

FACILITATION OF ROAD PASSENGER TRANSPORT POST COVID-19

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Context

The EC Communication on ‘*Covid-19: Guidelines on the progressive restoration of transport services and connectivity*’ points out the impact that the sanitary crisis would have passenger transport. While transport of goods was not interrupted (despite a significant reduction of the traffic), EU MS and WB regional partners, decided to put passenger transport for non-essential needs in a standstill mode. Western Balkans borders still remain closed for passenger movement by road and rail and only Serbia has opened recently limited air travel to few destinations in Europe.

In absence of a competitive rail offer and while air connections (in the pre-COVID-19 situation) were not covering homogenously all Western Balkan partners¹, transport trends in Western Balkans show that road transport was the preferred mode of transport, with passenger road transport counting for almost 80-85% of all movement in the region². During 2018, 24 million passengers entered the region through land border crossings (almost the same number in exit), 50-60 % foreigner citizens, with an average yearly increase of the passenger numbers between 5-10%. The highest peak of passenger traffic is experienced in summer with an increase up to 50% in terms of passengers at some border crossings³. Tourism in Western Balkans represents a significant source of income for a majority of the partners.

The foreseen relaxation, and then lifting the restrictions on transport by car, followed by collective transport (busses, vans), will allow an early resumption of mobility. The lifting of the restrictions to facilitate passenger transport is supposed to remain aligned with the broad distancing measures and prevention measures required or recommended by each Party. The limited availability of air transport combined with the lack of connectivity by rail is expected to increase the demand for road transport in the coming period and, as a consequence, also the pressure on border-crossings (at EU and internal borders).

Hence, in addition to the proposed measures by the Transport Community Secretariat for Post-COVID 19 transport facilitation relating to freight transport⁴, the following *phased approach* concerns the progressive restoration of the passenger transport services with the overall purpose to ensure **sanitary risk prevention** and support the Post-Covid19 **economic recovery through an efficient management of the border crossing operation**. In that sense, it shall complement

¹ Also affected by the bankruptcy of some regional companies like Adria Airways playing an important role in connecting Western Balkans to the EU.

² Based on the statistical data provided by Statistical Offices of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia.

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⁴Potential contribution of the Transport Community to the Commission Communication on Support to the Western Balkans in tackling COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery: Draft Action Plan on Transport Facilitation

the proposed Post-Covid-19 Action Plan on Transport Facilitation for intra Western Balkan Border/Common Crossing points and EU-WB BCPs.

General principles

- It is recommended that road passenger traffic restrictions are being lifted **gradually** and in a **coordinated manner** across the region, all such actions being duly associated with **public health protection measures**. The relevance and impact of the measures taken in respect of both public health and transport fluency should be under **constant monitoring**, so that to ensure quick adjustments whenever needed.
- The proposed measures could be set up first within Western Balkans. However, it would be desirable to gradually extend them to the neighbouring EU Member States. The restrictions at EU external borders will remain in place until at least 15 June 2020. It is therefore important that EU-MS and Western Balkan authorities initiate a dialogue as soon as possible to avoid a potential increase of flow of cars going through the border-points that might not be compatible with the existing capacity of these borders points and might be in contradiction with the principles of sanitary prevention deriving from the COVID-19 experience
- All BCPs/CCPs on the extended TEN-T Network in the Western Balkans connecting WB6 parties EU-WB6 shall ensure appropriate conditions for efficient and safe crossing before their re-opening for passenger cars.
- The restoration of road passenger transport in the Western Balkan region shall be accompanied by **short-term measures** aimed at tackling the immediate challenges but also **mid** and **long terms actions** seeking to address the long-lasting bottlenecks at the borders and ultimately facilitate better connectivity for the entire region. While the TCT has already put forward a comprehensive proposal and action plan aiming to ensure better intra WB connectivity and accessibility to the EU, the current proposal concentrates upon those immediate actions that could potentially avert border congestions with all associated health and economic risks.

Coordination

- In order to restore the cross-border provision of transport services, full effectiveness of health-related measures, and the confidence of the public, all parties (WB6 and EUMS) should take action in a coordinated and cooperative way. The experience with the green lanes proved that one of the major risks that could create uncertainties for the transport operations are the **unilateral actions** taken by any Party.
- While Member States should base decisions regarding the lifting of COVID-19 related travel restrictions on the Commission guidelines on internal borders, the decisions of the WB6 parties should take into account the same recommendations to the maximum extent possible.
- All decisions should be clearly communicated to the neighbouring party and to a wider audience, by using the established and functional network of national transport contact points on EU MS level and WB6 level. In the case of opening border crossing

points/common crossing points in WB6, the decisions should be communicated to the Transport Community Secretariat, as well.

- Strong coordination should be especially exercised when it comes to the health protocols of each party with respect to the sanitary checks of passengers and vehicles at the BCPs/CCPs, and other health issues concerning the transport workers, border employees and passengers in vehicles for collective transport. All measures by the Parties shall be proportionate and in non-discriminatory fashion and should remain limited in their scope and duration, to what is necessary to protect public health.
- In respect to the collective transport options for cross-border transport (busses, vans), additional coordination is needed to ensure clear and unified (or at least closely aligned) rules apply for transport operators and service providers along a cross-border route.
- Finally, the Parties must jointly agree on the minimum list of (sanitary) requirements and (health) documents for allowing passengers to enter or transit on the territory of each Party. This especially in the view of avoiding repetitive measures or duplication- for ex. if the passengers would have to undertake Covid19 testing in advance for being allowed to pass the border, no supplementary health screening at BCP should be imposed, and the Covid-19 test results should be recognized in the recipient country. The 15-minutes recommendation for health screenings by the recent EC Communication, should gradually be reduced and move from systematic health controls to sampling.

Short term measures (post COVID-19, summer 2020)

The purpose of short-term measures will be to facilitate people's movement while still keeping in place the effective sanitary measures to protect the health of passengers. As a general rule, border crossing points proceedings should not exceed 3 minutes for individual cars and 12 minutes for buses/coaches⁵. While Covid-19 is impacting all the industries, the tourism sector has experienced the most impact to date due to travel restrictions. Economies in the region highly rely on the tourism sector like Albania, Montenegro⁶ and this is also the case for Croatia, Greece and Bulgaria⁷.

Short term measures should consist of:

- Defining of tourist transit corridors and identification of the key BCPs/CCPs on such routes (based on past traffic volumes and trends) for further rationalization of resources and indicative prioritization of transit and tourist routes, as well as on expected traffic during the upcoming summer period;
- Nevertheless, the authorities of two neighbouring parties may decide to have other BCPs/CCPs treated as “priority” passenger-only BCPs/CCPs where possible (especially where the separation of goods and passengers’ flows is not physically possible);
- Ensuring maximum operational capacity for the selected BCPs to ensure 24h functioning and full functioning during day time (all lanes/booths open);
- Dedicated buses green lanes, separately from passenger cars and trucks traffic (where physically possible);

⁵ This represent the time spent during the control which was the target in the pre-COVID situation but often not the norm. It does not relate to the time spent waiting the control, but it clearly influence the waiting time. For a car it is calculated that passport checks should not exceed more than 45s for each passenger (on the basis of 4 persons per car).

⁶ Tourism in Montenegro represents roughly 1/3 of the GDP.

⁷ These two countries also rely on the Western Balkans network to be connected with the core of the EU.

- Highest priority should be given in terms of human resources (police / sanitary/custom staff) and equipment for efficient border management (handheld passport and ID scanners for example, if available) to be able to respond appropriately and to adjust to the current situations. All sanitary facilities should be put in place without any delays on all open BCPs/CCPs and not only to the “priority” ones;
- Continuous monitoring and displaying on all possible means (including radio broadcasting) of the real-time waiting times at the selected BCPs/CCPs to allow drivers to re-route if necessary in order to prevent the formation of long queues (also hardly incompatible with the sanitary situation, as a large number of people may be gathering in areas where no facilities exist). To this effect, common monitoring and reporting tools⁸ and proceedings should be developed at the regional level and with EU MS.
- Finalize One Stop Shop agreements in those BCPs/CCPs, where the consensus in political level was already reached before the sanitary crises/ and explore the possibility for temporary joint controls in the busiest BCPs/CCPs

Medium-term measures (economic recovery > 2020)

In a mid and long term, additional measures could be considered (in line with the existing proposal):

- One stop shop and joint controls which could effectively shorten the procedural time
- Deployment of ITS system, such as traffic counters, variable message signs (VMS), info boards, etc
- Automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) system
- Systems for calling and reservation (eQMS) and establishing modern facilities at waiting areas
- Investments to upgrade of the BCPs/CCPs infrastructure and accesses (construction of new lanes, design of new lay-outs).

⁸ The possibility to extend the Galileo app. Option to private car users should be explored in this context.