



CURRENT AFFAIRS

THE REFLECTION OF THE MASK

DIPLOMACY TO THE BALKANS

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THE REFLECTION OF THE MASK DIPLOMACY TO THE BALKANS

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Coronavirus (Covid-19), which emerged in Wuhan, China on December 31, 2019, has spread to the whole world in a short time due to its rapidly contagious characteristic and in this context, the global epidemic was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11. After China, the center of the epidemic has shifted to Europe (Italy, Spain and France), and since April 2020, the United States (USA) has become the new center of the deadly epidemic.

Balkan countries² were also affected by the Coronavirus Outbreak, and it was observed that many regional states (Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, Slovenia) declared a state of emergency and closed their border gates in March. As of April 8, 2020, at 17.00 o'clock, the total number of cases in the Balkans was recorded as 14,280, while the number of people who died was 522³. In the light of these data, it is seen that the Balkans constitute a share of 0.98% in terms of total number of cases on a global scale; it is also seen that the number of people who lost their lives constitutes a share of 0,62%.

The data we convey shows that the Coronavirus Outbreak has been successfully controlled in the Balkan countries. The main factors behind this situation were the public's compliance with the state of emergency decisions taken by the states in the region and public's observance of the warnings of the authorities. In addition, due to the mountainous topography of the region and due to the fact that a significant number of people live in rural areas, social mobility has followed a minimum level with the calls of the authorities. Therefore, a tragic increase is not expected in the number of those affected by coronavirus under the usual conditions.

Although the Coronavirus Outbreak followed a low course with the measures taken in the Balkans, weak Balkan economies, which were directly dependent on foreign aid, foreign investments and foreign financial inflows, tended to overcome the epidemic with bureaucratic and social measures. The economic and medical measures taken by these states remained insufficient. Yet the governments in the Balkans announced budgets consisting of symbolic figures in the fight against the Coronavirus Outbreak. Considering that the health systems of the countries of the region are not strong enough, the deficiencies experienced in the production of emergency medical equipment and preventive equipment made the issue of external procurement of these products a priority.

In this context, "Mask Diplomacy", which is a new type of diplomacy⁴ that includes transmissions of

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² Turkey is not included in this evaluation.

³ The data in question was compiled and transferred from the website of <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

⁴ Barış Özdal, "Maske Diplomasisi", Diplomasi Araştırmaları Derneği Güncel Gelişmeler 4 Nisan 2020, <https://www.>

medical equipment such as protective masks, rapid virus diagnostic kits, ventilators and the delivery of healthcare professionals, has emerged as a concept that is bursting and is becoming more popular day by day because of Coronavirus Outbreak. In this process, “Mask Diplomacy” practices were also observed in Balkan countries, that need medical assistance exceedingly. From a deductive point of view, it can be said that the actors who practice “Mask Diplomacy” in the Balkans are also those who try to pursue effective policies towards the region even before the epidemic. In this context, China, the Russian Federation (RF), European Union (EU) and Turkey have come to the fore. The USA, which does not attach prior importance to the Balkans in her foreign policy, lagged behind the Mask Diplomacy practices with becoming the new epicenter of the outbreak. Undoubtedly, this situation has brought disappointment towards US in the Balkan countries.

As of actors, even though China was the epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic, it has implemented Mask Diplomacy efficiently after its successful struggle with Coronavirus and its concrete reflections have been seen in the Balkans for a while now. For example, whereas Croatia, Greece, Bulgaria, Slovenia provided masks and other protective medical supplies from China, a few Chinese living in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republica Srpska entity produced 12,000 masks in a very short time and donated them to the Public Health Institute.



Serbia was the country where China's Mask Diplomacy in the Balkans showed its impact coefficient intensely. Serbia became the country where China sent aid firstly in the Balkans on March 16, 2020, while other Balkan countries also received these aids (medical supplies and doctors) subsequently. Serbian President Alexander Vucic praised China, while the streets of Belgrade were covered with gratitude posters thanking to Chinese leader Xi Jinping.⁵ China's aid to Serbia has been a successful example of Mask Diplomacy not only in the Balkans, but also at global stage. As a matter of fact, the relations among the two countries have a historically strong past and as it is known, the Beijing administration supported the theses of Serbia during the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The current counterpart of this cooperation, which has continued in the 2000s, is that Serbia has become the most reliable

ally for China in the Balkans. As a matter of fact, Serbia is the central country of China's economy-oriented policy towards the Balkans.

Serbia, the traditional ally of Russia in the Balkans, gained the political, economic and military support of Moscow in the 1990s and 2000s. Similar to China, Russia was trying to implement Mask Diplomacy in the Balkans, however, it was limited with Serbia only. In the Coronavirus Outbreak, Russia also sent medical supplies and personnel to Serbia with 11 military aircrafts.⁶ However, while the aid of Russia took place approximately two weeks after China's aid, the public impact coefficient was also relatively low. In this context, it should be noted that the countries where Russia has received a positive reaction in public opinion in terms of Mask Diplomacy were mostly USA and Italy.



On the other hand, it is seen that the EU lagged quite behind in terms of the Mask Diplomacy in the Balkans. The fact that after Europe became the epicenter of the Coronavirus, the EU's inability to provide the medical support which members needed has brought criticism even by the founding states of the Union. In this conjuncture, while the Balkans have ceased to be a priority for the EU in the fight against Pandemic, the region has become more open to the impacts of the actors such as China, Russia and Turkey. The European Commission, which has been trying to engage in the Western Balkans as of April, announced that an allocation of about 410 million Euros has been allocated to combat the Coronavirus Outbreak. While 38 million Euros of this amount is allocated for medical supplies and protective needs for the region in the short term, it is stated that 374 mil-

diplomasiarastirmalari.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/4-Nisan-2020-Maske-Diplomasisi.pdf, (08.04.2020).

⁵ “Serbia Imposes State of Emergency, Pleads for China's Help”, Balkan Insight, 16.03.2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/16/serbia-imposes-state-of-emergency-pleads-for-chinas-help/>, (08.04.2020).

⁶ “Russia Sends Medical Aids to Serbia to Fight Coronavirus”, Reuters, 3 April 2020.



lion Euros is for the economic and social support of the region in the medium term.⁷ With the aid package in question, it can be argued that the EU is trying to prevent the Western Balkan countries, which have not yet become a member of the Union and are uncomfortable with the delay of their membership processes, from the actors that try to influence in the region. However, the corruptions occurring in some of the basic values of the EU due to the outbreak of the coronavirus and the pessimistic comments on the future of the Union has strengthened Western Balkan countries' orientation to the actors such as China, Russia and Turkey. In addition, the fact that the other two actors, especially China, did not make any concrete demands in return for their investments and assistance in the region contrary to EU officials, gives momentum to this trend. The fact that the EU's announcement of this support package did not have as much repercussions as they expected in the public opinion of the Western Balkans countries

is a phenomenon that shows the loss of power and image of Brussels.

Within this overall equation, Turkey has also applied to the Mask Diplomacy as an effective regional actor. Essentially, Turkey, as the world's biggest humanitarian aid contributor when considering the comparative rates of the states' budgets, has tried to come to the fore in the fight against the outbreak of coronavirus. In this context, in the address to the nation on March 25, President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan's statements that "the 69 countries of the world have requested assistance from Turkey and within the bounds of possibilities, 17 of them have been aided" are important. In the Balkans, Turkey, which provided the aid to Bulgaria firstly, sent 50 thousand of masks, one hundred thousand of protective clothing and glasses and reported that she is ready to send more if requested⁸.

In terms of Mask Diplomacy, Turkey's actual moves occurred on April 8, 2020. The Aid consisting of protective masks, overalls and diagnostic kits, delivered by Turkish military aircraft, was delivered to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro. Essentially, the Western Balkans which Turkey attach a special importance in her foreign policy towards the Balkans, has been one of the focal points of the Turkish Public Diplomacy by the 2000s. This situation made Turkish policy inevitable to follow Mask Diplomacy during the epidemic period. The fact that Turkey have to compete with global actors in the region and he has historical heritage as well as demographic links emerging from community of cognates/relatives are the factors that trigger the granting of aid by Turkey. While the aid in question has had the expected impact on the Balkan countries, statements of gratitude were made by the relevant Ministers of the Balkan states that received the aid⁹.

As one can understand from the information we convey, the Balkans has become one of the effective application areas of Mask Diplomacy. With this new type of diplomacy, actors who have been active in the Balkans are still trying to strengthen their influence and image through humanitarian aid. In this process, While Turkey and China were seemingly competing in the Balkans, Russia's assistance remained limited in terms of comprehensiveness. After becoming the new epicenter of the Outbreak, the USA, which focused on internal Coronavirus developments, could not take part in Mask Diplomacy in the region due to the fact that the Balkans were not in a central position in its foreign policy anymore. On the other hand, it is seen that the aid package announced by the EU does not have the expected effect and the image of the Union tends to decrease in the Balkans.

⁷ "EU response to the coronavirus pandemic in the Western Balkans", European Commission, April 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus_support_wb.pdf, (08.04.2020).

⁸ "Pristignaha Pirvite Maski ot Turtsiya", Fakti.bg, 11 Mart 2020, <https://fakti.bg/bulgaria/453913-pristignaha-parvite-maski-ot-turcia>, (08.08.2020).

⁹ "Türkiye Balkan Ülkelerine Tıbbi Yardım Gönderdi", Anadolu Ajansı, 8 Nisan 2020.

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