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Länderbericht



Balkans: Geopolitics in Times of Corona

Foreign Aid and Public Relations Work and Their Perception in South East Europe

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The coronavirus pandemic is a stress test for global value chains, national health systems and the resilience of societies – with no clear outcome. Against the backdrop of the crisis, we are also witnessing a geopolitical, systemic competition to win the *hearts and minds* of states and societies and to dominate global narratives. True to the motto that every crisis harbours an opportunity, the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation in particular are striving to gain sympathies in selected countries through rapid aid and its propagandistic staging, so as to highlight the superiority of their own systems and thus to expand their *soft power*. It would be naive to assume that their actions are guided solely by humanitarian considerations and international solidarity. What’s more, they are applying illegitimate methods such as *fake news* and disinformation campaigns as well.

An arena that is attracting special attention from Beijing and Moscow is the Western Balkans. The six non Member States of the region represent an enclave within the European Union, are economically and financially weak, with poorly consolidated democracies and equipped with ailing health systems. It is true that the EU has announced up to 38 million Euro in additional emergency aid, and a reallocation of pre-accession assistance amounting to 374 million Euro as part of its global reaction to the Western Balkan region’s health emergency in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak. Yet, will this aid arrive and will it be recognised? And what real aid is being provided by China and Russia in the crisis? The heads of the KAS country offices provide us with assessments from the Western Balkans and the EU Member States Croatia and Slovenia.

Serbia

Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes

Serbia was totally unprepared for the spread of the coronavirus in early March. After initially dubbing the virus “the most ridiculous virus in the world”, the government recognised that they misjudged the situation and had misguided the public: they imposed a state of emergency across the country and initiated drastic measures for combating the spread of the virus. It soon became clear that Serbia’s health system was ill-prepared for such a challenge. There is a shortage of medical staff as well as the appropriate equipment and intensive care beds.

To date, six aircraft **from China** have landed in Serbia with protective masks, technical and medical equipment. Further material has been transported to Serbia with Serbian aircraft, in part from China, and in part from Chinese production warehoused in the United States. According to government data, more than 14 million protective masks and items of medical equipment have arrived in Serbia thus far, making it possible for Serbia to establish its own protective mask production. Six Chinese doctors and 14 health experts have been

supporting Serbian efforts to fight the coronavirus. China also donated two modern test laboratories, while Serbia has agreed to purchase test kits from China.

Some of the Chinese aid is paid for by Chinese companies working in Serbia, purchased by Serbia for the most part, and at times financed by European Union funds (for example an aircraft delivery on 26/03/2020 from China amounting to 450,000 Euro was paid by the European Union). The Chinese relief efforts consistently attract great media attention. One of the main events to hit the headlines was State President *Aleksandar Vučić*'s personal welcome of the first Chinese aircraft, which entailed him kissing the Chinese flag. Large billboards in the city of Belgrade, and a media campaign expressively thanking the Chinese state leadership, are the most visible signs. The talk is of a "friendship as strong as steel", "China as the only friend and brother"; addresses of thanks to the Chinese President, *Xi Jinping*, and the Chinese government, as well as to the Chinese Ambassador to Serbia are also part of the narrative shaped by the Serbian government. The outbreak of the corona crisis was preceded by Serbian relief efforts to China, which triggered media hype in China surrounding the President *Vučić*. A visit by the Chinese State President following the crisis in Serbia is currently being announced, during which Serbia would like to extend their thanks once again.

Russia, as its traditional ally, continues to support Serbia with medical and technical materials; a total of eleven aircraft transporting aid consignments have landed at Serbian airports. Russia is assisting Serbia with military and medical personnel, one general, 42 officers, 42 non-commissioned officers and eight teams of doctors consisting of general physicians, epidemiologists, anaesthetists, medical technicians, ABC protection experts and interpreters. According to Serbian government data, Gazprom Neft is donating fuel for police, fire-fighting and rescue vehicles.

The first Russian aircraft were welcomed at the airport by Serbian Prime Minister *Ana Brnabić*, while all Serbian media outlets are drawing attention to Russian aid. The Prime Minister not only thanks Russia for their technical and medical assistance, but also for the "psychological support". Serbia is reiterating the long-standing and reliable friendship with Russia. Here, too, an imminent meeting of the state presidents is envisaged following the end of the crisis.

The **European Union** has promised comprehensive aid for Serbia amounting to 93 million Euro. 15 million Euro are earmarked for immediate and short-term assistance to the health system, and 78.4 million Euro are to be redeployed from pre-accession aid for combating socio-economic repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic in Serbia over the medium-term. The EU has also invited Serbia to enter into the joint European agreement for the purchase of medical equipment. President *Vučić* also extended thanks for assistance from the EU, whereas two days after initiating an emergency situation in Serbia, he said that "there is no European solidarity": This is a fairy tale on paper." The Minister for European Integration, *Jadranka Joksimović*, is in close contact with the EU Ambassador, *Sem Fabrizi*, and EU Commissioner for Enlargement *Olivér Várhelyi*. The EU activities are regularly published on her website, however, there is no sign of a comparable campaign to that on the help from China or Russia. The following text is regularly found at the end of her announcements: "The European Union is Serbia's partner in the accession process, its greatest investor, trading partner and donor. Since the start of accession negotiations in 2014, EU citizens have provided Serbia with approx. two billion Euro of non-refundable financial support. Over the past two decades, the EU has given Serbia 450 million Euro for the health sector alone."

Individual European Union Member States such as Germany and Hungary are also helping the candidate country Serbia in bilateral efforts to fight the pandemic.

During the night of 6 April, public spaces and buildings in Belgrade were illuminated in black-red-gold, however this led to online "irritations" given that it also marks the anniversary of Nazi Germany's attack on Belgrade. The Deputy Mayor apologised for this faux pas and

explained that the illumination should be understood as a symbol of solidarity with the German victims of the coronavirus.

Turkey, too, long perceived as an ally of the Muslim states in the region, also provided relief to Orthodox Serbia: and hence 100,000 masks, 2000 protective suits and 1500 test kits arrived from Turkey on 8 April.

Albania

Dr Tobias Rüttershoff

Albania has been fighting against Covid-19 since early March when the first cases were announced, and the government started to impose strict constraints. Public life has come to a standstill. There is a general lockdown, which is only lifted a few hours a day in order to buy food or medication. Nonetheless, this lockdown was relaxed somewhat at the start of the Easter week, giving people more time to run errands. Land and sea borders continue to be closed. Even the airport has discontinued passenger traffic, yet the first flights to Rome and soon to other cities are scheduled to start again from 18 April – mainly to repatriate stranded Albanians back to their homes. Following their return, however, they must then spend 14 days in quarantine in a hotel at their own expense. In spite of this, decisive action taken by the government is already paying off: on 16 April, the level of total confirmed infections was 581, with at least 26 people having died from a Covid-19 disease so far.

Yet, such measures for protecting public health are placing considerable strain on the economy and beyond. The longer the restrictions last, the greater the probability of an economic, social and political crisis. We are already witnessing the first signs, not only at the economic level where many companies fear for their survival, but also in the political sphere. The Albanian parliament, at the request of the socialist majority, has in some cases rigorously tightened detention and imprisonment sentences for those violating against the lockdown. Hence, a failure to comply with self-quarantine, for instance, is punished with up to three years imprisonment.

In order to counter the medical and economic repercussions of the crisis, the **European Union** has promised Albania up to 50 million Euro for combating the virus and its effects. The aid comprises four million Euro for emergency medical equipment, eleven million Euro for alleviating the social ramifications and up to 35 million Euro as economic support.

While the Serbian President, *Aleksandar Vučić*, has denounced European solidarity as a “fairly tale on paper”, the Albanian Prime Minister *Edi Rama* (SP), the State President *Ilir Meta* and the opposition leader *Lulzim Basha* (DP) expressed their gratitude. *Basha* said:

“We are not alone. Many thanks are owed to the European Union for this valuable help for Albanians during these difficult times”.

It is worth mentioning that on 28 March, Albania posted 30 doctors and nurses to Italy in the Bergamo region in order to support in the fight against Covid-19.

China donated 1000 tests kits to Albania as a reaction to the outbreak of Covid-19. The Institute for Public Health in Albania extended its thanks to the Chinese Embassy in Tirana for its support with the words: This is not only help during these difficult times, but also a gesture of generosity from a big country with an even bigger heart. This support from China came after Albania’s Deputy Minister of Health had asked the Chinese Embassy for help. Even during the first days of the coronavirus outbreak, Prime Minister Rama assured his citizens that **Turkey** would help Albania in the event of a major emergency. Rama said: “I have sent a list of requests to Turkey”. Shortly after, Turkey dispatched 4.5 tonnes of medical

supplies and equipment to Albania. Albania also received a new fleet of civilian ambulances from Turkey.

The **United States of America** have included Albania in a 100 million Dollar aid package, which was promised to countries affected by the coronavirus to help combat its effects.

The Albanian government has not engaged in any directly anti-European propaganda, but its rhetoric that “we are as strong as the US military”, and “we are faring better than all other countries thanks to state measures”, is a self-confident statement on the part of the government. It looks as though the government is exploiting the crisis so as to illustrate its “super power” in the fight against Covid-19.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sven Petke

The coronavirus pandemic represents an enormous burden and challenge for all areas of society in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The developments in Italy and Germany were followed with particular attention. Restrictive measures adopted by the governments at the various levels are largely complied with. Apart from a few exceptions, politicians have so far endeavoured to engage in a more consensual form of debate. The poor performance of the health system is a well-known fact. Social life is paralysed. There is likely to be a serious impact on the nation’s economy. While it is hoped that the reduced significance of production in China represents an opportunity in future, the direct effects on tourism and foreign direct investments, which were modest even prior to the crisis, are leading to a dramatic increase in unemployment. The first state aid has been announced for affected employees.

Some politicians are voicing criticism about holding local elections, which are expected to take place throughout the country in October this year. A potential postponement to October 2022 and thus merging with elections in the State and Entities seems possible.

Both hopes and expectations are placed on foreign countries and the **European Union** in particular to help during this critical situation. Criticism has not been levelled against the EU in public. Having said that, the temporary export bans for medical products met with confusion.

The overview includes the most important points since the first infection was detected on 5 March. The rapid reaction of representatives from **China** and **Russia** is astounding. Extensive support from the EU is being carried out in phases and with a considerable time lag. In most cases, the handover of aid supplies is accompanied by ambassadors of the respective states. The media mostly report about it as a pure aid delivery and do not question whether the goods actually help or not. The approach taken by Bosnia and Herzegovina and the reports from neighbouring states, allow us to conclude that the intention to provide real help is just as important as representing their own state in a positive light.

17 April

Minister of Security *Fahrudin Radončić* speaks publicly against returning Bosnian and Herzegovinian nationals from abroad.

The Ambassador of China presents various regions with mask deliveries.

Extensive curfews apply in the Republic of Srpska during Orthodox Easter. These were agreed following a vote between the President of Serbia and the Serbian member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

2 April

The European Union approves an aid package of more than 410 million Euro for the Western Balkans to combat corona. Bosnia and Herzegovina receive 80.5 million Euro. Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania receive direct support amounting to 38 million Euro for the purchase of respirators, tests, protective equipment and a further 374 million Euro to counter the negative social and economic repercussions. The adoption of this package is the EU's reaction to the coronavirus pandemic occurring in these countries. For the health sector there is seven million Euro of direct support, and 73.5 million Euro will be available to Bosnia and Herzegovina for social and economic recovery through the reallocation of pre-accession aid.

The European Union is supplying 7,500 corona tests. A total of 15,000 visors will be delivered to meet the needs of medical institutions throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. Delivery of the first respirators is expected during the first half of April 2020.

The Institute for Public Health Republika Srpska received a donation of 12,000 masks presented by citizens of the People's Republic of China who have lived and worked in Bosnia and Herzegovina for more than ten years.

The International Monetary Fund has earmarked 165 million Euro for Bosnia and Herzegovina, mainly for health and the economy. Turkey also pledges to support the health sector.

Serbia is sending truck deliveries with five clinical and five transport respirators, 30,000 epidemiological N95 masks, 2,000 protective suits and 50,000 gloves.

30 March

USAID declares that the **United States** will donate 1.2 million Dollars to Bosnia and Herzegovina. These funds will serve to equip laboratories, carry out and supervise tests, support experts, increase community awareness and participation and strengthen prevention.

28 March

The Swiss Embassy is providing 200,000 Dollars. The US government donated medical and emergency equipment for hospitals and ambulances as well as food and water, which were presented to members of the armed forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The latter will continue to deploy them throughout the country. **Turkey** donated protective masks, gloves, protective suits and protective glasses to the Red Cross in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Caritas located in Vienna donated 29,000 protective gloves and disinfectant to the border police of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

26 March

The EU pledges the first two million Euro for the medical emergency in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

24 March

Russia's Foreign Minister *Sergei Lawrow* promises Russia's support with medical supplies to the Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina. No deliveries have been recorded to date.

23 March

The United States helped with ambulances, equipment for hospitals as well as food and water supplies. Members of the US armed forces presented the aid delivery to members of the armed forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina at Sarajevo airport. The aid consignment is

being deployed throughout the whole country. "The United States and the American people are reacting to this situation with the strong and sustained support that we have been providing to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina for over 25 years", explained the United States Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

17 March

The Chinese Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina decided to donate disinfectant to schools and universities in the crisis caused by corona, in which the Republika Srpska finds itself. Further assistance was promised.

5 March

Identification of the first person infected with corona in Banja Luka, Republika Srpska.

Kosovo

Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes

Despite the governmental crisis in Kosovo, the response by state authorities is largely satisfactory, however, the medical and personnel situation in Kosovo is critical and requires support. Kosovo is not receiving any support from **China** or **Russia** during the corona crisis since there is no official communication, and they do not recognise it as state. Serbia is providing assistance to the north of Kosovo.

The **European Union** has allocated a sum of five million Euro emergency aid and pledged a total sum of 63 million Euro in aid, which can be increased to up to 160 million Euro over the next two to six months through various EU budgets.

In light of America's huge influence in Kosovo, it is interesting that the **United States** have only pledged 1.1 million Euro to date.

The relief efforts of the EU are positively received in Kosovo, and this attitude is mainly reflected online given that printed newspapers are not being published at the moment. Support from the EU and the United States is also being illustrated in public. The positive public attitude towards the EU is also remarkable seeing as the appointment of *Miroslav Lajčák* as EU Special Representative for the normalisation dialogue had led to criticism against the EU due to Slovakia's refusal to recognise Kosovo. Aid from the United States is also positively received.

Montenegro

Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes

The management of the corona crisis in Montenegro is characterised by notable restraint on the part of government representatives when it comes to communicating about the crisis; the population relies on the health authorities to provide them with information.

Internationally, Montenegro is not receiving any support from **Russia**, whereas **China** sent 1000 test kits three days after the first infection was notified (on the same day, **Turkey** also sent 1000 kits and on 8 April announced the dispatch of 50,000 masks, 1000 protective suits and 1000 test kits). What's more, 5000 protective masks arrived from China and the

province of Sichuan donated a further 20,000 masks in early April. Podgorica also received 20,000 masks from the Chinese construction company CRBC, which is implementing the major motorway project in Montenegro.

The **United States** Embassy presented the country with three monitors for observing the vital function of critical patients.

On 26 March, the Delegation of the **European Union** to Montenegro in Podgorica announced an emergency aid package amounting to three million Euro for urgent purchases in the health sector; this was implemented on 2 April. A further 50 million Euro is being provided by the EU for social and economic ramifications associated with the crisis. The media and policy-makers in Montenegro are presenting these aid packages in a positive light. Likewise, the government of Montenegro is publishing donations made by companies and private persons from both within and outside the country. On 6 April the sum amounted to 6.7 million Euro. The government is informing the public about expenditure on a weekly basis.

North Macedonia

Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, North Macedonia became a member of NATO and received the green light for starting EU accession negotiations. The initiation of negotiations with the EU was considered by North Macedonia as a clear signal of solidarity and support from the EU.

The European Union is supporting North Macedonia with 63 million Euro to combat the effects of the health crisis and for the economy. North Macedonia has also been granted access to the European Solidarity Fund, so that North Macedonia can participate with all EU Member States in measures to purchase materials and equipment for hospitals dealing with the coronavirus.

Slovenia is supporting North Macedonia with 1000,000 protective masks as well as many pairs of protective gloves at a total amount of 110,000 Euro. During the first visit of a representative of an EU Member State, Hungarian Foreign Minister, *Péter Szijjártó*, 100,000 protective masks and 5000 protective suits were also presented to North Macedonia on behalf of Hungary.

Since the onset of the crisis, the **Chinese** Embassy in Skopje has donated protective equipment for staff at the Ministry of the Interior and pledged 200 ventilators. In late 2019, North Macedonia received a donation from China of four million Euro, intended for the purchase of 104 ambulance vehicles, mini buses, equipment for the health sector and for science and research.

North Macedonia has not received any support from **Russia** to date.

Despite the state of emergency imposed by the technical government in Skopje, the NATO accession and the decision to start EU accession negotiations has attracted high levels of media attention. Much is reported about EU support for overcoming the corona crisis as well as bilateral support from the EPP-governed EU Member States Hungary and Slovenia, whose help is publicly welcomed by the government.

Croatia

Holger Haibach

There are no special grants from the **European Union** to the EU Member State Croatia. It is emphasised that the EU Commission has permitted Croatia to convert Structural and Cohesion Funds in the amount of 174 million Euro, or 1.3 billion Kuna. These funds are used to speed up the financing of projects co-financed by European funds. The EU Commission has also determined that the Croatian support programme for companies affected by COVID-19 amounting to six billion Kuna (790 million Euro), complies with the EU regulations for state aid in accordance with the framework conditions. The decision of the EU Commission to exempt medical equipment imported from third countries in the fight against COVID-19 from value-added tax and customs, was warmly welcomed in Croatia.

The Croatian government has only received two donations to date. UNICEF donated four tonnes and the **United Arab Emirates** 11.5 tonnes of protection and medical equipment to combat COVID-19 in Croatia.

Since the EU failed to take rapid action at the start of the crisis for many reasons, this afforded **China** the opportunity to assist the Western Balkans, and Serbia in particular. In contrast to the Western Balkans, where other influential actors prevail besides the EU, European policy is a key factor when it comes to facing various economic and security policy challenges for Croatia.

To date, Croatia has purchased 12.5 tonnes of medical equipment from **China** for the fight against COVID-19. In addition to the purchased equipment, Croatia (here: the Red Cross) also received a donation of medical equipment from the Chinese government. There are however donations from Chinese companies, too. For instance, China Road donated 800,000 Kuna (115,000 Euro). China Road is well-known for building the Pelješac Bridge in Croatia, which in turn is financed by EU funds. China Road also disclosed that this will not be the only donation. A further donation was sent to the Croatian electric car manufacturer Mate Rimac from Xiangyang. The donation consists of 20,000 masks for the Croatian Red Cross. There were two additional donations using the same approach: one amounting to 40,000 protective masks from the Chinese company Gree to the Croatian company Deltron. Another donation came from the Chinese company Z-Run Well Ton Industry at 200,000 Euro for the city of Velika Gorica, a city near to Zagreb, on whose territory Zagreb airport is located.

Following a telephone conversation between the Croatian Prime Minister, *Andrej Plenković*, and the Chinese Head of Government, *Li Keqiang*, it was agreed to establish an air bridge between both countries. This air bridge is now intended to serve as a sustainable supply chain to uphold the Croatian health system. Croatia chartered an aircraft from the company SF Cargo Airlines for the direct flight between Shanghai and Zagreb.

Slovenia

Holger Haibach

Despite the health system of the EU Member State Slovenia being relatively stable, the Slovenian media and the new Slovenian government warned against a lack of protective equipment in almost all of the country's health facilities at a time when numbers of

coronavirus patients first started to increase. In late March, 125 respirators were available in six Slovenian hospitals. This underlined the need for urgent intervention.

Seeing as the Minister of Defence, *Matej Tonin* (NSi), announced that the order delivery of three million protective masks was a scam and the ordered masks failed to arrive, each donation and order has been checked separately since then.

An initiative that was co-launched by one of the most popular Slovenians, UEFA President *Aleksander Čeferin*, met with wide public approval. He came to an agreement with the Chinese entrepreneur Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba Web Store, to donate 300,000 masks for Slovenia. When viewed holistically, the coronavirus has led to closer relations between **China** and Slovenia: Hence, on 24 March the Slovenian President *Borut Pahor* and the Chinese Ambassador to Slovenia agreed to establish comprehensive "humanitarian, scientific and economic contacts in both countries so as to contain the effects of the coronavirus".

Regardless of the fact that both countries agreed to the delivery of protective masks and respirators from China, Hisense, the Chinese owner of the Slovenian company Gorenje, also organised one of the largest-scale donations for Slovenia. In total, Hisense donated 200,000 protective masks, 2,000 items of protective clothing and protective glasses for medical staff, 2,000 surgical protective clothing and 500 respirators. Hisense also donated a medical ventilator and assisted in the purchase of an additional 46 medical ventilators, which will arrive in Slovenia in the next two weeks. Owing to major logistical problems when collecting and transporting donations for protective equipment, the Hisense Group also helped Slovenia by providing a warehouse and workers in Qindgao, where its company headquarters is located.

Cooperation between the new Slovenian government and other Member States of the **European Union** is experiencing a positive trajectory, too. On 7 April, the Prime Minister *Janez Janša* announced that the Polish Prime Minister *Mateusz Morawiecki* had offered to support Slovenia with Polish medical staff on-site. Despite receiving little media coverage, on 3 April an aid package from Hungary also arrived in Slovenia – 100,000 protective masks and 5,000 items of protective clothing.

Summary

It goes without saying that humanitarian or financial help as well as international solidarity are at first welcomed with open arms during times of crisis. China, the country where coronavirus originated, also called for and in turn received such help at the apex of the epidemic, just as Russia will be able to rely on international support if their situation were to further deteriorate. There is nothing reprehensible about abiding by the motto “do good and make it known”. The European Union and its member states primarily have themselves to blame for China and Russia having adopted the role of reliable partner and emergency responder in South East Europe. On the one hand, this was due to a lack of solidarity and coordination even within the EU itself, with everyone looking after themselves. That did not go unnoticed in the Western Balkans. And once they finally achieved increased coordination in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic, the initial focus was on protectionism and export restrictions of medical equipment – the Western Balkans were excluded.

Improvements have been made with far-reaching aid packages bearing testimony to European solidarity. However, China and Russia had already reacted and painted the right picture. Here, too, we can observe a deficit: whereas European help may be both substantial and sustainable (some Chinese or Russian support raises suspicions that it is more illusion than reality), there is certainly still room for improvement when it comes to enhancing the visibility and public relations underpinning European assistance. The new EU Commission, which explicitly sets itself the objective of becoming a geopolitical commission, also needs to learn how to present itself with more confidence and more readiness for political staging; while ensuring that it does not neglect the substance in doing so. Sometimes a picture says more than a thousand words (or figures): we should not underestimate symbolic politics. For the European Union and its member states, this crisis is also a geopolitical litmus test, with the Western Balkans representing an important arena here.

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