

# THE EU AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: COVID-19 Travel Bans and the Socio-Economic Trade-Offs Explained

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## The EU and the Western Balkans: Covid-19 Travel Bans and the Socio-Economic Trade-Offs Explained

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# THE EU AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: COVID-19 TRAVEL BANS AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRADE-OFFS EXPLAINED

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current pandemic turned to be a hard test for the Schengen area, a cornerstone of the European Union. Whether the Western Balkans is not part of it, all of them but Kosovo can travel visa-free to Europe. Yet, Covid-19 travel restrictions have limited significantly the requirements to enter the EU, despite current research clearly showing that travel bans limit the spread of the virus in a marginal way only. Also, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended countries worldwide to keep their borders open, while declaring the virus a public-health emergency. But its suggestion has remained unheard with unnumbered countries closing down their borders and with a cost to the global economy up to US\$400 Bill each month.

The EU travel bans have hit particularly the already fragile Western Balkans' economies. Since the start of the pandemic 139.000 jobs have been lost, and between 165.000 and 336.000 people have been left into poverty in the region. The tourism industry, contributing 15% to overall GDP of the Western Balkans and sustaining around 550.000 jobs, has been hit harshly, with Montenegro suffering a 90% collapse accounting for more than 20% of its GDP. But also Kosovo and Albania, relying considerably on tourism-related services' exports, are likely to witness a worsening of their current account deficits (CAD). In addition to that, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia's remittances will probably move backward from 0.8% to 0.1% of GDP. Besides that, EU Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) to the region, accounting for more than two-thirds (almost 70%), with the region's share of overall EU trade being only 1.4%, are expected to fall from 5.1 % of GDP in 2019 to 3.6% in 2020, the lowest level since 2005. Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia will be the most affected.

Despite Brussels' disbursement of € 3.3 Bill to the region, its pandemic management measures have revealed key shortcomings. First, the entry conditions for third-country nationals have not translated into an EU common approach, while leaving room for double standards. Second, the EU's measures to ease travel restrictions have left the Western Balkans out of the box. This condition may contribute to a further isolation of the region with negative consequences for the local socio-economic well-being and development. To start with, the Western Balkans is not part of the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC)'s common map traffic lights. Besides that, they are not part of the Digital Green Certificate.

Overall, the EU pandemic crisis management has shown the lack of an EU coordinated approach and of a common line of action towards the region. Besides that, Brussels should have anchored the area to the mechanisms mentioned above, by signaling its geostrategic importance and a still alive European perspective. But it is never too late.

## INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 challenged severely the core of the Schengen area: the free movement of people and goods. Whether the Western Balkans are not part of Schengen, all of them but Kosovo can travel visa-free to Europe. Yet, the EU travel bans have hit harshly the socio-economic well-being and development of the countries in the region.

At the beginning the EU rejected the idea of suspending the Schengen free travel zone, and introducing border controls. But by mid-March 2020 the majority of the EU Member States reinforced their external borders on non-essential travel to the EU for a period of 30 days. This measure was uplifted to the Western Balkans on July 1st, 2020 only. However, the first requirements regulating the entry conditions for third-country nationals from the Western

Balkans have not translated into an EU common approach. Rather they enabled the room for double standards towards the region's citizens. Following the rise of infections and the risks posed by the more transmissible variants of the virus within and outside the EU at the start of 2021, further restrictions have been introduced. At the beginning of May 2021, with a look at a better situation due to the vaccination campaigns and improvements in the epidemiological situation worldwide, the European Commission (EC) proposed that the Member States should ease travel restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU for third country nationals. Yet, it is too premature to assess how the uplifting of these measures is going to be implemented for the Western Balkans in the practice.

On the whole, the EU pandemic crisis management missed to establish an EU common approach towards the region. Also, it has failed to treat its neighbours as future potential partner, as they have been left out of the two key EU measures adopted to ease travel bans: traffic lights' common map and Digital Green Certificate. Brussels has, rather, shown to adhere to a post-trauma approach, by channeling vaccines via COVAX and disbursing € 3.3 Bill to the region recovery. Yet, the Western Balkans countries have not been actively engaged on board to jointly manage the pandemic. This stance, however, might signal a still far European perspective with negative consequences for both Brussels and the region. Despite this, the EU is by far the main trade partner of the Western Balkans with a trade volume totaling EUR 54.4 Bill in 2018, and EUR 55 Bill in 2019. And, it is time that its neighbours are treated equally and not as patients to be healed.

The paper is divided into seven parts. The first part provides a brief overview on the limitations of the EU travel bans on the Schengen area on the one hand, while further hardening the restrictions for the citizens of the Western Balkans on the other hand. The second part mentions the current research's stand on travel restrictions, which are likely to slow down the spread of Covid-19 in a marginal way only, with countries in Europe and worldwide ignoring the suggestion of having their borders open, with high costs for the global economy. The third part pin points that the EU first measures regulating the entry conditions for third-country nationals from the Western Balkans have not translated into an EU common approach, by setting the basis for double standards. The fourth part portrays a continuous lack of an EU coordinated stand following the rise of infections and the risks posed by the more transmissible variants of the virus, within and outside the EU, at the beginning of 2021. The fifth part lists the EU measures to ease travel restrictions with the EU having left mistakenly the Western Balkans out of the box, while leaving a negative message for the region's concrete European perspective. The sixth part refers to the EU measures, other than travel bans, aimed at easing travel to the EU with a particular focus on the Western Balkans. The seventh part deals with the socio-economic impacts deriving from the EU travel-bans on the hand, and Covid-19 in general terms on the other hand. The paper ends with key policy recommendations for the European Commission.

## **I. The EU and the Western Balkans in the midst of the Pandemic: Freedom of Movement at a Hard Test**

The ongoing pandemic has turned to be a hard test for the free movement of people and goods, being a cornerstone of the European Union. Referred to in the 1985 Schengen Agreement<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup>The Schengen Agreement signed on the 14th of June 1985, by five of the ten member states of the then European Economic Community (EEC), entered into force a decade later with all countries of the EU, except the UK which in the meanwhile left the Union, and Ireland joining later on. Countries in Europe but outside the EU have also become members, including Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein.

creating the Schengen area (26 countries) covering nearly all main land Europe<sup>2</sup>, this principle has largely abolished internal border checks and established external border controls for travelers entering and exiting the area. In 1990 the Agreement has been supplemented by the Schengen Convention proposing the complete abolition of systematic internal border controls and a common visa policy. The two treaties have been then incorporated into European Union law by the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997).

Whether the Western Balkans are not part of the Schengen area, some of them (North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) can travel, after almost two decades of isolation, visa-free to the European Union, starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> December 2009. On the one hand, however, the visa requirement has been counterproductive for hampering business and creating a psychological barrier increasing skepticism about a concrete future in the EU. On the other hand it has been no condition-free. In fact, the Balkan countries have been asked to carry out far-reaching reforms in the area of border control, passport security and the fight against organized crime, corruption and illegal migration. Yet, at the beginning Albania, BiH and Kosovo have been excluded from the group.<sup>3</sup> Over time Albanian citizens have been allowed to travel visa-free to the EU, but they will need to apply soon for the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS), the new visa waiver for the Schengen Area, to be launched at the end of 2022.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the Council of the EU has approved visa-free travel for the citizens of BiH on the 8th of November 2010.<sup>5</sup>

Kosovo, however, has been left out of the box up to day. At the beginning there has been even no prospect for visa liberalisation. But in October 2009 the European Commission has promised a 'visa dialogue' with the perspective of eventual liberalisation, conditional on necessary reforms.<sup>6</sup> The last European Commission Progress Report (2020), however, clearly confirms the EU's inability to deliver on its promise for providing a visa-free travel to Kosovo's citizens, even if the Commission and the European Parliament have reiterated their support various times since July 2018.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, the Kurti-Osmani *duo* taking office recently and announcing it would deliver major reforms, including the fight against corruption and organized crime, many of which are either directly or indirectly related to the visa liberalisation process, may leave some room for hope.

Yet, Covid-19 travel restrictions have limited significantly the requirements to enter the EU under a new form. Controlling the pandemic has required an unprecedented range of limitations. And, travel bans, along with imposed quarantine, contact tracing, etc., have been representing a high and ever-increasing cost for individuals, families, communities and businesses, within the EU and at the external borders. Particularly, 36 countries have imposed, right after the outbreak of Covid-19, travel restrictions on people coming from China with the goal

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<sup>2</sup>For a list <https://www.axa-schengen.com/en/countries-schengen-area> [online]. Accessed: 4 May 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Gerald Knaus, Alexandra Stilgmayer. Visa-free travel in the Balkans, Euobserver, 6 December 2009 [online]. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/29097> [Accessed: 7 May 2021].

<sup>4</sup>EU confirms Albanians do not need a visa for Europe, *ETIAS*, 1 November 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.etiasvisa.com/etias-news/eu-confirms-albanians-not-need-visa#:~:text=Albanians%20do%20not%20need%20a%20visa%20to%20travel,passport%20and%20stay%20for%20up%20to%2090%20days.> [Accessed: 7 May 2021].

<sup>5</sup>Council of the European Union. Visa liberalisation for Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, PRESSE 294, 15957/10, Brussels, 8 November 2010 [online]. Available at: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/jha/117555.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/jha/117555.pdf) [Accessed: 7 May 2021].

<sup>6</sup>Gerald Knaus, Alexandra Stilgmayer. *Op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup>Donika Emini, Zoran Nechev. Visa liberalisation for Kosovo: From one report to another, European Western Balkans, 29 April 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/04/29/visa-liberalization-for-kosovo-from-one-report-to-another/> [Accessed: 7 May 2021].

of slowing down the spread of the virus.<sup>8</sup> Others talk about 70 countries imposing travel restrictions against Beijing.<sup>9</sup> Inevitably, this measure has impacted consistently the global economy and its long-term effect is difficult to assess at present.

## II. Travel Restrictions and the Spread of the Virus: An Effective Measure?

In modeled simulations travel bans are likely to delay the spread of Covid-19 by up to a few weeks. Also, epidemiological research is almost entirely theoretical and model-based.<sup>10</sup> An analysis carried out by Chad R. Wells's team, at the end of March 2020, reveals that travel restrictions are likely to slow down the rate of exportation from mainland China, but is insufficient to contain the global spread of Covid-19.<sup>11</sup> Another study by Chinazzi's team, and published on *Science* at the end of April 2020, suggests that early detection, hand washing, self-isolation, and household quarantine are likely to be more effective than travel restrictions at mitigating the pandemic. Specifically, the researchers estimate that the travel ban has contributed to a 77% reduction of cases imported from China to the rest of the world in early February. However, this has only lasted about two to three weeks. After that the number of international cases has ticked upward due to cases imported from other parts of China.<sup>12</sup> A recent study, published by *The Lancet* (7th December 2020), argues that travel restrictions have worked early in the pandemic, but they have become less effective throughout the year. Concretely, the researchers have found that, with no reductions in movement, international travelers in May would have contributed to more than 10% of total COVID-19 cases in 102 countries that month. But by September, the contribution of international travelers to most countries' COVID-19 case count has dropped significantly.<sup>13</sup>

In 2005, following the SARS epidemic, the WHO has adopted a revised International Health Regulations (IHR)<sup>14</sup>, namely the international legal framework governing how countries prepare for and respond to outbreaks. Its core is to avoid unnecessary interference with international traffic and trade, by empowering the WHO to make recommendations on the restrictions' necessity. But it seems that, as for H1N1 in 2009 and for Ebola in 2014, governments have been ignoring WHO's recommendations and imposed large-scale restrictions anyway.<sup>15</sup> Also for Covid-19 the WHO, while declaring the virus a public-health emergency, has

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<sup>8</sup>Alex Nowrasteh. Travel restrictions and the spread of Covid-19. What does the research say?, 23 March 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.cato.org/blog/travel-restrictions-spread-covid-19-what-does-research-say> [Accessed: 5 May 2021].

<sup>9</sup>Mara Pillinger. Virus travel bans are inevitable but ineffective, 23 February 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/23/virus-travel-bans-are-inevitable-but-ineffective/> [Accessed: 5 May 2021].

<sup>10</sup>Alex Nowrasteh. *Op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup>Chad R. Wells *et al.* Impact of international travel and border control measures on the global spread of the novel 2019 Coronavirus outbreak, PNAS, 31 March 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/13/7504.full> [Accessed: 5 May 2021].

<sup>12</sup>Matteo Chinazzi *et al.* The effect of travel restrictions on the spread of the 2019 novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak, *Science*, 24 April 2020. [online]. Available at: <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/368/6489/395.full> [Accessed: 5 May 2021].

<sup>13</sup>Smriti Mallapaty. What the data say about border closures and Covid spread, 22 December 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-03605-6> [Accessed: 5 May 2021].

<sup>14</sup>World Health Organization. International Health Regulations (2005) Third Edition, 1 January 2016 [online]. Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241580496> [Accessed: 5 May 2021].

<sup>15</sup>Mara Pillinger. *Op. cit.*



advised nations worldwide to keep their borders open. But its request has remained unnoticed, with many countries closing their borders and, thus, contributing to an unprecedented drop-off in global travel still going on. Such measures may cost the global economy US \$400 Bill each month, Steven Hoffman, international lawyer and epidemiologist at York University in Toronto, has said.<sup>16</sup>

The European Union has lined up with the global trend with its travel bans. And, particularly those imposed on the Western Balkans have socio-economically impacted an already weak region in a significant way. Coupled with that, and in the midst of the pandemic, the EU-Western Balkans Zagreb summit, held on the 6th of May 2020, while reaffirming the region's European perspective, has not openly discussed about enlargement.<sup>17</sup>

### III. Travel Restrictions on Non-Essential Travel to the EU: The Western Balkans on the Frontline

Early in the pandemic the EU has rejected the idea of suspending the Schengen free travel zone, and introducing border controls.<sup>18</sup> However, some EU member states have announced a complete closure of their borders to foreign nationals in March 2020.<sup>19</sup> In mid-March of the same year the EU has agreed to reinforce its external borders by adopting coordinated and temporary restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU for a period of 30 days.<sup>20</sup> Such a decision has shown full support to Italy as well as other member states severely affected by the pandemic.<sup>21</sup>

The Western Balkans has been hit harshly by this measure being uplifted on the 1st of July 2020 only. In the midst of the travel ban the EU-Western Balkans Summit (May 2020), supposed to take place in Zagreb, but then held by video conference, has focused on working together in light of the Covid-19 pandemic with the EU disbursing 3.3 Bill EUR for a kick-start economic recovery, help refugees and provide humanitarian assistance, as well as macro-financial support and investment packages by the European Investment Bank to the region.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Smriti Mallapaty. *Op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup>Council of the European Union. EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit, 6 May 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43753/final-eu-wb-zagreb-summit-background.pdf> [Accessed: 6 May 2021].

<sup>18</sup>Coronavirus: EU rules out Schengen border closures amid Italy outbreak, 24 February 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-eu-rules-out-schengen-border-closures-amid-italy-outbreak/a-52497811> [Accessed: 1 April 2021]

<sup>19</sup>Coronavirus: Some of these 24 European Countries Have Closed Their Borders to Tourists, 14 March 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tamarathiessen/2020/03/14/coronavirus-europe-closes-borders-tourists/?sh=751768332765> [Accessed: 2 April 2021].

<sup>20</sup>European Council. Video conference of the members of the European Council, 17 March 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2020/03/17/> [Accessed: 2 April 2021]. European Council. Conclusions by the President of the European Council following the video conference with members of the European Council on Covid-19, 17 March 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/17/conclusions-by-the-president-of-the-european-council-following-the-video-conference-with-members-of-the-european-council-on-covid-19/> [Accessed: 2 April 2021].

<sup>21</sup>European Council. Video conference of the members of the European Council, 10 March 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2020/03/10/> [Accessed: 2 April 2021].

<sup>22</sup>Solidarity at a time of crisis. EU-Western Balkans Summit, 6 May 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/europa/erweiterung-nachbarschaft/eu-western-balkans/2339500> [Accessed: 9 April 2021].



Some days after (13th May 2020) the European Commission has published its first guidelines and recommendations on how to safely resume freedom of movement within the European Union. And, discussions have followed on how to tackle the situation for a reopening of the external border.<sup>23</sup> But considering that the conditions have stayed critical in certain third countries, the European Commission has issued, on the 11th of June 2020, a recommendation to the Schengen Member States and the Schengen Associated States with a view at extending the external border closure until June 30th.<sup>24</sup>

However, the first measures regulating the entry conditions for third-country nationals from the Western Balkans have not translated into an EU common approach towards the Covid-19 crisis management. Council Recommendation 2020/912 leaves the Member States fully responsible to assess whether, on a case-by-case basis, a third-country national is to be considered a threat to public health, while following some objective criteria, when drafting the list of countries, as recommended by the Commission: epidemiological situation and Coronavirus response in that country; the ability to apply containment measures during travel; and whether or not that country has lifted travel restrictions towards the EU.<sup>25</sup> At the same time Member States have been requested to ensure a close cooperation between border guard authorities and transport providers. Pursuant to the Council Recommendation 2020/912 Member States have started uplifting temporary restrictions on non-essential travel into the EU as of the 1st of July 2020.<sup>26</sup>

Referring to recommendation 2020/912, the uplifting measure should have applied with regard to residents of third countries listed in Annex I to the recommendation. Serbia and Montenegro have been on the list, to be reviewed every two weeks<sup>27</sup>, along with other countries, while Kosovo – together with Albania, BiH and North Macedonia – have been excluded.<sup>28</sup> At the time the EU gave its green light to Serbia and Montenegro, Austria has openly confirmed travel bans for Kosovo, Albania, BiH and North Macedonia. This measure was attributed to an increase of infections countrywide traced back to people who have travelled from the Western Balkans, Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg, has said. These same countries have, in fact, witnessed a rise in infections by the end of June 2020 (i.e., North Macedonia with 2.067 cases, Kosovo and Albania with over 1.000).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>European Commission Guidance on Reopening the Schengen Area, 12 June 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.newlandchase.com/european-commission-guidance-on-reopening-the-schengen-area/> [Accessed: 31 March 2021].

<sup>24</sup>EU Commission Recommends Partial and Gradual Lifting of Travel Restrictions for Third-Country Citizens Starting from July 1, 11 June 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/official-eu-commission-recommends-partial-and-gradual-lifting-of-travel-restrictions-for-third-country-citizens-starting-from-july-1/> [Accessed: 31 March 2021].

<sup>25</sup>EU Commission Recommends Partial and Gradual Lifting of Travel Restrictions for Third-Country Citizens Starting from July 1, 11 June 2020. *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>Council of the EU. Council Recommendation (EU) 2020/912 of 30 June 2020 on the temporary restriction on non-essential travel into the EU and the possible lifting of such restriction, Official Journal of the European Union, L 208I/I: 2 [online]. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020H0912&from=EN> [Accessed: 2 April 2021].

<sup>27</sup>Council of the EU. Council Recommendation (EU) 2020/912 of 30 June 2020, *ibid.*: 4.

<sup>28</sup>I.e., Algeria, Australia, Canada, Georgia, Japan, Morocco, New Zealand, Rwanda, South Korea, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay, China. See Annex I. Council of the EU. Council Recommendation (EU) 2020/912 of 30 June 2020, *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>Coronavirus: Austria issues travel warning for six Balkan states, 1 July 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53248720> [Accessed: 5 May 2021].

Four months after the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe, the first third-country citizens eligible to travel to the Schengen area on July 1st, after over three months of a total border closure of non-EU/EEA traveler's block, have been from the WB.<sup>30</sup> This beneficial measure is to be attributed to a better epidemiological situation.<sup>31</sup> But while citizens of Albania, BiH, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia would have been eligible to travel to the Schengen area as of July 1st visa-free, Kosovo citizens would have needed to apply for visas.<sup>32</sup>

In the absence of an EU common approach to the Covid-19 crisis management, and relying on a case-by-case assessment by individual Member States, some Western Balkans countries and their respective citizens have been particularly sidelined. For instance, at the beginning only Greece, Croatia and Bulgaria have announced the opening of their borders with Serbia.<sup>33</sup> Also, at the time the EU Council has adopted, on 30 June 2020, recommendations on a gradual opening of EU borders with citizens from Montenegro and Serbia allowed to freely travel to the EU, restrictions on entry into Germany still have applied, at least at the start, to Serbian citizens, because Berlin had not taken a decision on easing travel restrictions for third-country nationals yet.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, this case-by-case approach may be explained with that 'it [is] up to the member states to decide whether or not to lift restrictions to citizens of the Western Balkans. [And, the EC] recommendation was not only because of the epidemiological situation but also because of the EU's relations with [the] region', the EU's Spokesperson for Home Affairs Adalbert Jahnz, has reported.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, this scenario has enabled the space for double standards towards the region and its own citizens.

On the whole, and anticipating the Council's recommendation above, while countries like Spain have re-opened borders on the 21st of June, France and Germany have been the last European countries to do so.<sup>36</sup> Also, France's re-opening to non-Schengen borders would have been gradual and varying according to the health situation in each of the third countries concerned, starting from July 1st 2020, and pursuant to the EU's arrangements, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Interior Minister Christophe Castaner, have said.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>EU Opens its Borders for Western Balkan Citizens on July 1, 11 June 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/eu-opens-its-borders-for-western-balkan-citizens-on-july-1/> [Accessed: 21 March 2021].

<sup>31</sup>Draft List of Countries Permitted to Enter EU When Borders Reopen on July 1st, 27 June 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/draft-list-of-countries-permitted-to-enter-eu-when-borders-reopen-on-july-1/> [Accessed: 31 March 2021].

<sup>32</sup>EU Commission Recommends Partial and Gradual Lifting of Travel Restrictions for Third-Country Citizens Starting from July 1, *opcit.*

<sup>33</sup>Snezana Bjelotomic. Which countries have opened their borders for Serbian citizens? 28 May 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/which-countries-have-opened-their-borders-for-serbian-citizens/> [Accessed: 13 May 2021].

<sup>34</sup>Citizens of Montenegro and Serbia can travel to the European Union from July 1, 1 July 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/07/01/citizens-of-montenegro-and-serbia-can-travel-to-the-europe-an-union-from-july-1/> [Accessed: 9 April 2021].

<sup>35</sup>EU borders may remain closed for Western Balkans, 23 June 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.rtklive.com/en/news-single.php?ID=16846> [Accessed: 13 May 2021].

<sup>36</sup>Germany and France reopen borders as Europe emerges from lockdown, 15 June 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/15/germany-and-france-reopen-borders-as-europe-emerges-from-lockdown> [Accessed: 5 May 2021].

<sup>37</sup>France to start reopening non-Schengen borders from July 1, 13 June 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20200613-france-to-start-reopening-non-schengen-borders-from-july-1> [Accessed: 5 May 2021].

However, a proper assessment of the way each European Member State has acted differently towards its Western Balkan neighbours is difficult to provide. This is even more a challenge under the conditions of an ever changing situation and the new Covid-related variants. Despite this, *a first overview suggests the need of an EU coordinated approach to the pandemic crisis management and the adoption of a common line of actions towards the Western Balkans.*

#### **IV. Western Balkans Travel Restrictions to the EU Intensified: Lack of a coordinated approach confirmed**

Following the rise of infections and the risks posed by the more transmissible variants of the virus within and outside the EU, the European Commission has proposed amendments, to its previous 16th March 2020 recommendation, on the 25th of January 2021. These follow the recommendation by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) to avoid non-essential travel, in order to slow down the importation and spread of the new variants of concern, which appear to be somewhere between 50-70% more transmissible.<sup>38</sup> Pursuant to the Commission's amendments, the Council of the EU has updated its recommendation on travel restrictions for third countries' nationals to the EU. However, the Council's recommendation, as per the Commission's amendments, is not binding. In fact, the authorities of the member states remain responsible for its implementation.<sup>39</sup> The same is valid for the Council's recent recommendation (14 June 2021) adopted for recommending a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This update responds to the evolving epidemiological situation, the ongoing vaccination campaigns and the adoption of the EU digital COVID certificate, mentioned in the following pages. Concretely, the Council urges upon the Member States to continue discouraging all non essential travel to and from dark red areas on the ECDC's common traffic lights map, as reported in the next pages. The same requirement is valid for areas with a high prevalence of Covid-19 variants of concern or interest and for areas with unknown prevalence due to insufficient sequencing. Therefore, people travelling from these areas should be in possession of a negative test certificate and/to quarantine/self-isolate.<sup>40</sup> Or, the Council's recommendation implementation relies on each Member State. Similarly, the decision on whether to introduce restrictions on free movement to protect public health remains the responsibility of member states.<sup>41</sup>

The Council is in charge of reviewing the list of third countries, the member states should gradually uplift travel restrictions on a regular basis for. Whether the Western Balkans

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<sup>38</sup> Council of the European Union. Council Recommendation amending Council Recommendation (EU) 2020/912 on the temporary restriction on non-essential travel into the EU and the possible lifting of such restriction, 1 February 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5712-2021-REV-2/en/pdf> [Accessed: 2 April 2021].

<sup>39</sup> Council of the EU. Covid-19: Council updates recommendation on restrictions to travel from third countries, 20 May 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/20/covid-19-council-updates-recommendation-on-restrictions-to-travel-from-third-countries/> [Accessed: 18 June 2021].

<sup>40</sup> Council of the EU. Covid-19: Council updates recommendations on free movement restrictions, 14 June 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/14/covid-19-council-updates-recommendation-on-free-movement-restrictions/> [Accessed: 18 June 2021].

<sup>41</sup> Council of the EU. Covid-19: Council updates recommendations on free movement restrictions, 14 June 2021, *ibid.*

were not displayed on the previous lists (28th of January 2021<sup>42</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2020<sup>43</sup>, 7th of August 2020<sup>44</sup>, 22nd of October 2020<sup>45</sup>, and 17th December 2020)<sup>46</sup>, the recent EU Council's update (18th June 2021) gives the green light to Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia.<sup>47</sup>

The criteria to determine the third countries travel restrictions should be uplifted for refer to the epidemiological situation and containment measures, including physical distancing, as well as economic and social considerations. Also, they apply cumulatively and reciprocity should be taken into account regularly as well as on a case-by-case basis.<sup>48</sup>

On 2nd February 2021 the EU has agreed on an updated recommendation on temporary restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU, and the possible lifting of such restrictions. Specific criteria for lifting restrictions were previously: not more than 25 new COVID-19 cases per 100 000 inhabitants over the last 14 days; a stable or decreasing trend of new cases over this period in comparison to the previous 14 days; more than 300 tests per 100 000 inhabitants in the previous 7 days, if the data is available to ECDC; not more than 4% positive tests among all COVID-19 tests carried out in the previous 7 days, if the data is available to ECDC; the nature of the virus present in a country, in particular whether variants of concern of the virus have been detected. Also, the Council of the EU has made it clear that where the epidemiological situation worsens quickly and in particular where a high incidence of variants of concern of the virus is detected, travel restrictions for non-essential travel maybe rapidly reintroduced.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Council of the EU. Travel restrictions: Council reviews the list of third countries for which member states should gradually lift restrictions on non-essential travel, 28 January 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/01/28/travel-restrictions-council-reviews-the-list-of-third-countries-for-which-member-states-should-gradually-lift-restrictions-on-non-essential-travel/> [Accessed: 6 May 2021].

<sup>43</sup>Council of the European Union. Council updates the list of countries for which member states should gradually lift travel restrictions at the external borders, 16 July 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/07/16/council-updates-the-list-of-countries-for-which-member-states-should-gradually-lift-travel-restrictions-at-the-external-borders/> [Accessed: 6 May 2021].

<sup>44</sup>Council of the EU. Lifting of travel restrictions: Council reviews the list of third countries, 7 August 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/08/07/lifting-of-travel-restrictions-council-reviews-the-list-of-third-countries/> [Accessed 6 May 2021].

<sup>45</sup>Council of the EU. Travel restrictions: Council reviews the list of third countries for which restrictions should be lifted, 22 October 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/10/22/travel-restrictions-council-reviews-the-list-of-third-countries-for-which-restrictions-should-be-lifted/> [Accessed: 6 May 2021].

<sup>46</sup>Council of the EU. Travel restrictions: Council reviews the list of third countries for which member states should gradually lift restrictions on non-essential travel, 17 December 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/17/travel-restrictions-council-reviews-the-list-of-third-countries-for-which-restrictions-on-non-essential-travel-should-be-lifted/> [Accessed: 6 May 2021].

<sup>47</sup>Council of the European Union. Council updates the list of countries, special administrative regions and other entities and territorial authorities for which travel restrictions should be lifted, 18 June 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/18/council-updates-the-list-of-countries-special-administrative-regions-and-other-entities-and-territorial-authorities-for-which-travel-restrictions-should-be-lifted/> [Accessed: 18 June 2021].

<sup>48</sup>Council of the EU. Travel restrictions: Council reviews the list of third countries for restrictions on non-essential travel should be lifted, 17 December 2020, *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup>Council of the EU. Covid-19: Council updates recommendation on travel restrictions from third countries into the EU, 2 February 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/02/02/covid-19-council-updates-recommendation-on-travel-restrictions-from-third-countries-into-the-eu/> [Accessed: 2 April 2021].

The Council's recent recommendation (14 June 2021) raises the thresholds for including an area in one of the four defined colours, as per the ECDC's traffic light map: *green* if the 14-day notification rate is less than 50 and the test positivity rate below 4%, or if the 14-day notification rate is less than 75 and the test positivity rate less than 1%; *orange* if the 14-day notification rate is less than 50 and the test positivity rate is 4% or more; if the 14-day notification rate is between 50 and 75 and the test positivity rate is 1% or more; or if the 14-day notification rate is between 75 and 200 and the test positivity rate is less than 4%; *red* if the 14-day notification rate is between 75 and 200 and the test positivity rate is 4% or more; or if the 14-day notification rate is between 200 and 500; *dark red* the threshold for this colour is maintained at a notification rate of more than 500. Also, the Council recommendation includes two additional criteria to be taken into account, when considering whether to restrict free movement: the vaccination up take and the prevalence of Covid-19 variants of concern or interest.<sup>50</sup>

*'[...] one of the lessons we have learned so far is that our inter dependence means that imposing restrictions in one part of the EU has implications for all.'*<sup>51</sup>

In these circumstances the Commission has called upon the Member States to prepare for a coordinated approach to a gradual lifting of Covid-19 restrictions when the epidemiological situation will allow.<sup>52</sup> It asks for an EU-wide measure to safe and sustainable re-opening, which promotes the goal of lifting restrictions within a common set of tools based on a clear understanding of how to ensure, and maintain, an effective suppression of the virus.<sup>53</sup> It is too premature, however, to talk about an EU common approach. Despite this, the EC proposed, on the 3rd May 2021, that the Member States ease the current restrictions on non-essential travel into the EU, while taking into account the progress of vaccination campaigns and developments in the epidemiological situation worldwide. Its suggestion to raise, with a view at the evolution of the epidemiological situation in the EU, the threshold related to the number of new Covid-19 cases used to determine a list of countries from which all travel should be allowed, has been implemented by the European Council's recommendation of 14th June 2021, mentioned above. The EC's move should enable the Council to expand the list to be reviewed every two weeks.<sup>54</sup> The recent updated list, mentioned in the previous pages, has proved beneficial for Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania, while leaving outside Kosovo and Montenegro.

Indeed, easing travel and trade traffic to and from the Western Balkans is necessary for the region not to feel isolated on the one hand. And, it is important for Brussels' economy too,

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<sup>50</sup>Council of the EU. Covid-19: Council updates recommendations on free movement restrictions, 14 June 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/14/covid-19-council-updates-recommendation-on-free-movement-restrictions/> [Accessed: 18 June 2021].

<sup>51</sup>European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council. A common path to safe and sustained re-opening, COM (2021) 129 final, 17 March 2021: 2 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-safe-sustained-reopening\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-safe-sustained-reopening_en.pdf) [Accessed: 2 April 2021].

<sup>52</sup>Coronavirus: a common path to Europe's safe re-opening, 17 March 2021 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_1184](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1184) [Accessed: 31 March 2021].

<sup>53</sup>European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council. A common path to safe and sustained re-opening, COM (2021) 129 final, 17 March 2021, *op. cit.*

<sup>54</sup>Commission proposes to ease restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU, 3 May 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/commission-proposes-easing-restrictions-on-non-essential-travel-to-the-eu/> [Accessed: 6 May 2021].

considering the close economic and trade inter dependence between the two regions as explained in the next pages, on the other hand. Rather, *the current crisis must be used as a chance to reinvigorate the EU-Western Balkans relations. After all, 'the Western Balkans are part of Europe and not just a stopover on the Silk Road'*, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, has said.<sup>55</sup>

## V. EU Measures Easing Travel Restrictions: Western Balkans Out of the Box

With a view at easing travel bans the European Union has adopted several measures, the Western Balkans have been excluded from. But their anchoring to these mechanisms from the beginning may have softened the crisis's socio-economic impact on the region, while signaling its strategic importance for the EU, as well as for their future European perspective. Whether the recent visit of Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi to the region, as the COVID-19 vaccines (in total 651.000 BioNTech/Pfizer doses will be delivered in weekly installments from the beginning of May to August) have arrived there<sup>56</sup>, is to be welcomed, Brussels has shown to be faithful to a post-recovery approach, instead of pro-actively engaging the Western Balkans into its Covid-19 preventive measures.

The Western Balkans is, for instance, not part of the ECDC's joint travel restrictions adopted on the 13th of October 2020. These impinge on the rights of Europeans to travel freely throughout the 27 Member countries only. A common map based on traffic light basis, where regions are coloured in green, orange and grey has, therefore, been created. The map considers three factors: notification rate (the total number of newly notified Covid-19 cases per 100 000 population in the last 14 days at regional level); test positivity rate (the percentage of positive tests among all tests for Covid-19 infection carried out during the last week); and the testing rate (the number of tests for Covid-19 infection per 100 000 population carried out during the last week). On the basis of these three factors the various colours will be assigned as per the European Council's recent recommendation (14 June 2021) and new threshold, as mentioned in the previous pages. Overall, however, the traffic light system is not enforceable by law and each member state can decide whether to implement it or not.<sup>57</sup>

The Western Balkan region is also not part of the so-called Digital Green Certificate. Also known as 'Covid passport', it is a temporary measure, in force until the WHO declares the end of the pandemic, serving as a proof of vaccination enabling EU citizens to travel with fewer restrictions within the EU. All Member States will be required to recognize the certificate. But individual Member States may decide to accept other vaccines too. The certificate is also open to citizens of Liechtenstein, Switzerland and Norway, as well as to citizens of other countries having their residence in the EU. Also, the Commission is working with the WHO to ensure that certificates issued in the EU can be recognised elsewhere in the world.<sup>58</sup> However, third-country nationals not residing in the EU, including Western Balkans' citizens, are not included in the

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<sup>55</sup>European Western Balkans. Von der Leyen: Western Balkans are part of Europe, not just a stopover on the Silk Road, 16 September 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/09/16/von-der-leyen-western-balkans-are-part-of-europe-not-just-a-stopover-on-the-silk-road/> [Accessed: 13 May 2021].

<sup>56</sup>Commissioner Várhelyi travels to the Western Balkans as first EU funded vaccines arrive, 3 May 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://webalkans.eu/en/commissioner-varhelyi-travels-to-the-western-balkans-as-first-eu-funded-vaccines-arrive/> [Accessed: 6 May 2021].

<sup>57</sup>New EU Travel Restrictions, Country By Country, As Covid-19 Rates Soar, 24 October 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexledsom/2020/10/24/eu-covid-19-restrictions-who-can-travel-in-and-out-and-whats-open/?sh=46eb3ff652b0> [Accessed: 1 April 2021].

<sup>58</sup>EU Digital Covid Certificate [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/safe-covid-19-vaccines-europeans/covid-19-digital-green-certificates\\_en#what-is-a-digital-green-certificate](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/safe-covid-19-vaccines-europeans/covid-19-digital-green-certificates_en#what-is-a-digital-green-certificate) [Accessed: 9 April 2021].

mechanism.<sup>59</sup> Besides that, the use of the digital green certificate has not been greeted positively by Serbia. In fact, the pass might be valid for vaccines approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) only. This body currently excludes Russian *Sputnik V* vaccine or any vaccine from Chinese manufacturers, which have been widely used in Serbia.<sup>60</sup> The privilege of holders of vaccination certificates, issued in line with the EU digital COVID certificate regulation, is confirmed by the fact that they should not be subject to testing or quarantine/self isolation if they are fully vaccinated with an EMA approved vaccine and at least 14 days have passed since full vaccination. Member states could also lift such restrictions after the first dose of a two-dose series.<sup>61</sup>

Concretely, the Digital Green Certificate shows and/or states whether a person has either been vaccinated, or has a recent negative test, or has recovered from COVID-19 – and has, thus, antibodies. Additionally, the certificate will make sure that the results – or what it shows, the data, the minimum set of data – are mutually recognised in every Member State. And, last but not least, with this digital certificate, the EU aims at helping Member States to reinstate the freedom of movement in a safe, responsible and trusted manner.<sup>62</sup> At the same time this certificate will require a compatible technical framework to be defined at the EU level, and set in place by the Member States. The goal is to have the system functioning by mid-June 2021 with the idea of its future usage to compatible certificates issued in third countries as well.<sup>63</sup> But the Western Balkans is currently not part of the mechanism. However, until the Digital Green Certificate is operational, Member States should be able to accept certificates from non-EU countries based on national law, taking into account the ability to verify the authenticity, validity and integrity of the certificate, and whether it contains all relevant data.<sup>64</sup> Yet, how this will work in the practice remains unknown.

In the meantime the Western Balkans has activated the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM). They have started to receive assistance from UCPM Member States and participating states, in order to face most direct pandemic challenges, while possibly managing travel restrictions more consistently. Particularly, Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, being participating states in the Mechanism, are able to contribute and request support of EU, including stock piling of medical counter measures and equipment. Also, stranded citizens from the Western Balkans have been among those repatriated to Europe thanks to flights organized and co-financed under the UCPM.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>EC: Member States will be required to accept certificates for EU-approved vaccines, but they can also accept other vaccines, 17 March 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/03/17/ec-member-states-will-be-required-to-accept-certificates-for-eu-approved-vaccines-but-they-can-also-accept-other-vaccines/> [Accessed: 9 April 2021].

<sup>60</sup>Green Certificates to be used only within the EU for now, no details on the third countries, 13 March 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/03/16/green-certificates-to-be-used-only-within-the-eu-for-now-no-details-on-the-third-countries/> [Accessed: 13 May 2021].

<sup>61</sup>Council of the EU. Covid-19: Council updates recommendations on free movement restrictions, 14 June 2021, *op. cit.*

<sup>62</sup>Statement by President von der Leyen at the Read-out of the College meeting/Press conference on the Commission's response to Covid-19, 17 March 2021 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_21\\_1222](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_21_1222) [Accessed: 31 March 2021].

<sup>63</sup>European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council. A common path to safe and sustained re-opening, *op. cit.*: 4.

<sup>64</sup>Commission proposes to ease restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU, 3 May 2021, *op. cit.*

<sup>65</sup>European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Support to the Western Balkans in tackling Covid-19 and the post-pandemic recovery. Commission contribution ahead of the EU-Western



## VI. The EU and the Western Balkans: Beyond Travel Restrictions

Beyond travel restrictions and easing-related measures, the EU and its Member States are establishing a coordinated European approach to vaccine-sharing by setting up an EU Vaccine Sharing Mechanism based on the principles of fairness, gradual build-up, zero waste and a Team Europe approach. Its aim is to further support and go beyond existing bilateral initiatives by the Member States. The mechanism will start and buildup gradually as vaccine availabilities improve and quantitative targets are set. Vaccines will be preferably channelled via COVAX with a particular focus, together with Africa, on the Western Balkans.<sup>66</sup> And, to ensure that Covid-19 vaccines are accessible to all, the European Investment Bank (EIB) has approved on 12th May 2021 an extra EUR 200 Mill to the Covax initiative, in a tweet the institution has reported. But before a common effort steps up, individual EU Member States keep providing their support to the region as well. For instance, Germany has recently shipped 360.000 test kits, worth EUR 1.5 Mill to Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia, in a tweet Susanne Schütz, German Director for the Western Balkans (13 May 2021), has confirmed.

Also, the EU is providing financial support of more than EUR 3.3 Bill to countries in the Western Balkan region with a view at addressing the immediate health crisis and facing humanitarian needs.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, both sides have been cooperating together to face the pandemic via, among others, a joint procurement medical equipment exempting the region from the EU's export authorization scheme for personal protective equipment, and the supply by the EU of testing material. The region is also benefiting from technical assistance and information exchange facilitated by the ECDC. Besides that, candidate countries in the region have been invited as observers to the EU Health Security Committee and are given access to the related Early Warning and Response System. Additionally, the Western Balkans also benefit from the extended joint proposal of the Permanent Secretariat of the Transport Community and Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA) securing the concept of 'green lanes' ensuring the fast flow of essential goods within the region. The Commission is also ready to associate the region closely with the implementation of its 'Joint European Roadmap' towards lifting Covid-19 containment measures.<sup>68</sup>

There are a couple of mechanisms helping the region to face the pandemic-related challenges. Yet, *they much reflect a post-trauma approach. What, in fact, is missing is the region's full integration into the crisis management proper.*

## VII. EU Covid-19 Restrictions to the Western Balkans: Socio-Economic Impact Explained

Along with a lack of a proper anchoring into the EU pandemic management, the Western Balkans region has been experiencing a consistent socio-economic downturn. Across the region borders have been closed, and international aviation has been severely restricted. Hotels and restaurants have been shut down, yachts and boats have been prohibited from entering Adriatic

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Balkans leaders meeting on 6 May 2020, COM (2020) 315 final, Brussels, 29 April 2020: 2-3 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/com\\_2020\\_315\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/com_2020_315_en.pdf) [Accessed: 04 May 2021].

<sup>66</sup>European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council. A common path to safe and sustained re-opening, *op. cit.*

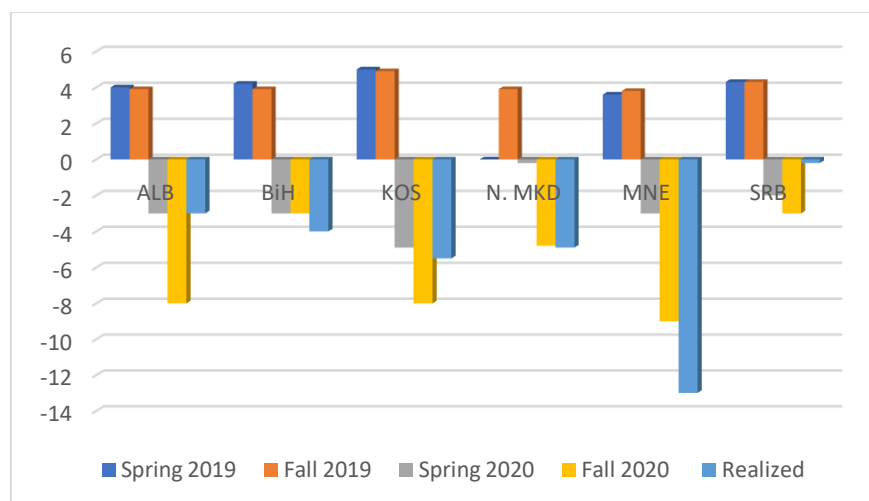
<sup>67</sup>European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Support to the Western Balkans in tackling Covid-19 and the post-pandemic recovery, COM(2020) 315 final, 29 April 2020, *op. cit.*: 1.

<sup>68</sup>European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Support to the Western Balkans in tackling Covid-19 and the post-pandemic recovery, COM(2020) 315 final, 29 April 2020, *ibid.*: 3.

ports. All these containment measures, aimed at preventing the spread of Covid, have affected particularly the touristic industry and trade with the European Union.

Since its start 139.000 jobs have been lost, and between 165.000 and 336.000 people have been left into poverty in the region.<sup>69</sup> On the whole the pandemic has contributed to a major shift in growth expectations across the Western Balkans, with Montenegro performing well behind its neighbours.

**Figure 1.** *The pandemic led to a major shift in growth expectations.  
Predicted and realized growth in 2020*



Source: Data from World Bank RERs.

Lying at a crossroads, where empires have met, fought and formed a kaleidoscope of cultures unique in Europe, visible in the local architecture, cuisine, music, traditions and languages, the region has been benefiting most from tourism over the last years, with the main tourists coming from Europe.

**Table 1.** In bound Tourism to the Western Balkans 2015-2019

Inbound Tourism	ALB	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
	Arrivals Total	4.132	4735	5119	5928	6407
	Arrivals from Europe	3759	4485	4687	5332	5796
	Rest of the world	373	250	432	596	611
	BIH					
	Arrivals total	679	779	923	1053	1199
	Arrivals from Europe	536	566	648	733	788
	Rest of the world	143	213	275	320	411
	MNE					
	Arrivals Total	1559	1662	1878	2077	2510
	Arrivals from Europe	1496	1592	1774	1940	2332

<sup>69</sup>Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, Subdued Recovery, No. 19, Spring 2021: 2 [online]. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35509/Subdued-Recovery.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> [Accessed: 10 May 2021].

	Rest of the world	63	70	104	137	178
	KOS*					
	North MKD					
	Arrivals total	486	511	630	707	757
	Arrivals from Europe	440	466	562	626	677
	Rest of the world	46	45	68	81	80
	SRB					
	Arrivals Total	1132	1281	1497	1712	1846
	Arrivals from Europe	1011	1158	1320	1440	1556
	Rest of the world	121	123	177	272	290

Source: aggregated data have been extracted per each country from <https://www.e-unwto.org> [Accessed: 12.05.2021]. Data from Kosovo are not available. Data have been updated between 13.07.2020 and 29.10.2020.

The branch contributes 15% to overall GDP of the region, and it sustains around 550.000 jobs<sup>70</sup>, with 1.4% of Western Balkans employees working in this sector.<sup>71</sup>

**Figure 2.** Contributions of the tourism sector in the Western Balkans, 2019



**Note:** No data available for Kosovo

Source: World Bank and Tourism Council (<https://data.worldbank.org>)

Yet, the breakup of the pandemic, and travel-related bans, have inevitably affected this industry in a consistent way. Particularly, Montenegro has suffered a 90% collapse in tourism accounting for more than 20% of its GDP.<sup>72</sup> On the whole, and after the outbreak of the virus,

<sup>70</sup>The Covid-19 Crisis in the Western Balkans. Economic impact, policy responses, and short-term sustainable solutions: 5 [online]. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf> [Accessed: 6 April 2021].

<sup>71</sup>Tourism in the Western Balkans: Where and How in the Times of the Pandemic? 8 June 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.rcc.int/news/629/tourism-in-the-western-balkans-where-and-how-in-the-times-of-the-pandemic> [Accessed: 6 May 2021].

<sup>72</sup>Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, Subdued Recovery, No. 19, Spring 2021, *op. cit.*: 4. See also The Economic and Social Impact of Covid-19. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 17, Spring 2020: 5[online]. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33670/External-Sector.pdf?sequence=21&isAllowed=y> [Accessed: 7 May 2021].

42% of employers working in the touristic sector have been forced cutting costs and laying off some of their employees.<sup>73</sup> Laurent Gurkinger from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) has confirmed the EU commitment to the Western Balkans, by reminding that the EUR 3.3 Bill allocated to the region will serve, along with the health sector, for the overall economic recovery with tourism being a priority in cross-border cooperation and bilateral programmes.<sup>74</sup>

Together with Montenegro abovementioned, Kosovo and Albania rely considerably on tourism-related service exports. Therefore, they are likely to witness a worsening of their CADs.<sup>75</sup> Especially, Albania will be the most affected, considering its high dependence (half) of its exports on Italy. Kosovo's CAD will worsen too, because of lower Diaspora-driven service remittances and exports. The region's overall CAD is estimated to rise from 6.2 % in 2019 up to 7.4% in 2020. In addition to that, the countries across the region have been facing a considerable decrease in remittances, making up 6.1% of GDP for the past five years, because the countries' primary resources of remittances, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Greece and Italy, have been hit harshly by the pandemic. It is expected that Kosovo, BiH and Serbia's remittances will move backward from 0.8% to 0.1% of GDP.<sup>76</sup>

At the EU level there is still not a roadmap for a tailored- and country-specific recovery package in the touristic industry across the region. In fact, the briefly aforementioned EU Commission EUR 3.3 Bill of financial support mobilized jointly with the EIB to the benefit of the Western Balkans' citizens aim to address the immediate health and resulting humanitarian needs of the pandemic, while broadly referring to the social and economic recovery too.<sup>77</sup> Besides that, the EU Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) launched on the 6th of October 2020 with a view at spurring the region's long-term recovery, and setting out a substantial investment package for the Western Balkans – up to EUR 9 Bill (on EUR 14 Bill in total) of IPA III funding for the period 2021-2027 for supporting economic convergence with the EU – is too vague. Aimed at facilitating public and private investment in the region by the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and other International Financial Institutions (IFIs), EIP misses to name concrete actions per economic sector to be jointly undertaken. It contains neither a plan nor a list of resources' prioritisation to be channeled in sector *a* and/or *b*. Also, the document reiterates the *dictum* of structural socio-economic reforms (i.e., rule of law, high quality public administration, fight against corruption, human rights, etc.) to be carried by the countries across the region, pending the successful completion of key benchmarks (i.e., rule of law, fight against corruption, public administration reform, etc.). Yet, it does not specify sub-criteria for each of these benchmarks. Despite this, EIP foresees investing in sustainable transport with the goal of bringing the core transport network up to the EU standards.<sup>78</sup> Inevitably, this is a crucial step for boosting tourism, while driving investment,

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<sup>73</sup>Tourism in the Western Balkans: Where and How in the Times of the Pandemic? 8 June 2020, *op. cit.*

<sup>74</sup>Tourism in the Western Balkans: Where and How in the Times of the Pandemic?, *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup>The Economic and Social Impact of Covid-19. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 17, Spring 2020: 1, *op. cit.*

<sup>76</sup>The Economic and Social Impact of Covid-19. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 17, Spring 2020: 5, *ibid.*

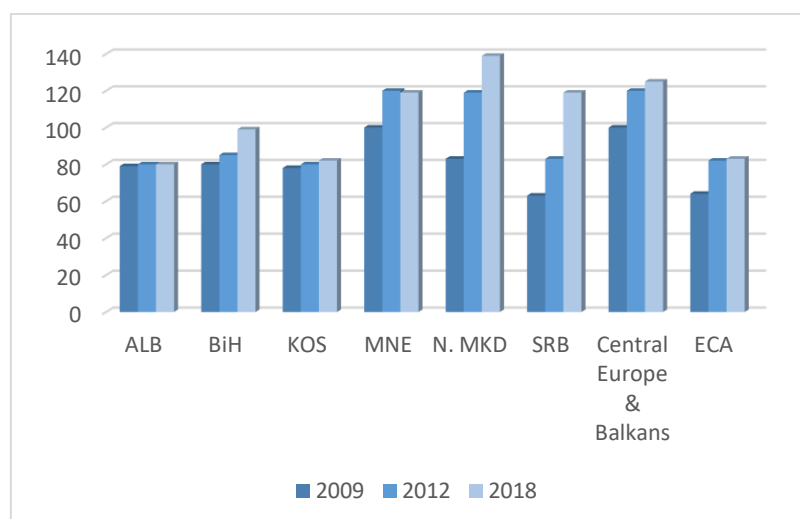
<sup>77</sup>Western Balkans' leaders meeting: EU reinforces support to address Covid-19 crisis and outlines proposal for post-pandemic recovery, 29 April 2020 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_777](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_777) [Accessed: 13 May 2021].

<sup>78</sup>European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, COM(2020) 641 final, 6 October 2020: 1-2 & 5-7 [online]. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood->

regional trade and delivering sustainable economic growth. Among the major transport investments, to be either completed and/or upgraded by 2024, are the *Peace Highway* in Kosovo, linking Pristina to Nis in Serbia, with the Serbian connection substantially advanced; the *Blue Highway* along the coast from Croatia down to Greece: the Tirana road bypass will be completed and two further sections in Albania plus the Budva bypass in Montenegro will be substantially advanced; the *railway route connecting Belgrade to Pristina* will be further upgraded; and the *Sarajevo to Podgorica capital connection* will be enhanced, linking further to the existing and planned networks in BiH, and providing more direct links between neighbours.<sup>79</sup> The EIP also pinpoints the key objective of the region to build a *Common Regional Market*, as a stepping-stone to integrate the region more closely with the EU Single Market already before they accede to the Union. Such an enhanced market integration of the Western Balkans could bring an additional 6.7% GDP growth to the region.<sup>80</sup>

Along with the touristic sector mentioned above trade in services might be hit severely by the pandemic as well. All the Western Balkans, witnessing significant trade openness in the period 2009-2018, could be affected. But it is too early to make exact predictions on the matter.

**Figure 3.**Trade Openness Index



Source: World Development Indicators (WDI).

enlargement/sites/near/files/communication\_on\_wb\_economic\_and\_investment\_plan\_october\_2020\_en.pdf [Accessed: 13 May 2021].

<sup>79</sup>Annex to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, COM (2020) 641 final, 6 October 2020: 1-2 [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/communication\\_on\\_wb\\_economic\\_and\\_investment\\_plan\\_october\\_2020\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf) [Accessed: 13 May 2021].

<sup>80</sup>European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, COM(2020) 641 final, 6 October 2020: 16-17, *ibid*.

In Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo trade in services play a big role, because of the much developed tourism industry and related-services in their economies,<sup>81</sup> as mentioned earlier. And, the last available data on trade in services with the region confirm the close economic inter dependence between the EU and the Western Balkans in this endeavour.

**Table 2.** EU-27 Trade in Services with the Western Balkans (2017-2018)

Bill EUR	Albania			BiH			Kosovo			Montenegro			North Macedonia			Serbia		
	Import	Export	Balance	Import	Export	Balance	Import	Export	Balance	Import	Export	Balance	Import	Export	Balance	Import	Export	Balance
2017	1.0	1.0		1.0	1.0					0.4	0.2	-0.2	0.7	0.7		1.9	2.4	0.5
2018	1.1	1.2	0.1	1.1	0.9	-0.1				0.6	0.3	-0.4	0.6	0.7	0.1	2.0	2.5	0.5

Source: Aggregated data extracted from <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/statistics/> [Accessed: 07.04.2021].

On a global scale Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia's exports dropped more than imports, with the decline being higher in Montenegro because of a considerable downsize in foreign tourism having a major impact, according to recent World Bank's data (spring 2021). Concretely, the decline in net exports has been the primary reason of Montenegro's recession, amounting for a 6.7 pp drop in its economy's growth rate.<sup>82</sup>

Along with the global scale, the EU-Western Balkans trade relations are likely to be affected harshly by Covid-19 containment measures. In fact, the EU is by far the main trade partner of the Western Balkans, with a trade volume totaling EUR 54.4 Bill in 2018<sup>83</sup>, and EUR 55 Bill in 2019.<sup>84</sup> With a population of nearly 18 Mill people, the region is an important market for the EU and a transit area for European and international goods. From 2009 to 2019 there has been a continuous increase in exports towards the region, with imports being out of balance for North Macedonia only. Kosovo is, with about EUR 1.300 Mill, ahead of Montenegro with something more than EUR 1.200 Mill, below the other countries across the region in terms of EU's exports in 2019. Imports from Kosovo are well below the region's average in the 10 years-term. Data are not available for 2020, when the pandemic has broken out.<sup>85</sup> Across the region Serbia is by far the key EU's trade partner with Kosovo witnessing a trade increase, almost doubling, from 2011 to 2019.

**Table 3.** EU-Trade Balance with the Western Balkans 2011-2019

EU Trade Balance in EUR Mill		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
	Albania	1384,1	1325,5	1091,5	1221,9	1354,7	1415,4	1479,1	1438,9	1342,6	
	SRB	3968,4	4607,6	3339,0	3247,4	3261,4	2948,3	3392,4	3730,3	3741,1	
	BiH	1794,9	1840,0	1532,2	1694,1	1583,3	1472,7	1665,0	1388,7	1944,5	
	MNE	561,7	594,5	723,5	721,9	733,3	842,8	901,6	1018,9	1098,7	
	North MKD	757,7	1261,9	1007,7	799,7	748,6	727,4	716,8	641,7	814,5	
	KOS	595,6	590,0	598,6	632,3	659,8	781,7	817,5	946,0	1161,7	

Source: Eurostat [online].

<sup>81</sup>The Economic and Social Impact of Covid-19. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 17, Spring 2020: 2, *op. cit.*

<sup>82</sup>Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, Subdued Recovery, No. 19, Spring 2021: 5, *op. cit.*

<sup>83</sup> EU Engagement in the Western Balkans: 3 [online]. Available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/new\\_eu\\_wb\\_factsheet\\_28\\_05\\_2019.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/new_eu_wb_factsheet_28_05_2019.pdf) [Accessed: 7 April 2021].

<sup>84</sup>European Commission. Western Balkans [online]. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/western-balkans/> [Accessed: 7 April 2021]

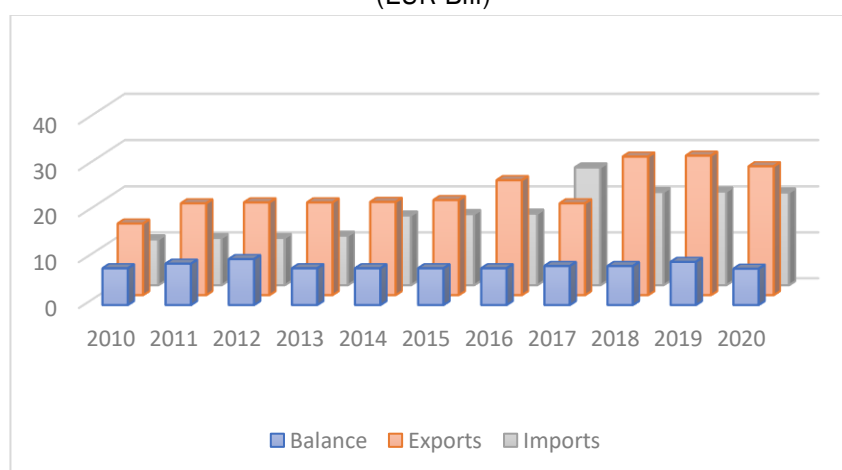
<sup>85</sup> Information per each country has been taken from <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/statistics/> [Accessed: 07.04.2021].

However, bearing in mind that all countries across the region are closely integrated with the EU economies in both intermediate and final goods, as well as services, they will be particularly vulnerable<sup>86</sup> to any Covid-19 disruption. Also, on a more general note, the EC's decision (end of March 2020) to drastically restrict medical equipment exports to non-EU countries, while making such export subject to the approval of all Member States, has been met with disappointment in the Balkans. This measure will affect severely the concerned countries in an unpredictable way. And, whether Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's saying "European solidarity does not exist – that was a fairytale on paper"<sup>87</sup> is not something new, definitely the *EU has missed to properly anchor the region to the pandemic management from the very beginning*.

Yet, trade plays an important role in the EU's efforts in promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity across the region. Under the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP, June 1999), the EU has concluded Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) – referred to as Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) – with each Western Balkan partner.<sup>88</sup> SAAs have established a free-trade area over a transitional period which has now ended except for Kosovo (2026), and they foresee elimination of duties and non-tariff restrictions on bilateral trade. Only some agricultural and fisheries products are not fully liberalized, and are subject to reduced duties and/or preferential quantitative concessions.<sup>89</sup> Notwithstanding the current Covid-19 crisis, this framework represents a key cornerstone for sound and long-lasting economic relations between the EU and the region. *Rather, the pandemic might serve as the basis for renewed and more robust trade relations between the two parties.*

Inevitably, the EU-Western Balkans close economic interdependence is well reflected in the EU recording a trade surplus with the region up to EUR 7.9 Bill in 2020, despite the pandemic.

**Figure 4. EU-Trade with Western Balkan countries, 2020**  
(EUR Bill)



*Source: Eurostat - Comext DS-018995*

<sup>86</sup>The Economic and Social Impact of Covid-19. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 17, Spring 2020: 2, *op. cit.*

<sup>87</sup>Akri Çipa. The EU and the Western Balkans: Love lost in the time of coronavirus, 20 March 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://emerging-europe.com/voices/the-eu-the-western-balkans-love-lost-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/> [Accessed: 5 May 2021].

<sup>88</sup>I.e., Albania (2009), North Macedonia (2004), Montenegro (2010), Serbia (2013), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2013), and Kosovo (2016).

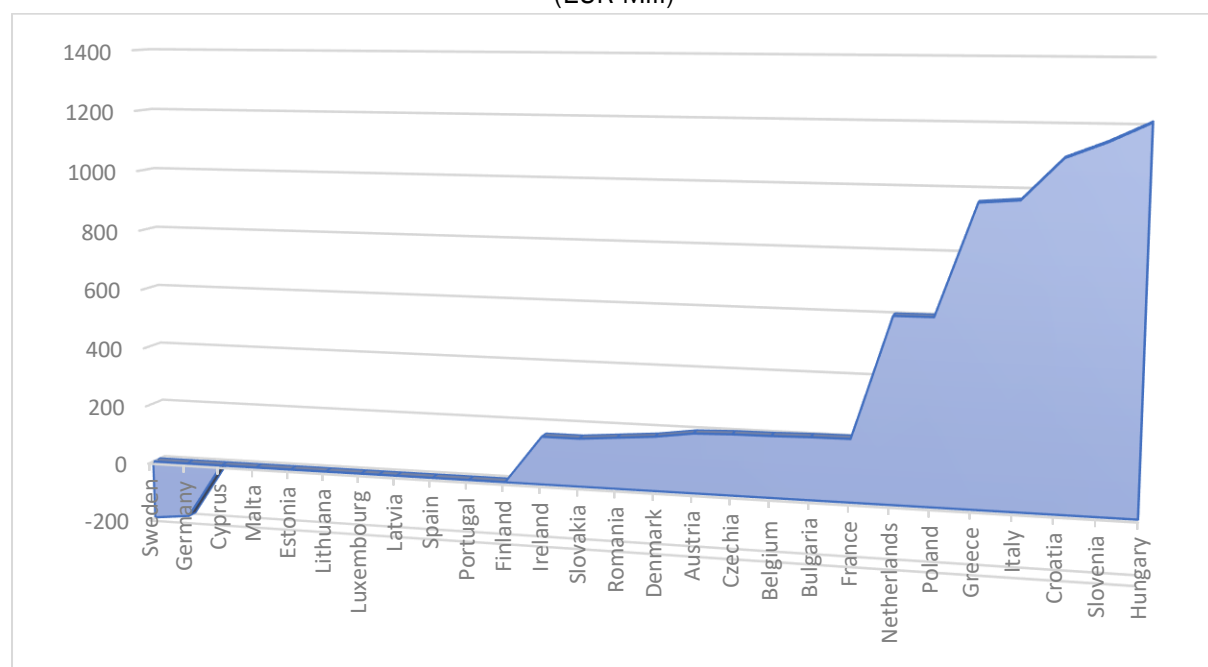
<sup>89</sup>European Commission. Western Balkans, *op. cit.*



Across the EU three Member States have recorded their exports above EUR 3 Bill in 2020: Germany (EUR 5.2 Bill), Italy (EUR 4.0 Bill) and Slovenia (EUR 3.0 Bill). But whether for Germany (0.9%) and Italy (1.9%) these exports have been only a small percentage of their total exports to countries outside the EU, for Slovenia the share has represented 24% of its total exports. Percentages have been even higher for Croatia (51 %), Bulgaria (12.3 %), Hungary (12.0 %) and Greece (11.4 %). Also, the same three member states (Germany, Italy and Slovenia) being the main exporters to the region, have been the main importers in the year 2020: Germany (1.4 %, EUR 5.3 Bill), Italy (1.9%, EUR 3.0 Bill), and Slovenia (12.8%, EUR 1.9 Bill), with Croatia reaching 27.9%.<sup>90</sup>

Across the EU the trade balance with the Western Balkans has been uneven in 2020, with six member states (Sweden, Germany, Cyprus, Malta, Estonia and Lithuania) having small trade deficits with the countries in the region, while three (Hungary EUR 1.2 Bill, Slovenia EUR 1.1 Bill, and Croatia EUR 1.0 Bill) have registered surpluses of at least EUR 1 Bill.<sup>91</sup>

**Figure 5. EU-Trade Balance with Western Balkans per country, 2020**  
(EUR Mill)



*Source: Eurostat - Comext DS-018995*

Besides the service sector mentioned before, the EU is the main trade partner in goods making up 77% of EU exports to and 80% of EU imports from the Western Balkans.<sup>92</sup> Particularly, manufactured goods dominate trade with the region. Forecasts, at the start of the pandemic,

<sup>90</sup> The Western Balkans are important trade partners for Croatia [online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=479856#Manufactured\\_goods\\_dominate\\_trade\\_with\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=479856#Manufactured_goods_dominate_trade_with_the_Western_Balkans) [Accessed: 11 may 2021].

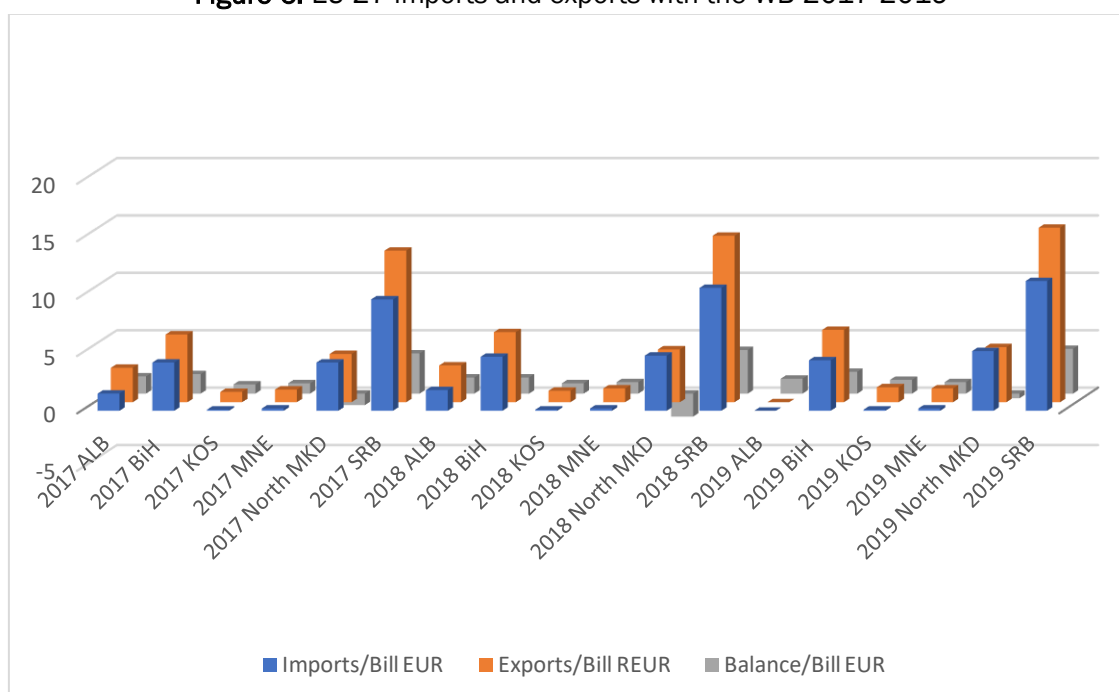
<sup>91</sup> Trade Balance with the Western Balkans, 2020 [online]. Available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=479856#Manufactured\\_goods\\_dominate\\_trade\\_with\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=479856#Manufactured_goods_dominate_trade_with_the_Western_Balkans) [Accessed: 11 May 2021].

<sup>92</sup> Western Balkans EU international trade in goods (statistics) [online]. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=479856> [Accessed: 11 May 2021].

have foreseen a move backward for food, entertainment, and retail services, with countries like North Macedonia, Serbia and BiH registering a more pronounced goods' trade integration.<sup>93</sup> Earlier prognosis has been confirmed with wholesale and retail having particularly shrunk, and the sector being unable to recover even in Q4 2020 in most countries across the region.<sup>94</sup>

Besides the goods' trade sector, almost 70% of the Western Balkans' exports go to the EU, being also the source of about 60% of their imports.<sup>95</sup> EU exports to Kosovo have made up EUR 388 Mill in the food and raw material sector in 2019, whereas the highest number of imports in the same sector has come from Serbia with EUR 1.435 Mill, and exports in the chemicals sector in the same country amounted to EUR 2.454 Mill. Data for 2020 are not available. On the whole Serbia is the EU's key importer and exporter across the region.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, it might be affected by the pandemic in a more consistent way.

**Figure 6.** EU 27 imports and exports with the WB 2017-2019



Source: Data have been aggregated per each country from [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets/](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/) [Accessed: 11 May 2021].

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, foreign direct investments (FDI) at the OECD level, have been providing consistent support to economic growth, job creation, innovation and technological progress across the Western Balkans.

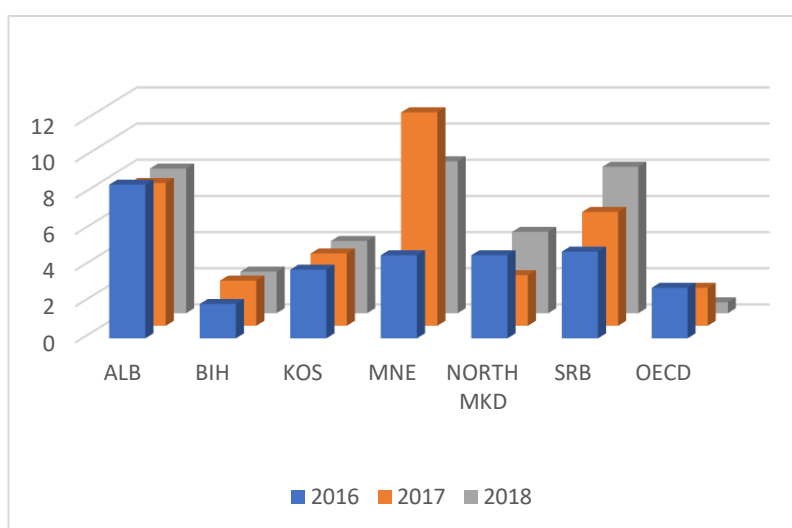
<sup>93</sup>The Economic and Social Impact of Covid-19. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 17, Spring 2020: 2, *op. cit.*

<sup>94</sup>Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, Subdued Recovery, No. 19, Spring 2021: 5, *op. cit.*

<sup>95</sup> The Economic and Social Impact of Covid-19. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 17, Spring 2020: 2, *op. cit.*

<sup>96</sup>Data for 2020, when the pandemic broke out, are not available.

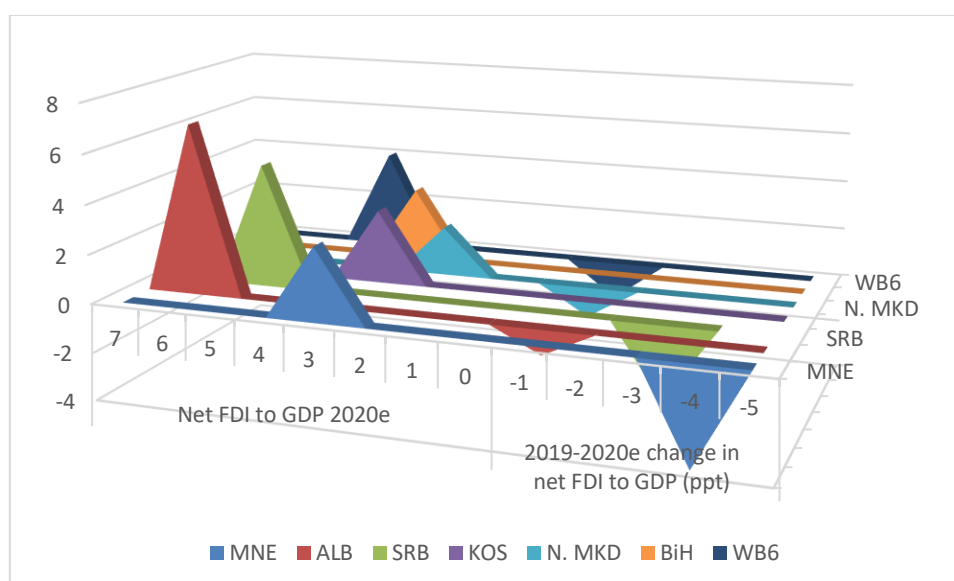
**Figure 7.** Foreign direct investment, net inflows (% of GDP)



Source: World Bank Data URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/bx.klt.dinv.cd.wd> [Accessed: 11 May 2021].

On a global scale Montenegro's net FDI's loss has been higher (-4,1% ppt) than its neighbours, followed by Serbia (-3%ppt).

**Figure 8.** Net FDI-to-GDP Ratio

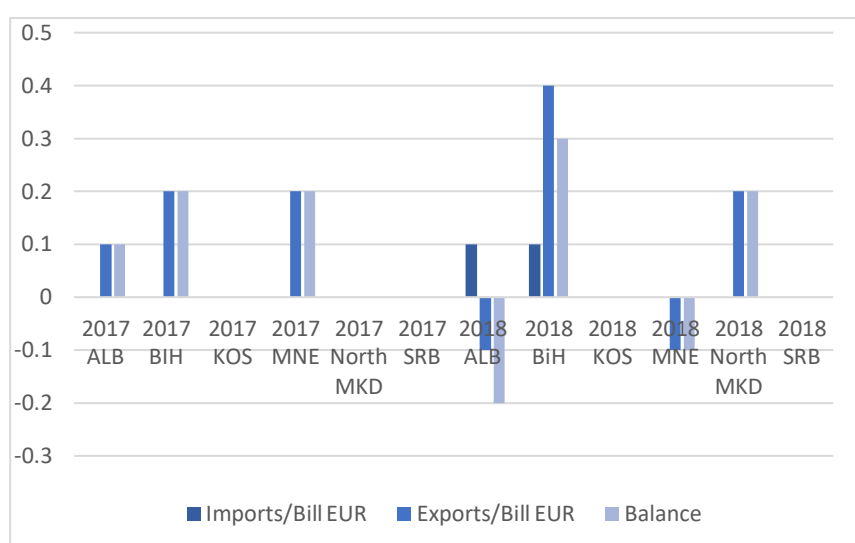


Source: National authorities and World Bank staff calculations.

Particularly, EU FDI account for more than two-thirds (almost 70%), while the region's share of overall EU trade is only 1.4%<sup>97</sup>, with BiH outperforming (EUR 0,4 Bill) in 2018, if compared to its neighbours.

<sup>97</sup>European Commission. Western Balkans, *op. cit.*

**Figure 9.** EU 27 FDI flows with the Western Balkans 2017-2018



Source: Data have been aggregated per each country from [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets) [Accessed: 11 May 2021].

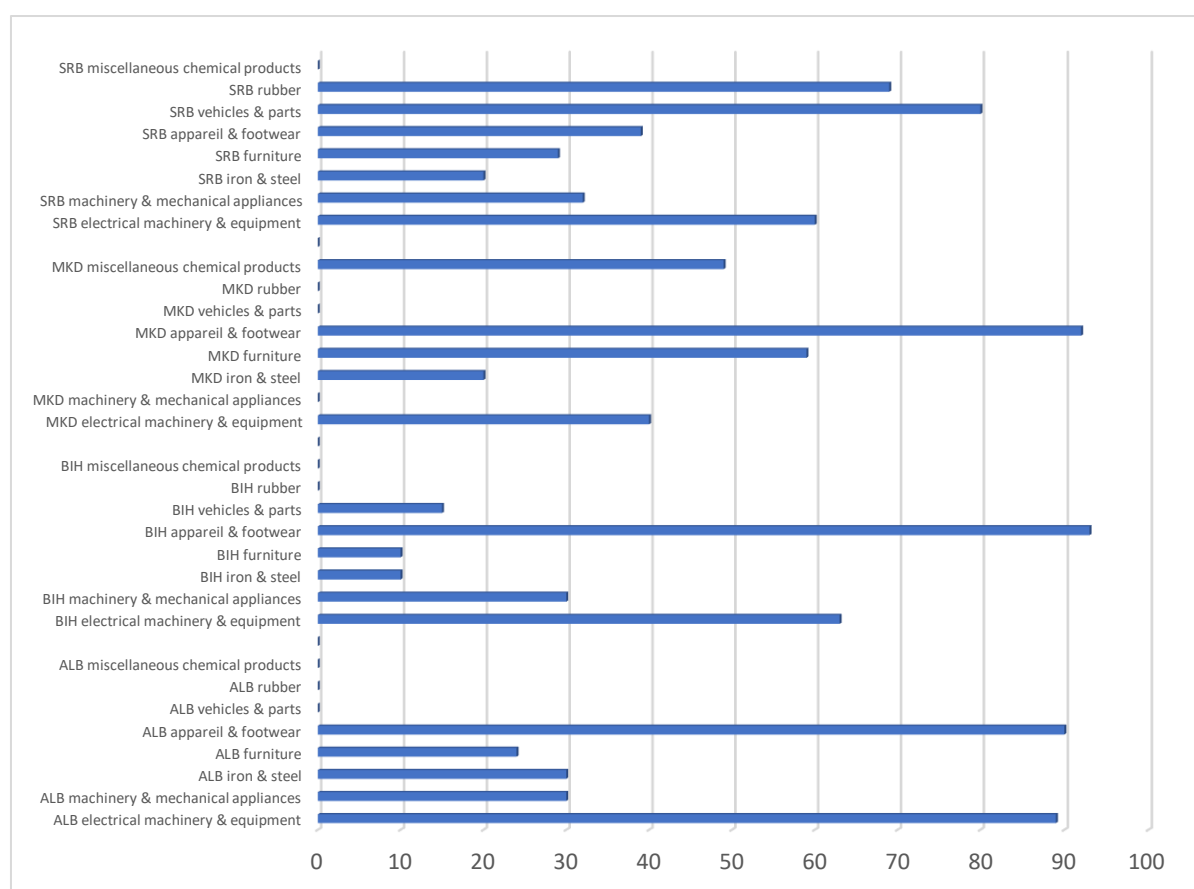
Whether data are not available for 2020, the likelihood that new FDI have taken place is unrealistic. Also, predictions are difficult to make on the curve in Q3 and Q4, 2021.

However, due to the pandemic, prognoses are that FDI will be lower in 2020 than in 2019 by 1.5 pp, thus affecting the countries' ability to finance their CAD. And, whether the supply side shock to trade and Global Value Chains (GVCs) can be managed as containment measures across Europe are lifted, demand disruption effects will be more lasting. Average FDI is expected to fall from 5.1 % of GDP in 2019 to 3.6% in 2020, the lowest level since 2005. Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia will be the most affected. Declines are likely to be much smaller in Albania and BiH, while no decline is expected in Kosovo at all.<sup>98</sup>

Definitely, one way the pandemic will affect the Western Balkans' economies is through the GVCs heavily dependent on just-in-time delivery of key imported components, and particularly affected by regional quarantines, production shutdowns, and border controls. Especially, Serbia, BiH and North Macedonia specializing in manufacturing mainly integrate into GVCs through backward linkages to the global economy.

<sup>98</sup> The Economic and Social Impact of Covid-19. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 17, Spring 2020: 5-6, *op. cit.*

**Figure 10: Selected Processing Trade Exports**



Source: Eurostat ComExt and World Bank staff calculation [Accessed: 10 May 2021].

Their exports like autos or electronics require a considerable amount of parts imported from abroad, with their main partners being Germany, Italy and the UK.<sup>99</sup> Shortly, these countries are more susceptible to supply-side shocks. For instance, Volkswagen, Audi, Peugeot, and Ford, as well as other major European manufacturers halted their production in mid-March 2020. And, this move has downsized considerably the demand of car parts and components produced in the Western Balkans.<sup>100</sup> Despite this, and being a key trade and transit region for European and international goods, the Western Balkans has a key role to play in the GVCs supplying the EU.<sup>101</sup>

Beyond Covid-19 related socio-economic impacts, whether the current crisis might distract Brussels for focusing on more immediate urgent needs, it should be viewed as a source for boosting a *renewed economic reform* in the region, while making the European perspective tangible and setting for the *ad hoc* measures for proportionally sanctioning any reform implementation's backsliding. It is not a mystery that the Western Balkans' full membership is a geostrategic investment. Yet, the conditions for a merit-based accession process should be clear,

<sup>99</sup> The Economic and Social Impact of Covid-19. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 17, Spring 2020: 3-4, *op. cit.*

<sup>100</sup> The Economic and Social Impact of Covid-19. Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No. 17, Spring 2020: 4, *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, COM(2020) 641 final, 6 October 2020: 1, *op. cit.*

objective, precise, detailed, strict and verifiable from the start.<sup>102</sup> But this has not taken place yet.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The European Commission ***should speed up the process of granting visa liberalization to Kosovar citizens***, in the light of the harsher limitations they have been suffering following the break-up of the pandemic.
- The European Commission ***should speed up the enlargement process*** to the Western Balkans, considering the shortcomings of a lack of membership and further isolation of the region when facing and managing the pandemic crisis.
- The European Commission should work on a proposal of establishing a ***Pandemic Crisis Mechanism*** guaranteeing an ***EU common approach to a pandemic management***, as well as ***in dealing with third-countries' nationals so as to avoid double standards***
- The ***common map based on traffic lights*** established by the European Centre for Disease Control ***should be extended to the Western Balkans***, so that they are effectively and actively anchored in pandemic-related pre-detection mechanisms and are not left in isolation.
- The European Commission should urgently start working on a proposal for allowing the ***Western Balkans to be an integral part of the Digital Green Certificate***. Failure to do so will only further increases their isolation and be a counterproductive signal for the EU's concrete commitment to the region's future integration.

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<sup>102</sup> European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, COM(2020), 57 final, 5 February 2020: 1 & 5 [online]. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0057&from=EN> [Accessed: 14 May 2021].

## **Policy Analysis**

Policy Analysis in general is a policy advice paper which particularly aims to influence the key means through which policy decisions are made in both local and central levels of government. The purpose of Policy Analysis is to address, more in-depth, a particular problem, to examine the arguments related to a concerned policy, and to analyze the implementation of the policy. Through Policy Analysis, Group for Legal and Political studies seeks to stimulate wider comprehensive debate on the given issue via presenting informed policy-relevant choices and recommendations to the key stakeholders and parties of interest.



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