

The Impact of the EU Engagement in Serbia and Albania During the First Wave of COVID-19

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Abstract

Solidarity is a fundamental value of the European Union, alongside cooperation and competition. The COVID-19 pandemic tested the value of European solidarity; amid this unprecedented crisis, the EU initially failed to determine the most appropriate course of action. This provoked a strong reaction within the European Union and affected the EU's position in the Western Balkans as a soft power.

This paper examined the consequences for Serbia and Albania of the lack of solidarity that characterized the initial surge of the pandemic and the consequences on the integration process. The two countries were selected based on their dissimilar foreign policies. The paper aimed to explain the distinct effects of Russia's and China's foreign policy during the pandemic in Albania and Serbia. The core idea of the research was to evaluate the European intervention and aid during the first phase of the pandemic and the public opinion perception of the EU's role in the two countries.

The study collected the data of the Balkan Barometer surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021. Also, other data from the poll conducted by the International Republican Institute and various official statements and documents from the European Union were included in the study. As a brief conclusion, the study suggested that the EU's role in the two countries during the first phase of the COVID-19 crisis was impacted by national factors like national politics and media narratives and also by the external influence of other actors like Russia and China.

Keywords: European solidarity, Covid-19, China, Russia, European aid

Introduction

The fundamental values of the European Union, in the words of Delors, are stimulating competition, reinforcing cooperation, and solidarity as a unifying value (Delors, 2020). European solidarity is not only a legal principle but also a component of the EU legal order, as reaffirmed by the European Court of Justice in recent years. This reaffirmation underlines that solidarity requires burden-sharing and a fair distribution of the costs that can result from unforeseen circumstances (European Court of Justice, 2022).

Article 80 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) states that the concept of solidarity and equitable sharing of responsibility shall guide the EU policies on border checks, asylum, and immigration (TFEU, Article 80). Furthermore, member states are constantly urged to share responsibility and respond to humanitarian, financial, social, and economic crises affecting Europe through solidarity-inspired actions (Nicodemi, 2020). European solidarity relies on legal structures, institutions, funding, and programs funded by the EU budget. Over the past two decades, new EU mechanisms have been adopted, like the "Solidarity Clause," the "European Union Solidarity Fund," and the "European Solidarity Corps" that provide social cohesion and promote shared EU values (European Union, 2020). The EU Solidarity Fund includes all the EU states and supports the EU in providing aid to citizens affected by natural catastrophes that might have economic and social implications (EU Solidarity Fund, 2021).

The migration crisis following the Syrian war, as well as a flood of migrants, called into question European solidarity as a fundamental value of the European Union, putting many countries and nations to the test and cracking the EU's legitimacy in the public sphere (Di Napoli, Russo, 2018).

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, however, posed the greatest threat to European solidarity. Many EU supporters, among them Delors, voiced apprehension in 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, regarding the dire consequences that Europe's absence of unity was causing (Chopin, 2024). During the COVID-19 crisis, intra-state and EU solidarity as a general principle guiding EU efforts in numerous fields was questioned, putting the EU's credibility within its territory and its impact in Western Balkans countries to the test.

However, the EU's involvement in the pandemic was constrained, in part, by a shortage of competencies; the health system is a national responsibility; therefore, the EU has merely provided support for health-related competencies and has not allocated direct resources to intervene in an emergency of the nature that Covid-19 generated (Politico, 2020). Despite its lack of direct capabilities, the EU could have engaged indirectly by enabling

the activation of national solidarity mechanisms, as well as through the European Stability and Growth Pact and the European Union Mechanism of Civil Protection. During the first phase of the emergency, the EU hesitated to activate the Civil Protection Mechanism, and solidarity was invoked only in response to criticism and harsh reactions. The EU didn't demonstrate solidarity toward Italy, the first country severely hit by the pandemic in March 2020. The EU wasn't able to provide immediate medical aid as well as the other countries refused to shoulder the economic costs of recovery.

This lack of cooperation and solidarity caused popular rage, and far-right political organizations like the Lega used it to call into question the EU's very existence and Italy's membership (Christian Balmer, 2020). The far-right's political use of the EU's lack of solidarity and the anti-EU feelings served as a wake-up call to the European Commission. In April 2020, the European Commission apologized to Italy for its lack of solidarity and began to take steps to mitigate the consequences within the EU's borders.

Although the Western Balkans have been comparatively less impacted than other European Union countries, the pandemic presented a significant obstacle to an already precarious healthcare system. It grapples with a scarcity of medical personnel and apparatus, exacerbated by the massive influx of migrants from EU member states. Initially, the EU faced criticism for its role in the Western Balkans due to the ban on exports of medical supplies and the lack of a recovery package for the region. This led to a perception of abandonment, eroded credibility, and increased negative feelings towards the EU in some countries like Serbia, fueling fake news and disinformation (Balmer, 2020). However, the EU later announced its engagement in the region and approved aid packages that expressed the EU's commitment to the region (European Commission, 2020). Following the initial hesitancy, the EU's collective response was outstanding, including health measures, economic measures, research promotion, the battle against disinformation, and strong support for the Western Balkans (Rolof, 2020). Despite challenges and some delays in the integration process the EU's support toward the region during the pandemic aimed to strengthen ties with the region and to contest the impact of other actors in the region like Russia and China. Especially China used the vaccine campaign to gain influence in the region and to revitalize economic ties.

This paper will examine the effects of these actors on the region in the initial phase of the pandemic's transmission, the reactions of the Balkan states (Albania and Serbia in particular) to the European Union's reluctance, the dissemination of false information, and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the process of integration throughout the two-year health crisis.

Methods

The principal objective of this research is to evaluate the influence of the European Union's approach throughout the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia and Albania, the perception of European sentiments in the two countries, and the impact on the Albanian integration process. This study evaluates the factors and actors that influence European sentiments and the perception and interpretation of aid from other international actors like China and Russia through the interpretation of the Balkan Barometer Polls and other polls conducted in Serbia.

The objective of this research endeavor is to analyze the preliminary actions undertaken by the European Union (EU) in reaction to the pandemic in both countries and the adverse perception of abandonment that arose because of the export ban on medical supplies.

This article used a problem-oriented empirical approach to evaluate how the pandemic situation and the European Union primary contributory role in the region influenced the public's perception of the European Union. The methodology employed to achieve these goals consists of a review of reports, documents, and literature, with primary sources such as the European Union summit declaration and aid packages declaration, also newspaper and TV declaration of the principal political actors of the region, and polls organized by the Republican International Institute.

Furthermore, the paper incorporates press articles and interviews with key political actors engaged. The paper analyzes Balkan Barometer data in 2020 and 2021 on public support for the integration process to examine the extent to which public opinion was influenced during the pandemic by the mass media in Serbia and Albania.

Results

Following the initial shock of the 2020 pandemic, numerous analysts argued about its geopolitical ramifications, emphasizing the influence that other geopolitical actors would exert in various regions across the globe, including our region of interest, the Western Balkans. Many did not perceive the pandemic as a geopolitical "game-changer" due to its potential to expedite pre-existing trends. However, for others, such a worldwide and pervasive event would undoubtedly usher in a "new normal": a world radically different from the previous.

The reality in the Balkans, especially in Albania and Serbia, has elements of both. The COVID-19 pandemic affected the perception of solidarity within the EU, even in the Western Balkans, and the role of third parties such as China and Russia in the region. However, it did not shift attention away from the accession process. In the words of Ursula von der Leyen, "Solidarity will not be lacking in the area; the EU has a special

responsibility towards the states whose future lies in the EU" (von der Leyen, 2020). The integration process continued despite the pandemic; the EU granted accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, and the WB-EU summit was organized remotely in June 2020 under the Croatian Presidency.

The pandemic underscored solidarity and cooperation to address shared challenges. The European Union's response exhibited its dedication to bolstering regional resilience in the face of future crises and assisting the Western Balkans through financial aid and assistance. Together with the European Investment Bank, the EU expressed its solidarity towards the region by declaring on April 29, 2020, an economic package of 3.3 billion euros to contribute to its citizens (European Commission, 2020).

The package provided 38 million euros reallocated from the IPA fund for immediate assistance to the healthcare sector, providing states with the tools to address the problematic situation in hospitals, such as protective clothing, masks, and ventilators (European Commission, 2020). Furthermore, a portion of the financial assistance was designated to tackle the social and economic issues further aggravated by the pandemic across all regional states. The aid package also sought to address social challenges. Nevertheless, despite the EU's substantial assistance, some states in the region expressed disapproval due to the EU's prolonged acceptance of the region as a crucial component of Europe. Also, in some states of the region, the EU's failure to prioritize the Western Balkans in its response to the pandemic has damaged its reputation as a soft power.

The reaction can be attributed to the implementation of stringent export restrictions on medical equipment to non-member nations and the requirement for authorization to export protective medical equipment. The ban was consequentially corrected (European Commission, 2020), but these measures were interpreted as indications of neglecting the region, and, as a result, the credibility of the EU was dented during the first months of 2020. (Cameron and Leigh, 2020)

In the countries of the region, there were various reactions. Serbia used sharp rhetoric against the EU in the state media. The EU's initial response to the region during the pandemic and subsequent period of disinformation has incentivized actors such as China and Russia to try and fill the gap through investment and assistance, promoting adverse reporting, false news, and disinformation campaigns. In March 2020, state-run media outlets in Serbia used strong language against the European Union. Specific media organizations disseminated a succession of misinformation to advance a particular political agenda by exploiting the situation; the misinformation emphasized the crisis management capabilities of China and Russia and the EU's lack of solidarity with the region (European External Action Service, 2021). On the contrary, these sources present Russia and China as the sole

reliable actors during the crisis and saviors who assisted Italy and Serbia while the European Union remained inert.

President Vucic, in a press conference on March 26, dismissed European aid as an elusive notion and asserted the nonexistence of European solidarity (Vucic, 2020). He underscored the significance of bolstering relations with Russia and China, regarding them as regional actors of equal importance to the European Union. (Cameron, 2020). Also, the vaccine diplomacy in Serbia underscored the importance of Serbia's significant contribution to advancing China's vaccine diplomacy and promoting China's positive image in the region. Chinese officials and media have extensively publicized the intended production and distribution of Chinese vaccines in Serbia for COVID-19 (Mujanovic, 2021).

Russia, an additional significant player in the game, maintained an active presence in Serbia and sought to enhance its regional influence. To this end, the Russian Direct Investment Fund funded the Sputnik delivery in the Western Balkans, with Serbia being a particular focus (European External Action Service, 2021). Conversely, Serbia utilized vaccine diplomacy and the involvement of Serbia and China in the subject matter to amass regional influence and bolster its position as a leader in the Western Balkans; the media coverage mirrored the large number of individuals from throughout the region who traveled to Serbia to receive a vaccination. Serbia sought to establish itself as a regional power through this strategy by capitalizing on the COVID-19 crisis and the vaccine controversy. It also endorsed the cooperation and solidarity of China and Russia during the EU's withdrawal. The President's response contradicted the Prime Minister's assertion that the vaccine strategy was a health issue, not a political one; he described the Chinese vaccine distribution as the most crucial intervention in Serbia and attacked the EU and European solidarity (China Global Television Network, 2020).

The pandemic has further solidified that while the European Union has been Serbia's principal supporter for a significant duration, it still needs to make substantial advancements before it is universally acknowledged as the country's preferred partner. In the March 2020 survey of the Western Balkans (excluding Albania), the International Republican Institute discovered that respondents held various opinions regarding their nation's economic relations with other countries. Many Serbian participants cited Russia and China as their principal economic allies, even though the EU is Serbia's biggest investor, trade partner, and donor. (International Republican Institute, 2020). Serbia receives substantial financial assistance from the European Union and ranks among the top three recipients of such aid. However, in 2022, a survey by the International Republican Institute revealed that 30% of respondents believe that China is the country's largest foreign donor, while 38% advocate for the country's foreign policy to be balanced between Russia and the EU

(International Republican Institute, 2022). In terms of both trade volume and economic transactions, the EU is by far the region's largest and most significant; despite this, the EU's communication campaign during the pandemic was deficient. The poll conducted by the International Republican Institute in 2020 evidenced that during the first months of the pandemic, 39.9% of the Serbians thought that the primary aid against COVID-19 was sent from China, 17.6% from the EU, and 14.6% considered Russia as the principal donor (International Republican Institute, 2020).

It is reasonable to presume that pro-Russian and pro-Chinese media propaganda and the government exert a significant influence over public opinion and that the EU has a problem with visibility in the country, as emphasized during the COVID-19 crisis. Russia and China used the pandemic situation to expand their influence in the region, not only with medical aid but also by beginning a disinformation campaign aimed at discrediting the role of the EU during the crisis (Gaub, 2020).

Furthermore, public sentiment affected the EU's standing as a soft and normative power during the pandemic and influenced its reputation. According to the Balkan Barometer in 2020, only 26% of Serbian respondents believed that EU membership would be positive, while 44% thought it would be neither good nor bad for the country (Balkan Barometer, 2020). The decline of citizen trust in European integration undermines the EU's standing as a regional model, particularly in Serbia. The pandemic allowed China to increase its regional investments, which does not inherently contradict or oppose EU integration. However, the EU's approach in Serbia and the region is undermined by its provision of loans to political leaders without requiring them to adhere to public procurement standards, transparency, accountability, and environmental respect to access funding. Moreover, it diminishes the effectiveness of EU conditionality and aids in consolidating a less democratic regime.

Despite the national propaganda fueled by the authoritarian governance model, EU aid has been consistent and present from the beginning to the end of the emergency in Serbia and the entire region, although less heavily advertised than Chinese aid. The EU granted 93 million euros in March 2020, with 15 million for immediate emergency assistance and 78 million for economic recovery to support jobs and small and medium enterprises (European Commission, 2020). However, despite the presence of solidarity from the EU, the political elite reacted differently. President Vucic, who capitalized on the crisis to promote China and Russia policy and minimize EU aid and efforts, responded on Twitter several weeks after declaring EU aid to the region (Ivkovic, 2020). In this case, the health emergency was used to promote a specific political agenda and increase the influence of Russia and China while minimizing the role of the EU in Serbia. Chinese aid, constantly

diverging from EU regulations concerning state aid, competition, procurement, and bilateral investment agreements, plays an ever-increasing and consequential role in preserving the authority of governing elites. The Western Balkans, specifically Serbia, have used Chinese assistance to justify domestic measures based on China's authoritarian style and criticize the EU's response (Bieber et al., 2020).

Despite the initial hesitation and the delayed delivery of EU aid to the region because of internal complications, the EU's pivotal position in addressing the crisis in Serbia and the Western Balkans cannot be questioned. The EU launched a 3.3 billion euro financial package rescue for the region, 38 million in funds for the health sector, access to EU instruments and medical equipment, 750 million in micro-financial assistance, and 1.7 billion in preferential loans by the European Investment Bank (Gaub, 2020).

The aid to Serbia was concrete and directed in several directions. Serbia became part of the Rescue stockpile of medical equipment, which was part of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, a mechanism in which Serbia is part of 2014 together with all the other European countries that have provided urgent assistance to Serbia. Also, Serbia is part of the medical reserve fund created to assist member states facing shortages or needing medical equipment to address emergencies (European Union Delegation in Serbia, 2020).

From March to July 2020, the European Union RescEU stockpile distributed over 20,000 masks, ventilators, tests, and other medical equipment in Serbia as a response to the Serbian request for protective masks to the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism (European Union Delegation in Serbia, 2020).

While the European Union's involvement in the Serbian emergency was not as widely publicized as that of other international actors, it was undeniably more crucial and foundational in the long run, given the economic recovery package implemented in the aftermath of the pandemic. In 2022, the European Union (EU) provided €11,968,276 in non-repayable aid through the EU Solidarity Fund to support emergency operations in the fight against COVID-19 and implement additional health system recovery measures in Serbia as an expression of the EU dedication to support Serbia as a future member of the EU (EU Grant's 12 million to Serbia's Health System for Pandemic Relief, 2022). Furthermore, the EU's ongoing support for the modernization and consolidation of the healthcare sector over the past two decades is of the utmost significance; it has contributed to the health system's strengthening and modernization.

Albanian case

The emergence of COVID-19 in 2020 coincided with a crucial and advantageous phase in the Albanian integration process, as the European Union granted the initiation of accession negotiations after one year and a half.

Although the pandemic somewhat deflected the integration process, the European Union (EU) maintained its agenda. It extended the WB-EU summit online from May to June, positively signaling the country and the region. Notwithstanding the favorable phase of the integration process, the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania inflicted severe social, economic, political, and human consequences. In particular, the healthcare system proved precarious and incapable of managing an emergency of this magnitude.

The Albanian government responded to the pandemic with almost immediate, drastic measures of social isolation and declared a state of emergency. The Albanian government deployed the army during the first wave of the pandemic (March–April 2020) to ensure and enforce the curfew measures alongside the police. The government restricted citizens' liberties through normative acts that amended the law on the Prevention of Infectious Diseases, sparking a national discourse on the validity of these restrictions and the risk they posed to democracy and legal institutions amidst the pandemic. (Esch, 2020).

As for the communication strategy, the Prime Minister used social media to describe the situation and raise public awareness of respect for social distancing and the use of masks. Amidst the pandemic, the government received favorable coverage in the national media, while problematic situations received minimal attention. Furthermore, a report on the government's response to the crisis and its institutional and technical capacities still needs to be published.

Regarding aid from the international community, particularly the EU, Turkey was the first nation to offer assistance in the form of masks and ambulances. The Prime Minister's rhetoric frequently underscored the absence of international aid, occasionally accentuating the matter on social media platforms and media: *"We are alone in this fight"* (ABC News, 2020).

Nevertheless, the initial absence of European solidarity did not reflect poorly on the EU in Albania; in fact, positive attitudes towards the EU remained unaffected by the EU's decision to withhold aid or to impose a moratorium on the export of medicine in the Western Balkans. Albanians have historically held a favorable attitude towards the European Union and have consistently demonstrated substantial backing for the European integration process. Since the collapse of communism, this has been regarded as Albania's sole option for foreign policy.

When comparing the Balkan Barometer data from 2020, 2021, and 2022, support for the integration process ranges from 80% to 89%. Many Albanians believe the integration process will yield positive outcomes, encompassing health and social systems and economic growth (Balkan Barometer, 2020, 2021, 2022).

At the end of March 2020, the EU presented a package of assistance to the region, reinstating solidarity as a fundamental value and expanding its strategic role and engagement in every country in the region.

Under the motto "We stand together," EU assistance to Albania was part of the EU's strategy towards the region. The European Union mobilized a package of €410 million in relocating bilateral assistance in April 2020 to assist the area during the emergency. Of this amount, 4 million euros were allocated as immediate support for the health sector in Albania, while the remaining 46.7 million was designated for social and economic recovery (European Commission, 2020). The European Union initiated a social media campaign to educate the most susceptible individuals about appropriate conduct amidst the coronavirus crisis; the social campaign raised awareness of the EU's role in Albania during this period.

The continuity of the integration process was one of the most critical concerns during the initial months of the pandemic. As stated, the EU initiated access negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia following repeated delays. The Albanian integration process was not adversely affected by the pandemic; instead, it increased the European Union's solidarity and focus on the region, providing an opportunity to contrast the positions taken by China, Russia, and Turkey.

The pandemic-related situation in the region and the state's economic recovery after the crisis were the main topics of discussion at the Zagreb Summit in May 2020. During this Summit, the European perspective of the region was reconfirmed, and the EU presented its dedication to actively aid its Western Balkan counterparts in their endeavors to mitigate the repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic on economies and societies (European Council, 2020). During the Summit, the European Council boosted its solidarity with the region and presented an economic package of 33 billion euros and 1.5 billion euros as a soft loan from the European Investment Bank (European Council, 2020). This financial package reaffirmed the EU's status as the preeminent actor in the Balkans and the most trusted aid provider to states afflicted by the health crisis.

The Summit was an important event that affirmed the European future of both states, EU solidarity with the region, and the EU's attention to the region during the sanitary crisis. Also, the final declaration of the European Council affirmed the need to fight disinformation from third-state actors and strengthen collaboration on resilience-building and cyber security (European Council, 2020).

Although the Summit confirmed the EU's attention to the region in tackling the economic crisis, it needed further to advance the integration process for North Macedonia and Albania. The pandemic had no impact on the process's agenda, but Bulgaria's veto against Northern Macedonia

prevented the integration of Albania and Northern Macedonia. In this perspective, the Zagreb Summit did not mention the accession negotiations but referred to the importance of the reforms undertaken by the two states. The Summit was essential to confirm the European future of states and EU solidarity with the region. However, further light needs to be shed on the opening negotiations; Albania opened the negotiations in July 2022.

In November 2020, the European Union authorized a package of 103.3 million euros to assist Albania in addressing the social and economic repercussions of the health crisis and to further the reforms initiated in preparation for EU membership (European Delegation to Albania, 2020). The assistance provided by the EU was welcomed in the media and by political actors, created a positive impact, and confirmed the EU as a significant factor in the country's economic and social development.

The initial lack of EU solidarity in Albania did not affect the perception of the EU's role in the country, and the influence of China and Russia was also negligible. The media refrained from praising the assistance of other international actors, except for Turkey. While China and Russia tried to raise their influence in the region, especially in Serbia, to create new alliances or strengthen existing ones, Turkey operated less for foreign policy and more for domestic reasons. Turkey's assistance to the Western Balkans functioned as a domestic propaganda instrument: customized aid packaging was strategically crafted to amplify Turkey's President's benevolence on an international stage, and the Turkish government's ability to assist its neighboring countries amidst a global pandemic was promoted in the domestic media as an indication of the nation's grit and resilience (Aspen Institute, 2020). During the crisis, Turkey echoed the unique cultural and historical relations with the region, especially with Kosovo, Bosnia, and Albania, considering the role that President Erdogan has tried to take since he came into power, not as an external actor in the region but as a friend, ally, and protector. The President tried to use his relations with Prime Minister Rama to influence the impact of Turkish aid in Albania. "Healthy" tourism from Albania to Turkey also grew consistently during that period. The media illustrated the Turkish assistance, but they acknowledged, by far, the EU aid in the region and the country specifically, and the EU has been able to fight disinformation.

We can safely assume that the Albanian integration process was not delayed due to the pandemic situation and that the aid of other actors like China and Turkey did not influence the EU soft power and role in the country. Russia has a minimal impact on the country due to the perception of a close affinity between Serbia and Russia.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical nature of European Union (EU) solidarity beyond its borders, including in the Western Balkans (WB). It also emphasized the need for enhanced collaboration between European Union member states and external partners, including those in the Western Balkans. The pandemic demonstrated that during crises, the actions of a significant actor such as the EU can have varying outcomes and, as in the case of Serbia, can sometimes diminish the EU's soft power and credibility. In response, the EU has implemented various measures to bolster public health, foster economic recovery, and increase the region's resilience.

The European Union extended significant financial and logistical assistance to the Western Balkan region to mitigate the economic and health risks posed by the pandemic. Nonetheless, the pandemic revealed a few obstacles in the relationship between the EU and WB, including the necessity for improved communication and coordination between the two regions.

The growing influence of other international actors, such as China and Russia, forced the EU to alter its course of action, making a positive relationship with the region more vital than ever. The European Commission modified its information campaign to emphasize its crucial role as the most stable economic partner in the entire region, with a particular focus on Serbia.

The European Union approved Albania's and Northern Macedonia's accession negotiations in 2020, unaffected by the pandemic. However, the subsequent Bulgarian veto negatively impacted the credibility of the process and the application of conditionality in the region.

The complete ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania remain unknown, except for the health sector. The discourse did not analyze the enduring consequences of the pandemic on the European Union relations with the region.

The research was founded upon an extensive compilation of reports and studies conducted by various European and international institutes and organizations, including the European Parliament, the Aspen Institute, the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and authors such as Gaub, Esch, and Bieber, whose work specifically examined the Covid-19 pandemic in the region. As with the selected nation, the study compares the similarities and differences between Serbia and Albania; however, a more comprehensive view of the region must be considered in the future.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented Serbia, Albania, and the European Union (EU) with a complex and varied relationship marked by collaboration, obstacles, and divergences of opinion. Amidst the pandemic,

Serbia has made steady progress towards EU membership. The EU has reaffirmed its dedication to the country's European integration and has urged it to undertake the requisite reforms.

The European Union has granted Serbia financial aid and technical assistance to bolster its healthcare infrastructure, acquire medical supplies, and execute immunization initiatives. However, the EU's assistance to Serbia was tainted by a disinformation campaign, while the media lauded Russia's and China's contributions throughout 2020. The campaign has contributed to a misunderstanding regarding the EU's status as the nation's most dependable and significant partner.

The media campaign capitalized on public sentiment; according to surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021, a significant proportion of the Serb population believed that China and Russia were the primary contributors to the nation's economy. Furthermore, the country's altered pro-EU sentiments impede the effectiveness of EU conditionality and the EU's ability to promote and facilitate the implementation of essential reforms.

Serbia's acquisition of COVID-19 vaccines from non-EU sources, such as Russia and China, has generated controversy and prompted inquiries regarding the nation's compliance with EU policies and benchmarks. Serbia's vaccine procurement strategy has garnered commendation for effectively managing vaccine supplies. However, it indicates the nation's attempt to balance its ambitions to join the European Union and its strategic alliances with other prominent international actors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced nuances and difficulties into the Serbian-EU relationship. However, it has also emphasized the significance of collaboration, communication, and reciprocal assistance in tackling shared obstacles and promoting common goals. During this period, the interaction between Serbia and the European Union demonstrates a complex interplay between geopolitical factors, public health cooperation, and the ongoing European integration process.

The relationship between the European Union and Albania throughout the COVID-19 pandemic was characterized by a positive signal, such as the authorization to begin accession negotiations and the imperative to resolve the health crisis. In addition to assisting the healthcare system, the European Union provided financial assistance to mitigate the socioeconomic repercussions of the crisis.

The summit declaration in Zagreb reaffirmed the European Union's dedication to the Western Balkans and attempted to resolve the region's primary challenges posed by COVID-19.

The substantial public endorsement of the European integration process in 2020 and 2021 indicates that, despite the influence of other actors such as China and Turkey, Albanians regard the EU as their most vital and

dependable ally. Efforts to strengthen cultural and diplomatic ties, medical assistance, vaccine diplomacy, and economic cooperation comprised most of China's involvement in Albania during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although China's participation in Albania was met with approval from both the government and the public, EU aid was never compared with Chinese aid, and the role of the EU wasn't minimized by the media.

Consequently, the European Union altered its initial course of action in the region, exhibited values of cooperation and solidarity, and played a significant role in the socioeconomic recovery. External actors influence such as China, Russia, and Turkey also compelled and imposed this role. So, the EU changed its course of action after the first initial lack of solidarity but this change was caused due to external actors policy in the region. The differences between Albania and Serbia demonstrate how public opinion is influenced by the national media campaign and national political narratives. Also, we can conclude that the Albanian support of the European integration and EU role is the only course for the country. Albania doesn't have many choices in its foreign policy unlike Serbia which can relate to another ally and use its affinity with Russia to pressure the EU.

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