

Southeast Europe - COVID-19 Bulletin No 3

International chessboard

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Back to normal?

In this third bulletin, we provide an update on the latest developments on the rates of infection and mortality arising out of the pandemic in the region, the general easing of restrictions, as well as the range and extent of international assistance.

As most EU member states embark on a gradual lifting of lockdown measures, and focus on efforts to mitigate the economic fallout from the pandemic, the SEE countries are facing increased challenges from a worsening economic situation combined with in some cases electoral pressures and a rise in Covid-19 infections.

The support and direct assistance already announced by the EU for the SEE countries will play a critical role in helping to mitigate the worst effects of the pandemic at a time when EU related reforms have in most cases taken a back seat.

Epidemiological evolution

As we review the latest developments with Covid-19 in the SEE region, a mixed picture emerges ranging from zero increase in infections in the case of Montenegro to infection rates under control in most countries, but with upward trends in both Albania and North Macedonia. The difference is that the increases in these two cases appears to be confined to localised clusters linked to religious celebrations and/or the textile industry. Testing capacities as well as tracking and tracing procedures will be critical in determining whether these increases can be controlled in the coming weeks.

Unwinding strategy

The easing of lockdown measures has continued throughout the region. However, in the case of North Macedonia the resurgence of infections could result in a re-imposition of curfew measures in the capital city and other localised areas, while the technical government in place has been criticised for its perceived failure to ensure observance of lockdown measures and allowing electoral considerations to determine its approach.

In the case of Turkey, the government has been criticised for giving priority to economic considerations in advancing the timing for the easing of restrictions, and opening the door for a possible second wave.

Table: Infections and deaths, as per 31 May 2020

	No. of infections	Infections per 100,000	No. of deaths	Deaths per 100,000	Population (Mio)
EU/EEA + UK (7 June)	1,435,607 (+148,655)	283, 16	168,699 (+15,338)	33,27	507
Albania	1137 (+221)	40.61	33 (+2)	1.18	2,86
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2,510 (+274)	76.5	153 (+25)	4.7	3,28
Kosovo	1083 (+128)	59.8	30 (+1)	1.65	1,81
Montenegro	324 (=)	51.4	9 (=)	1.4	0,63
North Macedonia	2.315 (+552)	111,4 (+26.2)	140 (+42)	6,7 (+2)	2,08
Serbia	11,412 (+974)		243 (+18)		6,98
Turkey	163,942 (+17,485)	194,38	4,540 (+485)	5.38	84,34

Authors' own compilation, based on figures from the ECDC and national authorities of SEE-7

	AL	BiH	KS	MNE	MK	SB	TR
Public gatherings	Restrictions on public gatherings remain in place until further notice.	All public gatherings above 100 persons in closed and 400 in open spaces (Federation) and 50 (RS) banned until further notice	Banned under phase I and II, No more than two 2 people are allowed out at the same time or in the same car; except for funerals	Allowed outdoors and indoors, with a maximum of 200 people, with the obligation to respect a distance of at least 2m (plus other protection measures)	Banned until further notice; protocols for political rallies for the electoral period are unchanged.	As of 31 May, gatherings of up to 1,000 people are allowed, as well as presence of spectators at sporting events (maintaining 1m distance)	Allowed since 1 June; except for people above 65 and below 18 who are allowed to go outside only on set days
Places of worship	Open under strict rules of social distancing and hygiene	Open since 6 May; social distancing, face masks and hygiene rules apply	Open from 28.05.2020	Open, with the obligation to respect a distance of at least 2m (plus other protection measures)	Open, religious gatherings discouraged	Open; social distancing measures and protective equipment encouraged	Mosques reopened on 29 May
Personal movement	Personal movement is allowed for all citizens both in red and green zones, respecting rules of social distancing	Curfew lifted in entire BiH: in Federation (24 April), in RS (22 May) and Brcko District (22 May). Federation lifted its ban of all outdoor activities for <18 and >65 (15 May)	From 18 May citizens were allowed to circulate for 2x2 hours. From 28 May citizens are allowed to move from 05:00 to 21:00	There are no longer restrictions on freedom of movement	Curfew and restriction on free movement removed as of 27 May. Social distancing rules apply; when not possible wearing protective equipment is obligatory .	Entirely unrestricted	Allowed wearing face masks since 1 June; except people above 65 and below 18
Public transport	Remains suspended until further notice	Until further notice allowed with social distancing measures and hygiene rules	Allowed with face masks and other protection measures	Allowed (with protection measures).	Allowed under specific conditions, with exceptions of one municipality .	Operating normally; distancing measures apply	Allowed wearing face masks only; except for people above 65 and below 18
Intercity travel	Allowed for personal vehicles and for taxi services, except for travel between green and red zones. Since 1 June , all intercity travel allowed with no restrictions	Allowed	Allowed with face masks and other protection measures	Allowed (with protection measures).	Allowed; distancing rules and limited capacity up to 50% remain in place.	Allowed	Allowed since 1 June after taking a code from "Hayat Eve Sigar (life fits inside the home)" mobile app from health ministry. Turkish & Pegasus Airlines resumed domestic flights (June)
Shops and markets, basic services	Shops, markets, outlets offering basic services are open with no time limits, under strict protocols	Open; social distancing rules apply, face masks and hygiene rules	Grocery stores, pharmacies, bakeries remained open. Green market, other retail shops resumed 18 May. Social distancing	Opened (with protection measures)	Shops, markets and malls are opened as of 13 May with specific guidelines and protocols.	Open; cautionary and hygiene measures apply	Allowed, except for people above 65 and below 18; social distancing rules apply

Schools & universities	Schools closed except third year of high school (18 May/5 June only for subjects of State Matura exams). Universities closed for rest of academic year. Students back in classes for a few weeks ahead of final exams in July/August. Kindergartens open since 1 June , following strict hygiene protocol	Partially resumed; kindergartens are open	Closed until further notice. Exams in higher education; matura and other achievement tests to be held in late June/ early July. Reconsideration based on the evolving situation	Closed (except kindergartens).	Distance learning and online examination applied for primary and secondary education. The state exam has been cancelled. Universities allowed to resume in-person activities as of 22 May	Remain closed until further notice; School trips to be permitted from 1 June; The state exam (Matura) to be conducted in June, under strict rules and precautionary procedure	Education at universities will begin under special conditions on 15 June, primary/secondary education will begin in September
Outdoor sporting activities	Since 1 June , parks open without restrictions. Outdoor sport activities resumed without public, following strict hygiene measures	Allowed	Selective opening of sporting activities	Allowed (with a maximum of 200 people)	Allowed, under specific protocols as of 13 May	Allowed	Allowed since 1 June, except for people above 65 and below 18 who are allowed to go outside only on set days
Bars, restaurants, hotels, attractions	As of 1 June , all open (except night clubs, cultural centres, theatres, cinemas, pools) but social distancing & hygiene measures apply. Private beaches in hotels open since 1 June; public beaches on 6 June	Opened (15 May); Strict social distancing, face masks and hygiene rules apply	Gastronomy open from 01 June onwards	Opened on 15 May	Opened as of 28 May for outdoor attendance until 22:00 with lowered capacities	Bars, restaurants and hotels open; cautionary measures apply	Reopening of libraries, museums, picnic areas, tea gardens, local community centres, and pools on 1 June, two weeks earlier than expected
International borders	Remain closed for all citizens except for repatriation. As of 1 June , all land borders are open and two-week quarantine rule lifted	Opening of borders to citizens of all three neighbouring states and business travels from 1 June; 14-day self-quarantine for incoming passengers lifted (20 May); airports open 1 June	Borders are closed; only essential arrivals of citizens and residents are allowed; 14 day quarantine for incoming passengers until 28 May; from 28 May 7 day self-isolation	Opened on 1 June, 14-day quarantine for incoming passengers from countries with more than 25 infected per 100,000 population	Closed, arrivals are allowed. Mandatory 21 days quarantine replaced with 14 days self-isolation with negative PCR test (t - 72h), otherwise 14 government issued quarantine	Gradual opening beginning from 1 June; initially borders open only with Bulgaria, Greece and Romania, more to follow. Air traffic liberalised	Borders that were closed will open on 15 June. Turkish Airlines will start international flights to six countries in Europe on 18 June: Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark

Foreign aid and geopolitical (re-)positioning

With the exception of Turkey, the EU is confirmed as the largest donor to all the countries of the region. While in some cases, such as in Serbia, the EU was criticised for its initially slow response and delays in lifting export restrictions of medical supplies, the support and direct assistance announced by the EU in the course of May has received wide recognition and appreciation. It has included not only medical equipment but also direct grants and loans to assist the countries in their economic recovery plans. The support from the EU has been complemented with direct assistance from a number of EU member states and other European countries such as Switzerland and Norway.

A key challenge facing the region will be the manner and speed with which the aid is implemented, in particular the preparation of suitable project proposals, where, as in the case of Albania, the national administrative capacity remains weak.

With the exception of Kosovo, China has been active in providing assistance to all of the countries mainly in the form of medical equipment and protective clothing. However, even in those countries such as Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia where Chinese investments are already substantial, the level of assistance provided for the pandemic was comparatively modest and without much publicity, with the exception of Serbia where the President made a big show of welcoming the Chinese shipments.

With the dramatic situation arising out of the pandemic in Russia, it is probably not a surprise that assistance to the region was both modest and mainly limited to its 'traditional' partners, such as Republika Srpska and Serbia.

The US meanwhile was also active in providing assistance, mainly in the form of direct grants, some of which was channelled through international organisations.

In terms of assistance from the region itself, while the proactive role of Turkey in providing assistance to some 80 countries was to be expected, the direct support provided by Albania in the form of a team of doctors dispatched to the Bergamo region in Italy is noteworthy, as was Serbia's gesture of sending some medical equipment to Kosovo.

Finally, it is clear from the assessments below that the EU related reform programmes have suffered over the past months in the region. There has been either a slowing down of much needed reforms as in the case of Albania or Montenegro, even if the government there has accepted the new methodology for accession negotiations, or no movement at all, as is the case in North Macedonia where the technical government remains in place in preparation for the early elections, for which a date has yet to be set. A bright spot could be Bosnia and Herzegovina where the President of Republika Srpska, a traditional euro-sceptic, launched an initiative for implementation of the reforms set out by the EU last year, although it remains to be seen what practical impact this will have.

ALBANIA

1. General overview: Since the beginning of the epidemic, over 16,000 molecular and serological tests had been performed. There were, however, no group tests for infection or for immunisation rate from Covid-19 according to the random samples. Hence there is no public information on how much the Albanian population have been affected in general, how many have been immunised, or are a-symptomatic. **Status: While the total of infections kept going up in the last two weeks of May, the number of fatalities had increased only slightly.**

2. Unwinding strategy: The Albanian Government has eased most of lockdown measures, apart from public transport and public gatherings. The current Covid-19 public discourse has shifted from health issues towards the negative economic consequences, and on its impact on individual freedoms. **Status: exit almost complete; the debate turned to the impact of the crisis on the economy.**

3. International context:

EU: The EU continues to remain the main donor and largest supporter in the country, a fact largely acknowledged by the population. The EU has reallocated EUR 50 million from IPA II funding to help Albania fight the coronavirus crisis and mitigate its impact on the economy. This [financial assistance](#) package includes EUR 4 million for immediate equipment and health support, EUR 11 million for social protection, and up to 35 million Euros for economic recovery. The EU has also pledged another [EUR 180 million](#) macro-financial assistance package to Albania in the form of loans at highly favourable terms to mitigate the socio-economic consequences. The total value of the aid package for Albania is estimated at [EUR 230 million](#). Regarding the disbursement and implementation, while the short term aid is expected to proceed smoothly, the loans aimed to support economic recovery may face challenges regarding the maturity of the 'loan dossiers' prepared by the national administration. Conversely, the Albanian Government on 28 March sent 30 Doctors and Nurses to Italy to help with the health crisis. The government paid 11 million lek (about EUR 90,000) to cover the stipends and other costs for 30 volunteers who worked for a month in the Bergamo area.

China: Notwithstanding the unique historical ties, China's influence in Albania today is very small. The Chinese presence in Albania is limited to oil extraction and a Hong Kong-based company owns 100% of the shares of Tirana International Airport. In the beginning of April, China provided its first aid to Albania with 1,000 Covid-19 tests. On 25 April, China provided its second aid batch consisting of 5,000 tests, 5,000 protective clothing, 10,000 protective masks, goggles, surgical gloves and surgical masks. The Covid-19 aid was offered by China under the sign of solidarity and friendship between the two countries. The Chinese face-mask diplomacy has not been visible in Albania and no other ways of intervention have been publicly noticed during the pandemic.

Russia has been absent in providing any help or assistance to Albania during the Covid-19 pandemic, nor has it intervened in other ways.

US: The US government has so far donated materials for the protection of health personnel including masks and clothing, [30,000 tests](#), and [USD 1.2 million](#) in laboratory equipment and other expertise. US aid was provided as a sign of solidarity and friendship among the two countries. There is no publicly available information about whether Albania was a demandeur of such aid but the needs of the country have been made known to the main partners. The role of the USA in Albania remains uniquely strong.

Other bilateral assistance: As part of the fight against Covid-19, a contribution of USD 700,000 from Switzerland and Norway helped the government to procure [30 additional respirators](#). The Turkish Red Crescent donated approximately [1.5 tons of medical aid](#) material (75,000 surgical masks, 4,000 nitrile gloves, 2,000 protective overalls and 2,000 goggles) to the Albanian Red Cross. The Covid-19 crisis has confirmed the very good bilateral relations with Turkey and the continuous commitment of Switzerland and Norway to Albania.

IFIs: [The IMF Executive Board approved USD 190.5 million](#) in emergency support to Albania to combat the pandemic and to address Albania's urgent needs on balance of payments.

NATO: there is no publicly available data or information about any sort of assistance.

Status: The Covid-19 crisis has caused the prolongation of the IPA-II projects and related assistance, and postponement of different consultations and roundtables at different levels & formats with EU and bilateral partners. While the appointment of the Albanian Chief Negotiator went through smoothly, the quarantine impacted the pace of ongoing judicial and electoral reforms (the May 31 deadline for an agreement amongst political parties regarding electoral reform was missed by five days). The month of June 2020 will be decisive in determining the progress of the country in EU accession talks.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

1. General overview: By 31 May authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported 2,510 confirmed cases, of which 153 died and 1,862 recovered (495 active cases). The total number of performed tests was 65,220 (data for the number of persons tested is not available). Since 15 May authorities reported 25 deaths, which is less compared to 59 deaths in the 15 days before. **Status: The doubling of cases continued to slow down from every 30 days on 15 May to 41 days on 31 May.**

2. Unwinding strategy: Authorities across the country continued to implement their unwinding strategies. By 1 June the bulk of the rules (e.g. on self-isolation of passengers coming from abroad, curfew and border crossings) had been to a great extent harmonised. The authorities have not reacted positively to a push by part of the public and the opposition to allow the entry of people who are no longer citizens but originally come from BiH. **Status: implementation measures of the exit strategy have been to a great extent harmonised across the country.**

3. International context:

EU: Next to the IMF, which provided EUR 330 million in loans, the EU has been the largest provider of support to BiH during the pandemic. So far the EU provided EUR 7 million of immediate support for the health sector, EUR 73.5 million in grants for social and economic recovery (redistribution of unused pre-accession funds) and EUR 250 million in loans of macro-financial assistance. EU member states provided bilateral support to BiH too, including Sweden, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia and Poland. Initially, the support that came from Hungary provoked political bickering since the Hungarian foreign minister announced that the aid would only go to Republika Srpska. The decision was altered after politicians in the Federation complained.

In mid-March the Serb member of BiH's tripartite Presidency, Milorad Dodik, expressed his disappointment with the lack of EU support and [wrote to](#) the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, saying that "abandoned by Europe, we look at you and hope for China's help." By late April 2020, with other partners failing to provide and EU increasing its support Dodik went on to [thank the EU](#) "for the important support which shows that the EU has not forgotten us." It was in the midst of the pandemic that Dodik proposed - and the BiH Presidency adopted - an initiative to start the implementation of priorities that the European Commission set in May 2019 as conditions for (a candidate status and) start of the accession talks.

Overall, the EU has seen its visibility increase during the pandemic as a result of a concrete support (including enabling free flow of goods) and a very active head of the EU Delegation in Sarajevo, Johann Sattler, who took over this position in August 2019.

China: In the past several years China's presence in BiH has increased. In 2019 the value of Chinese supported projects in BiH was [estimated](#) at EUR 3.8 billion (20% of [the 2019 GDP](#)). In March 2019, despite the [EU's open opposition](#) due to breach of the state aid rules, the authorities in the Federation approved a guarantee for a 0.9 billion euro loan for the China Gezhouba Group and Guandong Electric Power Design to build a powerplant in Tuzla. The support provided by China to BiH included six ventilators and several thousands of protective masks and gloves. Overall, this humanitarian aid received only modest public attention. Several companies purchased and delivered equipment and goods from China but this was never presented as Chinese support.

Russia: On 9 April [the first of the three](#) planned flights from Moscow landed in Banja Luka with medical protective equipment, ventilators and a group of persons that disinfected hospitals in Republika Srpska. On 1 May visit of a Russian team for medical support, invited by the speaker of the country's Parliamentary Assembly and leader of the largest Croat party HDZ BiH, Dragan Covic, was postponed indefinitely. According to the BiH's Foreign and Defence ministries (headed by Bosniak politicians), the Russian team included one military vehicle and military technicians, which according to the BiH's laws in order to be allowed entry required an approval from the tripartite Presidency. A Croat member of the Presidency, Zeljko Komsic, said in public that he was against such visit. This created an outcry among many Croat and Serb political parties in BiH. Overall, Russian support has been rather modest, it created divisions among politicians in BiH and was exaggerated by authorities in Republika Srpska.

US: Two flights carrying medical support for the Armed Forces arrived from the US on [23 March](#) and [26 May](#). Both received mostly positive public attention. The second flight also carried support provided from NATO.

Other bilateral assistance: BiH received support in medical and protective equipment from several other countries, including Switzerland, Norway, Turkey, Serbia, Malaysia, Qatar and the UAE, confirming already good relations.

IFIs: The World Bank has provided around EUR 31 million in support for the health sector. On 2 June, political disagreement in the Federation over the IMF's EUR 330 million was resolved and the loan was distributed in BiH.

Status: BiH received a rather limited concrete support from Russia, China and Turkey and in the public the EU visibility and importance given to the EU by BiH authorities seem to have increased. Whether this will be sufficient to accelerate EU-related reforms in BiH will also depend on whether and in which way the EU will aim to use this small window of opportunity.

KOSOVO

1. General overview: Until 31 May, 1083 citizens have been infected and 30 fatalities have been recorded. The number of recovered has risen to 843. Kosovo is experiencing a steady downward trend in the number of infections. To date 14,968 tests have been conducted. **Status: Numbers are steady; effects of going back to normality remain to be seen.**

2. Unwinding strategy: As [reported](#) in the second bulletin, phase II of the implementation of the exit strategy began on 18 May. The restrictions allowed citizens to circulate for 2x2 hours. The schedule was decided by the penultimate digit of their ID card. On 28 May the Ministry of Health reassessed the epidemiological situation, lifted the previous restriction and allowed citizens to move freely from 05:00 to 21:00. From 01 June, gastronomy, malls, taxi services, kindergartens will work normal hours while respecting the social distancing rules and other measures. **Status: The strategy seems to be working; majority of citizens respect the restrictions.**

3. International context:

EU: The European Union is Kosovo's largest supporter. Its support has been very visible to the population. In response to the Covid-19 crisis, the EU supported the Ministry of Health with [EUR 5 million](#). The medical supplies include respirators/ventilators, infusion pumps and syringe infusion pumps and supplies of other necessary items such as tests, tubes, masks, gloves. The EU also pledged [EUR 168 million](#) to support Kosovo for its post pandemic recovery; EUR 68 million will go to budget support and projects, and EUR 100 million as Macro-Financial Assistance (Loan Programme). The first disbursement is expected in June/July 2020. The Central European Bank (CEB) approved a [EUR 36 million](#) loan on the ongoing efforts to provide healthcare for citizens affected with Covid-19.

China plays no role in Kosovo other than importing goods and there are no economic investments in Kosovo. Yet, imports from China reached [EUR 340 million](#) in 2019. This makes China the third biggest importer with 9.8 % of [total imports](#). Kosovo's main trade partners are the [EU countries](#) with a total of [43.1 %](#) of imports. Kosovo has received no funds or medical equipment's from China or Russia, with which the country had and continues to have almost no relations.

The US has always been one of Kosovo's key supporters. On 30 March, USAID donated [USD 1.1 million](#) to support the country's response to the outbreak. On 20 May, they donated an additional [USD 500,000](#). With this emergency funding assistance, USAID will provide operational support and increase Kosovo's response capability to stop further transmission and mitigate Covid-19's impact.

Other bilateral assistance: Japan donated USD 718,000 aimed at combating the pandemic. The Japanese Embassy in Kosovo also announced that they would donate 2,500 Avigan tablets to help treat patients who have contracted Covid-19. Turkey also [donated](#) 1000 Covid-19 kits and a high number of protective masks, protective suits and other medical equipment's. Likewise, Switzerland (CHF 500,000) and Norway ([EUR 450,000](#)) donated funds through UNDP to help procure urgently needed ventilators for Kosovo. On 23 May, Poland donated 50,000 masks and Luxembourg through UNDP donated 5000 Covid-19 Kits. Austria's Federal Minister for the EU and the Constitution and the Federal Minister for European and International Affairs were the first foreign officials to land in Kosovo after the breakout of the pandemic. The Austrian government donated [EUR 250,000](#) for the purchase of Covid-19 test kits. The relations with the EU countries remain unchanged, and they have been very supportive towards Kosovo throughout the pandemic. Uniquely, Kosovo itself has donated EUR 500,000 for the Albanian inhabited municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja in South Serbia ([29 April](#)).

IFIs: The IMF approved [EUR 51.6 million](#) as financial assistance under the Rapid Financial Instrument. The World Bank announced in a [press release](#) that they are finalising a programme of activities, which is likely to exceed EUR 120 million. On 21 May, the World Bank approved [EUR 46 million](#) in financial assistance through its International Development Association branch.

NATO's KFOR has delivered more than 50 donations of food and clothing worth of EUR 70,000 to 14 Kosovo municipalities. The UNDP donated and facilitated donations from other countries. Apart from the donations mentioned in the last [report](#), they also provided protective items for the Kosovo Employment Agency and Kosovo Police. [UNICEF](#) donated 36.200 gloves, 68,544 surgical masks, 53,680 N95 masks, thermometers and other medical equipment.

Status: The geopolitical position of Kosovo has largely remained unaffected by the pandemic.

MONTENEGRO

1. General overview: By 31 May, no new cases have been recorded, so the number of infected since the beginning of the epidemic remains 324, of which 9 died and 315 recovered. The number of tested per day varied, with the highest recordings at 195 per day, and 47 as the lowest. Twenty-eight days after the last registered case, the National Coordinating Body for Infectious Diseases declared an end to the epidemic on 3 June.

Status: The first wave of the coronavirus crisis in Montenegro is over.

2. Unwinding strategy: Relaxation of the measures continued, now public gatherings are allowed, but with a maximum of 200 people, with the obligation to respect a distance

of at least 2 meters. Moreover, Montenegro opened its borders on 1 June, but entry without quarantine or self-isolation is only allowed for persons entering from a country with an active coronavirus case rate of less than 25 per 100,000 inhabitants. The Institute of Public Health updates the list of countries on a weekly basis. **Status: A number of measures are still in force, while protective measures are mandatory despite the end of the epidemic.**

3. International context:

EU: The aid that Montenegro has received from the EU is the largest and amounts to EUR 3 million in immediate support for the health sector and EUR 50 million in support of social and economic recovery by reprogramming already available pre-accession funds dedicated to Montenegro. On 20 May, the decision on another EUR 60 million of macro-financial assistance was adopted by the European Council and will be provided in the form of loans on favorable terms. Both the Government and the EU have promoted this assistance through the media. The Government also signed an [agreement on joint procurement of medical supplies and other goods](#) to ensure faster, more efficient handling.

It is also interesting that during the pandemic, [Montenegro decided to announce its acceptance of the EU revised enlargement methodology](#), although the Commission in February said that it was not binding for countries that had already started negotiating membership. So far, however, the impact of Montenegro's decision is likely to be marginal since reforms were almost halted during the crisis. Yet, with such an announcement the Government sent a message that it accepts the stricter conditions of negotiations, and that the EU path remains a priority for the country.

China: Chinese donations to Montenegro were limited to medical equipment (masks, respirators, protective suits) but the [1000 tests \(alongside with another 1,000 tests from Turkey\) arrived](#) just three days after the first case of coronavirus infection was registered. [The second donation arrived in mid-April.](#) In an interview with a local newspaper, the Chinese ambassador to Montenegro pointed out that China shared its experience in fighting the coronavirus through the World Health Organization (WHO), helping Montenegro as well. China is currently present in Montenegro through infrastructure projects, in the first place through the construction by the Chinese Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) of a highway linking the port of Bar with Belgrade. Because of the loan that the Government needs to pay in this regard, public debt increased to 80% of GDP in 2019, with projections that [it will increase by an additional 2.6% in 2020](#). Construction continued during the epidemic, but with a difficult supply of materials and equipment, as well as a shortage of staff, since workers from China could not return due to restrictions on entry into the country. As the deadline for the construction of the first section is 30 September, it is likely that the timeframe will be exceeded.

US: Among other countries, the US Government committed [USD 300,000 in health assistance](#) via the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), but also through the U.S. European Command, including 120 patient monitors, 210 infusion sets and one infusion pump.

NATO: Following Montenegro's request for assistance through [NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre](#), the Netherlands transported and delivered the [protective equipment and medical supplies from Beijing to Podgorica twice in April and May](#).

Other bilateral assistance: From NATO allies, Montenegro also received help from Turkey, which has donated 50,000 masks, 1000 protective suits and 2000 tests. The fact that Montenegrin President Milo Đukanovic thanked the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (in letters exchanged between the two presidents the Turkish president announced a visit to Montenegro), was partially politicized by the radical part of opposition, but it seems that there is no story behind it. Just a few days later, on 16 April, during one of his rare TV appearances during the crisis, [the President didn't criticise the EU's export restrictions](#), like some of his colleagues from the region did, but praised the fact that they were lifted. He also praised the ['good news'](#) regarding further enlargement of the EU. Via twitter, he later also thanked [Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the UAE](#) for a donation of seven tons of medical protective equipment.

Country/Company	Donation
Austria	Medical equipment
Croatia³	50,000 pieces of surgical masks, 2,000 liters of medical alcohol, 2,000 pieces of visors and 1,000 pieces of protective medical goggles
Hungary	50,000 masks and 2,500 protective suits
Norway	10 ventilators worth EUR 188,000
Poland	10 tons of medical equipment

Status: During the crisis, Montenegro acted as a candidate for EU membership, but did not ignore the help that came from other sides.

³ In March, the Montenegrin government also sent humanitarian aid to Croatia for earthquake remediation, see: <http://www.gov.me/en/News/223236/Government-decides-to-send-humanitarian-aid-to-Croatia-for-earthquake-remediation.html>

NORTH MACEDONIA

1. General overview: There was an [upward trend](#) in the last week of May, presumably tied to family religious holiday celebrations. Yet, the spread is tied to identified clusters in several municipalities in [Skopje and in Štip and Tetovo](#), while other towns have seen sporadic cases. By the end of May an average of 14.645 tests on 1 million inhabitants had been carried out. Targeted screening in kindergartens and care homes for the elderly continued. Massive testing was underway in [textile](#) companies. **Status: Widespread, but localised transmission changes expected trends.**

2. Unwinding strategy: Belated [responses](#) to breaches of protocol by private [companies](#) and the PM's failure to [condemn](#) private and [religious gatherings](#) during curfew signals a lack of commitment by the technical government. The failure of the Ministry of Interior (governed by an opposition minister) to effectively enforce Covid-related measures has led to the main [ruling](#) and [opposition](#) parties shifting responsibility. This approach might be shaped by pre-electoral considerations (elections expected to take place on 5 July) and attempts to mitigate the devastating effects of the crisis on the [economy](#). The [state of emergency](#) was extended for an additional 14 days. [Local quarantine](#) could be the next step for high risk municipalities. **Status: The implementation of the exit strategy seems to resemble that of an impromptu action plan.**

3. International context: The [Secretariat for European Affairs](#) coordinates the foreign assistance for North Macedonia. Conditions attached remain generally unknown as agreements are not disclosed.

EU: Government officials have recognised the [EU as the biggest donor](#) during the pandemic. The [reallocation of IPA funds](#) included EUR 4 million for the [healthcare sector](#), [complemented](#) by EUR 52 million for economic recovery (presented in [bulletin No.2](#)) and an extra EUR 10 million for future immediate needs. Low interest rate credits will be available with support from the [European Investment Bank](#). EUR 160 million in loans was granted through the EU's [macro-financial assistance](#). The country was included in initiatives initially available for EU member states only. Through [rescEU](#) North Macedonia received bilateral support, the [green lanes](#) enable trade and transit of goods under community rules, and the [export authorisation](#) scheme and the [joint procurement scheme](#) allow for eased access to medical equipment. The country signed the [EU Initiative on Health Security](#). North Macedonia is not expected to apply for the [EU Solidarity Fund](#).

Some media outlets [criticized](#) the EU's response and a short lived [anti-campaign](#) took place on social media in an early stage of the pandemic. State officials' [open letters](#) for EU assistance did not initiate negative rhetoric, rather the [outcomes](#) were [praised](#).

The technical government does not undertake any major reforms. Planned pre-accession related activities, such as meetings of groups working on legislative reforms and

the judiciary, were postponed indefinitely, in line with Covid-19 measures in place. From the EU side, the [European Council](#) finally decided to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia in March. The Commission committed to deliver the negotiation [framework](#) by June, but the publication of the country report was [postponed](#) until an undisclosed date in autumn. Revived [bilateral issues](#) also add uncertainties to the country's pre-accession path.

China: Projects supported by Chinese state bank loans and development cooperation funds have been implemented in the country. Previously, two major projects, construction of [two highways \(767 million euros\)](#) and an [e-education project \(undisclosed amount\)](#) were marked by scandals. Despite the former Government's proposal to create a China-specific free economic zone, [Chinese FDI in North Macedonia remain insignificant](#). During the pandemic, North Macedonia [purchased 30 respirators](#) from a Chinese supplier through the UNDP, less than initially requested. The Chinese Embassy donated [EUR 30,000 to the Ministry of Health](#). [Another donation consisted](#) of 5,000 tests, over 10 thousand protective suits, 10 thousand pairs of gloves, 10 thousand glasses and over 20 thousand masks. Chinese donations were perceived as any other bilateral support.

Russia: There is no news, data or announcements on Russian aid or donations.

USA: Through USAID, the [US Government](#) provided [USD 1.1 million](#) to the [WHO](#) and [UNICEF](#) in North Macedonia to support the laboratories conducting CRS tests, monitoring and rapid response and supervision of patients. Its aid also aims at training and equipping rapid response teams, educating citizens, improving case management, disease prevention and increased control in health facilities. An additional [USD 330,000](#) were granted to the Red-Cross in North Macedonia to support socially vulnerable groups and mental health programmes. Diplomatic activity was mainly tied to NATO membership.

Other bilateral assistance: [Bulgaria](#) donated 100 reusable protective suits and 100 reusable masks and another [package](#) of an undisclosed quantity while [Slovenia](#) donated 100 thousand masks and 100 thousand gloves to the Ministry of the Interior. Other EU member states donations include the [Czech Republic's](#) 1 million protective masks, [Hungary's](#) 100 thousand protective masks and 5 thousand protective suits and [transport](#) of Chinese aid. The [German embassy](#) redirected EUR 40,000 for Covid-19 related needs. [Austria](#) donated a package of an undisclosed amount. The only EU member state that donated through [NATO](#) is [Poland](#), a package of 100,000 protective masks and over 10 thousand liters of disinfectants. Norway donated EUR 300,000 for [medical equipment](#) and a [mobile tent hospital](#) which was later dismantled. Another mobile hospital with 72 beds has been constructed and will remain in place with a donation from the [Swiss government](#) of around EUR 185,000. Other bilateral donations include 50,000 protective medical masks, 1,000 protective suits and 1,000 tests for the healthcare sector from [Turkey](#); and [Qatar's](#) 95 thousand masks, over 70 thousand N95 masks, tens of thousands of goggles, protective helmets, suits and gloves. The [Canadian embassy](#) announced a donation of EUR 250,000.

Government officials commended all bilateral support and the media covered each of these aid packages.

IFIs: The [IMF](#) approved EUR 176.53 million in emergency financial assistance. The [World Bank](#) approved EUR 90 million for the healthcare sector as well as support for socially vulnerable groups. Another 50 million euro project will support the government's [repayable assistance](#) targeting MSMEs. The [EBRD](#) committed EUR 250 million and the country could use the [solidarity package](#). An EBRD-ILO [task force](#) developed labour market policy recommendations for North Macedonia.

NATO: North Macedonia became the 30th [member of NATO](#) on 27 March and promptly [triggered](#) the EADRCC, requesting personal [protective equipment](#). [Poland](#) and [Norway](#) responded. The country is using the NATO [NICS system](#), implemented earlier in 2019 to coordinate the government response to emergencies.

Status: The EU is (and was praised as) the biggest donor. The speed of implementation of the EU accession agenda suffered in this period, even if the European Council decided on opening membership talks with North Macedonia. The crisis has had no measurable impact on rearranging the geopolitical position of the country.

SERBIA

1. General overview: Testing continues to be conducted, and while new cases are confirmed daily, their numbers are lower, and there are now days where no fatalities are reported. At the end of May, 245,985 persons were tested for Covid-19; 6,698 persons had recovered. After almost four weeks since the revocation of the state of emergency, there was a continued slowdown of the infection rate, and it would appear that the exit strategy caused no detrimental effects. **Status: Continuing to stabilise; no second wave.**

2. Unwinding strategy: After almost a full month since the revocation of the state of emergency and consequent measures, these have all but left the minds of the Serbian citizens. With no manifestation of a second outbreak, it would seem as if the epidemic is already a distant memory to most. With looming parliamentary elections in late June, daily conversation and discussion is utterly dominated by politics rather than health. Some question whether the elections had anything to do with the rapid exit strategy. In addition, political tensions with Montenegro, most recently regarding cross-border movement, have drawn attention further away from issues of health. **Status: Populace relieved; health debate overshadowed by daily and regional politics.**

3. International context

EU: The EU stands out as one of the two principal sources of foreign aid to Serbia in fighting the Covid-19 epidemic. Announcing a [package](#) of EUR 93 million to be reallocated from unspent IPA II funds to allow for the acquisition and transport of much needed equipment, the EU has done much to alleviate the pressure that rested on Serbia's shoulders in this crisis. This financial aid is part of a wider [financial support](#) package worth EUR 3.3 billion designated by the European Commission. Furthermore, Serbia has become involved in multiple regional and European initiatives, such as the 'Green Lanes' system, the EU mechanism for joint procurement of medical supplies, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and the EU Solidarity Fund.

The authorities in Serbia, as well as the pro-regime media, were met with [objections](#) for the [inadequate acknowledgement](#) of EU aid in the initial stages of the crisis. The president initially criticised the EU, [stating](#) that "EU solidarity is a fairy tale." In the first weeks of the crisis, very little media attention was paid to EU efforts to provide aid to Serbia. Since then, this imbalance in narratives has been somewhat corrected, with the President now lauding the EU for its show of solidarity and all the aid that was and continues to be provided.

There are no known incidents of embezzlement regarding the aid provided by the EU, however the government [refuses](#) to provide information on how much money has been spent on procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical equipment, which is arguably a cause for suspicion.

It is difficult to gauge the exact [effects](#) of the Covid-19 crisis on the Serbian accession process. Despite the initial narrative disparity, the President has assured the EU of Serbia's continued dedication to EU accession. Meanwhile, the reform progress has ground to a halt. Reports by [Freedom House](#) and [GRECO](#) indicate a further erosion of democracy and a weak response to corruption.

China: The Chinese presence in Serbia had been quite [significant](#) even before the outbreak. Economic ties have strengthened significantly over time, especially in industry and infrastructure. Serbia is a signatory of the Belt and Road Initiative and takes part in the 17+1 Framework. Since the end of 2019, significant Chinese 'investments' have entered Serbia. What the authorities consistently fail to mention is that USD 3.7 billion thereof are in fact [loans](#). Diplomatically too, China has had a strong presence in Serbia, with the Serbian Prime Minister [stating](#) in 2019 that Sino-Serbian relations were "at their highest in history."

At the outset of the Covid-19 crisis, along with the declaration of the state of emergency, President Aleksandar Vučić [stated](#) that the only actor able to help Serbia was China, and that he had personally requested aid. Within days, the first shipments of Chinese aid arrived, welcomed with much pomp and media attention. In total, the aid from the Chinese state and Chinese companies amounted to over 15 million masks and machines to produce more, an unspecified number of testing kits, four thermal cameras, equipment for [two laboratories](#)

which were to be set up worth EUR 710,000, a cash donation of EUR 17,000, and a number of medical specialists. Out of the EUR 710.000 worth of equipment, at least [EUR 140,000](#) was financed by Serbia, mostly to purchase testing kits. The exact ratio of what has been donated and what was purchased remains unclear.

China's already solid reputation in Serbia has soared during the crisis, as indicated by a recent [poll](#). Beijing's rapid crisis response was widely advertised and [lauded](#) by the authorities and much of the media, glorifying the "eternal, steel friendship" between the two nations. Even as the authorities began to praise and thank the EU, China is still portrayed by them as a stalwart partner.

Russia: Interestingly, Serbia's long-time "Slavic brother" has been very seldom mentioned in the battle of narratives. Russia did in fact send aid – [medical experts](#) with supporting teams made of [military and state personnel](#), 16 motor vehicles for disinfection, 15.000 tests, and a number of other pieces of PPE (provided by the [Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre](#)), as well as other donations by Russian companies such as Lukoil and Sberbank. While actually requested by the Serbian government, this aid has not been overly advertised in the public sphere, which is unusual given that Russia is perceived by many to be Serbia's staunch ally. Nevertheless, the previously mentioned [poll](#) shows that Russia's reputation in Serbia remains strong.

US: [Aid](#) provided through USAID to UNICEF and the Red Cross of Serbia is part of a package amounting to USD 1.38 million designated by the US for Serbia. This aid includes testing kits, hygiene supplies, and assistance to the most vulnerable communities in Serbia. Furthermore, companies such as [United Group](#) and [McDonalds](#) provided aid, worth USD 1 million and EUR 34.000 respectively, in the form of direct donations, testing kits, PPE, thermometers and meals. Much like in the case of Russia, this aid has gone unnoticed in the Serbian public sphere. The USA's reputation in Serbia has neither suffered nor profited from this, though it was not particularly high to begin with.

Other bilateral assistance: Norway has provided aid to Serbia in the form of a donation of EUR 5 million and a pledge to aid in the purchase of additional ventilators. Switzerland has provided EUR 600,000 in the form of hygiene products and food for the most vulnerable. Also, a truck carrying tents, blankets and tarpaulins was donated by the Swiss Humanitarian Aid. Other states, such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Azerbaijan, have provided significant amounts of various PPE.

During the pandemic, Serbia has itself [sent aid](#) to Italy as a show of solidarity, as well as a [donation](#) of 1.000 testing kits to Kosovo – an unprecedented gesture in a diplomatic relationship otherwise fraught with rivalry and tension. Interestingly, Serbia has also [supposedly sent](#) China around RSD 15 million (~ EUR 127,500) worth of medical equipment, along with a EUR 5,000 [donation](#) by the president of the National Council for Coordination

of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, in February, prior to the outbreak in Serbia.

IFIs: There is no significant talk of involvement of the International Financial Institutions in the Covid-19 crisis response in Serbia. It should be noted that the IMF did offer Serbia a favourable loan in April as part of a wider EU initiative, which Belgrade has [refused](#) – the only country in the region to do so – choosing instead to sell government bonds on the international market.

Status: Spurred by the President ahead of the general elections in late June, China and the EU have been locked in a battle of narratives. China initially received preferential treatment, triggering objections from the EU. This stance has since been somewhat corrected by the government, which reiterates Serbia's desire to stay on the EU path, even as the crisis sees reform progress practically halted.

TURKEY

1. General overview: The WHO has [indicated](#) that, as of the end of May, Turkey had passed to "post-peak phase" of the pandemic. According to the official figures, Turkey on 31 May had 163,942 ([146,457](#)) known cases, 4,540 ([4,055](#)) deaths, and 127,973 ([106,133](#)) recovering from the virus. Over 2,039,194 ([1,547,389](#)) tests had been completed, with an average of some 31,000 tests per day in the second half of May. **Status: the numbers of new infections and deaths are declining gradually.**

2. Unwinding strategy: The government decided to start all [normalization processes](#) two weeks earlier than expected, with the exception of the curfew imposed on Turkey's senior citizens (over 65) and those under 18. Described as "[normalization with caution](#)", as of 1 June civil servants went back to work, intercity travel restrictions were lifted and public places such as restaurants, cafes, sports halls, parks, and gardens were opened. While there was a decrease in the number of new cases and deaths per day, [the number of active cases](#) had not decreased significantly over the previous two weeks. There was some criticism of the government's "early normalisation" decision while Turkey still had [31,429 active cases](#) on 31 May. A recently published [report](#) on the "normalization process in the Covid-19 in Turkey and fluctuations" by members of the Academy of Sciences projects two scenarios: the effects of normalization in June, July, and August; and the possible consequences of normalization and delayed measures in June. According to the report, because of the active and asymptomatic cases, the second wave will occur in all three cases, but normalization starting in the beginning of June will result in a stronger second wave and the consequences will be harder to control. Moreover, the Turkish Medical Association [criticized](#) the government's decision on early normalization and claimed that the decision had been taken with economic concerns in mind, not based on the scientific data. **Status: early normalization for economic reasons, with the danger of a second wave.**

3. International context:

EU: While the EU has been the main donor to other Southeast European countries, EU aid to Turkey is not visible. The EU's three billion euro macro-financial assistance package released on 22 April does not cover Turkey. However, Turkey has expressed an interest in receiving assistance from the EU Solidarity Fund. The European Commission redirected EUR 8.75 million in pre-accession funding for the prevention and the treatment of Covid-19 cases. On 19 May, the European Commission and the European Central Bank released [a joint statement](#) with the Western Balkans and Turkey and agreed on a continued economic policy dialogue.

The debate on the "future of Europe" was visible in Turkey before the pandemic, and the failure of the EU to take cautionary steps in the first days of the outbreak further triggered these debates. The aid that Turkey sent to Italy and Spain following the EU's late response to the crisis sparked discussions on whether Turkey was trying to improve its international image which deteriorated after the Syrian refugee crisis, and [position](#) itself as an alternative donor. Yet, starting in May, relations began to improve. While the EU-Turkey refugee deal has played a "[toxic role](#)" in the relations, Turkey continues to [highlight](#) that the coronavirus outbreak has brought Turkey and the EU closer. Following the European Parliament's rejection of the proposal to cut pre-accession funds for Turkey, the EU recently [announced](#) that Turkey will be included in the 2021–2027 Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance.

China: In 2010, bilateral relations between China and Turkey were elevated to the level of "[strategic cooperation](#)" and have been improving over the years. In 2019, [China's Central Bank](#) transferred USD 1 billion in funds to help Turkey's foreign reserves.

Apart from material support, the Chinese government's experience in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic prompted Turkey to request technical help and know-how, which led the two parties to increase cooperation through online platforms regarding the spread of the virus, its prevention, hospital treatments, and protection of medical staff. During the first week of the outbreak in Turkey, China sent [almost 50,000 test kits](#) for the detection of the virus, in addition to a special drug, which allegedly helped shorten the recovery time. At the end of March, the Turkish branch of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China [provided](#) a large amount of medical supplies and donation worth USD 100,000. At the end of April, President Xi Jinping [announced](#) that China had provided batches of medical supplies and had given priority to Turkey's urgent procurement needs. In May, the Turkish Trade Minister [announced](#) that 54 Turkish companies received permission to start exporting milk products to help the producers that have been severely hit by the pandemic in China.

[The Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#)'s [importance](#) in the Turkey-China relationship has increased in an unprecedented way as the project's routes are being used to transport medical materials from China aiming to support Turkey in its fight against the coronavirus.

Maersk Company [launched](#) the first rail service between Xi'an and Izmit. Future relations are especially [promising](#) as China's economy recovers from the impact of the crisis.

Russia: At the end of April, Presidents Putin and Erdoğan [discussed](#) expanding areas of bilateral cooperation and joint efforts to fight the effects of the coronavirus. On 22 May, Russia and Turkey started discussions on [joint work](#) to develop a vaccine for Covid-19.

US: There is no source indicating that Turkey has received any additional US aid during the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, the coronavirus has played a role in helping to ease tensions with the US after Turkey [announced](#) postponing the activation of the Russian S-400 missile defence systems. With the financial support of the US government, UNICEF, together with the Turkish Red Crescent and other national partners, [provided](#) 50,000 psychosocial support kits for children forced to stay at home because of the curfew in order to help them overcome feelings such as anxiety, stress, and uncertainty.

Other bilateral assistance: Turkey's vice-president announced that Turkey has provided medical equipment and financial assistance to [80 countries](#) during the pandemic including Italy, Spain, the UK and the US; some Balkan countries, such as Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bulgaria; and to countries in the wider MENA region like Iran, Iraq (to which Turkey also sent food aid), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, and [Palestine](#).

Japanese companies have [provided](#) assistance in building a new hospital complex in Istanbul, which is expected to play a major role in treating people infected with the new coronavirus. President Erdoğan [inaugurated](#) the hospital on 21 May. The Prime Minister of Japan participated via videoconference.

IFIs: Before the outbreak, Turkey had implemented weak economic and monetary policies, especially in regard to interest rates, and refused help from the [IMF](#). Talks with the IMF were suspended in March, even if the business community sees that the IMF's financial support would be useful in tackling the country's public debt.

At the end of April, the World Bank [approved](#) a 100 million USD loan to Turkey to help face the pandemic as part of its USD 14 billion global Fast Track Facility. Under its Solidarity Package to combat the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and support recovery, the EBRD provided USD 175 million to [DenizBank](#) and USD 110 million to QNB [Finansbank](#), which will scale up their trade finance activities and lending to smaller municipalities and agricultural firms amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The UN's Covid-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan lists Turkey under [the Regional Refugee Response Plan](#), which targets Syrian refugees living in Turkey. The UN has provided USD 2 billion in assistance for 51 countries across South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

The Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) Public Sector Financing Facility loan has [provided](#) Turkey with EUR 200 million aimed at supporting the Turkish health system to cope with the spread and consequences of Covid-19 and ensure the availability of medical services through the provision of the necessary medical treatment, material, and equipment.

Status: While the EU has been the main donor to other Southeast European countries, EU aid to Turkey is not visible. During the pandemic, Turkey has been referred to more as a “[donor country](#)” than an aid recipient. Turkey’s “[corona diplomacy](#)” has been widely reported in the national media. Since the start of the outbreak, Turkey has provided masks and medical equipment to more than [80 countries](#). Furthermore, the country has [donated](#) 75 million euro to the Coronavirus Global Response.