

WORKING PAPER

Post-Pandemic World and Western Balkans: Transformative Resilience as the Response to the Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sanja Arežina

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Wu Baiyi



Post-Pandemic World and Western Balkans: Transformative Resilience as the Response to the Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sanja Arežina¹

Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a worldwide and multiple crisis, whose consequences will be felt in the post-pandemic world. The European Union (EU), as a significant stakeholder in international relations, will also suffer serious health, political, economic and social consequences. This will significantly affect the change of perceptions that have been formed within the Western Balkan (WB) countries, which aspire to EU membership, but these countries are currently also facing serious political, economic and social problems. In this article, the author examines the different perceptions of the EU formed in the Western Balkans during the pandemic, the factors that influenced the change in the perception of the WB countries about the EU and the consequences they had on the dynamics of their political, economic and social activities. In order to prove the basic hypothesis that the WB countries will continue to cooperate with other important international actors, primarily China, in order to overcome the crisis in the post-pandemic world and improve their societies when it comes to resilience to shocks and structural changes (the so-called transformative resilience), the author will use structural-functionalist analysis, induction and deduction.

Key Words: *COVID-19 pandemic, crisis, European Union, Western Balkans, perceptions, China*

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 has triggered a worldwide and multiple crisis, whose consequences will be significant and worldwide in the post-pandemic era in terms of changing international structures and economic progress. The EU, as a significant stakeholder in international relations, will also suffer serious health, political, economic and social consequences. Despite the differences between European countries, they are in a similar position, whether they are EU member countries or EU candidate countries. Namely, during the COVID-19 pandemic, all European countries experienced problems with the lack of

¹ Sanja Arežina, Ph. D, Counsellor at the Government of the Republic of Serbia and Assistant Professor at University of Belgrade, Serbia.

medical supplies and protective equipment, insufficient capacity of health systems, declines in economic growth, increasing public debt, and problems with fiscal constraints. After the end of the pandemic, all of them will face financial problems and the need to bring their economy and life back to normal.

This article highlights the part of the Balkan Peninsula for which the EU has devised a special political name – the Western Balkans – which consists of five non-EU member countries: Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Albania. Although the initial response of the Western Balkan (WB) countries to the pandemic was very good, following the example of countries (such as China) that have already gone through the initial stage of fighting the SARS-CoV-2 virus, as time goes by, they began to lag behind EU member states in their response, primarily because they do not have at their disposal the support and assistance mechanisms that EU member states have.

At the very beginning of the pandemic, the WB countries were treated by Brussels as "third countries", and not as part of the EU family that has certain privileges obtained during the accession process. This behaviour of Brussels will affect the perception of the WB countries about the EU. It will also affect the reforms they must implement in order to adapt and transform their entire state system to respond to the disturbances and changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare themselves for possible new crises. Bearing in mind that all Western Balkan countries have declared their intention to become EU members as their foreign policy goal and are in various stages of the accession process, it can be concluded that strengthening cooperation with the EU will be a priority for them in the coming period. Nevertheless, the basic hypothesis of this research is that the Western Balkan countries will continue to cooperate with other important international actors, primarily China, in order to overcome the crisis in the post-pandemic world and improve their societies when it comes to resilience to shocks and structural changes (so-called transformative resistance).

In the previous period, there was no research on this topic. In order to comprehensively consider this topic, the emphasis in this research is placed on the perceptions developing in the Western Balkans about the EU membership, factors influencing the dynamics of relations with the EU in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of changing perceptions in the WB countries to their political, economic and social activities. During the research, the author answers the questions: How did the process of joining the Western Balkans to the EU develop? How did the entire process of European integration and the COVID-19 pandemic affect the perception of these countries about the EU membership? What factors influence the formation of perceptions in the Western Balkans during the COVID-19 pandemic? What measures did countries take during the pandemic? What are the consequences

of changing perceptions to the dynamics of their political, economic and social activities? What measures should the countries of the Western Balkans take to be ready to respond to future challenges in the post-pandemic world? Will the Western Balkan countries continue to cooperate with other important international actors, primarily China, in order to overcome the crisis in the post-pandemic world? The research will use relevant academic and policy documentation, official statements and news from European and international media. Also, for the sake of authenticity, the research was enriched by formal and informal interviews and conversations the author had with the EU and Western Balkan's officials, analysts, researchers, journalists and businessmen, who were directly involved in various aspects of EU-Western Balkans relations, in particular at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The article has five parts. In introduction, the author gives the context for the research will, explains the crux of the problem and sets out the hypotheses. In the second part, the author explains how the process of joining the Western Balkans to the European Union developed and how the entire process of European integration and the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the perception of these countries about EU membership. In the third part, the author outlines the factors that affect the formation of perceptions in the WB countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the fourth part, the author explains how the change in the perception of countries during the pandemic affected the dynamics of their political, economic and social activities. The concluding remarks will summarize the research and the conclusions reached, after which the author provides a projection which direction it is best for the WB region to move in order to overcome the crisis in the post-pandemic world and makes recommendations for developing transformative resilience.

Perceptions about the EU in the Western Balkans during the Pandemic

Five WB countries have entered the process of joining the EU, believing that the process of Europeanization is the best framework for their stabilization and progress, wanting to avoid possible further conflicts and isolation from the international community. Although the British have challenged the idea that the European Union is an anti-war project, arguing that it is primarily an economic project, the citizens of the Western Balkans believe that European integration can help them transform their countries from fragile and weak states into states based on shared values such as democracy, rule of law and minority rights (Jović, 2018, p. 10).

Unlike the transition process that Central and Eastern European post-communist countries went through, the transition of the Western Balkans is much different and more complex, because they had to go through different processes of change from backward countries with problematic past to countries aspiring to EU membership and working on development and

common European values. Consequently, they are turning away from being an object of international politics and becoming instead a subject – that is, from "being on the table" (e.g. on agenda) into "having a seat at the table". In this way, the leaders of these countries reconciled the particularistic vision of national interests with the idea of joining the EU, i.e. the nominal sovereignty was replaced by "real sovereignty" (Jović, 2018, p. 11).

The WB countries have moved differently on their path to the EU, and they are at different stages of the EU accession process. Of the 5 countries in the Western Balkans, four are candidates for membership – Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia, while one is aspiring to become a candidate – Bosnia and Herzegovina.

- *Montenegro* submitted the application for EU membership in December 2008. The candidate status was granted on 17 December 2010. The opening of accession negotiations took place in June 2012. So far, Montenegro has opened all chapters and provisionally closed three chapters (European Commission, 2020d).

- *Serbia* applied for the candidate country status in December 2009. The candidate country status was granted in March 2012. On 21 January 2014, the first Intergovernmental Conference took place, signalling the formal start of Serbia's accession negotiations. So far, Serbia has opened eighteen chapters and provisionally closed two chapters (European Commission, 2020e).

- *Albania* applied for the EU membership in April 2009 and received the candidate status in June 2014 (European Commission, 2020a). In March 2020, the General Affairs Council decided to give a green line to opening of accession talks with Albania (European Commission, 2020f).

- *North Macedonia* was declared a candidate country in December 2005. Since October 2009, the Commission has continuously recommended to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia (European Commission, 2020c). In March 2020, the General Affairs Council decided to give a green line to opening of accession talks with North Macedonia, after a June 2018 deal with Greece that had removed long-standing issues between those two countries (European Commission, 2020f).

- Stabilization and Association negotiations with *Bosnia and Herzegovina* were opened in September 2005 and on 16 June 2008, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the European Union signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). The SAA entered into force in June 2015. In February 2016 the country has submitted its application to join the EU. In September 2016, the Council invited the Commission to present an

Opinion on B&H application. The Commission adopted its Opinion in May 2019, which was endorsed by the EU Council in December 2019 (European Commission, 2020b).

However, the "enlargement fatigue" that has existed in the EU for a decade has been further intensified by the internal crisis that Brussels has been facing in recent years (Eurozone crisis, migrant crisis, Ukrainian crisis, Brexit, etc.). Former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, in 2014, during the presentation of the political guidelines for his Commission, pointed out that there will be no new enlargement during his term (2014–2019) (European Commission, 2014). The prospect of enlargement and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans was confirmed in the EU Strategy for the Western Balkans of 6 February 2018, although it was emphasized that the EU's policy must be part and parcel of the larger strategy to strengthen the Union by 2025 (European Commission, 2018). In alignment with the Strategy, French president Macron stated at the EU-Western Balkans summit in May 2018 that the EU must first reform from within and solve a number of internal problems before expanding and committing to the accession of new states (Gray, 2018). After that, in February 2020, the European Council adopted a new revised methodology for EU enlargement of the Western Balkan countries, which will have a negative impact on the speed of accession of EU candidate countries. By adopting the new methodology, the countries of the Western Balkans may lose their gains if there is a setback in reforms (European Commission, 2020g).

When it comes to joining the EU, the perspective of the WB countries has become somewhat positive after Northern Macedonia became the 30th member of NATO in February 2020, and the next month, together with Albania it got the green light to start accession negotiations with the EU. However, with the outbreak of the global pandemic of the COVID-19, the awakened potential for progress in European integration and reforms in the Western Balkans was once again laid dormant. At the same time, the pandemic gave a completely new perspective on joining the EU, as a result of which two completely opposite perceptions were formed in the WB countries:

On the one hand, there is *a negative perception* conditioned by the lack of clear and explicit promises that enlargement will continue, as well as a less attractive vision of EU membership, which itself is in crisis. In this sense, the lack of a clear perspective, despite many declaratory promises about the "European perspective" being opened to all countries of the region, is a very important reason for growing skepticism. There is a visible gap between elite enthusiasm and popular skepticism which produces permanent confusion and then results in a growing number of those who "don't know" and/or "don't care" about EU membership. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the perception of the WB countries of EU

membership was negatively affected by increased internal divisions in the EU, institutional inadequacy, external challengers, and a lack of a savvy communication strategy. All of this seemingly contributed to the underwhelming perception of the EU's role in the Western Balkans at the times of the pandemic. Brussels made a bad PR by restricting the export of medical equipment (ventilators and PPE) on March 15, disorderly closing borders without consultation, which created a general sense that each European country looked after its own rather than fellow Europeans. In the Western Balkans, the negative impression of the initial COVID-19 reaction is generally present, where there was an evident lack of solidarity, a principle that represents one of the basic values on which the EU is based. It will take time for this bad impression to be corrected, despite the funds allocated by Brussels as bilateral financial assistance, bearing in mind that the EU's credibility as a soft power player with countries around the world depends on demonstrating its effectiveness at safeguarding basic values within the Union and in its own backyard, and that the EU has a visibility problem in some parts of the Western Balkans.

Serbia is one of the countries where the strengthening of negative perception towards the EU during the pandemic is visible. Although it has always been in some way indifferent to the EU, with very pronounced confusion but without open skepticism, Serbia's membership in the EU has never been publicly questioned by the elites. Compared to other countries in the Western Balkans, there has always been a higher percentage of citizens in Serbia who have spoken negatively about joining the EU. The reason for that are the destructive sanctions during the 1990s (for which most Serbs blame Western countries), as well as the recognition of the unilaterally declared independence of the so-called Kosovo* in 2008. Since then, the popularity of the EU in Serbia has been in question, mostly because the process of normalization of relations with Pristina is a direct and most important condition for Serbia's accession to the EU, but also because of the increasingly direct reluctance of the EU to continue enlargement. With 76% of Serbs supporting EU accession in October 2009, following visa liberalization with the EU, support for European integration fell to 49% in November 2015 (IRI, 2015, p. 4), before falling further to 46% in September 2020 (021, 2020). Although EU accession is Serbia's dominant foreign policy goal, and the EU has invested nearly 2 billion in grants to support the country's modernization since the start of the accession process, that percentage was further lowered at the start of the pandemic, when President Vučić was vocally disappointed with the EU's lack of assistance, when he said that "the EU solidarity is just an illusion". The negative

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244/99 and the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

picture was somewhat improved by the financial package set by Brussels for Serbia in the amount of 93 million euros, both for the purchase and transportation of emergency medical equipment and consumables, and for economic recovery, to which President Vučić reacted by recognizing EU efforts (Kljajić, 2020).

Excessive enthusiasm regarding EU membership does not exist *in Bosnia and Herzegovina* either, especially when it comes to Republika Srpska, where citizens are increasingly Eurosceptic. The obvious lag in the European integration of this country in relation to other countries in the region is something that citizens find difficult to come to terms with, although there has never been an open rejection, which could be seen in polls in which a smaller percentage of the population spoke negatively about joining the EU. With greater US involvement in the region, disenchantment with never-ending enlargement, declarative commitment of European integration politicians who simultaneously advocate rapprochement with Moscow or Ankara, disillusion caused by the image of the EU's internal crisis, negative perception of the EU's role in the Balkan route migrant crisis, emigration drain, and the poor initial response of the EU to the pandemic led to a decline in the confidence and interest of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina in EU membership. According to a survey from the Bosnian Directorate for European Integration, support for membership dropped from 76% in 2016 to 56.5% in 2018 (Sasso, 2020), and that percentage continued the fall to 47% in 2019 (Regional Cooperation Council, 2019, p. 37). Leading politicians had rather inconsistent statements when it comes to EU engagement during a pandemic. In his statement of April 18, 2020, Presidency member Milorad Dodik expressed his disappointment with the EU because it limited the export of medical equipment and the expected help did not arrive when needed, to be far more positive in his statement on April 26, after the aid was received (Izmirić, 2020). On the other hand, other members of the Presidency, Šefik Džaferović and Željko Komšić, thanked the Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi for the financial assistance earmarked for BiH, as well as for help in transporting medical equipment from China to B&H, while Komšić condemned Dodik's negative statements addressed to the EU (BN, 2020). However, although the EU has earmarked funds for financial assistance to B&H due to the pandemic in the amount of €80 million, the negative perception of European integration has not diminished significantly (European Commission, 2020h).

On the other hand, there is *a positive perception*, which is conditioned by the expectation of the countries of the Western Balkans that they will become members of the EU and enjoy the same rights as other member states. None of them wants the Western Balkans to remain a "black hole" on the map of Europe and for EU citizens to perceive it as a space where corruption, crime and powerlessness flourish. That is why in the media, joining the EU is

presented as a transition from a peripheral to a possibly middle-developed society after fulfilling the EU standards, which primarily refer to the establishment of democratic institutions and the creation of necessary economic preconditions for joining the EU single market. Therefore, the citizens of the Western Balkans, who had high expectations of the EU which they perceive as a significant factor on the international scene, should not be blamed for the support it should provide in a situation like a pandemic, and for enthusiastically waiting for a common EU financial response to the pandemic. The approval of the fund for the fight against the pandemic, although smaller than the proposed one, has significantly strengthened the trust of the citizens of certain countries in the Western Balkans in the EU.

In *Montenegro*, both the Government and the citizens have promoted the EU's support. The fact that Montenegro is the most advanced of all the countries of the Western Balkans in the process of joining the EU mostly contributes to that. In his TV appearance on April 16, President Milo Djukanović went with a completely different approach compared to his Serbian counterpart, by not criticizing the EU's export restrictions but praising the fact that they are going to be lifted soon. "Let us hope that Europe, of which we are citizens, will learn from this problem and revitalize its fundamentals through the reforms that have already begun", Djukanović said, signalling that there will be no change in the foreign policy course of his party. Institutions of Montenegro were also eager to promote other forms of cooperation with the EU during the crisis (Vijesti, 2020b). For example, the country's parliament was one of only two parliaments of the region to publish the response of the European Parliament President David Sassoli to the letter signed by all six speakers of the Western Balkans regarding their Appeal for assistance to the Western Balkans region in combating the coronavirus pandemic. The Government also signed an agreement on joint procurement of medical supplies and other goods, becoming a part of the mechanism created by the EU to ensure faster procurement of medical supplies, which was described by the head of the EU delegation in Montenegro as a sign that the country is already part of the European family (Ivković, 2020). EU financial assistance in the amount of €53 million additionally increased the already existing positive perception of European integration in Montenegro (European Commission, 2020h), so that compared to 2018, when it amounted to 65.9%, after the first wave of the pandemic 66.4% of Montenegrins support the EU accession (Kancelarija za evropske integracije Republike Crna Gora, 2020).

Albania is constantly enthusiastic when it comes to the European integration. Most opinion polls on the EU have shown that Albania has high hopes and expectations of EU membership, especially after receiving the green light to start negotiations, but the further continuation of delay to the start of the negotiations (under the pretext of an unsatisfactory fight

against corruption) leads to a further decline in enthusiasm (Arežina, 2020, p. 12). This attitude of the Albanian population is largely due to the fact that the West has sided with the so-called Kosovo*, so they see it as a kind of saviour, protector and key strategic ally. The existing positive perception was strengthened by the EU's engagement in organizing the International Donor's Conference taking place in February, during which 1.2 billion euros were gathered for the November 2019 earthquake relief. This event was very publicized and well received by the Albanian public opinion. Also, receiving the green light for the start of negotiations with the EU was positively received in Albania, especially through the public appearances of Prime Minister Edi Rama. However, the "little-Albania-helps-Italy" event was more important in the news than the historic decision of the Council to open accession talks with the country couple of days earlier (Koleka, 2020). Even the news that the EU has allocated €410 million to the region to fight the pandemic and help the economic recovery, of which €50 million have been earmarked for Albania, has not received a proportionate amount of local attention (European Commission, 2020h). The news of EU's assistance has been treated as positive, but expected. The pandemic has once again shown the systemic problem that the EU has with the visibility of its actions in the Balkans. On the other hand, the Albanian parliament was the second one which published Sassoli's respond to the Western Balkans' countries (Ivković 2020).

In *North Macedonia*, the majority of the population did not show much interest in EU membership, although they were generally positive about the European integration, primarily because they did not feel that the outcome of the process depended on them but exclusively on the EU member states. However, political elites considered the EU membership as a key issue for aspiring political leaders, and have wholeheartedly supported it for years. In line with that, the Prespa Agreement with Greece was signed, which finally unlocked the door for Macedonia to join NATO. After that the citizens also showed greater enthusiasm for joining the EU, which subsided again after the Council refused to give them the green light to start negotiations in September 2019. However, the situation improved in March 2020, when Northern Macedonia finally received approval to start the process, still without a specific date. Politicians, in order not to subside the enthusiasm of the citizens towards the EU, as a result turned their attention to NATO membership, emphasizing the importance of joining this organization as the initial step of the dual agenda, of which the EU is a complementary part (Miladinović, 2020). In any case, that was enough for the perception of citizens to be positive towards the European integration, as well as the news that the EU has allocated €66 million for economic recovery (European Commission, 2020h), which was confirmed by the polls of the National Democratic Institute, according to which 82% of Macedonian citizens support the European integration (NDI, 2020).

Factors That Have Influenced the Change of Perception of the EU by the WB Countries

The change in the perception of the WB countries about the EU is influenced by several different factors, and above all by *the success of the EU member states in the fight against the pandemic*. At the very beginning of the pandemic, the EU member countries faced challenges and problems at various levels:

- Health level: the lack of medical supplies and protective equipment, and insufficient capacity of health systems, especially medical staff and accommodation facilities in healthcare institutions.
- Political level: the growing global geopolitical fragmentation, and the public opinion pressure onto state authorities due to the poor response to the pandemic crisis.
- Economic level: the emergence of multiple crises that span the health and financial crisis, which will lead to higher budget expenditures for the health system, economic aid packages and social aid to the population, and lack of primary products, especially medical supplies, but also other products during the crisis.
- Social level: social divide in understanding pandemics, and spread of various conspiracy theories, strengthening of the negative public opinion towards the governments because of the measures taken to suppress and mitigate the pandemic, decline in social activities of the population, and increase in electronic communication and payment.

The emergence of problems at different levels caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in multiple crises in EU member countries. Each of the EU member countries tried to find the best possible model for fighting these crises in order to protect the security of the country and the health of the population. The ad hoc measures that were applied had mostly very unfavourable results, which can be seen in the health crisis that affected Italy, Spain, France and Belgium. Britain, which initially tried to apply the herd immunity model of fighting the pandemic without restricting the movement of the population, quickly faced the scale of the problem, and Prime Minister Boris Johnson gave up on that strategy because of the danger of overstraining health capacities. Only Sweden remained consistent in choosing relaxed measures to fight the pandemic. On the other hand, Germany has managed to find a good balance between measures to limit and to continue normal life. In addition to Germany, Eastern European countries such as Slovakia also performed well, although they were not particularly organized or as rich as Western European countries.

Even when it comes to the economic response, EU member countries have not set a positive example to their neighbours in the Western Balkans. Due to the stagnation of the economy caused by the restriction of movement and the interruption of supply and industrial chains, a large number of EU member countries have come to the situation of significantly increasing their public debts. Thus, in March 2020, Italy's debt-to-GDP ratio was 134%, Spain's and France's were close to 100% (European Commission, 2019).

In the initial months of the appearance of SARS-CoV-2 in Europe, many articles and reports appeared in the media of the Western Balkan countries on the topic of the incompetence of the EU member countries in the fight against the pandemic. Most of them were on the topic of internal divisions in the EU, institutional inadequacy, external challengers, and, perhaps, lack of more savvy communication strategy among countries. As the EU member countries did not provide them with a positive example in the fight against the pandemic, the EU countries mostly accepted the Chinese model of restricting the movement of the population in order to avoid the Italian and Spanish scenarios. They opted to limit the freedom of movement by putting specific categories of people into complete lockdown and by introducing mandatory curfews for all citizens, without age distinction. This model initially proved to be good, however, in the long run it proved inapplicable because it threatened to provoke social unrest, and governments replaced it with measures of social distancing with mandatory wearing of masks and restriction of larger gatherings of people.

- The government of *Serbia* declared a national state of emergency on 15 March 2020 and decided to adopt containment measures (closing borders, prohibiting movement of citizens, suspending the public transport and all activities in parks and public areas, closing shopping malls) which were lifted on 6 May. There were different restrictions on movement for citizens of different ages, and everyone was strongly advised to respect the social distancing measures and to follow the sanitary protocols. In response to an increasing number of cases, new containment measures have been implemented on 1 July, including mandatory use of masks in public transportation and indoor spaces as well as stricter measures in municipalities where a state-of-emergency has been declared. As of 15 July, the government introduced stricter measures (valid from 17 July) on the whole territory of Serbia (OECD, 2020b, p. 1).

- At the beginning of March, the *Montenegrin* government began to gradually adopt containment measures (closing borders, banning the movement of citizens, suspension of public transport and all activities in parks and public areas, closing shopping malls), and finally on March 26 the COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared, without the formal introduction of a state of emergency. Between 24 May and

18 June, there were no active cases of COVID-19 recorded in Montenegro, and the end of the epidemic was declared on 2 June. However, as of July 29, the Government reintroduced a number of restrictions to prevent the new spread of the coronavirus. As of 21 July 2020, it is mandatory to use protective masks indoors and outdoors in the entire territory, and gatherings of people were limited (OECD, 2020c, p. 1).

- Recognizing the danger posed by the spread of COVID-19, on 18 March 2020 *North Macedonia* declared the state of emergency, initially for 30 days, which it was later extended until 22 June 2020. The curfew was introduced on 23 March, and very soon after its abolition on May 27 it was reintroduced on June 4 due to the rise of COVID-19 cases. Also, the Government has undertaken a series of regulatory responses to mitigate the negative effects of population protection measures on the economy. From 8 May, the Government began the process of opening up the economy, and on 12 May adopted a three-phase economic recovery plan (OECD, 2020d, p. 1).

- The state of emergency in *Bosnia and Herzegovina* has been declared on 21 March, and both entities introduced a curfew. After a month, the state of emergency rescinded, and deconfinement measures have been gradually introduced since the second half of May. As of end of June, Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen a recent resurgence of infections with the number of positive cases increasing within the entire territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Government specified that the increase in the number of COVID-19 positive cases was mostly a result of non-compliance with the sanitary measures introduced (physical distancing and wearing masks). A new measure of wearing a protective mask outdoors has been introduced on 20 July, whenever it is not possible to maintain a distance of two meters (OECD, 2020e, p. 1).

- In *Albania*, on 24 March, Prime Minister Edi Rama declared a 'state of natural disaster' across the country for a period of 30 days, which was later extended by two more months and ended on 23 June. On 1 June, Albania opened land borders with all neighbouring countries. As of 9 June, the number of new cases started rising, putting the deconfinement process into question. As the situation continued, on 19 June, the government announced an increased monitoring of the measures (keeping distance, wearing masks etc.) and a zero-tolerance policy towards those who fail to comply. On 23 June, the state of natural disaster ended, but the government reiterated their statement that there shall be a strict monitoring of the implementation of the measures (OECD, 2020f, p. 1).

The second factor is *the common European Union response to the pandemic*. The perception of the WB countries about the EU response at the beginning of the pandemic was extremely negative. Brussels has been shown as poor responder to immediate relief needs but to have performed much better when it came to structural support. Although the Union does not have exclusive competence when it comes to health, it got bad public relations (PR) when Germany prevented the export of medical aid to Italy, which was the first and of all EU member countries the most affected by the pandemic. The same thing happened when the Czech journalist revealed the information that the Czech Republic confiscated medical material that was going from China to Italy (Tidman, 2020). Although the German hospitals subsequently took over Italian patients with corona disease, demonstrating European solidarity, the Czech authorities sent medical supplies to Italy in the amount of the previously seized equipment, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen apologized for not being with the Italians when Brussels, the restriction on the export of medical equipment on March 15, the closing of the EU's external borders and the delay in sending aid to the countries of the Western Balkans left a negative impression on the countries of the Western Balkans (Federal Foreign Office, 2020). This approach has created the impression of a lack of solidarity within the EU itself, which is one of the basic principles on which this community should rest.

The pandemic has shown that a quick reaction is not the European Union's strongest suit. The EU decision-making mechanism doesn't do well under stress and it is too often reactive, rather than proactive. Before helping the neighbouring countries, Commission President Von der Leyen had to tend to substantial shambles created by the member states acting on their own, and burning decades of political efforts and hard-reached compromises. After a few weeks of harmonization by the member states, the EU did however come to the rescue of its WB neighbours, and it did so with a very substantial financial package. Brussels announced a €3.3 billion assistance package for the Western Balkans on 29 April. It involves support from the Commission and the European Investment Bank for emergency needs, recovery and reconstruction. Previously, the European Commission provided 38 million in immediate support for the Western Balkans to tackle the health emergency caused by coronavirus and the reallocation of €374 million to help the socio-economic recovery of the region. The Commission has also included the Western Balkans in EU initiatives to tackle the coronavirus crisis like the joint procurement schemes of protective personal equipment and has accelerated the implementation of a project with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). Additionally, WB countries received assistance through the delivery of equipment and repatriation of citizens from the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) member states and Participating States (European Commission, 2018). This joint response has boosted EU

confidence in the Western Balkans, and EU structural assistance is expected to improve the Western Balkans' perception of the EU in the long run.

The third factor is *treating the Western Balkan countries as "third countries"*. Border and population protection measures introduced by the EU due to the pandemic have hit the citizens of the Western Balkans hard, as well as companies importing/exporting products to the EU. Namely, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on March 15, 2020, the European Commission passed regulation 2020/402 which banned the export of medical equipment, especially personal protective equipment (PPE), without prior approval, temporarily for six weeks in order to protect public health within the Union (Official Journal of the European Union, 2020). The next day, March 16, it proposed that the EU's external borders be temporarily closed for 30 days, making it impossible for passengers to move at the EU's external borders, without affecting transport and trade with neighbouring countries. However, as early as March 23, the decision to restrict the export of medical equipment outside the EU to third countries was changed by Regulation 2020/568, which reduced the restrictions to a minimum, in order to maintain the principle of international solidarity in a global pandemic situation, but on 26 March it was extended for another month (Official Journal of the European Union, 2020). Also, at the request of the Western Balkans Chamber of Investment Forum, on April 13, the European Union exempted the Western Balkans from restrictions on medical equipment exports from the European Union and included it in the EU system of priority green lanes located along the Trans-European Transport Network. TEN-T) which will enable easier flow of people and primary products (food, medicines and medical equipment) during the pandemic. These are "green lanes" that have three branches:

A. HU/SRB border - Belgrade - SRB/MK border - Skopje - MK/EL border (with a branch towards KOS* and Pristina) || RO/SRB border - Belgrade SRB - MNE border - Podgorica - (port of) Bar.

B. HR/BiH - border Banjaluka/Sarajevo - (port of) Ploce (HR) || HR/SRB border - Belgrade - SRB/BG border. || SRB/BiH border - Sarajevo/Banjaluka - BiH/MNE border - MNE/KOS CCP - Pristina.

C. (Port of) Durres - Tirana - ALB/MK border - Skopje - MK/BG border and Port of Durres - Fier - ALB/EL border || ALB/KOS* CCP - Pristina - KOS*/MK border || ALB/MNE border - Podgorica.²

² Chamber Investment Forum Western Balkans 6. (2020, 11 April). CEFTA to open green lanes on April 13th. Retrieved from <https://www.wb6cif.eu/2020/04/11/cefta-to-open-green-lanes-on-april-13th/>.

At the initiative of the Foreign Minister of North Macedonia Nikola Dimitrov and other countries of the Western Balkans, a joint request was sent to the EU to lift the export restrictions, after which the EU "ceased to apply" temporary restrictions on the export of medical equipment on 26 May (Worldecr, 2020). However, measures to restrict the entry of citizens from countries that are not on the safe countries list, including some Western Balkan countries, still remain in force, depending on the results of the pandemic fight they are undertaking (Roščić, 2020).

The fourth factor is *the division of public opinion in the countries of the Western Balkans on the issue of EU membership*. While the elites of the WB countries agreed to pursue EU membership as their supreme objective, the general population in some of these countries – not in all of them – remains sceptical and even dismissive (Jović, 2018, p. 12). The problem is that the whole European project is being largely built by elites, which these days have significant difficulty to convince their own population to follow it. Paradoxically, it is this gap between elites and population that makes the countries of the Western Balkans much more similar to the member states. Unlike political elites which are all pro-EU, the public opinion is divided and the support for membership has been declining almost continuously over the last ten years. If one of the main characteristics of the identity of the Western Balkans is in alleged desire by its countries to join the EU, then it can be said for elites, not for population, at least not equally for public opinions of all countries.

There are several reasons for that, and the most important is that the countries of the Western Balkans are demoralized, and the citizens are indifferent, because they believe that the accession process does not depend on their work on reforming their countries but on the opinion of individual EU member states (European Western Balkans, 2019). During that time, the EU keeps acting as if nothing has changed since 2004. Not only that it is not alarmed by increasingly cold reception it is met with among the general population, but it keeps introducing higher and higher criteria (Copenhagen criteria) and standards for new candidates. By doing this, the EU is encouraging candidate countries to simulate reforms that they cannot implement due to either ever stronger opposition of domestic public opinion, or to the character of new demands that are increasingly unrealistic. Although it was believed that European integration had no alternative, countries were slowly turning to alternatives for cooperation such as the United States, Turkey, China, Russia and the United Kingdom (Ibid).

However, after the increase of pessimism in 2019, when according to the Balkan Barometer in 2019, Albania had the most respondents who showed a positive attitude towards EU integration (86%), significantly less Montenegro (52%) and Northern Macedonia (51%), followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina (47%) and Serbia, whose public opinion is the least optimistic (32%) (Regional Cooperation Council, 2019, p. 37). It is evident that most countries

believe that the EU has lost credibility in the region. However, after the region's prospects for accession improved in February and March 2020 with the adoption of a new methodology for EU accession and the giving of the green light to open negotiations to Albania and Northern Macedonia, cautious optimism has emerged in public opinion in the Western Balkans, although the percentage of extreme pessimists remains significant.

The fifth factor is *the assistance that arrived to the countries of the Western Balkans from other international actors*. With its reluctance to immediately help the countries of the Western Balkans, the EU opened the door to external influences, including those of the US, China, Russia and Turkey. The fact that the EU's contribution was by far the largest has been slow to translate into a public recognition of this support. The International Republican Institute's March 2020 poll in the Western Balkans (excluding Albania) found that a majority of Serbian respondents identified China and Russia as their state's main economic partners. The 17+1 expert video conference on the prevention and control of the COVID-19 virus, which was organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe on March 13, was especially important for Chinese experts to share information on disease control, drugs and civilian aviation, customs and local government management. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro, respondents were split between identifying western countries, China, Russia and Turkey as their most important economic partners (Bruegel, 2020).

- *Serbia* received significant assistance from China, the EU, the United States, Turkey and Russia, with Chinese assistance being the most visible because it came in a time of crisis, which is why the Serbian leadership paid the most attention to it. Serbia also received humanitarian aid from Qatar, Azerbaijan and recently from Poland and Austria.

- The United States, EU, Turkey, UAE and Norway have offered their assistance to *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, while the complex nature of this country has enabled the involvement of another global player - Russia. The US and Turkish aids were distributed to all regions and ethnic communities in the country. On the other hand, Russia delivered its aid selectively and discriminately, to one part of the country only – Republika Srpska (Ivković, 2020).

- *Northern Macedonia* received medical assistance from the EU, IMF, USAID, World Bank, Hungary, Slovenia, Czechia, and Turkey, with the most visible assistance provided by Hungary during the first weeks of April. The reason for this is that it was delivered by the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó, in order to make

it easier for Northern Macedonia to cope with the upcoming refugee waves (Ivković, 2020).

- *Montenegro* received medical assistance from the EU, the European Council, Austria, Estonia and Romania (Vijesti, 2020), as well as from Turkey and China, which also provided expert assistance given the significant experiences of its health workers with the pandemic (CDM, 2020).

- The EU, China, Turkey, Switzerland, Norway, Hungary, the UAE and UNDP were the largest donors in *Albania*, in terms of the medical assistance they sent. In addition to these countries, the United States gave Albania \$700,000 to prepare the health sector for a pandemic (OECD, 2020f, p. 6).

Consequences of Changing Perceptions of the WB Countries on the Dynamics of Their Political, Economic and Social Activities

The COVID-19 pandemic caused major disruptions that led to systemic problems in countries around the world. The Western Balkans was not spared either, encountering health, political, economic and social disorders and changes, to which individual countries did not have an adequate systemic response prepared. As the EU did not have an adequate mechanism to react in such situations, they did not have common European protection mechanisms at their disposal to overcome the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With this in mind, and none of them has developed an adequate systemic response to a crisis of this kind, they have tried to solve problems on their own through one-off measures, with weak regional cooperation or seeking *ad hoc* assistance from partner countries outside their immediate environment.

Governments introduced measures to protect their fragile health systems by purchasing medical equipment and medicine, converting medical centres to specialized COVID-19 centres and concert and sport arenas to temporary field hospitals, increasing the salaries of medical staff, and changing the work hours to safeguard the medical staff. In addition, governments responded with lockdowns and partial shutdowns in the second half of March, resulting in the closure of airports and borders, educational institutions, restaurants and shops, bans on large gatherings, restrictions on domestic travel, and the instatement of curfews (OECD, 2020a). These containment measures and external shock are expected to result in a notable contraction across the region:

- Measures of restriction of movement introduced by some governments were not positively accepted by the opposition. This has led to *the instability of governments*, especially those that have previously struggled with legitimacy in the aftermath of mass protests, and their possible electoral loss. Also, there was an *increasing populism* to fill

the leadership vacuum, due to mismanagement of the country during the crisis. In Macedonia, parliamentary elections have been postponed due to a pandemic.

- Due to restrictions on movement, countries have suffered significant *declines in economic growth, increasing public debt*, and problems with *fiscal constraints*.

- The containment measures unequivocally have an impact on *domestic demand and supply*, significantly decreasing economic activity. Supportive macroeconomic policies can partially aid the recovery of demand but cannot completely offset the economic consequences of enforced shutdowns.

- *Exports* across the region are affected by depressed demand, as well as *disruptions in value chains*. Those economies in the region, which have manufacturing sectors that are comparatively more integrated into global supply chains (Serbia and North Macedonia) and have higher contributions in terms of value-added and employment would likely bear the greatest cost of the pandemic in the short term.

- A deceleration of both public and private *investment* can be expected, which will further inhibit economic growth. A reduction in foreign direct investment (FDI) to the Western Balkan economies would also negatively affect job creation and technological progress.

- The COVID-19 crisis has already curtailed global international travel demand and will lead to a collapse in *tourism* ahead of the summer season. Albania and Montenegro will be hit particularly hard, as tourism revenues exceed 20% of GDP in both economies (EBRD, 2020, p. 19).

- The Western Balkans rely heavily on the steady inflow of *remittances*, financing domestic demand and investment. Remittances, which constitute 10% of the GDP in the Western Balkans, are likely to diminish due to travel restrictions and increased unemployment, linked to the anticipated economic contraction in the EU – the main source of remittances for the Western Balkans.

- Social divide in understanding pandemics, and the spread of various conspiracy theories has led to a *strengthening of the negative public opinion towards the governments* because of the measures taken to suppress and mitigate the pandemic. Social activities of the population have been significantly reduced, but the use of electronic communication has increased, which significantly affects people's mental health.

The Western Balkan governments responded with immediate monetary policy tools and fiscal stimulus packages to counteract the economic downturn.

- The central banks across the region reacted by cutting their key policy rates and providing liquidity to banks and non-bank financial institutions, which in turn, ease the burden on companies and individuals affected by sharp disruptions.

- All Western Balkan economies have introduced fiscal stimulus packages, to support firms by temporarily subsidizing salaries of employees. Governments have expanded their support packages to provide social assistance to unemployed persons and the most vulnerable households. Immediate financial support was given to the health sector to purchase medical equipment and to support medical staff.

- These support packages will inevitably lead to fiscal deficit and accumulation of debt in the Western Balkans, which have been rising in recent years. Their GDP to debt ratios (albeit varying across the region, ranging from 81% in Montenegro to 18% in Serbian south province Kosovo and Metohija) are still comparatively lower than the EU-27 average of 80%. Despite the existence of a relatively larger fiscal space, spending will still need to carefully prioritize the most urgent needs in order not to jeopardize debt sustainability (OECD, 2020a, pp. 1-2).

In addition to these short-term measures, the WB countries will have to work for substantial changes if they want to prevent the multiplication of crises in the post-pandemic world. This implies a fundamental adaptation and transformation of the entire state system in order to be able to respond to the disturbances and changes that are a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for possible new crises. In that sense, in the post-pandemic world, it is necessary to first of all manage the recovery process and implement structural changes, in order to develop different resilience capacities through a combination of prevention, preparation, protection, advancement and transformation measures. The WB countries will have to work independently to develop transformative resilience. Even the leaders of countries where the pandemic has not changed the positive perception of citizens about European integration have realized the importance of strengthening their own capacities, and that they should not rely entirely on mechanisms for cooperation with the EU. In this regard, they need to work on progress on the following key issues:

- *Politics*: Strengthen cooperation with other important international actors such as the US, China, Turkey, because during the pandemic it was shown that diversification of aid and supply sources is crucial in crisis situations, but also in the post-crisis period

when it is necessary to direct all capacities to strengthen the economy in order the possibility of a recession has decreased.

- *Trade*: Keep supply chains going by ensuring the flow of goods and services within and outside the region. Continue the effective regional cooperation to keep food supply chains flowing to ensure the food delivery and to reduce the risk of food loss. Avoid export restrictions on essential goods, such as medical equipment and food products.

- *Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)*: Supporting SMEs in response to COVID-19 requires fast and well-coordinated support that combines financial measures to address their short-term cash-flow problems. Addressing structural problems by stepping-up the efforts on SMEs digital transformation and by leveraging innovative start-ups in the fight against COVID-19. Encourage SMEs uptake of e-commerce to facilitate their entry into new markets.

- *Tourism*: Ensure efficient co-operation mechanisms between the government and tourism sector actors to introduce sound and sustainable tourism recovery measures. Develop health and safety guidelines in the hospitality sector and promote domestic tourism.

- *Employment*: Policies should aim both to protect workers from exposure to the disease at workplace, while at the same time ensuring workers' access to income support. Further facilitate the transition towards teleworking through free and rapid access to communication tools. Secure jobs and the economic viability of firms through specific support measures.

- *Education*: Promote remote learning and the use of online school learning platforms and continue supporting students to gain access to the necessary equipment for remote learning. Provide teachers with digital learning opportunities on how to teach online, to share their resources and give and receive peer feedback.

- *Digitalization*: Promote the effective and widespread transition of many activities onto digital platforms. Take measures to avoid online congestion by reducing temporarily mobile network congestion and by upgrading interconnection capacity of network operators.

- *Investment*: The region's governments can encourage and support businesses that can shift their production toward essential healthcare goods and services. Economies in the region should keep paying attention to protect sensitive assets in

strategic sectors, while continuing to promote market openness and responsible investment policy.

- *Environment*: The pandemic has called for an all-inclusive approach to human health by also considering environmental health, especially in relation to air quality, water and sanitation, waste management and biodiversity preservation. Thus, support measures should not derail the efforts to tackle the ongoing environmental challenges.

- *Gender Equality*: Governments should continue adopting emergency measures to support women and parents with caring responsibilities, and to offer public childcare options to working parents in essential services such as health care. All policy responses to the crisis must embed a gender lens and account for women's unique needs, and responsibilities (OECD, 2020a, p. 2).

Conclusion

At the beginning of the research, basic information on the process of European integration of the Western Balkans was given. Special emphasis was placed on the division of countries into two groups, those that are candidates for EU membership (Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia) and those that have not yet become candidate like Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the research, the author builds the events that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in the European Union and the Western Balkans, over the already existing perceptions of these countries about the accession process, and concludes that in these five countries two different perceptions of the European Union – negative and positive. In this regard, the author believes that both perceptions are based as much on the positive or negative impression of the progress so far within the European integration process and the benefits that the Western Balkans have benefited from it, as well as on the individual reaction of EU member states during the pandemic and joint EU response to the crisis that followed. In that sense, the author points out that there was no drastic change in perceptions in relation to the already existing perception of the WB countries when it comes to commitment to European integration, and that most countries remained on the previous position that they were fully committed to the EU accession process. In countries that previously had a negative perception, it was somewhat intensified at the very beginning of the pandemic, primarily due to the EU's poor response to immediate relief, and after easing restrictions on medical equipment exports and approving a joint financial aid package, this perception improved significantly. On the other hand, in countries that had a positive perception of the EU, it was further strengthened during the pandemic, primarily because the leaders of these countries do not see an alternative to the European integration process, and avoid publicly reacting to possible omissions made by the EU during the pandemic

because of the help they expected to receive from the EU in a situation of insufficient preparation for an independent response to the crisis that arose.

During the research, the factors influencing the formation of perceptions in the WB countries during the COVID-19 pandemic were identified. By analysing these factors, it was concluded that four of them have a negative impact on public opinion in the Western Balkans: the success of the EU member states in the fight against the pandemic, the treatment of the WB countries as "third countries", the division of public opinion in the WB countries on the issue of EU membership, and the assistance that arrived to the WB countries from other international actors. The general impression is that the EU made the mistake of not reacting in time and used the pandemic to strengthen its image as an undisputed and united leader in the region who wants to fully integrate. On the other hand, only one factor has a very positive impact – the common EU response to the pandemic. The general impression is that this factor has strengthened the confidence of the Western Balkan countries in the EU and strengthened its status in the international arena.

During the research, it was concluded that the assistance WB countries received from other international actors, primarily China and Turkey, was very important for them, especially at the beginning of the pandemic when the EU did not show the expected solidarity and efficiency. This primarily applies to the lack of coordination of actions at the beginning of the crisis, such as closing borders without consulting neighbours or banning exports, including personal protective equipment. Also, the United States has been spreading negative rhetoric about China throughout the pandemic, on the origin of the virus and the recklessness of the COVID-19 pandemic, on the use of diplomacy masks to spread political influence, on the tensions in Hong Kong over National Security Law, and on "spying" by Chinese IT and other companies. But, it did not significantly affect the leaders of the Western Balkans to reduce cooperation with Beijing, given the good cooperation with China and the no strings attached aid and investment that arrived in the previous period. However, the negative narrative has to some extent affected a smaller number of Western Balkan citizens which had reduced their enthusiasm for cooperation with Beijing.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic was not a trigger to change the perception of the WB countries about EU membership (from negative to positive and vice versa), it was the reason for the leaders of these five countries to understand the need to reform the entire state system. In that sense, all five countries have already started to manage the recovery process and implement structural changes. However, to be ready to respond to future challenges in the post-pandemic world they must work to develop transformative resilience. They can work on this together with the EU, which itself is in the process of changing and finding a solution to this

unique situation caused by the pandemic, so that changes would become an integral part of their European integration within the negotiation chapters. In this way, the EU would show that although it responds poorly to immediate relief, it works much better when it comes to long-term structural support. In this sense, the author believes that it would be best for the whole region for the EU to work with other international actors to overcome the crisis in the post-pandemic world and improve their societies when it comes to resilience to shocks and structural changes.

References

Arežina, S. (2020, 6 July). Reflections of the "Belt and Road" Initiative and China-CEEC Cooperation on the Perceptions of China Pervading the Public Discourse in Albania. China-CEE Institute. No. 27/2020. Retrieved from https://china-cee.eu/working_papers/reflections-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-china-ceec-cooperation-on-the-perceptions-of-china-pervading-the-public-discourse-in-albania/.

BN. (2020, 22 April). Komšić zahvalio EU na pomoći. Retrieved from <https://www.rtvbn.com/3982472/komsic-zahvalio-eu-na-pomoci-osudio-dodikove-napade>.

Cameron, A. and Leigh, M. (2020, 15 June). Has COVID-19 dented the EU's credibility in the Balkans?. *Bruegel*. Retrieved from <https://www.bruegel.org/2020/06/has-covid-19-dented-the-eus-credibility-in-the-balkans/>.

CDM. (2020, 4 April). Ambasador Kine u Crnoj Gori: Naši eksperti pomoći će vam u borbi protiv korone. Retrieved from <https://www.cdm.me/drustvo/ambasador-kine-u-crnoj-gori-nasi-eksperti-pomoci-ce-vam-u-borbi-protiv-kor-one/>.

EBRD (2020). Regional Economic Prospects: COVID-19: From Shock to Recovery. Retrieved from www.ebrd.com.

European Commission. (2020g, 5 February). A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process - Commission lays out its proposals. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_181 European Commission. (2020a).

European Commission. (2020f, 25 March). Commission welcomes the green light to opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_519.

European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations – Albania. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/albania_en.

European Commission. (2020b). European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations – Bosnia and Herzegovina. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/bosnia-herzegovina_en.

European Commission. (2020d). European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations – Montenegro. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/montenegro_en.

European Commission. (2020c). European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations – North Macedonia. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/north-macedonia_en.

European Commission. (2020e). European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations – Serbia. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en.

European Commission. (April 2020h). EU response to the coronavirus pandemic in the Western Balkans - Overview of the EU support package. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus_support_wb.pdf.

European Commission. (2019, 20 November). Opening remarks by Vice-President Dombrovskis on the Autumn Fiscal Package. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_6309.

European Commission. (2018, 6 February). Strategy for the Western Balkans: EU sets out new flagship initiatives and support for the reform-driven region. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_18_561.

European Commission. (2014, 10 September). The Juncker Commission: A strong and experienced team standing for change. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_984.

European Western Balkans. (2019, 13 December). Loss of hope for EU membership a worrying sign in the Western Balkans. Retrieved from <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/13/loss-of-hope-for-eu-membership-a-worrying-sign-in-the-western-balkans/>.

Federal Foreign Office. (2020, 24 March). How Germany is helping Europe in the Covid-19 crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/europa/maas-corona-europe/2328352>.

Gray, A. (2018, 17 May). Macron pours cold water on Balkan EU membership hopes. *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-pours-cold-water-balkans-eu-membership-enlargement/>.

IRI. (2015, 24 November). Survey of Serbian Public opinion. Retrieved from https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/serbia_november_2015_poll_public_release.pdf.

Ivković, A. (2020, 17 April). Perception of EU aid amidst the pandemic faces challenges across the Western Balkans. *European Western Balkans*. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/17/perception-of-eu-aid-amidst-the-pandemic-faces-challenges-across-the-western-balkans/>.

Izmirlić, A. (2020, 27 April). Dodik promijenio stav po pitanju pomoći od strane EU. *Istinomjer*. Retrieved from <https://istinomjer.ba/dodik-promijenio-stav-po-pitanju-pomoci-od-strane-eu/>.

Jović, D. (2018). Accession to the European Union and Perception of External Actors in the Western Balkans. *Croatian International Relations Review*. 24 (83), 6-32. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328633346_Accession_to_the_European_Union_and_Perception_of_External_Actors_in_the_Western_Balkans.

Kancelarija za evropske integracije Republike Crne Gore. (2020, 5 February). Istraživanje javnog mnjenja o evropskim integracijama. Retrieved from <http://www.kei.gov.me/vijesti/220283/Istrazivanje-javnog-mnjenja-o-evropskim-integracijama-Dvije-trecine-gradana-podrzava-ulazak-Crne-Gore-u-Evropsku-uniju.html>.

Kljajić, S. (2020, 4 April). EU pomaže više, ali je kina „bratska“. *Deutsche Welle*. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/sr/srbija-eu-poma%C5%BEE-vi%C5%A1e-ali-je-kina-bratska/a-53016017>.

Koleka, B. (2020, 28 March). Albania flies 30 doctors to Italy to help with coronavirus crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-albania-italy-idUSKBN21F0PG>.

Miladinović, A. (2020, 27 March). Intervju petkom: „NATO je u ovom trenutku bitniji od pregovora sa EU“ za Severnu Makedoniju, kaže predsednik Stevo Pendarovski. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-52057501>.

NDI. (2020, 1 April). NDI Poll: Public opinion research in North Macedonia. February/March 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-public-opinion-research-north-macedonia-februarymarch-2020>.

OECD. (2020f, 30 July). The COVID-19 crisis in Albania. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Albania.pdf>.

OECD. (2020e, 30 July). The COVID-19 crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina.pdf>.

OECD. (2020c, 30 July). The COVID-19 crisis in Montenegro. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Montenegro.pdf>.

OECD. (2020d, 30 July). The COVID-19 crisis in North Macedonia. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-North-Macedonia.pdf>.

OECD. (2020b, 30 July). The COVID-19 crisis in Serbia. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Serbia.pdf>.

OECD. (2020a). The COVID-19 crisis in the Western Balkans. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf>.

Official Journal of the European Union. (2020, 24 April). Commission implementing regulation (EU) 2020/568. Retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020R0568&from=EN>.

Regional Cooperation Council. (2019). Balkan Barometer 2019 – Public Opinion. Retrieved from https://www.rcc.int/seeds/files/RCC_BalkanBarometer_PublicOpinion_2019.pdf.

Rošić, D. (2020, 14 July). Agencije: EU uklanja Srbiju i Crnu Goru sa liste sigurnih zemalja.

Deutsche Welle. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/sr/agencije-eu-uklanja-srbiju-i-crnu-goru-sa-liste-sigurnih-zemalja/a-54177656>.

Sasso, A. (2020, 3 February). Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU: a limbo within a limbo. *Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso*. Retrieved from <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Bosnia-Herzegovina-and-the-EU-a-limbo-within-a-limbo-199386>.

Tidman, Z. (2020, 22 March). Coronavirus: Czech Republic seizes more than 100,000 face masks sent by China to help Italy tackle spread. *Independent*. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-face-masks-china-italy-czech-republic-latest-a9416711.html>.

Vijesti. (2020b). Djukanovic: Nadam se da EU ne odustaje od nas. Retrieved from <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/392221/dukanovic-nadam-se-da-eu-ne-odustaje-od-nas>.

Vijesti. (2020a). EU donirala Crnoj Gori još 10.000 maski. Retrieved from <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/449435/eu-donirala-crnoj-gori-jos-10000-maski>.

Worldcr. (2020, 4 June). EU ends restrictions on PPE exports. Retrieved from <https://www.worldcr.com/news/eu-ends-restrictions-on-ppe-exports/>

021.rs. (2020, 9 September). Istraživanje: 46% građana Srbije za ulazak u EU. Retrieved from <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/252784/Istrazivanje-46-odsto-gradjana-Srbije-za-ulazak-u-EU.html>.