



EDITORIAL

Health status of the populations in the Western Balkans region

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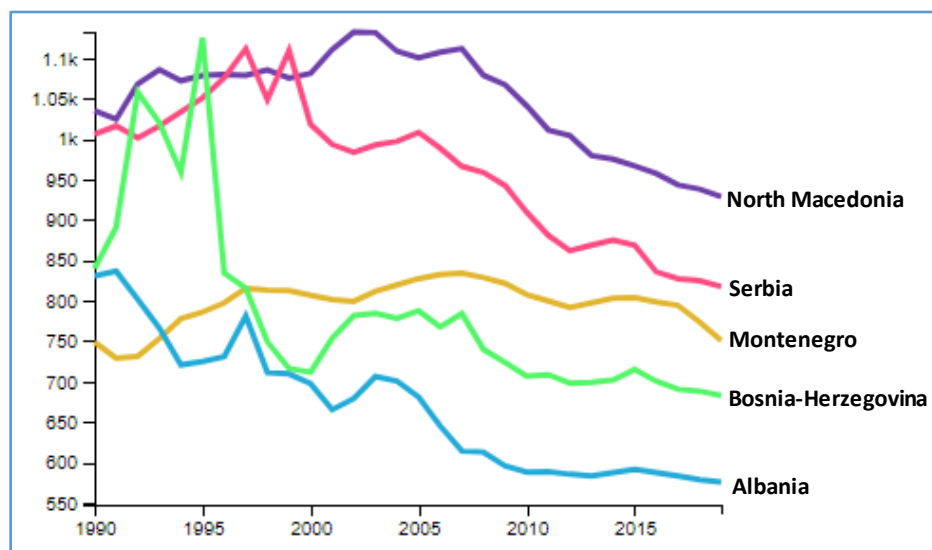
For more than twenty years by now, the countries of the Western Balkans have enjoyed peace after a terrifying warfare in the nineties of the last century. It is time to look at the progress made since. All countries in the Western Balkans region are undergoing deep reforms aiming at accession to the European Union (EU) which is a priority and a key policy driver for all sectors. Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia are currently candidate countries (1). Conversely, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries with a prospect for EU accession in the future (1).

Regarding the health domain, countries report on *acquis*, which includes a chapter on Consumer and Health Protection (2,3). The EU commission monitors these criteria in line with the administrative capacities of each country in their respective stages of the accession process (4).

Health status of the populations in the Western Balkans region is characterized by an excessive mortality compared with the EU average (5). Life expectancy in the Western Balkan countries ranges from 76.3 years in Serbia (the lowest) to 77.3 years in Bosnia and Herzegovina (the highest), whereas the average value in the EU countries in 2017 was 80.9 years (5).

According to the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) estimates (6), the age-standardized all-cause mortality rate in Albania in 2019 was the lowest in the Balkans region (about 575 deaths per 100,000 population), whereas in North Macedonia it was the highest (around 929 deaths per 100,000 population). However, the overall mortality rates have declined steadily in all Balkan countries in the past decade (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Age-standardized all-cause mortality rate (deaths per 100,000 population) in the Western Balkan countries in the past three decades [source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation - <http://ghdx.healthdata.org/gbd-results-tool> (6)]



The vast majority of mortality is due to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), which explain from 93% of all deaths in Albania (the

lowest NCD share) to more than 95% in Serbia (the highest) (6). Age-standardized mortality rate due to cardiovascular diseases in

2019 was the lowest in Albania (estimated at 314 deaths per 100,000 population) and the highest in North Macedonia (569 per 100,000 population) (6).

For the same year, the age-standardized mortality rate due to neoplasms was the lowest in Albania (113 deaths per 100,000 population) and the highest in Serbia (184 per 100,000 population) (6).

On the other hand, the age-standardized mortality rate from diabetes in 2019 was estimated at only 4 deaths per 100,000 in Albania (the lowest in the region), but more than 38 deaths per 100,000 population in Bosnia and Herzegovina (the highest) (6).

Regarding the universal health coverage (UHC) index reported by the World Health Organization (WHO), the service coverage index in 2017 ranged from 59 in Albania (the

lowest in the region) to 72 in North Macedonia (the highest) (5).

However, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has undermined the health systems and UHC reforms in all countries of the Western Balkans region, similar to the rest of the world. The excessive mortality and morbidity associated with COVID-19 in the past year has highlighted the lack of preparedness of most of health systems in the region, influencing rather negatively the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal for Health (SDG 3) (5). There is an urgent need to increase investments in order to strengthen health systems and improve the service coverage in all countries of the Western Balkans to face the current health challenges imposed by the ongoing Corona crisis.

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