

Pandemic Times: China and Russia's Health Diplomacy in the Balkans



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*Five European Union members: Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece do not recognise Kosovo as an independent state.

Health Diplomacy in the Western Balkans: the Non-EU Member States

The Scope

The global covid-19 pandemic has addressed the need for coordination between member states when tackling not only health related policies but also security related issues. It is a crisis like no other – one that places the individual and his/her health and security at the center of the international system. It pushed countries towards dialogue, while also increasing the potential for protectionism when it came to securing the supply of pharmaceuticals and needed materials to fight the pandemic. In a seemingly contradictory environment, countries did their best to support their national interests by providing health security at home and helping their partners abroad. This is why health diplomacy became a key element of foreign policy, especially during the first six months of the pandemic, when the degree of uncertainty and unpreparedness was highest.

While the term “health diplomacy” grew in popularity since the beginning of 2020, the concept is not a new one. Since we have started talking about the potential of climate change and considering events like tsunamis or earthquakes to be phenomena of extreme risks for the global population, health has become a goal of foreign policy, being considered a key contributor and a key element for human rights, socio-economic development and global poverty reduction. By addressing health as a socio-economic issue of highest relevance, countries are engaging in health diplomacy primarily through sanitary aid or even through food aid to other states. At the same time, such engagements, along with coordination on socio-economic related

policies support coordination in protecting joint interests and in taking positions on matters like disease control, access to medicines and technologies, food security or access to water resources.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, health diplomacy was brought up as a concept whenever countries decided to help one another fighting the pandemic. While health diplomacy was included in foreign policy for years, it became of heightened importance. More than that, during the first months of the pandemic, when much uncertainty and many questions were characterizing the global environment, the gestures that made for health diplomacy tactics were considered a measurement for soft power. Countries like China and Russia have used the opportunity to maintain or grow their influence in specific areas of interest, while the EU has been also looking to find ways for deterring the negative effects of the pandemic in Europe and its neighborhood regions.

Considering the importance of the topic for the Balkans – an area of competing interests, this report focuses on establishing the main health diplomacy tactics employed by the major powers in the region: Russia, China and the EU (especially for the non-EU states of the Western Balkans). The introduction sets the framework for discussing the topic while the next two chapters are giving the specifics of health diplomacy in the region.

Considering the fragile estate of the countries in the Western Balkans that are still aspiring

to EU membership, we have first considered their case. Then, we have refocused on the entire region, taking into account the specific interests that China and Russia have with regards to the EU members in the Balkans. The conclusions reflect the fact that, while health diplomacy has intensified in the Balkans during 2020, the tactics employed have been built on the existing strategic foundation of national interests. At the same time, while each country has behaved differently under the influence of health diplomacy tactics powered by China and

Russia, they have become key elements of these countries' strategy in the region. While the EU has grown its own influence through health diplomacy, Brussels needs to be aware and act upon the new Russian and Chinese additions to the tactical arsenal used for growing their mark into the Balkans.

Introduction

Situated in Southeast Europe, the Balkan Peninsula has always been a region defined by geopolitical volatility, fueled not only by the multi-dimensional rivalries between local actors, but also by great power competition. Naturally, being a region marked by so many ethnic, religious and cultural differences, the Balkans have historically been hard to control by any particular power and have always held the potential for conflict, being appropriately labeled as “the Powder Keg of Europe”.

The re-emergence of tensions in the region came with the end of the Cold War, the Fall of the Soviet Union, and the Breakup of Yugoslavia, key events that reshaped the geopolitical architecture of the region, creating new opportunities for foreign powers to assert their influence in the Peninsula. Attempts of western powers to stabilize the region through NATO expansion and the enlargement of the European Union have been recently met by the ever-growing influence of Russia and China, states that employed a variety of methods in order to achieve their designs.



Figure 1. The Current State of Western Balkan States in terms of Euroatlantic Integration.

The Russian Federation is a traditional actor in the Balkans, due to its cultural, religious, and historical ties with several states in the region. That is why Russia has mainly focused on Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Republika Srpska (the autonomous region of Bosnia and

Herzegovina that is predominantly populated by ethnic Serbs), a tendency confirmed by United Russia’s attempts to establish strong connections with similar political parties in those countries. Russia has also made use of its position as a permanent member of the UN

Security Council to veto any western initiative in the region: Russia has not recognized the independence of Kosovo; it has blocked US and EU attempts to solve the political crisis in North Macedonia regarding the “wiretapping scandals”¹; it has also encouraged Milorad Dodik’s rhetoric on the status of Republika Srpska and its eventual secession. A series of covert actions have allegedly been undertaken by Russia, such as the involvement in the planned coup d’état during the Montenegrin election of 2016² or the stimulation of popular discontent with the Prespa Agreement not only in North Macedonia, but also in Greece. It is also important to note that both Sputnik and Russia Today, pro-Russian news agencies, are very active in the region, thanks to operating in Serbian language. Last but not least, Russia has made sure that it controls the energy markets of Serbia and Republika Srpska through Gazprom (now the main gas supplier of Western Balkan countries) by purchasing several local refineries and gas stations. It is through all of these means that Russia has destabilized the region and attempted to slow down the Euro-Atlantic integration of these countries.

China, on the other hand, has only recently increased its presence in the Balkans, due to its emergence on the global scene as an economic powerhouse, in the past two decades. Differently from Russia, who has not hesitated to employ various means to assert its influence at a political level, China’s effort to establish a foothold in the Balkans only takes place at an economic level. China’s economic strategy resulted in the signing of cooperation agreements with all nations in the region, through the *Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries* (known as the 16+1 format). An exception is Kosovo, a country not recognized by China, mainly due to China’s rich cooperation with

Serbia. This way, China can be primarily seen as an investor, using vast amounts of capital in various projects, mainly focused on heavy industry, infrastructure, energy and mining. This strategy revolves around China’s Belt-and-Road Initiative, focusing on the development of the inter-connectivity of Balkan states, particularly in extension to the Greek port of Piraeus, which serves as the main entrance of Chinese goods in Europe. Examples of such infrastructure initiatives are: the construction of highways between Albania and Montenegro, between Bar and Boljare (between Montenegro and Serbia), and of a railway between Budapest and Belgrade.³ China sees the Balkans as a gateway for its commercial interest towards the European market, which is why, unlike Russia, China appears not to hinder the integration of the Western Balkans within the Euro-Atlantic sphere. There are theories that Western Balkan states such as Serbia may act as “Chinese Trojan Horses”⁴; the logic behind this is that the huge Chinese investments in the region may turn into “debt traps” that China may use as leverage against the European Union and its members.

It is in this context that the Covid-19 crisis unfolded, bringing global health at the forefront of popular concern, and intensifying the already existing tensions between the local powers. Taking the opportunity to strengthen their influence and image in the region, Russia and China engaged in “*health diplomacy*”, a topic that captures the interest of policymakers and scholars alike. “*Health Diplomacy*” can be defined as “international aid or cooperation meant to promote health or that uses health programming to promote non-health-related foreign aims”, being essentially a soft power tool.⁵

¹ Berendt, J. 2015. “Macedonia Government Is Blamed for Wiretapping Scandal”. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/world/europe/macedonia-government-is-blamed-for-wiretapping-scandal.html>.

² Higgins, A. 2016. “Finger Pointed at Russians in Alleged Coup Plot in Montenegro”. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/world/europe/finger-pointed-at-russians-in-alleged-coup-plot-in-montenegro.html>.

³ Bieber, F. & Tzifakis, N. 2019. “The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard? Myths, Realities and Policy Options,” SSRN Scholarly Paper, Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network. <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3406295>, p 7

⁴ Heath, R. & Gray, A. 2018. “Beware Chinese Trojan Horses in the Balkans, EU Warns,” POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/johannes-hahn-beware-chinese-trojan-horses-in-the-balkans-eu-warns-enlargement-politico-podcast/>.

⁵ Kurecic, P. & Haluga, V. 2021. “HEALTH DIPLOMACY AS A SOFT POWER TOOL OF THE PR CHINA DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC,” *Economic and Social Development: Book of Proceedings*, 237–43. <https://pesquisa.bvsalud.org/global-literature-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov/resource/pt/covidwho-1265291>

	Opportunity	Threat
Visible	Active opportunity seeking Pro-active participation in China-led initiatives, platitudes to Chinese leadership, advertising of cooperation	Active alarmism Voice criticism on China, link domestic with global debates
Under the radar	Cautious opportunity utilization Some participation in China-led initiatives, some cooperation, but without attracting too much attention	Threat avoidance Reduction of contact/interaction with China, but without making too much noise

Figure 2. “Ideal-type model showing different discourses on China pre-COVID-19”⁷

A closer look at the practice of health diplomacy during the pandemics of the 21st century would reveal a particularly relevant trend: if in the past, states used to deal with pandemics mainly through an international framework provided by such organizations as the World Health Organization, in more recent times, states chose to channel their aid on their own, in a bilateral manner. This trend from multilateralism to bilateralism may have multiple causes, such as the weakening of international institutions or the overall efficiency in fighting health crises, but the one that concerns this paper the most is the fact that bilateral aid seems to get more credit in general – which makes health diplomacy a more effective soft power tool⁶. The Covid-19 Pandemic seems to confirm this trend: actors decided to act almost exclusively in a bilateral manner, with China and Russia’s strategies in the Balkans as an excellent example.

An important factor in assessing the success of Health Diplomacy is the target countries’ positioning towards the external actor’s efforts, and the way their assistance has been framed publicly. Studies have defined four types of attitudes towards China’s health diplomacy: 1) Active Opportunity Seeking, 2) Cautious opportunity utilization, 3) Active alarmism and 4) Threat avoidance, taking into consideration the target countries’ perception of China’s actions, as well as how visible was this perception.

The argument is that the same logic can be applied towards Russia, although its presence in the Balkans has been constant in the past centuries; that is because discourses on Russia have indeed changed in the past years, and the COVID-19 health crisis may have accelerated the already-existing trends in this regard.

In these circumstances, how effective was Russia and China’s endeavor in solidifying their relations with Balkan countries and promote their image in the region through health diplomacy, relative to the European Union’s? This report attempts to answer this question by having a look at all Balkan states that received aid from China and Russia, and then by understanding the approaches of target states towards Chinese and Russian initiatives – whether they were perceived as opportunities or threats, and whether they were public or “under the radar” – in order to finally assess the success of Health Diplomacy.

We will first discuss the situation in the non-EU Balkan countries, namely Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo. Then, we will focus towards the EU member states in the Balkans: Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia and Slovenia.

6 Fazal, T. 2020. Health Diplomacy in Pandemical Times. *International Organization*, 74(S1), E78-E97. doi:10.1017/S0020818320000326

7 Vangeli, A. 2021. “Western Balkan Discourses On and Positioning Towards China During the COVID-19 Pandemic”. https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8496_western-balkan-discourses-on-and-positioning-towards-china-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf

1- Health Diplomacy in the Western Balkans: the Non-EU Member States

Serbia

Although it is a landlocked country, Serbia is nonetheless one of the most strategically important states in the Balkan Peninsula, being the most populous country and owning the largest economy out of the non-EU states in the region. Unlike other Western Balkan countries, Serbia does not aspire to become a NATO member, but it is, as of 1 March 2012, a candidate for EU accession, expecting to be able to join the Union by 2025. Serbia enjoys a special historical relation with Russia, that is reinforced by their cultural, linguistic and religious ties. In recent years, its economic ties with China have increased greatly: China is now the third most important trading partner for imports. Because of all these ties, Serbia can be considered a real battleground between the EU, Russia and China, whose competition was all the more evident during the Covid-19 health crisis.

As the European Commission swiftly enacted a ban on health supplies exports, China took the initiative by becoming the first to help Serbia. On March 21 2020, China delivered its first round of supplies, consisting in medical equipment and “six of China’s most eminent epidemiologists”⁸. China’s support was also shown through a fundraising campaign started by the Serbian Embassy in China on Weibo, a very popular social media website in China, an initiative that gathered more than 300,000 followers in the first day.⁹ Through funding from China and the UAE, a factory in Belgrade will be fully operational by the end of March 2022, that is set to produce the Sinopharm vaccine. The Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic, has said that the

output of the factory will be “enough for Serbia, the region and everyone who is interested”.¹⁰ These actions brought China great benefits, improving its image in Serbia, thanks to the attitude of the Serbian Leadership towards this aid: the “iron friendship” forged between the two nations was honored through the construction of a monument; at the same time, at the initiative of the Government, billboards in Serbia displayed the message “Thank you, brother Xi!”.



Figure 3. A billboard displaying the message “Thank You, Brother Xi!”, next to Serbia’s National Assembly building.

Russia’s support came in the shape of 11 planes, carrying “specialists in the field of virology and epidemiology with modern equipment for epidemiological diagnostics and disinfection actions”¹¹. The first such plane arrived in Serbia

8 CorD Magazine. 2021. “Aeroplane with Medical Equipment from China Lands at Belgrade Airport”. <https://cordmagazine.com/news/aeroplane-with-medical-equipment-from-china-lands-at-belgrade-airport/>.

9 Šantić ,D. & Antić, M. 2020. “Serbia in the Time of COVID-19: Between ‘Corona Diplomacy’, Tough Measures and Migration Management,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 61, no. 4-5 (2020): 546-58, p. 547.

10 Dragojlo, S. 2021. “Work Starts in Serbia on Chinese Sinopharm Vaccines Factory,” *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/09/work-starts-in-serbia-on-chinese-sinopharm-vaccines-factory/>.

11 Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. “The First Il-76 Aircraft of the Russian Aerospace Forces Flew to Serbia to Assist in the Fight against the Spread of Coronavirus Infection : Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation,” accessed September 14, 2021, https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12285000@egNews.

on April 3rd, 2020 – the same aid sent to Italy. The entire mission, organized by the Russian Ministry of Defense, brought to Serbia eight medical teams, consisting in “87 servicemen of the Russian Ministry of Defense, including military physicians, specialist virologists of the NBC protection troop, special medical equipment, protective equipment and 16 pieces of military equipment”¹². Their role was to disinfect several institutions, both public and medical, in more than 40 cities in Serbia. What is more, Serbia is now producing the Russian vaccine Sputnik: Torlak Institute in Belgrade produced the first doses of vaccine in June 2021. Indisputably, Russia’s help was mediocre relative to Chinese or EU aid, but the effect of this move was viewed very positively by the Serbian public, notably in those regions where the help was focused on.



Figure 4. Russian Ilyushin Il-76 plane, delivering a part of the Russian aid to Serbia.

The largest support, however, came from the European Union: the Commission announced a package of measures of prevention against COVID-19, to support Serbia, a country that heavily criticized the lack of help received from the EU at the beginning of the crisis. In fact, out of all Balkan states, Serbia received the largest sum of money from the EU: immediate assistance worth €15 million, for urgent needs negotiated with the Serbian government, and the purchase of medical supplies. Additional support rose to the sum of €70 million, aiming at “socio-economic development, employment, and social policies for the most vulnerable people”, out of which €30 million are dedicated to rural development, agriculture and small businesses¹³.

There are many other examples of EU assistance: a share of medical expertise on the side of the Centre for Disease Control in Brussels, the activation of the Civil Protection Mechanism, and the evacuation of Serbs from Wuhan, back when the disease was identified.¹⁴ Interestingly enough, this effort, which was much greater than the combined sum provided by any other parties, failed to capture any attention from the Serbian public, as opposed to what the Chinese managed to accomplish. This can be summarized by one of President Vucic’s controversial remarks: “European solidarity does not exist. It was a fairy tale. I have sent a special letter to the only ones who can help. That is China.” But Vucic’s words can be dismissed as “political theatre”: his main intention is to advertise his ties with China in order to gain leverage over Brussels.¹⁵

12 Joint Forces News. 2020. “COVID-19 ~ Russian Aid For Republic of Serbia,” <https://www.joint-forces.com/world-news/30831-covid-19-russian-aid-for-republic-of-serbia>.

13 European Commission. 2020. “EU Signs €70 Million New Pre-Accession Support Package with Serbia”. https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/eu-signs-eu70-million-new-pre-accession-support-package-serbia-2020-jun-19_en

14 Subotić, S. & Janjić, M. 2020. “What Have We Learned from the COVID-19 Crisis in Terms of Sino-Serbian Relations?”. European Policy Centre. <https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/what-have-we-learned-from-the-covid-19-crisis-in-terms-of-sino-serbian-relations/>

15 des Garets Geddes, T., Ghiretti, F. et al. “Europe China 360°”. MERICS, October 14, 2021, P. 2



Figure 5. On the left: “Iron Friends, Together In Good And Evil!” and on the right: “Thank You Brother Russia!”, on a municipal building in southern Belgrade.

Serbia’s attitude towards Russia and China’s involvement is the best example of what has been described as “Active Opportunity Seeking”¹⁶: Serbia took every chance to gain assistance from both Russia and China, and has not hesitated to advertise its cooperation. In fact, the Serbian Government went the furthest to underline how important its ties to China and Russia were, in the context of the Pandemic. Even though Vucic posited that this stronger relation with China will not affect Serbia’s trajectory towards European Integration, the Chinese and Russian health diplomacy have been undeniably successful. What is also worth noting is that the damage to EU image and

the absence of a credible commitment to EU membership is caused primarily by Serbian officials, not the interference of China or Russia. That is because, while Russia clearly has an interest in slowing down Serbia’s integration within the EU, this is not obvious of China. On the contrary, the Chinese may have a lot to gain from the accession of Serbia within the EU, in terms of access to European markets.¹⁷

¹⁶ Vangeli, A. 2021. “Western Balkan Discourses On and Positioning Towards China During the COVID-19 Pandemic”. https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8496_western-balkan-discourses-on-and-positioning-towards-china-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf

¹⁷ Subotić, S. & Janjić, M. 2020. “What Have We Learned from the COVID-19 Crisis in Terms of Sino-Serbian Relations?”. European Policy Centre. <https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/what-have-we-learned-from-the-covid-19-crisis-in-terms-of-sino-serbianrelations/>

Albania

Situated on the Western edge of the Balkan Peninsula, Albania has repeatedly found itself to be diplomatically isolated during its history. However, the dawn of the 21st Century saw Albania's trajectory to firmly turn towards the West, a change of course that was strengthened by Albania's special historical relationship with the United States, dating back to the end of the First World War, when the US supported the idea of an independent Albanian nation. This relationship permitted Albania to join NATO in 2009, and start EU accession talks in 2020.¹⁸ Albania also has a longstanding relationship with China, being the first country to recognize the People's Republic, and receiving economic aid in the shape of Chinese expertise and funds since the 1960s. At present, China is one of Albania's main economic partners and foreign investors, with Chinese capital pledged in various development initiatives. Russia, on the other hand, is seen as an untrustworthy partner, especially because of the extensive Russo-Serbian partnership. This is why Russia's influence in Albania is virtually non-existent, despite increasing Russian efforts to strengthen their soft power in the region.¹⁹

These dynamics seem to also apply in the case of health diplomacy. China made its commitments clear through donations of medical supplies to Albania. The first shipment arrived on April 25 2020, at Albania's Tirana International Airport.²⁰ As stated officially by the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), the shipment consisted in "testing reagents, protective clothing, medical

masks, goggles and surgical gloves", and was attended by important officials, such as Chinese Ambassador to Albania Zhou Ding, Albanian Deputy Minister of Health and Social Protection Mira Rakacolli and Albanian Deputy Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Etjen Xhafaj. Words of gratitude and solidarity were exchanged between the officials, outlining the importance of the Sino-Albanian friendship, and praising China's success in responding to the lack of medical supplies around the world.²¹ Albania also passed a normative act permitting the use of the Chinese Sinovac vaccine, which will be supplied through a Turkish distributor.²² Albania received as many as 1 million doses of the vaccine, with the first batch arriving on 25th of March 2021.²³



Figure 6. Chinese Ambassador to Albania Zhou Ding (Left) exchanges handover certificates with Albanian Deputy Minister of Health and Social Protection Mira Rakacolli (Mid) at Tirana International Airport.

¹⁸ Barigazzi, J. 2020. "North Macedonia, Albania Get Green Light for EU Membership Talks," POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/north-macedonia-albania-eu-membership-talks/>.

¹⁹ Cela, A. 2020. "Albania and the Influence of Outside Actors," THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS, AIES, p. 7-8., https://www.aies.at/download/2021/Role_of_External_Actors_in_WBDeutscherExecutiveSummary_1.pdf

²⁰ Bastian, J. 2020. "China's Evolving Footprint in the Western Balkans: Navigating Between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Covid-19 Pandemic," Tirana Observatory. <https://tiranaobservatory.com/2020/07/16/chinas-evolving-footprint-in-the-western-balkans-navigating-between-the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

²¹ China International Development Cooperation Agency. 2020. "China Hands over Medical Supplies to Albania to Help Fight COVID-19," accessed September 17, 2021, http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2020-04/26/c_484038.htm.

²² Euronews Albania. 2021. "Albanian Government Passes Normative Act on Chinese Vaccine" <https://euronews.al/en/news/2021/03/23/albanian-government-passes-normative-act-on-chinese-vaccine/>.

²³ Reuters Staff. 2021. "Albania Gets 192,000 Doses of Chinese Sinovac Vaccine," Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-albania-vaccines-idUSKBN2BH2N9>.

Russia's attempt to enlarge its influence in Albania naturally employed health diplomacy. On April 30, 2021, the Albanian Ministry of Health and Social Protection approved the use of the Sputnik V vaccine, as announced by the Russian Direct Investment Fund. This happened despite the diplomatic tensions between the two countries, that were provoked, interestingly enough, by the repeated violations of covid-19 restrictions by the Russian ambassador to Albania, Aleksei Krivosheev. On January 21, the Albanian Foreign Ministry declared the ambassador a "persona non grata", forcing him to leave the country in 72 hours. In reply, the Russians also expelled the first secretary of the Albanian Embassy in Moscow, Jonida Drogu. Russia condemned Albania's move as a "provocation with the aim of gaining political points" and accused Tirana of "playing along with anti-Russian forces in the West".²⁴

What is worth noting is that China and Russia are not the only non-EU external actor to aid Albania during the Covid-19 crisis. In May 2020, the *Qatar Fund for Development* also delivered a planeload of medical supplies to Albania to aid the nation's efforts in containing the eruption of the coronavirus.²⁵ On the same note, 10,000 doses of Sputnik V vaccines have been donated by the Crown Prince of the United Emirates, Muhammed Bin Zayed, as stated by two cabinet ministers, Ogerta Manastirliu and Arben Ahmetaj.²⁶

The EU help came in the shape of reorienting already-existing EU funding with a "twofold objective of helping Albania acquire emergency health supplies and equipment, and of addressing the social and economic fallout of the crisis." The resulting package destined to Albania sums up to €50.65 million, out of which €26 million, came from the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) 2020, for Economic Recovery

action, and other €4 million from IPA 2017 and €20 million from IPA 2019. All of these are part of the programme agreed upon by the European Commission in order to support the economic recovery of Albania, amounting to €103 million. According to Olivér Várhelyi, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, "The European Union continues to stand by Albania. In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, we have made adjustments to the existing funding to help Albania withstand the current social and economic challenges. At the same time, the EU funds aim at supporting the key reforms Albania needs to implement to move forward on its European path."²⁷

In conclusion, Albania's positioning towards China falls into the "Cautious opportunity utilization" category; even though the handover ceremonies were not underwhelming, there were no media campaigns to praise China's efforts, which were kept as under-the-radar as possible, granting Chinese health diplomacy a limited success. Russia, on the other hand, is seen as a threat by Tirana, although its efforts against it were not visible; that is why Albania has a "threat avoidance" behavior towards Moscow, and why Russia's soft power efforts did not have much success. What is also peculiar about Albania is the multitude of actors actively supporting its recovery. Its determined path towards integration within Western structures, its historical special relation with China and its religious ties with Arab countries and Turkey are the main elements that explain the diversity of supporters that Albania enjoys. Unlike Serbia, Albania's path towards EU Integration does not seem to be affected at all by the meddling of other actors, especially because of its strong commitment. However, The Chinese involvement, taking the shape of economic investments and health diplomacy should not be left under the radar.

24 Russian Direct Investment Fund. 2021. "Albania approves use of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine" https://rdif.ru/Eng_fullNews/6828/.

25 Bastian, J. 2020. "China's Evolving Footprint in the Western Balkans: Navigating Between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Covid-19 Pandemic," Tirana Observatory. <https://tiranaobservatory.com/2020/07/16/chinas-evolving-footprint-in-the-westernbalkans-navigating-between-the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

26 Euronews Albania. 2021. "Albanian Government Passes Normative Act on Chinese Vaccine" <https://euronews.al/en/news/2021/03/23/albanian-government-passes-normative-act-on-chinese-vaccine/>.

27 European Commission. 2020. "EU Grants €103.3 Million to Support Albania's European Path and Economic Recovery," https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/eu-grants-eu1033-million-support-albanias-european-path-and-economic-recovery-2020-11-12_fi.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Perhaps one of the most peculiar Balkan states, considering its political organization and ethnic diversity, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has been considered a potential candidate country for EU accession since 2003, and has applied for membership in 2016. Its NATO membership is also under negotiation since 2008. This lean towards the West, however, has not prevented other actors from asserting their influence over the country: Russia, for instance, has a special relationship with Republika Srpska (the autonomous entity within BiH that is inhabited predominantly by ethnic Serbs), manifested through the close ties between Moscow and Milorad Dodik, the current Serb member of the presidency of BiH, the collective federal head of state. The significant Muslim population of Bosnia serves as a base for the increasing Turkish presence in the country. The economic influence of China is also being felt, although not as strong as in Croatia or Serbia, through investments in infrastructure and thermal power plants, under the umbrella of China's "16+1" initiative.²⁸

On April 10, 2020, the first contingent of China's Donation arrived in Sarajevo, with the goal of supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina's fight against the coronavirus. This first batch, handed over the Ji Ping, the Ambassador of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina, consisted in six ventilators of different models and 58.000 masks, with more medical equipment and supplies on the way.²⁹ BiH's dealings with China in the field of medical equipment has also produced a corruption scandal: out of the large number of ventilators that were imported by BiH from

a Chinese firm, many were found to be useless. It seems that the ventilators were purchased from a rather unknown fruit-processing firms, with no license to import medical equipment, for the sum of 5 million euros. The ensuing investigation revealed that the ventilators "do not meet even a minimum of necessary characteristics for adequate treatment", as stated by prosecutors.³⁰ BiH was also donated 50,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine by the Chinese Government, a shipment that arrived on April 29, 2021³¹; In June, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the larger entity of BiH, has purchased half-a-million doses of the Sinopharm vaccine; interestingly enough, the terms of the contract were not made public, to the indignation of the press.³²



Figure 7. Chinese Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina Ji Ping (Left) and BiH's Minister of Civil Affairs Ankica Gudeljevic (Right) attend a handover ceremony of Chinese vaccines in Sarajevo.

28 Chrzová, B. et al. 2019. "Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors," Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute. https://6e7a0e8d-d938-46ff-832d-aid2166bc3a6.filesusr.com/ugd/2fb84c_0111856c88724a8cbocaacidadod762e.pdf.

29 FENA NEWS. 2020. "First Contingent of Chinese Donation in Medical Equipment Arrives," <https://www.fena.news/bih/first-contingent-of-chinese-donation-in-medical-equipment-arrives/>.

30 ABC News. 2020. "Bosnia: Imported Ventilators from China Useless for COVID-19," <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/bosnia-imported-ventilators-china-useless-covid-19-70620155>.

31 Yahoo News. 2021. "China Donates 50,000 Doses of COVID-19 Vaccine to Bosnia and Herzegovina". <https://news.yahoo.com/china-donates-50-000-doses-014835514.html>.

32 Kuloglija, N. 2021. "Bosnia Entity's Secrecy Over Vaccine Procurement Draws Criticism," *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/08/bosnia-entitys-secrecy-over-vaccine-procurement-draws-criticism/>.

The Russian Federation has focused its efforts exclusively on the predominantly Serb-populated Republika Srpska. Three Russian airplanes arrived on April 9, at the administrative center of the Banja Luka airport. Milorad Dodik himself has received the donation, along with Russian Ambassador Peter Ivancov. The delivery consisted in medical equipment and supplies, and teams of experts for disinfection, equipped with specialized military vehicles. It is worth noting that a Russian team has attempted to perform a disinfection procedure in the main hospital of the predominantly Croat West Mostar, at which point they were forced to renounce, because no officials of the BiH approved their request.³³ In February 2021, Republika Srpska also authorized the use of Sputnik V, with the first batches of the vaccine arriving the same month, out of a total of 400,000. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina did not receive any vaccines until the one ordered through the COVAX scheme and the EU would arrive.

Aid from the EU first arrived in the shape of medical supplies and equipment, including 7500 testing kits, 15.000 protective visors for medical staff and respirators. It was received by Sarajevo Canton Prime Minister Mario Nenadić, at the Institute for the Public Health of Sarajevo Canton. The visors were bought by the EU from a Bosnian firm, and thus supporting the local economy. By the end of April, 7 million euros were invested by the European Union for Bosnia and Herzegovina.³⁴ The EU also helped with the delivery of the vaccines through the EU4Health scheme, guaranteeing 1.3 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to BiH.³⁵ In total, the EU granted 330 million to Bosnia and Herzegovina, for various needs: procurement of medical equipment and materials, access to vaccines and implementation of vaccination campaigns, assistance in vaccine preparedness, macro-economic assistance, support for small

and medium enterprises, tackling of economic and social consequences, etc.³⁶

Bosnia and Herzegovina's attitude towards China can be catalogued as "cautious opportunity utilization", since it only used Chinese help when faced with limited possibilities, especially regarding vaccination. BiH's attempt to keep information regarding this help as limited as possible meant that the success of health diplomacy in this country was rather limited. Russia, however, has successfully increased the divisions within the country, whose attitudes clearly differ: while the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of "threat avoidance", Republika Srpska has obviously engaged in "active security seeking". This way, BiH's chances to join the EU and NATO have been undermined considerably.

33 Latal, S. 2020. "COVID-19 Raises Geopolitical Stakes in the Balkans," Analytical Study. Western Balkans at the Crossroads. Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute. p. 10-14., <https://www.balkancrossroads.com/covid-19-raises-geopolitical-stakes>.

34 UNDP. "7500 EU-Funded COVID-19 Testing Kits Delivered, Delivery of Medical Masks Begins". Accessed September 19, 2021, https://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia_and_herzegovina/en/home/presscenter/articles/2020/covid-19-Delivery2.html.

35 Y.Z. 2021. "The EU Has so Far Delivered over 1.3 Million Vaccine Doses to BiH," *Sarajevo Times*. <https://www.sarajevotimes.com/the-eu-has-so-far-delivered-over-1-3-million-vaccine-doses-to-bih/>.

36 Council of the European Union. "COVID-19: Over €3.3 Billion Support for the Western Balkans". Accessed September 19, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/economic-support-to-western-balkans/>.

North Macedonia

The Covid-19 crisis found North Macedonia in a critical period, marked by indecision and uncertainty. While the election of the SDSM and Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, with its pro-Western stance, has reinvigorated North Macedonia's path towards entrance in the EU club and secured NATO membership, many of the country's problems remained unsolved. The high level of unemployment and relatively low average wages translate into a weak economy, while the corruption issues, which are by far among the greatest in Europe³⁷, are creating even more barriers in the way towards EU accession, in the shape of Rule of Law concerns. Regardless of these issues, North Macedonia seems determined to opt for a Western path, in the detriment of its relations with Russia, that have never been remarkably strong, despite the cultural and religious ties. When it comes to China, however, despite the soaring of the relation in the 2000s, North Macedonia has opened its gates to massive Chinese investments, especially in infrastructure. However, the capital committed by the Chinese to these endeavors are not nearly as large as those in Serbia.³⁸

In terms of health diplomacy, the first actor to aid North Macedonia was the United States. On April 6, 2020, the US Government, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), committed \$1.1 million, in order to support the fight against the coronavirus. Through this assistance, the US Government will support the preparation of laboratory systems for large-scale testing of the disease and the establishment of rapid response teams, with the goal of preventing the infection of the North Macedonian Population.

Chinese help was more substantial. On April 19, 2020, the first load of medical supplies destined to help in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic arrived at the Skopje International Airport. At the handover ceremony, important officials were present: Chinese Ambassador to North Macedonia Zhang Zuo and Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia Bujar Osmani, via VTC, due to self-isolation.³⁹ One year later, the Chinese announced that they will deliver doses of the Sinopharm vaccine to North Macedonia, with a first batch of 200,000 arriving in early April, permitting North Macedonia to start its vaccination campaign by May 2021. Prime Minister Zaev was also among the people who chose to vaccinate with Sinopharm.⁴⁰ By the end of the month, another donation of 100,000 doses of the same vaccine were delivered by Beijing. Naturally, words of gratitude, admiration and solidarity were traded between the participants at the handover ceremony, with Ambassador Zuo stating that "Pure gold proves its worth in a blazing fire, and a friend in need is a friend indeed", and that this donation "further enriches our friendship between two countries and militaries!"⁴¹ 500,000 Sinovac vaccines were added to these on June 27, further enhancing the country's capability to inoculate its population of 2 million people. There was little emphasis on the inter-governmental relations, and the mediatization of these efforts was limited, talking mostly about bottom-up initiatives conducted by citizens who secured donations of supplies through their Chinese networks.

37 Taseva, S. 2021. "In North Macedonia, Public Pressure Opens a Door to Combat Entrenched Corruption." Transparency International. <https://www.transparency.org/en/blog/in-north-macedonia-public-pressure-opens-a-door-to-combat-entrenched-corruption>.

38 Chrzová, B. et al. 2019. "Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors," *Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute*. p. 49-55.

39 Xinhua. 2020. "China Provides Medical Supplies to North Macedonia to Help Battle Coronavirus". http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/19/c_138990481.htm.

40 Zuo, Z. 2021a. "Remarks by Ambassador Zhang Zuo at Polyclinic Jane Sandanski". https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1873879.shtml.

41 Zuo, Z. 2021b. "Remarks by Ambassador Zhang Zuo at the Handover Ceremony of Chinese Military Donation of Sinopharm Vaccines to North Macedonia" <http://mk.china-embassy.org/eng/sgxw/t1876056.htm>.



Figure 8. “Soldiers unload Chinese medical supplies at Skopje International Airport in Skopje”

However, Russia was much faster in selling its vaccine, the Sputnik V, to North Macedonia. In March, the first 3,000 arrived in Skopje, out of a grand total of 200,000. North Macedonia was quick to approve the usage of the vaccine and use it to inoculate its vulnerable population and medical personnel. It is worth mentioning that the first country to actually aid North Macedonia in this direction was Serbia, that donated 4,680 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech back in February, a much-needed aid, considering the fact that North Macedonia already ordered 800,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine and 200,000 doses of the Chinese Sinopharm, whose delivery was delayed.⁴²

Help from the EU came months later, in the Summer of 2020, an aid secured through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) and the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC). This was permitted by North Macedonia’s status as a NATO member; as the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Zhernovski emphasized, “Allies always respond to challenges together, and NATO membership provided us with greater security and stability,

as well as the opportunity to tackle this health as well as economy challenge more easily.” The help came through the Republic of Austria, and consisted in “tents, blankets, electric generators, mattresses and disposable beddings”. The second batch was received in Skopje, at the military barracks “Goce Delchev” in Skopje, with many important officials attending: The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrej Zhernovski, the Ambassador of the Republic of Austria H.E. Georg Woutsas and the Chief of the NATO Liaison Office Skopje, Colonel Zoran Jankovic. Austria also helped through treating patients from North Macedonia in Austrian hospitals which necessitate critical hospital treatment and intensive care.⁴³ The bulk of EU aid came through the COVID-19 Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA), a program which is “part of the EU’s wider engagement with neighboring and enlargement countries and is intended as an exceptional EU crisis response instrument.”⁴⁴ Two tranches of €80 million in conditional long-term loans were sent towards North Macedonia, aiming to “enhance macroeconomic stability and create space to allocate resources towards mitigating the severe negative socio-economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.”

The limited success of both the Chinese and the Russian health diplomacy campaign in North Macedonia is due to Skopje’s attitude of “cautious opportunity utilization”, limiting the mediatization and promotion of the Chinese help. This may be due to North Macedonia’s strong commitment towards Euro-Atlantic integration.⁴⁵

42 Reuters Staff. 2021. “North Macedonia Receives First Batch of Russian Sputnik V Vaccine,” *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-northmacedonia-vaccin-idUKL8N2L5oNZ>.

43 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia. 2020. “Second Package of Aid from Austria for Combatting COVID-19,” <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/8/post/2293/second-package-of-aid-from-austria-for-combatting-covid19>.

44 EU BUZZ. 2021. “EU Disburses €460 Million in Macro-Financial Assistance to Tunisia, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia,” <https://eubuzz.news/eu-disburses-e460-million-in-macro-financial-assistance-to-tunisia-kosovo-montenegro-and-north-macedonia/>.

45 Chrzová, B. et al. 2019. “Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors,” Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute. pp. 57-60. https://6e7a0e8d-d938-46ff-832d-aid2166bc3a6.filesusr.com/ugd/2fb84c_0111856c88724a8cbocaacidadod762e.pdf

Montenegro

Independent since 2006, the Republic of Montenegro is situated in the westmost part of the Balkan Peninsula, on the shores of the Adriatic Sea. It is considered to be the most well-prepared candidate for EU membership, being expected to become a member of the EU as early as 2025. Since 2017, Montenegro is also a NATO member, a development that enshrines the country's firm turn towards the West. It is this very change in course that damaged Montenegro's good relation with Russia: Montenegro joined the EU in imposing sanctions on Russia since 2014, and Russia answered in kind by getting involved in a coup attempt in 2016, paving the way to a souring of their bilateral relation. China's influence in Montenegro, however, has been increasing the past years, through infrastructure projects and culture promotion;⁴⁶ the limited transparency of China may prove to be an issue for Montenegro's small and vulnerable economy.⁴⁷

Despite the strong economic cooperation between Montenegro and China, there was no early help from the Chinese. It was only in February 19, 2021, that China has decided to donate 30,000 Sinopharm vaccines, so that Montenegro would kickstart its inoculation campaign.⁴⁸ The donation arrived on March 3, as reported by the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA); the handover ceremony was attended by Chinese Ambassador to Montenegro Liu Jin and Montenegrin Health Minister Jelena Borovinić Bojović. Eventually, the Montenegrin Government would order as many as 200,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine, that arrived in the country by the end of June, 2021. The delivery was received by Minister of Health

Jelena Borovinić Bojović and Director General of the Directorate for Digital Health in the Ministry of Health Aleksandar Sekulić, in a handover ceremony, as reported officially by the Montenegrin Government.⁴⁹ Russian involvement through health diplomacy was largely absent from Montenegro, except for the fact that Podgorica has purchased as many as 42,000 Sputnik V vaccines and negotiates a larger contract of 200,000.⁵⁰



Figure 9. Minister of Health Jelena Borovinić Bojović and Chinese Ambassador to Montenegro, H.E. Liu Jin.

In Montenegro's case, European help arrived way before China or Russia could make any move; in May 2020, medical and personal protective equipment donated by the EU arrived in the country. The Montenegrin Government reported the arrival of one part of the donation, consisting in 14 medical respirators and a batch of personal protective equipment for the health

46 Ibidem.

47 Xhambazi, V. 2021. "Montenegro, the First Victim of China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy," *New Eastern Europe*. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/05/07/montenegro-the-first-victim-of-chinas-debt-trap-diplomacy/>.

48 Ralev, R. 2021. "China to Donate 30,000 Doses of COVID-19 Vaccine to Montenegro - Embassy," *SeeNews*. <http://seenews.com/news/china-to-donate-30000-doses-of-covid-19-vaccine-to-montenegro-embassy-731853>.

49 Ministry of Health of Montenegro. 2021. "200,000 Sinopharm Vaccines Arrive in Montenegro." <https://www.gov.me/en/article/200000-sinopharm-vaccines-arrive-in-montenegro>.

50 Government of Montenegro. 2021. "Another 5,000 Doses of Russian Vaccine Arrive in Montenegro," <https://www.gov.me/en/article/another-5000-doses-of-russian-vaccine-arrive-in-montenegro>.

sector (80,000 gloves, 50,560 surgical masks and 10,200 goggles). This was part of an EU initiative worth 3 million Euros.⁵¹ As part of the 2021 EU response to the coronavirus crisis in the Western Balkans, Montenegro received a grand total of €103 million, out of which €3 was dedicated to immediate support to the health sector in the shape of medical equipment and materials, €40.5 million was destined to the tackling the economic and social effects of the crisis⁵², and €60 million to macro-financial assistance.⁵³

Montenegro represents a case where Chinese and Russian health diplomacy had very little success, compared to EU efforts, and this is especially because of Montenegro's positioning towards all of these actors. Montenegro, the most developed economy in the non-EU Western Balkans in terms of GDP per capita, has firmly turned towards the West in the past years; towards China, however, Montenegro has a "cautious opportunity utilization" behavior, while sour relations with Russia pushed Podgorica towards an approach characterized by "threat avoidance".

⁵¹ Government of Montenegro. 2020. "Part of Medical Equipment Provided by EU Arrived in Montenegro". <https://www.gov.me/en/article/224511--part-of-medical-equipment-provided-by-eu-arrived-in-montenegro>. Council of the European Union, "COVID-19."

⁵² Council of the European Union. "COVID-19: Over €3.3 Billion Support for the Western Balkans". Accessed September 19, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/economic-support-to-western-balkans/>.

⁵³ European Commission. 2021. "EU Disburses €460 Million in Macro-Financial Assistance to Tunisia, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia." https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/ip_21_2803

Kosovo*

Located in the center of the Balkan Peninsula, Kosovo becomes one of the most interesting cases to be discussed. Its main national issues revolve around its lack of recognition from important international actors, although it is acknowledged as a potential candidate for EU accession. Russia's influence, for instance, is being felt through its actions within international institutions, that are focused on preventing Kosovo from obtaining more international recognition, an attitude fueled by its strong relationship with Serbia. At the same time, the economic presence of China is not being felt either, exactly because China does not recognize Kosovo.⁵⁴

When it comes to Russia and China's health diplomacy in the Western Balkans, Kosovo is the exception: there is no direct involvement of these countries, there is no vaccine imported from them. However, looking at the larger picture will reveal the indirect effects of Russia and China's actions: their focus on Serbia, a state that still claims Kosovo as is own, may have given the Serbian state the ability to exert soft power over Kosovo through a health diplomacy of its own.⁵⁵ This has happened through an unofficial vaccination campaign ran by the Serbian Government in December 2020, in the predominantly Serb populated northern part of Kosovo, a region

where the government in Pristina has a limited control. Belgrade essentially maintains a "shadow" health-care system in Serb-populated areas of Kosovo – hospitals and other medical customers use Serbian insurance schemes.⁵⁶ In this context, Serbia has used up to 5000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to launch the vaccination efforts in Northern Kosovo, an act that is practically a direct infringement on Kosovo's sovereignty, undermining Pristina's authority and legitimacy.



Figure 10. Ethnic Distribution in Kosovo.

54 Chrzová, B. et al. 2019. "Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors," Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute. https://6e7a0e8d-d938-46ff-832d-aid2166bc3a6.filesusr.com/ugd/2fb84c_0111856c88724a8cbocaacidadod762e.pdf

55 Vuksanovic, V. 2021. "Kosovo: The Goal of Serbia's Global 'Vaccine Diplomacy,'" EUobserver. <https://euobserver.com/opinion/152849>

56 Deutsche Welle. 2021. "Coronavirus: Serbia Provokes Kosovo with Vaccination Scheme" <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-serbia-provokes-kosovo-with-vaccination-scheme/a-56375928>.

*Five European Union members: Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece do not recognise Kosovo as an independent state.

2 - Health Diplomacy in the EU member states of the Balkans

Romania

Unlike the rest of the Balkan states, Romania has not received help from Russia, and only a very minimal support from China in terms of equipment at the start of the pandemic. This Chinese support has consisted of assistance given by the Chinese authorities for the acquisition of medical equipment at the start of the pandemic, when Europe was facing a major crisis in terms of medical supplies, and also symbolic donations made by the Chinese community living in Romania.⁵⁷ This assistance has not been mentioned in the Romanian press - unlike in the other Balkan states where Chinese support was highly mediatized - and was only addressed in posts published on the website of the Chinese embassy. Relations between Romania and Russia have been traditionally cold. After the fall of the communist regime, Romania has been one of the pro-Western and pro-American states in Southern Europe. On the Eastern Flank of NATO, Romania, together with Poland, represent the main pillars of the US security cooperation in the region. Cold relations with Russia are based on a long history of animosity and conflicts, and this attitude isn't only reflected within the political establishment, but also at the level of the entire population, a fact that is underlined in opinion polls.⁵⁸ On the other hand, relations with China have been very good during the communist period and have continued in the same manner even after Romania has ceased to be a communist state. Various intentions of cooperation have existed

in the economic, energy, nuclear energy, and transport infrastructure domains. Bilateral visits have reached their peak between 2013-2015, followed by a period of regression in light of the competition between the US and China and the US' China containment policy, which has influenced Bucharest's own relations with Beijing. Currently, Romania is very reluctant to have Chinese investments in strategic domains or to offer support to Chinese companies in the infrastructure domain. Moreover, Romania has taken a rigorous stance in this matter, as practically, in this moment, Chinese companies cannot participate in EU-financed auctions in the infrastructure domain.⁵⁹

In early 2021, Romania did not buy any of the vaccines produced by Russian or Chinese firms and doesn't have any intention to do so in the future, unlike other Balkan states. Bucharest has fully relied on the European Union for supplies and financial assistance and has only purchased Western-produced vaccines. Thus, Russian and Chinese health diplomacy was not felt in Romania. Romania is, however, affected by disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories related to the vaccines and COVID-19, many of the primary sources coming from Russia and China. Romania, like other states in the Balkans, is the victim of a disinformation policy, whose aim is to weaken the trust in Western values, lower the cohesion at the EU and NATO level, and lower the trust of the

57 Chinese Embassy in Romania. 2020. "Interviu exclusiv al Ambasadorul Jiang Yu pentru revista "Economistul"<http://www.chinaembassy.org/rom/dsxxnew/dshdnew/t1840978.html>

58 INSCOP. 2021. „Neîncrederea publică: Vest vs. Est, ascensiunea curentului naționalist în era dezinformării și fenomenului știrilor false. Capitolul 1: Vest vs. Est, percepția asupra UE, SUA, Rusia”<https://www.inscop.ro/22-martie-2021-neincrederea-publica-vest-vs-est-ascensiunea-curentului-nationalist-in-era-dezinformarii-si-fenomenului-stirilor-false-capitolul-i-vest-vs-est-perceptia-asupra-ue-sua-rusia/>

59 Agiu, M. 2021. "Chinezii, excluși oficial din licitațiile pentru infrastructură din România", *Adevărul*. https://adevarul.ro/economie/stiri-economice/chinezii-exclusi-oficial-licitatiile-infrastructura-romania-tari-vor-putea-participa-1_608fe40f5163ec4271a6a83a/index.html

citizens in their own institutions. As a result, the rate of vaccination is currently at around 33%⁶⁰, of which the rate within the rural areas only reaches 16,31%⁶¹, these numbers being the direct effect of disinformation caused by circulated conspiracy theories and fake news. The population of the rural areas and the small towns with a lower education level are the most likely to believe in this false information, a fact that is reflected in the low vaccination rate. In October-November, Romania faces a significant increase of infections and relies on the support of the EU for important medical supplies such as ventilators.⁶² Romania has not requested support from either Russia or China. In contrast with other Balkan states such as Serbia, the mainstream press publishes articles with a critical tone, especially towards Russia, aiming, for example, at the vaccine diplomacy employed by Moscow. Publications have mentioned that Russia might have stolen technology from AstraZeneca in order to develop the Sputnik vaccine⁶³, or that the vaccine has been the cause of the failure of the Slovakian government in April 2021⁶⁴. The use of the Sputnik vaccine as “propaganda instrument and aggressive diplomacy tool” has also been outlined.⁶⁵

60 Our World in Data. 2021. „Share of people vaccinated against COVID-19, October 14”. Accessed October 14th, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?zoomToSelection=true&facet=none&pickerSort=asc&pickerMetric=location&Interval=7-day+rolling+average&Relative+to+Population=true&Align+outbreaks=false&country=BGR~ROU&Metric=People+vaccinated+%28by+dose%29>

61 Guvernul României. „Situația vaccinării în România”. Accessed October 16th, 2021. <https://vaccinare-covid.gov.ro/situatia-vaccinarii-in-romania/>.

62 Martuscelli, C. 2021. “Romania Asks for Emergency Help from the EU to Fight Coronavirus,” POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-asks-for-emergency-help-from-the-eu-to-fight-coronavirus/>.

63 Ionescu, A. 2021. “Rusia ar fi furat tehnologia vaccinului AstraZeneca pentru a-și produce propriul vaccin Sputnik”. Antena 3. <https://www.antena3.ro/externe/rusia-tehnologie-astrazeneca-sputnik-616530.html>.

64 Ștefan, A. 2021. “Vaccinul rusesc le-a adus sfarsitul! Primul guvern din UE care pica din cauza pandemiei,” Ziare. <https://ziare.com/europa/stiri-europa/guvern-slovacia-vaccin-sputnik-demisie-guvern-1670859>.

65 Hendrik, A. 2021. “Franța acuză Rusia! Vaccinul Sputnik V, instrument de propagandă. Replica Moscovei a venit imediat” Evenimentul Zilei. <https://evz.ro/franta-acuza-rusia-vaccinul-sputnik-v-instrument-de-propaganda-replica-moscovei-a-venit-imediat.html>.

Bulgaria

Situated in the North-East of the Balkan Peninsula, on the coast of the Black Sea, Bulgaria is a NATO member since 2004, and a member of the EU since 2007. This firm placement into the Euro-Atlantic sphere nullifies its cultural and religious ties with Russia, who allegedly labelled Bulgaria as an “unfriendly to Russia”⁶⁶. Its relations with China, at least before the pandemic, were rather limited, considering the scarce Chinese investments, relative to other Balkan countries. The pandemic, however, may have opened the door for Chinese investments, making it all the more interesting to find out how health diplomacy may have had an influence on such a development.

The Chinese sent help as early as April 2020, when a shipment arrived in the Sofia Airport. This donation from the Chinese side is the result of a telephone conversation between the Prime Ministers of Bulgaria and China, Boyko Borissov and Li Katsyan, on March 18; assistance has been provided by both countries and NATO, through the NATO Strategic Air Transport Partnership Program. The first shipment delivered on April 17, and consisted in 568,000 KN95 masks, out of a promised total of “50 respirators, 1,000,000 medical masks type KN95, 608,770 disposable masks KN95, 171,429 packages Hydroxychloroquine Sulfate Tablets 100 mg. and 30,000 packs of Azithromycin Dispersible Tablet 250 mg”, reports a Bulgarian publication. The handover ceremony was attended by then-Health Minister of Bulgaria, Kiril Ananiev, the Ambassadors of the People’s Republic of China, Dong Xiaojun, and the United States, Herro Mustafa.⁶⁷ In the ensuing weeks, the Bulgarian

government also purchased a considerable number of drugs and various medical products required in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, from China.

Although no help came from Russia, Sofia did consider purchasing the Sputnik V vaccine from the Russians. In fact, by the end of April 2021, a Bulgarian parliamentary committee passed a motion that would have approved the purchase of the vaccine. In the context of the low performance of Bulgaria’s vaccination campaign, the socialists within the Bulgarian Parliament promoted the idea that the Russian vaccine might solve the vaccine shortage that Bulgaria was confronting.⁶⁸ However, Bulgaria chose to respect EU regulations and reduce itself to using EU-approved vaccines.

Bulgaria has welcomed Chinese help, especially at the early stages of the pandemic. An good illustration of the public sentiment at that stage was provided by Defense Minister Krasimir Donchev Karakachanov, who declared at the beginning of the pandemic that it was China and Turkey, not Brussels, that was of real help to Bulgaria. He mentioned that “we have not received a single mask from Europe so far. We get help from China, from Turkey – countries with slightly different world views regarding the role of the state and its institutions in the world”. From his perspective, “the only institution that works for the benefit of citizens in Europe is not the expensive European bureaucracy, but the nation-state”. As the pandemic progressed however, the media refrained from applauding China’s efforts. On the contrary: news outlets

66 Novinite. 2021. “Bulgaria Added to Russia’s List of ‘Unfriendly States’” <https://www.novinite.com/articles/209251/Bulgaria+Added+to+Russia%E2%80%99s+List+of+%E2%80%9CUnfriendly+States%E2%80%9D>.

67 Dimitrova, С. “Командир Жасмина Христова и Екипажът ѝ Доставиха Първата Пратка Медицински Материали От Китай” Accessed September 30, 2021, <https://dnes.dir.bg/obshtestvo/komandir-zhasmina-hristova-i-ekipazhat-i-dostaviha-parvata-pratka-meditsinski-materiali-ot-kitay>.

68 Nikolov, K. 2021. “Bulgaria Moves on Purchase of Sputnik V Vaccine” Euractiv. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/bulgaria-moves-on-purchase-of-sputnik-v-vaccine/.

were particularly sympathetic to Western partners, underlining the fact that Chinese donations were facilitated by NATO. The lack of official sources and of any advertising of

Chinese efforts demonstrates Bulgaria's attitude of "cautious opportunity utilization".



Figure 11. Bulgarian Health Minister Kiril Ananiev welcomes the Chinese donation, at the Sofia Airport.

Greece

Greece, the southernmost country in the Balkans, is the “oldest” EU member in the region, being the only Balkan nation not to fall in the Soviet sphere of influence in the aftermath of the Second World War, firmly integrated within the Euro-Atlantic sphere. Greece’s relation with China is defined by China’s ownership of 67% of the Port of Piraeus, which serves as a gateway for Chinese interests into European markets. Greece’s relatively special historical, cultural and religious ties with Russia do not currently translate into a close diplomatic relation, especially since the diplomatic spat in 2018.

With Greece as the primary Chinese doorway to the European Union, China would naturally have a very strong incentive to fructify its opportunity to sway Greece through health diplomacy. Chinese efforts, however, were rather limited. Allegedly, China provided Greece with 500,000 masks as an aid against the coronavirus, arriving at the Athens International Airport on March 21, 2020, where Health Minister of Greece, Vassilis Kikilias was present.⁶⁹ CIDCA reports 550,000 masks, and “many other aid packages weighing around 10 tons, donated by Chinese enterprises and organizations”.⁷⁰ However, there are no official Greek sources reporting on this topic. Other than this, Greece did not receive or purchase anything Covid-related from China or Russia, including vaccines such as Sputnik V, Sinovac or Sinopharm. In fact, Greece gave in to EU pressure when it comes to accepting such vaccines: people who visit Greece and are inoculated with the Sputnik V vaccine are now required to undergo additional tests, as demanded by French and German criticism.⁷¹ Being part of the EU also meant that Greece received help from the Union in the shape

of the common recovery plan approved by the end of 2020.

Naturally, Greek attitude towards China should be categorized as “cautious opportunity utilization” – Greece was always open to Chinese investments; however, EU membership has limited its capacity to absorb Chinese opportunities. The success of Chinese health diplomacy, however, resulted in the Greek decision to also use Chinese investments in order to recover from the crisis: the Greek Minister of Development and Investments, Adonis Georgiadis, mentioned that Greece sought “to re-establish the strong relationship with China” before COVID-19.⁷²



Figure 12. Chinese Ambassador to Greece Zhang Qiyue (R) and Greek Health Minister Vasilis Kikilias attend the handover ceremony of medical supplies in Athens, Greece, on March 21, 2020.

69 Republic World. 2020. “Greece Receives 5 Lakh Masks from China to Combat Deadly COVID-19 Outbreak” <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/greece-gets-500000-mask-supplies-from-china-on-an-aircraft-to-athens.html>.

70 Xinhua. 2020. “Chinese Medical Supplies Arrive in Athens in Aid of Greece’s COVID-19 Fight” http://subsites.chinadaily.com.cn/cidca/2020-03/21/c_464045.htm.

71 Michalopoulos, S. 2021. “Greece Bows to EU Pressure, Requires Test for Russian Tourists” EURACTIV. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/greece-bows-to-eu-pressure-requires-test-for-russian-tourists/.

72 Jabarkhyl, N. 2021. “Greece Eyes Chinese Investment for Post-Pandemic Recovery”. CGTN. <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2021-04-23/Greece-eyes-Chinese-investment-for-post-pandemic-recovery-ZG14YkYjra/index.html>.

Croatia

As the newest member of the European Union, Croatia has fulfilled its desire to become a part of the Euro-Atlantic club, being also a part of NATO since 2009. This closeness to Brussels weakened Croatia's ties to Moscow, in spite of the loose cultural ties between the two nations. Its relations with China, however, is improving, due to the Chinese investments in Croatia. These relations translated perfectly into health diplomacy efforts on all sides.

On March 29 2020, a load of Chinese medical supplies arrived by air at Zagreb Franjo Tudman International Airport. The supplies brought by China were purchased by the Croatian Government, and was welcomed by Chinese Ambassador H.E.Mme Xu Erwen, Mr. Petesic, Head of Croatian Prime Minister's Office and Mr. Liu Kai, Economic and Commercial Counsellor of the Embassy.⁷³ On April 12, more supplies arrived, which also included donations from the Chinese Government.⁷⁴



Figure 13. Chinese Ambassador Xu Erwen (2nd Left) and Croatian Health Minister Vili Beros (2nd Right).

While Russian help was absent, Croatia had the intention of taking Hungary's example and purchasing the Sputnik V vaccine in February 2021. Being wary of the slow pace of EU regulation, the Croatian Government attempted to obtain approval from a local drug agency that would evaluate the safety of the vaccine.⁷⁵ The Prime Minister's declaration, however, later emphasized the need for a joint decision, which meant that Croatia was not going to take this decision without permission from Brussels: "We are currently waiting for the green light to arrive for Sputnik V's safety, from the Croatian drug agency and its EU counterpart."⁷⁶ Ultimately, as the EU did not approve the administration of the Russian vaccine, neither did Croatia.

The EU aid allocated to Croatia raised up to the sum of €202 million, as approved by the European Commission at the beginning of 2021. As the official site of the Commission mentions, this aid is designed to support "companies of all sizes active in the sports and tourism sectors (and in directly related ones, such as accommodations, restaurants) and, affected by the coronavirus outbreak". As conditioned by the Temporary Framework, this scheme would provide aid to various companies in loans as large as €800,000⁷⁷, according to the comprehensive ruleset available on the official site of the European Commission.

As in other EU countries, Chinese health diplomacy saw limited success, mainly because there were no state-funded campaigns in Croatia. The lack of transparency and official sources is another reason of this inefficiency, as compared to the extensive information provided by the European Union.

73 Chinese Embassy in Croatia. 2020. "Chinese Medical Supplies Fighting against COVID-19 Arrive in Croatia". https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjwb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbw_665378/t1763299.shtml.

74 Xinhua. 2020. "Chinese Aid for Fighting COVID-19 Arrives in Croatia," http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/12/c_138969672.htm.

75 Reuters Staff. 2021. "Croatia Says It Might Buy Russian COVID-19 Vaccine without Waiting for EU," *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-croatia-vaccine-idUSL8N2KN276>.

76 Macan, T.T. 2021. "Russia Offers Croatia Sputnik V Vaccine," EURACTIV. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/russia-offers-croatia-sputnik-v-vaccine/.

77 European Commission. 2021. "State Aid: Coronavirus: €202 Million Croatian Scheme". https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_49.

Slovenia

Slovenia is the most economically-developed country in the Balkan Peninsula, in terms of GDP per capita, while also enjoying a geographical proximity to Central Europe. In fact, among all ex-communist countries, Slovenia had one of the smoothest turns towards the West, in terms of joining NATO, obtaining EU membership and swiftly adopting the Euro. In terms of its ties with Moscow, Slovenia is one of the few Balkan countries whose economic connections with Moscow outweighs cultural ones; this is why Slovenia refrains from publicly criticizing Russia's annexation of Crimea. Slovenia also enjoys a friendly relation with Beijing, especially with the increasing interest shown by Chinese investors and Ljubljana's openness towards a closer relationship. As in many other cases, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the already existing trends in Slovenia's relations with the various poles of power on the global stage.

Interestingly enough, in February 2020, it was the Slovene Government that made a huge effort to help the People's Republic of China, through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Its generous donation, one of the largest in terms of value per capita, came in the shape of 1.2 million

facemasks. The efforts was accompanied by a donation of 60,000 EUR to the World Health Organization.⁷⁸

The Chinese answered in kind in May 2020, when the pandemic started to seriously affect Slovenia. The planeload arrived through a direct cargo that landed in Ljubljana Joze Pucnik Airport, carrying 12 tons of medical supplies donated by the Chinese government. The donation consisted in various medical supplies: "30,000 N95 masks, 700,000 surgical masks, 20,000 protective overalls, 10,000 goggles and 30,000 gloves" as reported by a Chinese outlet. Among the people present at the delivery, there were also Chinese Ambassador Wang Shunqing, and Slovenian Economic Development and Technology Ministry State Secretary Ales Cantarutti. The other foreign aid received by Slovenia came from the United Arab Emirates, as late as February 2021, in the shape of medical supplies and testing equipment. The much larger EU help arrived gradually, as approved by the Commission, as mentioned officially on the Commission's site.⁷⁹



Figure 14. Slovenian aid to China.

78 Government of the Republic of Slovenia. 2020. "Slovenia Shows Solidarity with the People's Republic of China in Efforts against Coronavirus by Sending Facemasks and Donating to WHO". <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2020-02-13-slovenia-shows-solidarity-with-the-peoples-republic-of-china-in-efforts-against-coronavirus-by-sending-facemasks-and-donating-to-who/>.

79 European Commission. "Details of Slovenia's support measures to help citizens and companies during the significant economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic". Accessed September 30, 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/jobs-and-economy-during-coronavirus-pandemic/state-aid-cases/slovenia_en.

Conclusions

Both Russia and China have taken advantage of the Covid-19 crisis and sought to build up their posture in the Balkans. Their success was, however, limited and conditioned by the strategy and specific background of each of the countries in the region. This way, in their endeavor of increasing their influence in the region, Health Diplomacy played a critical role as part of their soft power arsenal.

Both the Chinese and Russian Health Diplomacy techniques were more successful in the Western Balkans countries that are not (yet) EU members. Although the success of their efforts has been heavily dependent on the target country's framing and positioning, Russian and Chinese health diplomacy had a clear effect on the political dynamics of the region, especially because it has not only improved Russia and China's own image, but also cast a bad light on the European Union. That becomes especially relevant in the context of future EU Enlargement, undermining the credibility of the Union.

For Russia, health diplomacy became an integrated tool in its multi-layered information war on the West. Although limited to fewer countries, the Russian approach is much more complex, with health diplomacy as an extension to other means of exerting power. Unlike China, Russia has not shied away from getting involved politically in countries such as Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina (more precisely, in Republika Srpska). That is a consequence of two factors. First, Russia is a traditional actor in the Balkans, with a better understanding of the local political scene and the framing and positioning of local actors. Second, Russia has a deep interest in preventing Western Balkan nations from acceding to the EU, which naturally requires some sort of political involvement.

China appears to have a more limited, economy-focused approach towards the Balkans. Unlike Russia, China has refrained from direct political involvement in the domestic affairs of local powers. Health diplomacy, therefore, is a powerful soft power tool of China's more limited ambitions in the region. In fact, China has little care on whether the Western Balkan countries join the EU or not – as mentioned before, China may have a lot to gain from having an economic leverage over some EU member states. That is why China did not focus only on those countries that might provide destabilizing opportunities – China provided help even to states firmly embedded into the Trans-Atlantic sphere, such as Slovenia.

The position of the European Union has been initially damaged, because of the lack of a coherent response at the beginning of the pandemic. The ensuing uncertainty, together with the lack of competences assigned by member states to the Union with regards to health issues, meant that the EU could not have a rapid response. In effect, the EU help, although the most substantial, came much later in most countries, which resulted in much criticism towards the lack of EU assistance. In these circumstances, the EU continues its support, having reassured the Western Balkan countries regarding their integration. The recent EU summit in Slovenia reaffirmed the commitment towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans: "The EU reconfirms its commitment to the enlargement process and its decisions taken thereon, based upon credible reforms by partners, fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits."⁸⁰ The official declaration underlines the crucial role that the EU support plays for the Western Balkans, while also *demanding public recognition*: "the unprecedented scale and range of this support must be fully recognized and conveyed" by the Western Balkan countries in official communications.⁸¹

80 European Council. 2021. "Brdo Declaration, 6 October 2021." Accessed October 11, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/10/06/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021/>.
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Health diplomacy is, ultimately, a significant soft power tool, whose effects have been fully felt in the Balkan Peninsula. Whether it has been employed by non-Western actors, such as China and Russia, or the EU itself, it remains an important factor to be taken into consideration

by all involved actors and by future research. The future of European Integration in the Western Balkans, in the context of a post-pandemic world coming with its own new challenges, depends on the better understanding of such realities.

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