

Romania in the Time of COVID-19: Between Pandemic Diplomacy, Public Health Restrictions, and Migration Health Management

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the specificities of Serbia's response to coronavirus. Two most important issues during the pandemic were the role of the State and the management of migration flows. Being placed in the China–Russia–EU triangle shaped the response on the crises but also the image of the country in the world. Two phenomena shaped mobility patterns. Citizens returning from abroad were caught between accusations of spreading the virus and a plea for healthcare and other key workers from the Serbian diaspora to help in Serbia. The issue of refugees and migrants attracted significant amounts of positive public attention, but in parallel with that xenophobia arose as a new attitude as part of aggressive campaigns against them.

Keywords: Coronavirus diplomacy; state; quarantine measures; return migration; refugees; Serbia

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent measures taken by governments across the world, have had an equally severe impact on the Western Balkan states. With border checks initially being imposed, shortly followed by unilateral border closures, canceled international flights, states of emergency (both official and de facto) and wider economic crises across the whole region, citizens were placed under lockdown in order to alleviate the deadly threat posed by the pandemic. In these uncertain times, the measures introduced in an attempt to stop the spread of the coronavirus, including quarantine regulations, were one of the crucial epidemiological barriers. The lockdown seriously curbed the fundamental human right of free movement for individuals within a state, and in the longer term, the full effects of the serious downturn in economic output are yet to be seen.

The Republic of Serbia was no exception to these occurrences. However, two essential questions have arisen during the pandemic, pertaining primarily to the role of the state in the forefront of the situation, and the management of migration flows – both returnees and refugees. Answers to these questions are closely related to political responses enforced under the state of emergency; invocation of the “iron friendship” with China, the government’s response to the return of over 300,000 Serbian citizens and residents working abroad in a three-week period in March, and the cordoning of all refugee camps with permanent military surveillance. This paper presents an overview of the findings regarding the impact on Serbia’s foreign policy positions in relation to China, Russia and the European Union (EU) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also discusses whether migration issues have become a specific security challenge for the state.

“Coronavirus diplomacy” – the China–Russia–EU triangle

As the pandemic gained pace, it became obvious that major geopolitical players utilized soft power and aid to fulfil their foreign policy goals. Such so-called “coronavirus diplomacy” placed Serbia at the crossroads of competition between China, Russia and the EU (Walker 2020). While they provided assistance around the world, it seems that only Serbia was scrutinized over its receipt of support from a variety of partners. Headlines were filled with stories commenting on the COVID-19 crisis having opened up a space for a “battle of narratives” between China and Western democracies, implying we are witnessing a skillful rewrite of the geopolitical playbook (Ruge and Oerte 2020). The US government, with its internal focus on the pandemic, remained largely absent from this “coronavirus diplomacy” game, not only in Serbia,¹ but globally.

During pandemic crisis, Serbia faced its key crisis as a result of its positioning between the EU and China, with Russia largely acting as a tertiary player. As a candidate country for EU accession, but with strong historical links to Russia and recent economic ties with China, the country has developed a narrative of mutually beneficial diplomacy. Serbia declared a state of emergency at the very beginning of the crisis, on 15 March 2020. This happened to be the same day that the European Commission declared a ban on the export of medical supplies. The Serbian president was highly critical of the EU for its lack of assistance: “European solidarity does not exist. It was a fairy tale. I have sent a special letter to the only ones who can help. That is China.” (Simić 2020).

¹ The USA supplied 6,000 coronavirus tests to Serbia, which was immaterial in comparison to aid provided by the three players documented here.

Among EU member states, there was particular anger in Spain and Italy at the lack of a coordinated European response to COVID-19, and for those outside the bloc like Serbia, the rejection was felt even more strongly. This situation largely served to strengthen the unbreakable “iron friendship” between Serbia and China in “sharing good and bad” to a level never before publicly exhibited.



The first planeload of humanitarian aid, containing supplies, critical medical equipment, and six of China’s most eminent epidemiologists sent to help in the fight against COVID-19 landed on March 21st. From that time on, China and its relationship with Serbia have been at the fore of shaping national coronavirus policy. Parallel to this, the Serbian Embassy in China opened an official fundraising channel on Weibo, one of China’s largest and most popular social media websites, in response to many Chinese citizens expressing a desire to donate to Serbia amid the pandemic. In the first 24 hours of its existence, the profile gained over 300,000 followers. In media narratives across the world, the Serbian case was used to illustrate China’s success in winning the hearts and minds of Europeans in a time of need (Ruge and Oertel 2020). In Serbia itself, the government proposed the construction of a monument to Serbian-Chinese friendship, while billboards in Belgrade, on the initiative of a pro-government tabloid, displayed a simple but strong message: “Thank you, brother Xi” (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Billboard dedicated to China’s president Xi Jinping and the Chinese people in Belgrade, March 2020. Photo: Danica Šantić.

The country’s longstanding partner Russia sent a first planeload of humanitarian aid on 3 April 2020. In just 24 hours, 11 planes carrying disinfection specialists, as well as artificial ventilation machines and medical equipment, landed in Serbia. This aid package was identical to that which

they also sent to Italy. Eight medical teams, which were directly involved in the medical treatment of patients, were also dispatched (TASS, Russian News Agency, 2 April 2020). Russian experts disinfected medical and public institutions in more than 40 towns and cities in Serbia. Even though this help was modest compared to that supplied by the Chinese, it was viewed highly positively in public opinion, especially in the central part of the country where the help was concentrated.

The EU also worked hard to showcase the ways in which it had helped Serbia. On March 26th, the European Commission announced a package of measures to support Serbia in the fight against COVID-19, using the opportunity to stress the fact that they had been supportive the whole time, in an attempt to prove that talk of European values and solidarity was not just empty words. The package included immediate financial assistance of €15 million for the transport and purchase of emergency medical equipment and supplies procured from abroad. Funds were also allocated for other immediate needs agreed with the government for health and social care. The value of these resources was much higher than for other Western Balkan states. Short and medium-term measures include additional funding to the tune of €78 million, primarily targeting economic recovery, support for jobs and small and medium enterprises (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, March 26 2020). The first EU-financed cargo composed of emergency equipment and supplies arrived the same day, with supplies being distributed to healthcare facilities across the country. The entire financial package from the EU was significantly greater than the combined total of that provided by Russia and China, but it failed to spark a great deal of public attention (Figure 2). Chinese gestures are likely to be impressed deeply within the public memory. In an interview at the beginning of May, the Serbian president claimed that accepting aid

Italy (Xuefei 2020), led to significant changes in the official narrative, which abandoned the previous nonchalant attitude toward COVID-19.

The government administration and Crisis Command had no choice but to address the issue, taking very serious steps. Consequently, a state of emergency was declared on March 15th, followed by a nationwide lockdown, which paid no regard to regional and local differences in infection and mortality rates. The military and police were deployed to ensure that citizens behaved in accordance with the new emergency measures. In an attempt to coerce citizens into respecting these measures, the government introduced fines and imprisonment for those who failed to adhere to them. However, during the state of emergency, the measures were continuously adjusted in accordance with the epidemiological situation. The work of kindergartens, schools and universities was completely suspended, with online classes being introduced. The Crisis Command banned people older than 70 years in rural areas, and 65 years in urban areas, from leaving their homes at any time, and imposed a curfew on everyone else.² Extra hours during the curfew were provided for disabled and autistic people, dog walkers and elderly people in the final phases of the lockdown.

As the weather began to improve, the riverfronts and picnic areas became crowded with joggers, walkers and cyclists outside curfew hours, so the government had to close public parks and children's playgrounds in order to maintain social distancing. The "stay-at-home" measures introduced with the intention of minimizing contact were deemed insufficient by the government due to "poor discipline", with pleas urging citizens to take responsibility by practicing social distancing being continuously made, and so a ban of gatherings of more than two people was also implemented. An initial complete ban on public transport (both within and between towns and cities), was eventually eased, with the introduction of so-called "corridor lines", primarily intended for healthcare professionals and other key workers. In the absence of accurate information and immediate protection, responses to these measures among the populace ranged from outright panic and fear to disbelief and anger targeting the authorities and the state (BiEPAG 2020). With the scaling-down of the emergency situation at the beginning of May, the government retracted the state of emergency. People returned to many everyday activities, accepting the "new normal" and applying preventive measures.

² At its most severe, the curfew was imposed every working day from 5 pm to 5 am, with a complete restriction of movement during weekends and the Easter holiday period.

It is, however, often pointed out that Serbia introduced some of the toughest measures, shutting down the country in an intentionally porous lockdown and thus managing to slow the rate of coronavirus infections. Regardless of heavy demand, difficulties and shortcomings, the Serbian health system – with universal health coverage – succeeded in reducing the peak and reversing the spread of COVID-19. The public health system, which was well-developed and comprehensive during the Socialist period, and has been reinforced by EU donations and loans over the past two decades,³ managed to avoid many significant weaknesses observed in other countries. Despite huge pressure, the health care system managed to adequately address and treat patients in hospitals (regular and temporary so-called “Corona hospitals”). The Belgrade Fair, best-known as Europe’s largest arena for hosting trade shows and conventions, was converted into a 3,000-bed hospital (Figure 3).⁴ Although the mass testing regime failed to reach the scale recommended and promised, officials hoped that, through the implementation of such strict measures, a large-scale epidemic would be averted. From late April, testing became more widely available, and the health system has become better-organized in its response to the increased healthcare requirements. This is primarily the result of the opening of two Chinese-funded laboratories (“Fire Eye” laboratories) as well as one EU-funded laboratory, which although initially designed for quality control tests for food products has been repurposed as a coronavirus testing lab.

³ Since 2000, the EU has donated over €200 million and loaned a further €250 million to strengthen the healthcare system in Serbia (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia 2020).

⁴ The Ministry of Defense and the Serbian Army were responsible for the outdoor security service, organization of basic needs regarding accommodation and personal hygiene, and the external disinfection of the fairgrounds. Medical treatment of patients in the temporary hospitals was undertaken by the Ministry of Health.

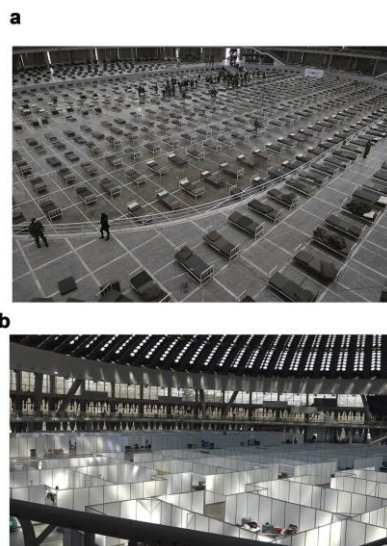


Figure 3. Belgrade Fair, transformed into a temporary coronavirus field hospital (early stage and after improvements). March, 2020, Belgrade (source: Ministry of Defense, Republic of Serbia). Ministry of Defense, Republic of Serbia)

Even in these uncertain times, the pandemic became heavily politicized by the government and the ruling party, who exploited it for political gain. The continuous presence of the President in the media gave the impression that he voluntarily took the entire burden of saving the nation upon himself, procuring medical equipment, deciding on the necessary measures, and giving advice. This eventually provoked a reaction from citizens, who, from the final days of April, every evening at 8 pm, after applauding for medical workers, expressed their dissatisfaction by making as much noise as possible (under the slogan “Noise Against Dictatorship”) on their balconies. The elections planned for April 26th were postponed to June 21st, as announced following the lifting of the state of emergency. While opposition parties have demanded the postponement of the elections, the government continued to scale-back its lockdown measures even further, with borders reopening on 20 May 2020. It would seem that, from the perspective of the election campaign, politicians have begun to act as if the coronavirus crisis never existed incredibly quickly. And all of this in spite of the fact that the numbers of newly infected are still on the rise, especially in the southern part of the country.⁵ It seems that the “health of democracy” is considered equally important as the health of the citizens.

⁵ Three South Korean-owned factories in the southern cities of Vranje and Leskovac are postulated to be new foci of coronavirus infection. After multi-day protests in early April, these factories finally reduced workplace numbers in

The pandemic has severely impacted human capital, including basic wellbeing, education, work and economic productivity. All non-essential businesses and industries were closed. Working from home became the new reality for many institutions and businesses. Where this was not possible, measures were taken to secure the implementation of social distancing rules. The government announced that “the fight is on for each job”, and introduced job guarantees, especially in the private sector. The economic response package, amounting to €5.1 billion, and including a series of measures to counter the negative impact, was launched on April 1st. The measures were split into four categories: tax policy measures, direct help for the private sector (especially small and medium enterprises), measures aimed at the preservation of liquidity, and other measures (Cord Magazine, 31 March 2020). A controversial stimulus to increase domestic demand by giving €100 to each citizen of legal age after the lifting of the state of emergency provoked a range of reactions in the public. After some negative reactions describing this aid as “humiliating”, the government announced an alteration to the policy: around two million pensioners in Serbia would each receive €100 automatically, while other adult citizens must confirm their wish to receive it, either by phone or online. In the end, only 10% of citizens failed to apply for it. One interesting facet of this stimulus is the fact that the majority of people who returned from abroad due to the pandemic also applied for the financial aid.

Managing migration in the time of COVID-19

Many forms of human movement have been drastically altered as a result of the pandemic, from travel to temporary and permanent migration, refugee resettlement, and returns, all in an attempt to prevent the spread of the virus. In Serbia, two phenomena interacted and influenced the shape and intensity of mobility: that of citizens returning from abroad in the wake of the economic downturn and changing labor markets – who were caught between accusations of spreading the virus and a plea for healthcare and other key workers from the Serbian diaspora to help Serbia – and that of refugees and migrants, where public opinion ranged from acceptance of people in need to right wing activists and their followers’ calls for the government to stop allowing migrants entering the country.

“Please don’t come” vs. “Please don’t go”

response to public pressure. However, after increases in the numbers of infected workers in these factories in mid-May, unions drew attention to the factories’ responsibility for the spread of the coronavirus infection.

The story of the Serbian diaspora's shaping of society in various ways is a very long one. In recent decades alone, hundreds of thousands have left the country since the collapse of Socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the subsequent difficult period of transition. The country is faced by a formidable demographic and economic situation, which has led the Serbian government to launch certain initiatives to decrease outflows and to introduce measures to promote return migration. Promising special incentives to bring people back, with the claim that Serbia is open to all returnees from abroad, resulted in the adoption of an Economic Migration Strategy in February 2020. But the situation with COVID-19 gave rise to a number of unprecedented challenges, which in turn have placed the issue of returnees high on the political agenda.

The coronavirus pandemic has triggered a massive reverse migration from destination to origin countries. Globally, tens of millions of unskilled and semi-skilled migrant laborers have returned to their countries of origin since the imposition of lockdown. As of late March 2020, more than 300,000 Serbian citizens and residents have returned to Serbia, mainly from EU countries, for reasons including precarious employment conditions, loss of income, and limited health insurance and social security coverage. Instead of welcoming those people, Serbia's leaders initially pinned the blame on them for bringing the virus into the country. The pro-government media declared on its front pages that at least 6,000 such returnees were infected with coronavirus (Informer, 20 March 2020). The government announced that, in spite of the plea to stay abroad, borders were crowded with cars, and in just 48 hours 65,142 people reentered Serbia, which imposed a specific security challenge upon the country (Tanjug, 18 March 2020). The situation of the diaspora worsened after the President's statement on April 3rd, in which he stated that, during the COVID-19 crisis, he had made only one big mistake: that of allowing all Serbian citizens to (re-)enter the territory of Serbia. The Premier stated that the massive return of Serbian workers was an anti-patriotic act, because they placed an additional burden upon the Serbian healthcare system (Stojanović 2020). It remains true that the worst-affected municipalities have been those with the highest numbers of returnees.

The public's reaction showed that this was to be considered one of the worst possible stigmatizations of people by the government, bordering on scandalous. Diaspora representatives claimed that only seasonal workers, those working in informal sectors, and those who had lost their jobs, housing and social security had returned. They reminded the authorities of the benefits

gained from their provision of financial and social remittances. Money sent back to the country by the diaspora, approximately US\$4 billion per annum, is a major driver of the economy, even greater than that of foreign direct investment, and it also comprises a significant proportion of the country's GDP (Economic Migration Strategy 2020). Also, official data suggested that 78% of those who returned to the country from abroad respected the self-isolation measures. Somewhat paradoxically, considering the claims of the President, the country issued an open call for medical workers abroad who were currently not in employment to temporarily return and help fight the epidemic in Serbia if they were available and willing to do so.

Following on from this diaspora controversy, the Serbian president has even more recently called upon returnees to stay in the country because the economic situation will be improved, and incomes will be higher. At the same time, the National Rural Revival Team invited returnees to invest in agriculture through a Cooperative Rebuilding Project, titled "500 cooperatives for 500 villages in Serbia" (Nova ekonomija, 15 May 2020).

"There is no difference between citizens and refugees"

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, a new refugee crisis has begun to loom with the declaration by the Turkish president that his country would no longer prevent migrants and refugees from entering the EU. From February 2020, some 12,000 refugees and migrants began to set up a camp on the Turkish side of the border with Greece, while others set out to cross the Aegean Sea, in an attempt to reach the Greek Islands. Finally, on March 28th, Turkish authorities cleared thousands of migrants from the borders as a precaution amid the coronavirus pandemic, worried that the situation would get out of control.

However, the number of refugees and migrants traveling along the Balkan Route has been on the rise. The number of asylum seekers and migrants counted in Serbia at the end of February 2020 was 6,724, of whom 5,530 persons were accommodated in government centers (UNHCR Serbia, February, 2020). After the declaration of the state of emergency, the number of refugees and migrants in reception centers grew significantly, as a result of taking in migrants who had previously stayed outside, mostly at the border zone with Croatia and Hungary and on the streets, and in private apartments and hostels in Belgrade, amounting more than 9,000 people (UNHCR Serbia, 20 April – 3 May 2020).

The decision on the temporary restriction of movement of refugees and migrants accommodated in asylum and reception centers was introduced following the national lockdown (Official Gazette 32/2020). All residents of the centers were forbidden from leaving unless they had been issued with a special permit. From March 18th, the army took over the role of increasing surveillance and security at these facilities. It should be noted that people housed in the centers arrived before the outbreak of the pandemic, and thus the closure of the centers was undertaken in an effort to avoid the spread of the virus within the camps from the outside. Like other institutions accommodating large numbers of people, these centers are extremely vulnerable to the possible spread of the infection, but there have been neither suspected nor detected coronavirus cases so far inside them. During the lockdown, migrants and refugees began to sew cotton masks, and offered their help to Serbia which attracted significant amounts of positive public attention. At the same time, anti-migrant sentiment rose, just as it did in other parts of Europe. Right-wing extremists were aggressive in their campaigns against refugees and migrants, spreading fake news about large numbers of migrants entering the country on a daily basis during the state of emergency with no health checks, claiming that some of them were infected, and that they were committing violent crimes throughout the country. Since Serbia and its institutions act in a humanitarian and hospitable manner, especially in comparison to the neighboring countries, this xenophobia became a new attitude adopted by people, spreading toward the political center.

After the lockdown ended, the Serbian army was reassigned to guard three migrant camps in a municipality bordering Croatia, which host 2,000 people in total. The government claimed that the increased security presence is aimed at protecting the local population from harassment by migrants, who are desperately trying to reach the EU, while the Commissioner for Refugees and Migration stated that the army presence was to ensure peace “not because something happened, but so that it does not happen”, adding that “thanks to the engagement of the army, there have been no infected migrants and that there are no excesses towards the outside community” (Slobodna Evropa, 17 May 2020).

Conclusion

The global COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken by the government aimed at stemming the spread of the virus have placed a heavy burden on economic activities and the healthcare system, as well as Serbia’s geopolitical position. In conditions whereby the major geopolitical

players are using soft power in their foreign policy, Serbia has found itself in a coronavirus diplomacy triangle between China, Russia and the EU. In specific instances, the “iron friendship” with China and traditional relations with Russia manifested themselves in immediate humanitarian aid. On the other hand, while the financial package from the EU was of significantly higher value, it failed to make a strong impression on public opinion. The state of emergency with intentionally porous lockdown introduced by Serbia followed by tough measures succeeded in reducing the peak and slowing the spread of COVID-19.

In relation to the endlessly changing dynamics of human movement in Serbia, the pandemic gave rise to new forms of returnee and refugee mobility. The two types of migration received contrasting reactions in public discourse, ranging from positive narratives and expectations to xenophobia and rejection stemming from a fear of spreading the virus. How the country will cope with the large number of returnees and increasing number of refugees and migrants taking the Balkan Route in conditions of closed borders, economic downturn and prejudice and intolerance, remain extant dilemmas with no certain answer. The “four pillars” (Subotić and Janjić 2020) of Serbia’s foreign policy, engaging with the EU, China, Russia and the US, illustrates how valuable those relations were during the COVID-19 crisis. Despite certain misunderstandings with the EU, Serbia remains engaged in negotiations about EU- accession, but with potential delays to progress which could lead to an uncertain future path. Serbia found in China, alongside Russia, a keen supporter of its fight against coronavirus, especially bearing in mind the recent series of major projects involving China that extend to the Western Balkans, as well as China’s economic influence in Serbia. At times China has expressed support for Serbia’s EU-accession process which links in complex ways with the goals of Belt and Road Initiative and China’s economic interests. It may offer China a route into the EU, or hints that if the EU does not take immediate and decisive action offering Serbia a credible membership opportunity within a reasonable timeframe, China will continue to strengthen its position there.

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