

# 'The skies are empty and the continent is overflowing with insoluble problems' – The Covid-19 crisis in the western Balkans and the failure of the EU<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Many societies are still in the stranglehold of the coronavirus. China, South Korea and Taiwan have apparently overcome the pandemic but problems that are almost impossible to resolve are piling up in Europe. Despite the joint vaccination procurement campaign, the EU in particular is struggling to regulate the crisis domestically. The states of the western Balkans which have been relying on an EU perspective for years and which have repeatedly been put off, have also been hit hard, piling problems on top of health services that are, for a number of reasons, already seriously jeopardised. In view of the worsening situation – countries in central and south-eastern Europe are over-represented among those with the highest numbers of Covid-19 related deaths – we take a closer look at current practicalities and political realities in these 'high incidence areas', as the region is currently known (according to the Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft). This article focuses on the role of the EU, and how views of this are changing in the region, as well as that being played by other, apparently more nimble and agile, powers.

**Keywords:** western Balkans, Covid-19, EU accession, Covax, vaccine diplomacy, healthcare services, future of EU

## The EU is losing ground

In 2020, it seemed, there would be forwards momentum in the European orientation of the western Balkans. At the EU-western Balkans summit in Zagreb, heads of state and government pledged their solidarity with the region. Coronavirus-related support was combined with an indirect warning to value and prioritise the EU perspective and not that of the Chinese or any other external partner (Becker 2020).

In the meantime, however, the expressed commitments of around €3.3bn are still working their way through the system and the delivery of vaccines is only now get-

1 This article is a revised and extended version of an article co-authored by Jens Becker and Ina Kulić, published in *Blätter für Deutsche und Internationale Politik* issue 5/2021, and specially translated for the *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*. The title of the article is an echo of Richard Wagner (2003) *Der leere Himmel. Reise in das Innere des Balkans* [*Empty Skies: Journey to the Heart of the Balkans*] Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, in which the author traces the national and cultural roots of the Balkans.

ting underway. References to delivery bottlenecks from within the EU have become a yardstick for the bloc's own evident failures early in 2021. China and Russia, which are using the current health crisis in a calculated way, are stepping into the breach. This is not only a symbol of the European alliance's geopolitical weakness but also of its lack of interest in engagement. The EU's promises to join 'at some point' are hardly taken seriously by most local people and what remains is deep-seated disappointment and the feeling of being left in the lurch.

For some years, expert assessments have been available as to how the western Balkans could be better integrated. Now China, in particular, is holding the mirror up to the west, says Jacopo Maria Pepe from *Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik* (the German Council on Foreign Relations), in its pursuit of a clear strategy and in seeking to integrate the Balkans into the global Belt and Road Initiative (Pepe 2017). The EU is threatened with a loss of its function as a regulatory power not only in the western Balkans but also in relation to Hungary and Greece which have become openly dependent on China (Tschinderle 2018). 75 per cent of the region's post-Yugoslav trade takes place with the EU, but gross domestic product is only one-third of the EU average. This is another reason why Chinese investments and loans are becoming increasingly important.

Many states in the region are prepared deliberately to overlook the EU's criticism of China's human rights violations – for example in Xinjiang, where thousands of Uyghurs are locked up in labour and re-education camps. Accordingly they have closed themselves to attempts by the west to denounce Chinese human rights violations within the UN's auspices, in essence shouting 'It's the economy, stupid'<sup>2</sup> at Eurocrats.

According to Dušan Reljić, from the *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (German Institute for International and Security Affairs), the EU needs to respond by opening up a noticeable economic integration perspective in the western Balkans, align the standard of living there with that in the EU, and over a clear timeframe, and slow down the emigration of highly-skilled people. As is well-known, the western Balkans, already reduced demographically by one-quarter, is bleeding out: in economic terms, it is a cheap workbench for individual EU countries in which the suppliers of Italian and German companies generate little added value domestically (Tschinderle 2018). Reljić considers that an extension of the value chain, allied to an expansion of infrastructural and digital networks, is the required policy response.

A timely goal is important in order to give a fresh boost to the influence of Europeans in the region. Better to have one bird in the hand than two in the bush: a soon-to-be-attainable, partial, connection is more motivating than a distant, uncertain full membership. (Ernst 2019)

This is the only way of limiting the influence of other powers in the Balkans, especially as the EU is communicating precisely its own lack of influence in its regular progress reports, but where states in the region are unable to respond because their

2 Bill Clinton's slogan in the 1992 US presidential election, repeating a phrase coined earlier by James Carville, a campaign strategist.

willingness to accept additional demands is exhausted. However, no-one other than Macron (in 2019) permits themselves to acknowledge this publicly (Becker 2020).

### Sick health systems

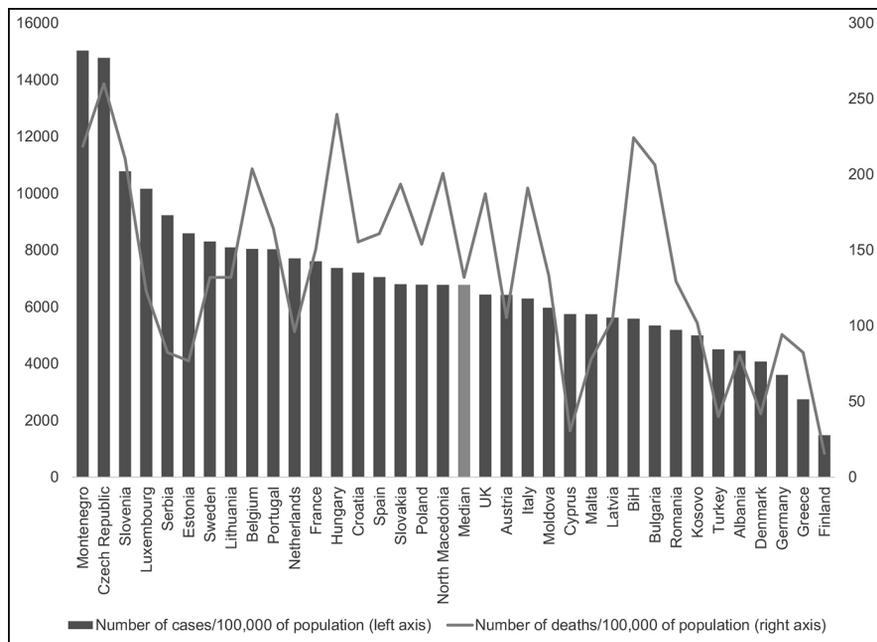
The pandemic is relentlessly revealing not only the political failings of the EU but also that which has been in difficulties for decades in post-Yugoslav states. As shown by the examples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia, separate health systems struggling under the weight of similar problems are exacerbating the crisis induced by the pandemic. The Yugoslav healthcare system, once regarded as the model, has hugely fallen back since the wars of disintegration in the 1990s. Hospitals and other infrastructures were often destroyed or, due to the dire economic situation, could hardly be maintained or even further developed. Well-trained medical professionals have been leaving their home countries in droves to look for better conditions in the EU. Germany is one of the most frequent destinations with around 2,000 Serbian doctors working in that country alone. In addition to the shortage of skilled workers, drugs are often in short supply, not to mention modern medical equipment – there is a lack of ventilators in the significant numbers that are urgently needed for the treatment of severe cases of Covid-19 infections.

Those who need comprehensive medical treatment in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia or Kosovo often cannot avoid having to dig deep into their own pockets which causes additional hardship given low average salaries. This means in part that drugs can now be bought that hospitals can no longer provide; but, frequently also, better or prioritised catering is being bought with individuals' own money. In addition to the rising numbers of private clinics, there is also the obvious amount of corruption within the public health system on top of which there are veritable economic crises that have solidified the high unemployment rates.<sup>3</sup>

Looking at the numbers of the Covid-19 pandemic in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia in terms of the infection rate per 100,000 inhabitants, all three countries were in the top quarter at the beginning of March 2021 – that is, in the worst part in terms of global comparison (in 48<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> places respectively), but they are not doing significantly worse than the large industrial nations of Europe. Even the eleventh place that Bosnia occupies globally in terms of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants brings it into the vicinity of significantly larger, richer and more powerful states such as the USA (9<sup>th</sup> place) and Italy (7<sup>th</sup>). Meanwhile Serbia, with plenty of vaccines, has a higher infection rate than Kosovo – a remarkable outcome.

3 10.3 per cent in Serbia; 28 per cent in Kosovo; and around 17 per cent in Bosnia.

Figure 1 – Cumulative cases of Covid-19 in Europe and the western Balkans



Source: World Health Organization. Data drawn from weekly update for 13 April 2021; Kosovo from 6 April 2021.

### Serbia rising

The expansion of Serbia on the regional stage is inextricably linked with the rise of Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). The process of change from nationalist anti-system to flexible pro-EU party, open to all sides, is paying off. The semi-autocratic president has been ruling the country with his party colleagues in various constellations of power since 2012. An extensive clientelist system has been created that also operates in health and the media, among others. SNS confidently won the parliamentary elections in June 2020 with the electoral list ‘Aleksandar Vučić: For our children’ winning no less than 60.7 per cent of the vote. A divided opposition – as is so often the case – was unable to benefit from the government’s initial zigzag course on Covid-19, oscillating between repressive lockdown and opportunistic easing. Civil society organisations continue to suffer from government intimidation and self-inflicted limited political effectiveness. Vučić, who likes to portray himself as the great leader of all Serbs,<sup>4</sup> who emerged under the tutelage of Slobodan Milošević and who is now Angela Merkel’s party friend within the European

4 Recurring rumours suggest that there have long been ties between Vučić and those around him with the Belgrade football mafia and thus with organised crime. On 6 March 2021, a staged press conference took place on the orders of the president which the state-controlled

People's Party, recently announced through the tabloid *Blic* that all EU citizens wanted a leader like him.<sup>5</sup>

That a monumental statue of the medieval leader Stefan Nemanja has just been completed in Belgrade, a reminder of a glorious past, fits into the picture especially during the Covid-19 crisis. Serbia, with its 6.9 million inhabitants, started very early with its vaccination programme: by mid-April, over one-quarter of the population had been vaccinated. In comparison: Germany and France had reached just 17 per cent by the same point; and only the UK, which approved the vaccines from BioN-Tech/Pfizer, Astra Zeneca and Moderna significantly earlier than the EU, and which has been able to benefit from preferential contracts signed initially with the developers of the Astra Zeneca vaccine, has registered a vaccination rate of one-half of the population (as a first dose). The Serbian immunisation programme would hardly have been possible had it been dependent on its own resources – its success has been made possible by bilateral agreements with Russia and China which, so far, have delivered 500,000 and 1.5 million vaccine doses of the SputnikV and Sinopharm vaccines to Serbia.

### Serbia's close ties with China and Russia

Serbia applied for membership of the EU in December 2009. The Covid-19 fragility of the EU symbolises its manoeuvrings and vacillation in the subsequent course of the accession negotiations with Serbia.

China and Russia, on the other hand, know precisely what they want: to exert influence through aid transfers. 'In times of need, true friends show up,' is how the journalist Jakša Šćekić interprets the initial reactions of the majority of the population (Sorić 2021). People should be just as aware, however, that Vučić is placing his country under the soft power of these two great powers although this seems to have been inevitable in view of the stalling of the global Covax programme to support poorer countries before it could even get underway. The Serbian government has just announced that it will shortly be manufacturing the Sputnik V vaccine within the country as opposed to be simply packing components sent by Russia.

mass media reported in detail and at which Vučić reported: 'There are pictures of disfigured bodies that look as if they have been run through a mincer. They are said to be the victims of a Serbian criminal gang. There is evidence of four murders so far but the gang has probably wiped out many more lives'. The leader held to be responsible is the imprisoned Veljko Belivuk who heads a group of football hooligans attached to Partizan Belgrade and with whom Vučić's SNS has cooperated. His *ultras* have acted, among other things, as hall security and in roles enforcing order at party meetings. Belivuk is charged with drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion and murder. It is believed in Belgrade that Vučić's press conference was a preventive attack seeking to distract attention from the connection between the mafia and the SNS leadership. See the articles by Michael Martens – one of the foremost Balkan experts in Europe – published originally in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (2021a) and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (2021b) and available at faz.net.

5 *Blic* 19 February 2021 'Građani EU zavapili: Hoćemo lidere poput Vučića!' last accessed 15 April 2021 at: <https://www.blic.rs/premium/gradani-eu-zavapili-hocemo-lidere-poput-vucica/pmxcz7c>.

Russia is a traditional ally of Serbia and has repeatedly held a protective hand over the country since the wars of Yugoslav disintegration in the 1990s. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative, China is investing heavily in large infrastructure projects such as bridges, roads and dams but also in learning software for schools. Chinese and Russian companies are working side-by-side to build a high-speed rail line between Belgrade and Budapest. The consequences of this soft dependence of Serbia on its donors to the north and east can only be guessed at: the vaccination campaigns that have made this possible are just another part of the mosaic of a sophisticated politics driven hard by self-interest.

With live media coverage and only after many months of evasion, Vučić finally received the controversial Sinopharm vaccine at the beginning of April, making a point at the time of thanking ‘our Chinese brothers’.<sup>6</sup> Critics accuse Vučić that his hesitation in getting vaccinated has helped to fuel the widespread scepticism about vaccination which exists in the country, stemming otherwise not least from the prevalence of online conspiracy theories and hoaxes, as well as the relaxed, *laissez faire* attitude of the Orthodox Church. Indeed, companies such as Ljuba Invest from Paraćin have resorted to offering €50 as an incentive for employees to get vaccinated.

Consequently it is hardly surprising that Vučić used the recent Serbian National Day (*Sretenje*) to demonstrate his appreciation for his brothers. In addition to the usual numbers of musicians, filmmakers and artists, those receiving national medals and awards this year included the Russian Defence Minister, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, a Chinese medical research institute and nine Chinese doctors who were sent to Serbia to help combat the pandemic. Vučić is positioning himself not only as the saviour of his nation but also as a responsible statesman showing leadership throughout the region via the expanding concept of ‘Srpski svet’ (Serbian world). He recently made offers to neighbouring countries to provide them with vaccines. North Macedonia’s Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, gratefully accepted the offer and, on 14 February, his country received the first delivery of almost 5,000 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine – quite clearly a drop in the well but whose symbolic significance, however, would not have missed its strategic effect. As Zaev commented:

I would like to confirm that we have held talks with our strategic partners, NATO and Washington in which we have come to the conclusion that the procurement of vaccinations from China is not a geopolitical question but the sovereign right of every state. (Georgievski 2021)

That such a situation has arisen speaks volumes.

## Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in the sights of Serbia

The situation of both these EU ‘potential candidates’ is different according to the official statuses of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, in both of which there are

6 Euronews 6 April 2021 ‘Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić gets Chinese-made COVID-19 jab’ last accessed 15 April 2021 at: <https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/06/serbian-president-aleksandar-vucic-gets-chinese-made-covid-19-jab>.

significant Serbian populations. So far, each has refused to import vaccines that are not approved in the EU and neither one has approved Sinopharm or Sputnik V, but the Serbian government has verbally announced that it will provide the Serb residents of both countries with these vaccines. It is clear that both countries are desperately waiting for EU aid and the first deliveries of the Covax programme: state finances are too weak in either case to be able to enter into negotiations with vaccine manufacturers. That the Serbian government is creating further tensions and indirectly intervening in the interests of two mostly sovereign states – Bosnia and Herzegovina is officially under UN administration; Kosovo is not recognised by all countries in the world – is another targeted provocation.

In addition, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been receiving a massive international scolding when it comes to dealing with refugees using the Balkan route to get into Croatia and thus into the EU. Camp Lipa serves as a code for the suffering of migrants who, some of them coming from the destroyed Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, have been holding out in inhospitable wintry conditions for months and who are likely to have to wait much longer for vaccinations. As inhumane as their 'accommodation' and the pure neglect of their plight is, the bitter truth also encompasses Bosnia having to bear a burden which the EU has chosen to unload beyond its own external borders and which is the result of wars in Syria, Libya, etc. (Grillmeier 2021). The western criticism of the situation at Lipa is, therefore, not only cheap but it also hits hard at Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country that is scarcely in a position to provide its own population with adequate infrastructure or medical care.

In the meantime, after a precipitously steep rise in the number of cases since March, this small country ranks in a sad 14<sup>th</sup> place in terms of the global death rate. Bosnia and Herzegovina is still a long way away from recovering from the war that tore the country apart between 1992 and 1995. This applies to its statehood, its economy and its infrastructure. The health system in Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular is already finding it hard to make ends meet. The situation here looks particularly bad in respect of the ventilators required to treat patients seriously affected by Covid-19 symptoms.

That Serbian residents in Republika Srpska can now hope for supplies through, or otherwise in, Serbia deepens the ethnic tensions that have never really gone away since the war – due also to the ethnic-based political system that the Dayton Agreement implemented and deeply cemented into the state constitution.<sup>7</sup> Here, glimmers of hope did emerge in November 2020: for the first time, non-nationalist parties managed to achieve important victories in the major cities in local mayoral elections. In Sarajevo Centar, Srđan Mandić, a candidate of an alliance of four progressive parties, ousted the SDA, the party of Muslim Bosniaks, and the dominant party here since the war. It is particularly symbolic that Mandić, who identifies as a Serb, was elected by a majority Muslim population. In Republika Srpska, too, the nationalist Serb party SNSD, which had previously been in power as the sole ruling party, had to surrender to the opposition in the two largest cities, Banja Luka and Bijeljina. On-

7 Editor's Note: see the content on Dayton elsewhere in this issue of the *SEER Journal* for detailed analysis.

ly HDZ BiH, the offshoot in Bosnia and Herzegovina of the conservative HDZ party of Croatia, which surfs even further on the right-wing tide in Bosnia than in its ‘homeland’, was able to maintain its dominance among the three traditional nationalist parties.

In Kosovo, a restrictive but effective lockdown was lifted in June 2020, the population feeling that they had overcome the pandemic. In the meantime, however, greater caution is spreading again. Beqë Cufaj, Kosovo’s ambassador in Berlin, reports:

Like the other peoples of the former Yugoslavia, we are a traumatised people. The lifting of the lockdown was celebrated like a triumph of freedom, like the end of the war. It is difficult to curb this – but we are doing everything we can to convince people to be more careful again. (Lau 2021)

The health system in Kosovo is also separated on ethnic lines – Serbs in the north of the country are insured through Serbian health insurance companies, not Kosovar ones. As in Bosnia and Herzegovina, supply from Serbia is available only to Serbs, a development that the Albanian political ruling class perceives as confrontational, especially as it views Serbia, which does not recognise the sovereignty of Kosovo, as interested only in destabilisation. As a result, there have recently been demonstrations by Serbian health workers in the Mitrovica district who, in turn, feel harassed by the government’s stance in Prishtina.

Serbian interventions may well matter even less in Kosovo in the future since Albin Kurti’s *Vetëvendosje* (Self-determination) achieved a brilliant victory with 50.3 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary elections in February 2021. The prime minister, meanwhile confirmed as such by parliament, and his close ally Vjosa Osmani, who parliament elected president on 4 April, will build on the widespread optimism for the far-reaching reforms set out during the election. They promise a ‘second liberation’, more jobs for women and young people and the elimination of ossified clientelist structures. The corrupt system of KLA ‘commanders’ and their dominant political representation is threatened with collapse, especially since Kurti has, so far, no visible connection with organised crime. It should be highlighted that ‘Never before have so many Kosovan women become members of parliament and of the government.’ President Osmani, a former member of Ibrahim Rugova’s LDK, represents modern middle-class citizens. ‘Pictures of ex-KLA warriors stood with rifles in front of black eagles belong to the past.’ Simply, they brought no jobs (Wölfl 2021).

One year ago, Kurti’s first government collapsed after only six weeks on the subject of how to handle the pandemic: in contrast to coalition partner LDK, Kurti rejected the declaration of a nationwide state of emergency before the coalition was overthrown by a vote of no confidence called by LDK. In the background, the US – represented by Richard Grenell, then ambassador to Germany and the Balkans representative – played a major role, freezing payments of about one-third of development aid totalling around €150m with the intention of putting pressure on Kurti and supporting the US’s preferred point of contact, former president and ex-KLA commander, Hashim Thaçi. This action was also connected with the state of relations between Belgrade and Prishtina.

Meanwhile, Taçi is no longer in office and must answer to the International Criminal Court in The Hague in respect of accusations of war crimes committed during the Kosovo war. Kurti, who stands for an uncompromising relationship with Belgrade, is in a strong position but the tough tug-of-war between Serbia and its former province will certainly continue. Serbian recognition of Kosovo as a sovereign state will only be achieved through international pressure and considerable concessions. Here, too, however, both are waiting for clear announcements from the EU – so far in vain. Clear announcements are furthermore needed against the latent worrying non-paper launched from Slovenian officials bursting with revisionist aspirations in the spirit of Milošević and Tuđman (Dragojlović 2021). In the self-interest of the EU, officials should act decisively against the proposal to draw borders based on ethnic criteria in post-Yugoslav countries, *de facto* dividing Bosnia and Hercegovina.

### The skies are empty and Europe is no substitute

One could conclude by summarising Richard Wagner's assessment by inverting it. Life in the western Balkans goes on even in the absence of an EU perspective and EU support. The entanglement of the political castes of many countries in the region in dubious business and crime, while the EU looks the other way, alongside the creeping influence of other major powers, leaves people in all three countries disaffected. Confidence in statehood, in leaders and also in health experts is suffering as a result. The most recent protests of the Bosnian population (April) have been directed against the political inability of the responsible bodies to provide vaccines for their citizens and instead to indulge in domestic political disagreement. Fraud and corruption allegations against the Federation Prime Minister, Fadil Novalić, in connection with overpriced masks and ventilators should be only the tip of the iceberg (Sorguc 2020).

One result of all this is that the strict protective measures imposed everywhere are often ignored. It was only in December that the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Irinej I, died as a result of Covid-19 infection after he had attended a funeral service for the Metropolitan of Montenegro. No-one adhered to the requirement for masks or kept their distance at this event. In mid-February a huge party with a thousand party-goers was broken up in Belgrade, cafés and restaurants in Sarajevo are still well-attended and election rallies before the elections in Kosovo were often held in front of large crowds, without social distancing and without masks. The Yugoslav author Mehmed Meša Selimović once put it thus:

It is not easy not to be afraid, but it is not worth it. A person's whole life thus passes in fear, as if he had not lived at all. Just what does he get out of life, then?<sup>8</sup>

This sentence seems to be becoming the laconic mantra of those who regard Covid-19 as just one problem among many in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo today.

8 The quotation as originally made read as follows: 'Nije lako ne bojati se, ali ne vrijedi. Prođe čovjeku život u strahu, pa kao da nije ni živio. Šta će mu onda i život?'

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