

## EU support for vaccination efforts in the Western Balkans

The coronavirus pandemic has accentuated the call for global solidarity and increased the need for health care and social support in the Western Balkans. The EU's response has included the 'Team Europe' facility, but also specific initiatives for the Western Balkans. In addition to the EU co-funded Covax facility, the most recent proposal by the European Commission and Austria, announced in April 2021, confirmed the delivery of some 651 000 vaccines to the region, where the EU is competing with other global actors, such as Russia and China.

### European Commission proposal

On 20 April 2021, the European Commission and Austria [announced](#) the conclusion of agreements for the delivery of Covid-19 vaccines to the Western Balkan countries. In addition to some 260 000 jabs already [supplied](#) under the Covax facility, another 651 000 BioNTech-Pfizer doses funded by the Commission and with the facilitation of Austria will be delivered to all the partner countries in the region, between early May and August 2021. When distributing the vaccines, priority will be given to countries with a low vaccination rate and pressing epidemiological needs.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) will receive 214 000 doses, Albania 145 000, North Macedonia 119 000, Kosovo<sup>1</sup> 95 000, Montenegro 42 000 and Serbia 36 000. Austria is coordinating the programme at the Commission's request; it has furthermore facilitated the sharing of the vaccines through legal arrangements with the producer and the Western Balkan partners. The doses are funded from the €70 million [package](#) under the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) adopted by the Commission on 28 December 2020 and secured under the EU's advance purchase agreements for its Western Balkan partners. Austria will commit up to €11 million for the delivery of the vaccines.

### EU Covid-19 global response

In addition to the EU's financial support for the Western Balkans vaccination programme and the [Covax facility](#) (a €2.47 billion contribution from the EU and its Member States), the Commission has helped raise almost €16 billion since May 2020 under the [Coronavirus Global Response package](#), the global action for universal access to tests, treatments and vaccines against coronavirus, and for global recovery. The [EU Vaccines strategy](#) also contributes to global solidarity efforts. The EU has invested close to €3 billion to pre-finance the development, research and production of vaccines through its advance purchase agreements with pharmaceutical companies. These agreements offer EU Member States the possibility to resell, donate or transfer options to partner countries, with particular attention on the Balkans, the EU Neighbourhood, Africa, and vulnerable populations. The EU has also invested another €350 million in vaccine research through the [Horizon2020](#) programme.

### Recovery packages for the Western Balkans

From the very outset of the coronavirus pandemic, the EU has taken swift action in support of its Western Balkan partners, mobilising a €3.3 billion [package adopted](#) in April 2020 to help address the immediate health needs and mitigate the socio-economic crisis in the region. In October 2020, the Commission proposed an [economic and investment plan](#) of up to €9 billion to spur the longer-term recovery of the Western Balkan countries and their convergence with the EU.

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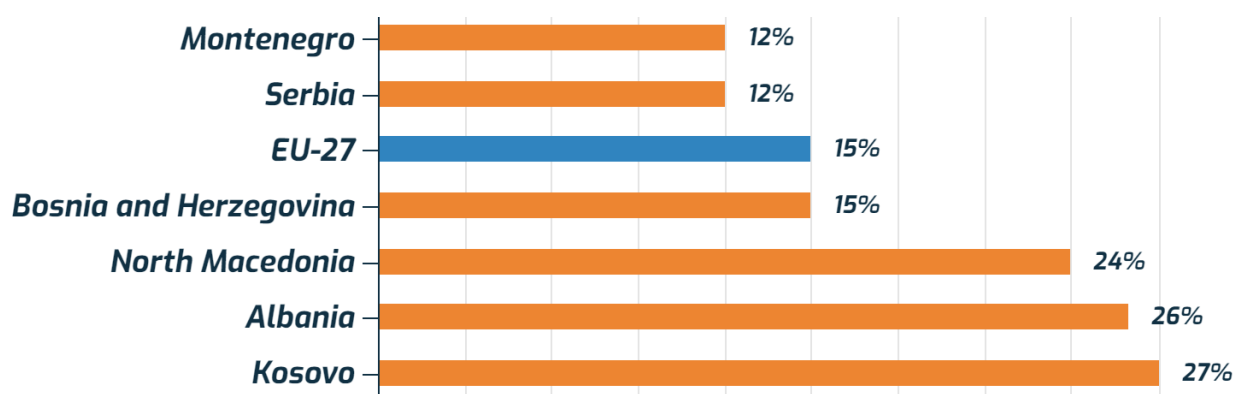
<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

## Views in the region

The pandemic has affected each Western Balkan country in a different way. Some observers, including the WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, have [criticised](#) the EU for its 'vaccine nationalism', in particular for not including the Western Balkan countries in the initial deals with pharmaceutical companies for the purchase of vaccines in 2020. The level of vaccination, taken as a percentage of the population that has been *fully* vaccinated (usually with two doses), differs from one country to another; based on [Johns Hopkins University](#) data as at 30 April 2021, BiH has the lowest level (0.01 %), followed by Kosovo (0.01 %), North Macedonia (0.01 %), Albania (0.02 %), and Montenegro (3.27 %). Serbia is the best-performing country, with a fully vaccinated population of around 20 %. According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), full vaccination among adults aged 18 years in [EU/EEA countries](#) is 11.6 %.

The new EU vaccination initiative could help to improve the Western Balkan countries' perception of Brussels, after on 15 March 2020 it included them in the export ban of medical supplies under [Commission Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2020/402](#). The ban was lifted by the end of April 2020. Nevertheless, the Serbian President, [Aleksandar Vučić](#), described European solidarity as a 'fairy tale' and called the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, a 'true friend' and a 'brother of the Serbian people'. Some observers believe that these views reflect a [global battle of narratives](#); others that [countries](#) supported by deliveries of Russian and Chinese medical equipment and vaccines have weathered the pandemic more successfully.

Figure 1: Annual excess mortality rate in EU-27 and Western Balkans during the pandemic



Source: The national statistical offices of the Western Balkan countries and [Eurostat](#), 2021.

In addition to having [vaccinated a higher percentage of its population](#) compared to the rest of the region (3.3 million vaccines distributed among a population of 6.9 million), Serbia also had a lower rate of Covid-19 excess mortality in 2020 (12 %) compared with Albania (26 %) and Kosovo (27 %) (Figure 1). In the EU-27, [excess mortality](#) reached 580 000 deaths, or more than 15 % over the average for the same period in the previous three years. Furthermore, on 5 April 2021, within the '[vaccines diplomacy](#)' roll-out, Serbia announced that it had reached an [agreement](#) on Sputnik V production, starting in June 2021. Other countries, with the exception of Montenegro, are still behind in terms of their vaccination programmes. In BiH, the shortage of vaccines has led to [street protests](#) urging the government to resign.

## European Parliament position

The Parliament has called for [global solidarity](#) and concerted efforts to fight the pandemic. In its [report](#) on Serbia, adopted on 25 March 2021, it asked the Commission and the Member States to allocate a sufficient amount of Covid-19 vaccines to the citizens of all Western Balkan countries. It [endorsed](#) the 'Team Europe' package and the commitment of €3.3 billion for the region. It also approved €3 billion in [macro-financial assistance](#) to enlargement and neighbourhood partners. Furthermore, Parliament adopted the enlargement [reports](#) related to the [Commission enlargement package](#) and welcomed the reallocation of €374 million from the IPA funds to help mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic in the Western Balkans. With regard to [Serbia](#), Parliament also noted 'the disproportionate visibility given by Serbia to third countries' and raised concerns about 'the disinformation narratives emanating from the Kremlin'.

