcare needs. Of this amount, the largest share went to Serbia - a total of 15 million Euros, 7 million were

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allocated to Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Albania and North Macedonia received 4 million each, Kosovo 5 million, and Montenegro 3 million Euros.

In Kosovo, all the allocated funds are mainly dedicated to the urgent needs of the University Clinical Center, and include adequate medical equipment necessary to combat the crisis.

However, the allocation of EU funds was only made after the Brussels institutions were criticized for not doing much to help countries that are in the immediate vicinity of the 27-member bloc.

Tensions peaked with the European Commission’s decision on March 15, 2020, to ban exports of medical and protective equipment outside the EU. The harshest statements came from the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic, who said the same evening that “European solidarity no longer exists” and that Serbia “turns its eyes to China”.

Although European officials qualified this as “export according to the authorization scheme”, in practice this had all the elements of a ban.

Five days later, the European Commission adopted the decision and made a number of exemptions to the original decision, thus incorporating associate states into the regulation, meaning the countries that have contractual relations with the EU through the Stabilization and Association Agreements.

The European Commission also reallocated 374 million Euros to help the region’s socio-economic recovery in the short and medium term. This is aid from the Pre-Accession Funds (IPA Fund) that aim to support the private sector, increase social protection, with a specific focus on vulnerable groups, and strengthen the sustainability of the public health sector. From this amount, Kosovo will benefit up to 63 million Euros.

As for its member states, the EU was only able to mobilize the available funds, which meant unused IPA funds. For Kosovo and the Balkan countries as well, a flexibility is expected to focus these funds to the urgent needs to address the crisis, because unlike all other measures, the search for other funds requires more time, while the fight against coronavirus is a battle against time.

In the future, the countries of the region will also be able to count on the assistance of the European Investment Bank, EIB, from which the Commission and member states requested special programs in response to the crisis.

The EU has also increased communication with Western Balkan countries to exchange information and experiences in the battle against the coronavirus. These constant contacts will continue, especially given the existing financial and commercial ties, as well as physical ones.

In times of a crisis, the EU called on the countries of the region, despite measures to restrict the movement of people, as a necessity, not to hinder the movement of goods between them and to have facilities in place to increase efficiency facing the crisis. In this regard, they considered that the deci-

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5 Aleksandar Vucic 15 (15.03.2020) - Press Conference, Belgrade.
sion of Kosovo to remove 100 percent tariffs on the imports from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina was a positive step.

The EU and member states also found opportunities to clarify the status of those citizens of the region whose visas or EU stay expired and who have not been able to return home. Complications with the closure of the borders that appeared at the beginning of the crisis, both with the external and internal borders of the EU, were overcome, as much as it was possible in times of crisis. This is also seen as an assistance to Kosovo and other countries that would face issues if everyone returned in times of pandemic. Capacities for their placement in quarantine or self-isolation would be limited in that case.

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6. Disinformation
- a challenge in the Balkans as well

A particular challenge for the European Union during the coronavirus crisis was dealing with disinformation campaigns. European Union experts dealing with the issue claimed to have identified “unprecedented amounts of disinformation” since the virus began to spread.

An internal analysis of the working group for the detection of disinformation in the EU External Action Service (EEAS) drew attention to the fact that pro-Kremlin media were behind the disinformation campaign regarding the coronavirus.

This special EEAS body, established in 2015 and committed to identifying fake news and combating it with all means, has never confronted more fake news and the threat they pose to the EU’s credibility.

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, was personally involved in this “battle”. She also sent a video to European citizens to warn them of the massive wave of fake news, “which is fuelled by insecurity and anxiety.”

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The European Commission also posted exclusive relevant information on the COVID-19 virus in the front page of its website, as well as frequently asked questions and answers about the crisis and adequate resources where citizens can be informed about the issues of concern.

Notes from the official EU body dealing with the fight against disinformation show that the EU is losing on the media front. The April 1, 2020, publication clearly states that the main purpose of sources spreading fake news (reports regularly target the state media and pro-Kremlin media) is to discredit the European Union. The report’s findings show that even EU member states are not immune to fake news, and that this situation is being exploited by political actors to advance their geopolitical interests.

Reports published regularly have shown that in only the first four months of 2020, more than 8,000 cases of fake news were identified and distributed by the pro-Kremlin media.

Pro-government Russian media, such as Russia Today, were identified as some of the outlets of unconfirmed news. The Spanish-language Russian television channel is said to be among the world’s 12 largest sources of information about the coronavirus, leaving behind many media outlets and news agencies with a good reputation from the West.

EU experts say that the often-spread narrative is that the virus was “man-made and brought by migrants” or that it was deliberately created by the United States, the United Kingdom, or China. Other myths that have been identified are speculations such as: “Non-smokers are more likely to become infected,” “The virus is an instrument for establishing totalitarian rule” or “Coronavirus is linked to the 5G network (Wuhan is a testing ground for 5G),” or that the “Coronavirus is” a lie because it doesn’t exist at all.

The European Union sought and found understanding for cooperation from all credible online platforms to continue their efforts to increase the trust on professional sources and help increase the visibility of the World Health Organization and other relevant health authorities. According to the analysis of European experts, an unprecedented move was made by all major platforms, adjusting their content policies in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The social network Facebook announced that it will remove “claims that have been created to discourage the treatment or appropriate precautions.”

However, European analyses dealing with the phenomenon of disinformation warn that there are fundamental challenges regarding new content constraints, especially regarding the transparency of reasoning and application of rules. Some actions can be seen as restricting freedom of expression and it takes time to regulate this by law.

“In addition, the major platforms continue to monetize disinformation and harmful content on the pandemic (including pro-Kremlin disinforma-

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11 Figure of the Week: 8000. (2020, April 8). Retrieved from: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/figure-of-the-week-8000-2/
European experts have identified an extremely large number of unverified news published in the Western Balkans media. However, according to the EU’s internal analysis, European experts warn that there are other risks associated with the spread of disinformation about the coronavirus in the countries in the Western Balkans.

Among these risks is the use of the situation in election debates to discredit political opponents, especially “in the context of the upcoming elections in Serbia and North Macedonia.” It is worth noting that this analysis was compiled before the political crisis in Kosovo.

“The Western Balkans working group noticed domestic actors are (mis-)using the situation in the political context,” the analysis said.

The crisis in the region due to the coronavirus, according to the findings of European experts, is also used to strengthen the narrative that “the EU is turning its back on the Western Balkans.” All this, it is said, is aimed at discrediting the EU.

The common narrative, which is supported by pro-Kremlin media that “the EU cannot fight the pandemic and therefore will be destroyed,” continues to be promoted both in the EU and Western Balkans media.

Concrete cases in individual countries are also mentioned in the report, such as the theory that “the crisis has revealed the pro-Serbian bias of the EU” in Kosovo.

The report also states that in the Kosovar media, disinformation is also related to religious and nationalist elements.

“In Kosovo, some local portals spread the message that the ‘Coronavirus is a punishment from God because women are not allowed to wear headscarves,’” said the EU document, without mentioning the names of the portals or media in question.

In the Albanian media specifically, a mention is made to the reporting on the fact that the government “kept secret the appearance of COVID-19”, or that it was reported that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps believes that the virus was spread by the United States of America to hit China and Iran.”

Although the West has claimed that this narrative is a Russian disinformation campaign, “the conspiratorial details mentioned therein still had an effect.”

There are cases, such as in Montenegro, where the government’s measures regarding the crisis are presented as an attack on the Serbian Orthodox Church.

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7. Ensuring the continuation of political relations and processes

As in a period of any crisis, the challenge of each organization is how to be as active as possible in order to ensure a normal functioning. EU’s relations with the Western Balkans are already at a very dynamic stage with many challenges.

The crisis came at a time when EU relations with the region were experiencing a new test on both sides: on one hand, how sincere was the EU with its enlargement policy and keeping the doors open to these countries, while, on the other, were the countries of the region realistically ready to make reforms and meet the conditions.

Shortly before the outbreak of the crisis, the European Commission had issued a report to change the enlargement methodology. Member states, with a strong commitment from Croatia, which had set the enlargement as a priority during its six-month EU presidency, were in the process of approving the decision to open membership negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania.

On the other hand, the EU was in the process of defining its ideas on how to mediate in the dialog between Kosovo and Serbia and appointing a Special Representative with this task.

These would be tough issues in normal circumstances and turned into real challenges afterwards. The coronavirus crisis also hampered the functioning of the EU and despite the crisis and restrictions on movement, European institutions continued to take decisions on the region.

In the time of the pandemic crisis, the decision to open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia was approved, and the Special Representative for Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia was appointed. Contacts with the countries of the region on the reform agenda have also continued.

The adopted amendments to the EU procedures allowed for written decisions on the enlargement. Thus, first the Ministers in the General Council of the EU approved the decision to open membership
negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania.\textsuperscript{16} The same decision was confirmed by the European Council (also through a joint statement).\textsuperscript{17} This decision is considered historic and proof that the EU remains committed to the enlargement process towards the countries of the Western Balkans.

The decision to appoint former Slovak Foreign Minister, Miroslav Lajčák, as EU Special Representative for the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and other issues in the Western Balkans region was also approved through a written procedure. His primary task will be to engage in comprehensive normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, as one of the conditions for progress on their European path.

The EU’s engagement in the case of Kosovo and the decisions on Albania and North Macedonia are cited as evidence that the EU does not stop working with the region even in times of crisis, and creates conditions for the work to continue at a higher pace once the situation normalizes.

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Urgent needs have prompted the European Union to plan and take urgent action. In terms of health, it is already clear what the priorities are and will be. Slowing down and stopping the spread of the virus, helping member states increase their capacities of their health-care systems, speeding up the discovery of the coronavirus vaccine, and preparations to address future risks faster, when they emerge. In all these issues, the EU has invested an urgent fund, and will increase this funding in its future budget planning.

Currently, the EU is mainly focused on measures for economic recovery and coping with social and economic consequences. The focus will be on three categories of countries: firstly, members of the Eurozone, then all EU countries, and finally those that are in the process of enlargement, including Kosovo, which has a Stabilization and Association Agreement and is considered as an associated state with the European Union. Although they will not have access to all aid programs, both Kosovo and the region are part of EU’s plans in discussions on future actions to face the consequences of the crisis.

It is a special situation this time around, different from the post-crisis periods in the region, as the EU countries, themselves heavily affected, will not be able to organize donor conferences for the countries of the region. Following the war in Kosovo, in the aftermath of the earthquake in Albania, and in other cases as well, the EU was able to mobilize donors and creditors to help in reconstruction efforts. This time there will be needs from all sides of the world, thus aid to countries in the region will be more structured.

The concrete measures will also depend on the duration of the crisis and the accurate analysis of the consequences after it is over. The European Union is expected to continue to use the financial resources available to the countries of the region, and they are limited as they are from the current EU Multiannual Financial Framework for the period 2014-2020. Although we are in the final year of this framework, a considerable amount of funds remains unused and it is planned to be shifted towards dealing with the crisis and its consequences.

In the future, assistance to the region will also depend on the new Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, which is yet to be approved. Although proposed by the European Commission two years ago, member states are yet to reach an agreement. The proposal on the table was larger in value than seven years ago, but smaller in percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that EU member states had to share. This multi-annual budget was the first in which the contribution of Great Britain, which has already left the EU, was not taken into account. This created a gap of around 12 billion Euros per year in the EU budget – the size of the British contribution. Despite some reductions, the funds for the Western Balkan countries under the Instruments of Pre-Accession (IPA), were more or less at the same level as they were before.

But now everything could change. Planning the budget framework will virtually start from scratch, as there are ideas that this Framework will be a kind of “Marshall Plan” for the EU. This means that the EU budget should be significantly increased if
the EU is to play a leading role in the recovery of member states after the crisis. The countries of the Western Balkans region will also be in these plans, although they do not participate in the decision-making process.

The European Commission is drafting a new proposal for the seven-year financial framework 2021-2027, but also the post-crisis recovery package.

The plan is to engage all EU institutions, such as the European Commission, which manages the budget, as well as financial institutions, such as the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), and the contingency fund; while other projects are also planned. The biggest aid, especially from the EIB and ESM, will be for countries that are members of the Eurozone - 19 of the 27 member states of the European Union. However, other countries can also benefit from affordable loans, with very low interest rates, for priorities related to mitigating the consequences of the crisis.

For member states, the EU has already proposed a fund of 100 billion Euros just to save jobs.

Priority for Kosovo and other countries in the region, according to what is being discussed in the EU at this stage, will also be the assistance to small and medium enterprises, which carry the largest burden of employment. Labor market analyses are planned, as the market could undergo dramatic changes in the region. On the one hand, this can happen as a result of the situation created in these countries, but on the other hand, as a result of the economic crisis in EU countries where a large number of citizens of the region have found temporary jobs, or generate income in form of remittances from the diaspora. Kosovo is extremely dependent on both of these phenomena, thus there is concern that the consequences for Kosovo could be rather serious. Therefore, the EU is aware that increasing public debt on the one hand, and foreign aid, including from the EU, on the other, will be essential to face the consequences of the crisis. There is readiness, but success will depend on the development in the coming weeks and months, when there will be more clarity regarding the development of the pandemic, and about the short-term and medium-term plans of the EU.
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