

Brussels, 17/05/2021

Mr Josep Borrell

Vice President of the Commission/High Representative

sent by e-mail to:

Josep.BORRELL-FONTELLES@ec.europa.eu

Ms Margrethe Vestager

Executive Vice- President of the European Commission

for a Europe Fit for the Digital Age

sent by email to:

margrethe-vestager-contact@ec.europa.eu

Ms Stella Kyriakides,

Commissioner for Health and Food Safety

sent by email to:

cab-kyriakides-contact@ec.europa.eu

Mr Olivér Várhelyi

Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement

sent by email to:

Oliver.VARHELYI@ec.europa.eu

Dear High Representative/Vice-President Borrell,

Dear Executive Vice- President Vestager,

Dear Commissioner Kyriakides,

Dear Commissioner Várhelyi,

We, undersigned Member of the European Parliament, want to express our **appreciation for the decision of the European Commission to accelerate the delivery of vaccines and to intensify the support of the European Union to the Western Balkan Countries.**

The commitment announced by the Commission last month that the UE would deliver 651.000 Pfizer/BioNTech doses of coronavirus vaccines to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,

Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia from May to August, finally materialized with the start of the distribution of hundreds of thousands of coronavirus vaccines this week.

We also welcome and greatly appreciate the visits paid by Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, to the Western Balkans in these days and his encouraging words of support for the enlargement perspectives of these countries, which are not only neighbours and partners but first and foremost future Members of the European Union.

The vaccines the EU is delivering right now are coming directly from the EU, rather than the COVAX programme, being part of the €70 million aid package adopted in December 2020. In this occasion, Commissioner Várhelyi stated that throughout the pandemic, the EU treated the Western Balkans as privileged partners and it would continue to act in this spirit for vaccines.

Most of the Balkan countries, however, have been struggling for months with vaccine supply shortages and their vaccination programs unveiled just lately in fits and starts. COVAX deliveries were significantly delayed and some of these countries have been struggling to purchase the vaccines directly from those manufacturers who are producing vaccines already approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and currently used EU-wide.

The tardiness of our action **is not acceptable in the perspective and spirit of our special partnership and of the enlargement policy**, which would instead require both an efficient and responsible definition of the support to the fight against Covid-19.

Although the vaccination process and the supply of vaccines are issues that have created and continue to create difficulties also for Member states, **the failure to include candidate and potential candidate countries in the EU vaccination plan**, allowing them to collectively negotiate the quantity of doses and the price to be paid, has denoted a strategic error. Not only on **a purely public health point of view** - given the commercial ties and constant interactions between citizens of the Western Balkans and the rest of Europe - **but also in term of lack of political vision.**

Our initial wavering **may have caused our Balkan partners to feel abandoned by the Union**, reinforcing that historical feeling of not really being considered as part of Europe. A feeling that has also been fuelled by the slowdown of the European integration process of the recent years, which has increasingly generating disillusionment towards the European Union on the part of public opinion in the Balkans.

Notably, our hesitancy has forced the Countries in the region **to rely on donations from actors other than the EU**. Serbia has been the first to launch a successful inoculation campaign, and that was due to million doses of China's SinoPharm and Russia's Sputnik V vaccines.

As of April 27, in **Serbia** 3.163.499 vaccine doses were given out; 1.282.971 citizens have been fully vaccinated and it is estimated that by the end of April, Serbia will have about 40% of the adult population vaccinated with the first vaccine dose.

Following the footsteps of Serbia, other countries have been turning to China, Russia and other countries, like the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and India for vaccines, while the EU faced strong criticism for supply delay.

- As of April 14, for example, **North Macedonia** had vaccinated only 29 263 citizens. Only on March 28, the national authorities received the 24 600 doses of AstraZeneca purchased through the COVAX system. In the meanwhile, they received 4680 doses on February 14, plus 3510 more on February 24 of Pfizer vaccine as a donation by Serbia. On March 7, they received 3000 doses, plus another 3000 on March 28, from a total order of 200 000 doses of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. On April 1, they received a further donation of 20 000 Sputnik V by Serbia. On April 12, they received a donation of 2000 SinoPharm by the United Arab Emirates.
- As of April 22, **Albania** had vaccinated 372,075 citizens. Albania received the first 38,400 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine under the COVAX facility only on March 15 and additional 90,000 doses on April 17.

On March 21, 2021, Albania received 10,000 doses of Sputnik V vaccine, donated by the United Arab Emirates.

On March 25, 2021, Albania managed to provide 1 million doses through a Turkish distribution company for the Chinese CoronaVac vaccine. The first batch of 192,000 doses was shipped on the same day of signing while another 100,000 were shipped on April 8. The final batch of 208,000 vaccines was sent on 19 April.

On April 5, 12 19 and 26 through four deliveries, 30,420 doses of the Pfizer vaccine were delivered as part of a direct contract with the company.

On April 7, the Albanian government paved the way for an agreement with an Indian company to provide 50,000 of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. The first 25,000 doses were sent on the 30th of the same month.

On April 18, a quantity of 50,000 vaccines Covishield, which is the brand name of the AstraZeneca vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India, were provided through the Vaccine Maitri initiative by the Indian Government.

- For **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the COVAX mechanism is considered the primary form of procurement of vaccines. However, as of April 15, they only received 23,400 Pfizer doses and 26,400 AstraZeneca doses on March 25.

In the meanwhile, they received 10,000 AstraZeneca donation from Serbia, 30,000 SinoVac donations from Turkey, and additional 10,000 AstraZeneca donations from Serbia for the Sarajevo canton. Finally, the Republic of Srpska obtained 42,000 doses of Sputnik V vaccine through direct agreements with Russia.

- As of April 29, **Montenegro** only received 24,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine through the COVAX system, delivered on 28 March.

In the meanwhile, they received: 2,000 doses of Sputnik V as a donation from the Republic of Serbia on February 17; 5,000 doses of purchased Sputnik V on February 25; 30,000 doses of SinoPharm as a donation from the People's Republic of China on March 3; 5,000 doses of purchased Sputnik V on March 7; 2,000 doses of Sputnik V as a donation from the Republic of Serbia, on March 9.

- **The case of Kosovo** is rather emblematic, it has indeed one of the lowest vaccination rates in Europe, with only 26,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccines received so far on March 29 through COVAX and started its National immunization plan on April 1. On April 14 only 10,704 citizens were vaccinated.

However, its government was forced to refuse an offer from Albania to vaccinate teachers due to legal constraints. Albania had run out of Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines and had only the Chinese Sinovac. However, national law prohibits the import of products that are not registered by EMA [European Medicine Agency].

The inability of ours to act quickly and to put on the same level candidate or potential candidate states and EU member states has further paved the way for action by those powers that have vested interests in the area. While any help is more than welcomed in an emergency situation, we know that these actors have their own agenda for the region and often **pursue a foreign policy that moves in open contradiction with our aims, constituent values, and strategic interests.**

Dear Commissioners,

While the start of deliveries of vaccine directly from the EU represent an important step to give the measure of the difference between the European approach and that of other powers towards the area, our delay may have further hampered our credibility in front of Western Balkan countries.

The fact that these countries have been forced to accept these vaccines represents a problem politically and symbolically, because other regional and non-regional powers have proved to be more willing and ready to react to the emergency than the EU. However, also practical concerns arise. Bearing in mind that the majority of the population in some Western Balkan countries will be immunized with Sputnik V and Sinopharm vaccine, problems could arise in terms of lack of recognition under the Digital Green Certificate, with these countries potentially losing interest in adopting it. This is an open issue that should be tackled as soon as possible by the Commission in order to guarantee the recognition of the immunisation of Western Balkans' people under the Digital Green Certificate.

We are therefore reaching you with this letter because we believe it is opportune **to clearly understand what have been our shortcomings** - both in terms of timing and in terms of doses - in relation to the real need of these countries, and make up for our mistakes.

For the future, it would be fundamental to renew and strengthen once again the commitments made. These countries are future members of the European Union and, **as such, they must always be included in EU plans and projects through a special and privileged partnership.**

As stated by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary in her 2020 State of the Union Address “the future of the whole region lies in the EU. We share the same history, we share the same destiny. The Western Balkans are part of Europe - and not just a stopover on the Silk Road”.

For this reason, we strongly believe **that distribution and production should be further strengthened.** We expect this renewed commitment to continue with **the same and greater intensity to help speed-up the vaccination** of all frontline medical staff and other most vulnerable groups. We need to do everything in our capacity to ensure the Western Balkan countries develop the required resilience to fight and come out of the pandemic in the short-term and thrive in the medium-long one so we can keep working together on the process that will eventually lead them to join our big European family.

Yours sincerely,

Fabio Massimo **CASTALDO** (NI)

Irena **JOVEVA** (Renew)

Mario **FURORE** (NI)

Vlad-Marius **BOTOȘ** (Renew)

Ilhan **KYUCHYUK** (Renew)

Dino **GIARRUSSO** (NI)

Željana **ZOVKO** (EPP)

Andreas **SCHIEDER** (S&D)

Viola **VON CRAMON-TAUBADEL** (Greens/EFA)

Damian **BOESELAGER** (Greens/EFA)

Javier **NART** (Renew)

Klemen **GROŠELJ** (Renew)

Vladimír **BILČÍK** (EPP)

Brando **BENIFEI** (S&D)

Fulvio **MARTUSCIELLO** (EPP)

Daniela **RONDINELLI** (NI)

Helmut **SCHOLZ** (GUE/NGL)