



Weekly Briefing

Serbia external relations briefing:

The pandemic confirms steel friendship between Serbia and China

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Abstract

Republic of Serbia is among countries that have been faced to various challenges posed by the changed world order. Although the list of those challenges already has been diversified, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic made it even more variegated. Despite the fact that government reacted promptly with comprehensive measures, external help was needed. As many times before, this bleak times confirmed firm relation between Serbia and China known as steel friendship.

Since 6th of March, when first COVID-19 infection was confirmed in Serbia, until the last day of April, totally 8724 of 78942 tested persons confirmed to be infected while 2470 of them have been hospitalized. Unfortunately, 173 persons passed away which makes a Corona virus death percentage of 1.98%.

At this point, another comparison between 6th of March and 30th of April should be made. As probably in the most of countries, on that very first day, when first patient was detected, people were not aware of the scope of threat that novel corona virus has brought. There was only narrow circle of those knowing what China went through and why particularly that approach that China has chosen was the winning one.

Luckily or both luckily and wisely, Serbian government, looking after Chinese, proclaimed state of emergency on March 15th, advising, wherever is possible, working at home; introduced online education for all levels; proclaimed strict prohibition of moving from 5 P.M. to 7 A.M., while older than 65 are not allowed to leave their apartments except at certain cases (medical needs, basic supply on Sundays from 3 A.M.- 8 A.M.). Although photos that constantly were coming from Spain and Italy were frightened and heartbreaking, Serbian people, significant number of them, kept its stubbornness and self-willingness. Like that stories that they were hearing about urgency to make painful choices in Italy and Spain, to decide who should be given the chance to survive, were not meant to cast long shadows, Serbian people wasn't eager to give up socializing. As time passed by and Orthodox Easter was approaching, there were even more and more pressures posed not only by ordinary people, but from the

Orthodox Church itself to loose a ban. Despite all that, government remained firm and didn't change its decision considering it as the substantive part of the first line of defense.

The other, equally important part was empowering the state health system. Serbian government put all efforts to make it to work as efficient as possible, to be capable to take care of every patient. Notwithstanding those efforts neither the government's intention, there were objective obstacles that Serbia couldn't pass by its own. Medical supplies were limited; there weren't enough protective masks nor clothes, but also the lack of ventilators that were only guarantee for the most difficult patients that they might survive.

Serbia asked the EU for help, but was turned down or, at least, put on ice. Despite decades of proclaiming solidarity, with the outbreak of COVID-19, situation dramatically changed. Suddenly, narrow, egoistic interest bursted out and not only that EU decided not to export medical supplies to other countries, they decided not even to provide help among them. First Italy, than Spain was left alone.

Serbia was not surprised by this type of the EU's reaction. If any country has ever experienced the EU double standard policy, Serbia has. The EU or its member states are excellent proof that interests are the core values of the EU.

But reality has both white and black side. As many times before, Chinese saying that friend in need is a friend indeed, proved to be true. Friendship and cooperation between two countries has been carefully built for decades have gleamed even brighter. (One of the recent examples of Serbian devotion to nourish bilateral relations with China was Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Ivica Dačić, visit to China on February 25th, at the time when China still led its fight against corona virus. That visit made him the only European country high official that visited China after the pandemic has been proclaimed.)

China reacted extremely promptly. First plane from China landed on Belgrade airport on March 15th, the same day when state of the emergency proclaimed. Cargo that was carried by this plane was consisted solely of test for COVID-19 detection. The next plane came on March 21st, doctors that were saving lives of Chinese citizens in Wuhan, came to Serbia to help in saving lives of our citizens. Seven experts were in this medical team and apart from their experience and knowledge they brought medical supplies such as tests, ventilators, protective clothes and masks.

Chinese experts immediately were involved in functioning of Serbian medical system; they visited many hospitals, valuing the way of organization and protocols that were

implemented in treatment of the patients. Their practical knowledge was so wide, that they even advised about the disinfection and ventilations systems of the hospitals. Listening to those doctors helped Serbian people finally to realize how dangerous and demanding this virus is.

In following days, until the end of March, seven additional planes came from China. Medical supplies kept flowing into Serbia. To largest extent they were donated to Serbia by Chinese government, but some were donated by private companies and Chinese citizens.

For all that time communication channels between our two governments were very active. As real friend of Serbian people, President Xi Jinping, sent the telegram of support and sympathy in this the most challenging moment of the XXI century. As always, China will support Serbia both politically and economically. Those words were supported by three new planes that landed in Belgrade during the first half of April. Apart from, let's say, regular medical supply, two of planes brought very interesting cargo. On one of the planes were four million masks and 14 experts that will help Serbia to install two, just purchased, machines capable to produce 190 000 masks on daily level. The other plane, the one that came punctually a month after the emergency state has been introduced, on April 15th brought the most sophisticated equipment for two modern laboratories. Both laboratories Chinese Government donated to Serbia.

One of the laboratories is situated in Clinical Center of Serbia, in Belgrade, and is known as "the fire eye". As explained, the origin of the name is from one of Chinese myth of an eye that is capable to see evil spirits and demons. Capacity of this laboratory is 2000 tests per day. The other is installed in Nis and its capacity is 1000 tests per day.

As Chinese Ambassador in Serbia, Ms. Chen Bo said, this is the only one of many examples of steel friendship that bonds two countries. Madam Ambassador repeated that two countries are standing shoulder to shoulder in this demanding fight.

Such attitude and Chinese experience will be crucial in a battle that Serbia still has to lead in this fight against the plague of XXI century. Foreign policy course that Serbia has set is very favorable, but this type of cooperation will bear the fruits only if citizens kept there awareness how partial limitation of their freedoms is the only way to secure the future.