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EU Support to Serbia and COVID-19

Not long after the introduction of the state of emergency in Serbia as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a message was delivered by state leadership stating that there is no such thing as European solidarity and that ‘it is simply a fairy-tale’¹. On the other hand, it was emphasised that our greatest faith has been placed on China, the only country able to help us in the given situation. As time passed, high praise was sung for aid received from countries such as Russia and the United Arab Emirates and for the arrival of goods paid for by Serbia. In terms of the help received from the EU, the intensity of praise was reduced to polite acknowledgement. As interpreted by Filip Ejdus, professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade: “European aid in Serbia is traditionally viewed as help from an wealthy, evil stepmother who gives far less than she can, yet nags far more than she should”.²

The objective of the text that follows, is not to downplay the help received from certain countries or international actors. Most certainly, we should be grateful for any assistance arriving in Serbia in these extremely difficult times, regardless of which corner of the globe it comes from. This is particularly important if we take into consideration that almost every country sending help to Serbia is facing similar challenges.

The end objective of this text is a deliberation regarding the extent to which the EU helped and is still helping Serbia, why has the EU’s reaction in light of the ongoing crisis seen as slower than it should ideally be, and above all, to establish whether European solidarity really is just a fairy-tale.

How much has the EU given to Serbia?

The European Union is by far, the largest donor of non-refundable aid to Serbia. Until 2018, EU assistance amounted to EUR 3.6 billion, while its member states, individually, added more than half a billion to this amount. No other country comes even close when it comes to access to pre-accession funds. At the same time, Serbia is the biggest recipient of EU funds in the entire Western Balkans.

According to the Ministry of European Integration’s data for the period 2000 – 2016, on the list of the most generous countries, second place is occupied by the US, followed by Switzerland, Norway, Japan and China, ranking from sixth to ninth place.³ Unfortunately, according to the same source, only 26% of the citizens recognise the EU’s leading role in this regard.

¹ <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/vesti/202003151122059574-vucic-evropska-solidarnost-je-bajka-na-papiru-koronavirus-pandemija/>

² <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a585748/Ejdus-Evropska-pomoc-se-u-Srbiji-dozivljava-kao-pomoc-bogate-macehe.html>

³ https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanje_javnog_mnjenja/ijm_dec_19.pdf, USA (EUR 695.56 million), Switzerland (EUR 176.09 million), Norway (EUR 171.10 million), Japan (EUR 126.13 million), China (EUR 31.40 million),

It is especially important that we remember the enormous amount of aid provided by the EU during the unprecedented floods that devastated Serbia in May 2014. The then Office for Reconstruction and Flood Relief cites that out of over EUR 200 million, collected for the amelioration of flooded areas, EUR 162 million arrived from the EU, along with approximately EUR 9 million from its member states.⁴

Right now, it is important to highlight the EU's contribution to the improvement of the Serbian healthcare system. Without its help, Serbia would definitely be facing even greater challenges in the current situation. In the previous 20 years, numerous hospitals, public health centres, laboratories and public health institutions were repaired, renovated and built, both in large cities and small towns countrywide. For that purpose, the EU donated EUR 200 million with an additional EUR 250 million in the form of loans.⁵ At this moment, when the entire world, the EU included, is faced with one of the biggest crisis ever, the EU has already donated EUR 93 million to Serbia; EUR 15 million intended as direct healthcare support, and EUR 78 million for the county's social and economic recovery from the pandemic.⁶

Where does the impression come from that the EU has not been efficient enough in providing help during the COVID-19 epidemic?

It is important to stop viewing the relations between the EU and Serbia through the psychologically infantile prism of a child and its evil step-mother. Also, the conventional rhetoric that Serbia is strong enough even without European integration, and that it has other 'friends' should, in this case as well, be used consistently. Finally, decisions made during this crisis are political and driven by interests and priorities, therefore, there is no need to romanticise them.

When the state of emergency was declared in Serbia on March 15, there were 57 cases of COVID-19 infection registered. At the same time in Italy, there were almost 25 thousand cases of the infection and in the North of the country, the healthcare system had already been brought to its knees. Spain, France, Germany, all had several thousand cases with a tendency for this number to increase. Every other member state was already at a brink of an epidemic.⁷ At that moment, a prevalently nonchalant approach towards the virus was producing consequences at a fast pace. Europe was becoming a hotspot for the virus.

In addition to entering the crisis unprepared, the European Union and its member states are an institution with a very complex decision-making system, even in times of crisis. The Union is comprised of 27 member states, each of which is combating the crisis in its own way, despite the

⁴ http://www.obnova.gov.rs/uploads/useruploads/Documents/Zakljucak_Godisnji-izvestaj-o-rad-u-KPOPP_maj-2014_maj-2015.pdf

⁵ <https://europa.rs/pomoc-eu-zdravstvenom-sektoru-u-srbiji-temeljni-napori-koji-su-modernizovali-citav-sistem-zdravstvene-zastite-srbije/>

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus_support_wb.pdf

⁷ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

EU's clearly defined relevant policy. The EU has no direct jurisdiction to intervene in regard to the healthcare policies of its member states, which inevitably slows the possibility of a coordinated and effective reaction. Even when a certain action does fall under the jurisdiction of the European Commission, the process between compiling a draft and its final adoption may be prolonged, and the final version may significantly differ from the original. If other institutions are included in the process, the situation becomes even more complex. The imperative is always to take the particularities, interests and needs of all member states into consideration, and these may vary drastically. Therefore, inertia and clumsiness should not be maliciously scrutinised. One could say that it is the only blemish in a sea of benefits that democracy and strong institutions can offer. Of course, the EU's actions should not be viewed as an example of good practice in this regard, but it is important to be aware of the subtleties, to grasp the circumstances and base our attitudes on facts.

The criticism of the EU's decisions primarily targeted the so called Implementing Regulation rendered by the European Commission which mainly restricts the export of protective equipment outside the EU.⁸ This act was interpreted as an export prohibition, but it actually makes the exportation of certain products subject to the production of an export authorisation, whereby the exporter must obtain export authorisation from the competent national institution. The guidelines pertaining to said Regulation emphasise that "it is not the intention of the Union to restrict exports any more than absolutely necessary, and the Union also wishes to uphold the principle of international solidarity in this situation of a global pandemic", and that authorisations should be granted if "the shipment in question poses no threat to the actual need for PPE within the Union and serves to satisfy a legitimate need for official or professional medical use in a third country".⁹ Subsequently, the Regulation was amended so that it explicitly allows export to the Western Balkans.¹⁰ Interestingly, despite criticism of "the lack of European solidarity", Serbia explicitly prohibited the export of a large number of products characterised as strategically important in the situation of global pandemic.¹¹

As mentioned earlier, the EU allocated a significant amount of funds to help Serbia's fight against the coronavirus. These funds enabled the purchase of equipment necessary to save and protect the lives of Serbian citizens, but also, these funds were used to finance the transportation of goods sent from and purchased in other parts of the world. The funds designated for social and economic recovery of the country after the pandemic are particularly important. As we all know, COVID-19 does not only affect the population's health, but their general wellbeing as well. All citizens and all segments of society are currently affected by an unprecedented impact; some have lost their jobs, some were unemployed before this all began, so their livelihoods are completely uncertain, and returning to normality will not be possible even after we have "dealt with the virus". For this

⁸ https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2020/march/tradoc_158671.pdf

⁹ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0320\(04\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0320(04)&from=EN)

¹⁰ <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2132>

¹¹ <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/lista-proizvoda-%C4%8Diji-je-izvoz-vlada-srbije-privremeno-zabranila>

reason, it is necessary to be grateful for all the support aimed at stabilising the institutions and lives of our citizens.

Is European solidarity a fairy-tale?

No, it is not. It is plain to see that this can't be further from the truth. European solidarity is very pragmatic, just like the very foundations of EU institutions. The European Union is not the most efficient creation, and that is old news. Still, the EU member states are countries with the highest standards in the world, therefore, we can, with certainty say that care for citizens, particularly those who are vulnerable, and solidarity are principles which bind European societies. Since they themselves finance the EU, member states are a priority in European institutions' provision of support. It is understandable that the countries at its borders, however close and relevant to the EU, do not enjoy the same degree of priority. Despite this, the EU is Serbia's long-term and strategic *partner*, just like other countries with whom Serbia collaborates, and not a friend to Serbia. We should not diminish the value of any aid we receive during this crisis. All support should be appreciated, regardless of its form or scope. For this reason, it is rude, to say the least, to cast a shadow on the European Union by emotionally charged statements. For over 20 years, the EU has been supportive in building institutions and improving the quality of life of our citizens, after the wars and the crisis of the 90's and it continues to provide assistance, despite being unfoundedly and crudely criticized by our officials. I do believe that by now, most would have given up providing their support.