

# COVID-19

## SOUTH EAST AND EASTERN EUROPE

# Response by the EU CBRN Centre of Excellence in South East & Eastern Europe

### Introduction

The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has a long-lasting significant health impact worldwide. The European Union's Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Centres of Excellence Initiative was seriously tested during its 10th anniversary with the global outbreak

of COVID-19 pandemic. Along with other 61 member states of the EU CBRN CoE Initiative, countries of the South East and Eastern Europe (SEEE) region benefited from different projects completed in the areas of bio-safety and bio-security. Additional projects and activities are being implemented and planned in this

region, as the aftermath and duration of this global crisis remains to be seen. In this situation, the adaptability to existing realities, quick response mechanisms triggered by partners of the Initiative, and smart use of existing network of experts will demonstrate viability of this initiative in the long run.



Project 37: Training activity

### Historical Projects

Since the launch of the EU CBRN CoE Initiative a decade ago, countries of the SEEE region benefited from a wide spectrum of different projects and activities covering all CBRN modalities. In terms of biological safety and security our partner countries significantly benefited from a few projects completed recently. Valuable knowledge obtained in the course of various capacity building and training activities along with donated equipment, allowed some of the National Focal Points and their national experts to perform their professional duties with more professional confidence. Especially, those officers and experts who are in the forefront of their national response to fight with the COVID-19 pandemic using their experience and knowledge accumulated during this period.

#### Project 37

The MediLabSecure Project aims to increase the health security in EU-neighbouring countries by strengthening the preparedness capacities to emerging viral diseases and bio-safety risks at national and regional levels. The project is





based on capacity building and institutional networking by promoting a One Health approach. During its first phase completed in 2018, the project implemented several training activities combining theoretical and hands-on modules that improved the national laboratories diagnostic capacities for the early detection of emerging arboviruses. The training activities also promoted transfer of biosafety best laboratory practices by addressing biosecurity and biosafety aspects such as biocontainment in BSL-3 laboratories, biorisk management and shipment of substances.

**Project 44**

Coordination and communication between different national stakeholders represent paramount importance for efficient and timely response to a CBRN incident, which can be a natural disaster or an accident. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven its extreme level of difficulty, since it does

not recognize any borders and impacts. Nowadays, we realize the importance of a framework for regional cooperation and sharing of information between countries in the SEE region, which was established within the framework of the project entitled Strengthening CBRN First Response Capabilities and Regional Cooperation.

This project was completed in 2018 and benefited 9 partner countries from the Western Balkan and Black Sea regions. The overall objective of this project was aimed at enhancing response capabilities and promoting inter-agency and regional cooperation among first responders of beneficiary countries. It was focused on general components of CBRN emergency response, including the civil protection during the incidents, establishment of safety perimeters (quarantine zones, in the case of biological emergencies) and decontamination. Nowadays, countries use General Operational Guidelines for first

responders on CBRN events and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), which were elaborated in each country's national language within the framework of the project.



Project 44: Activity in Albania



Project 44: Activity in Albania





**Projects 57 and 58**

Countries in the SEEE region have a well-established and developed traditional forensic capabilities for investigation and preparation of court cases. At the same time, knowledge and equipment to carry out traditional forensics in a CBRN environment required improvement. Strengthening crime scene forensic capabilities in investigating CBRN incidents in the South East and Eastern Europe region was aimed to address these needs and gaps. Completed in early 2020, this project aimed to strengthen the existing traditional forensic capabilities in investigating CBRN incidents among police and security experts and developed a training system for forensic investigation in CBRN-related cases. The project also fostered the establishment of networks of CBRN and forensics-related institutions and networks of forensics experts dealing with investigations at the sub-regional level.

As part of success stories, some countries developed and integrated SOPs in the field of CBRN forensics at the governmental and ministerial levels, which will allow countries to readily deploy them in the future. Several partner countries integrated training courses developed during the project as part of their training curricula within their respective Police Academies. Forensic equipment received in the framework of the separate project on CBRN SEEE Equipment for forensics (Project 58), significantly strengthened existing traditional forensic capabilities in investigating CBRN incidents among police experts. As the new threats emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, CBRN forensic teams trained within the framework of project 57 and 58, demonstrated their versatility and adaptability by undertaking preventive activities and measures such as disinfection of police stations, border control checkpoints, primary detention units and other targeted places.

**Ongoing initiatives:**

Some of the ongoing projects were launched recently, which will allow our member countries to properly address



Project 57: Train-the-Trainers (TTT) course



Project 57: Training activity



Project 58: Equipment received by Serbia





other needs and gaps in this field. Aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak clearly demonstrated the need to deal with extremely dangerous CBRN materials, including biological waste. CBRN waste materials originated from local hospitals and health care system, laboratories, industries, historical industrial sites, agriculture, mining, warehouses, former military installation, former and illegal waste dumping sites and inadequate waste disposal facilities and sites require stringent management by partner countries.

**Project 67**

Launched in July 2018, the Strengthening CBRN Waste Management Capabilities Project in SEE region, aims to support the long-term objectives of the partner countries governments to develop and manage their hazardous CBRN waste materials, resources and contaminated environments, as well as the safe and secure handling, transportation and the disposal of CBRN waste in the industry and in the public domain. In the long run partner countries will be able to enhance their legal framework through identification of gaps in existing laws and regulations, develop SOPs and Methodologies to deal with safe and secure storage and disposal of hazardous waste materials (including COVID-19 contaminated waste materials), strengthen the existing capabilities through training and exercises, foster the establishment of national and regional experts and institutions' networks.

**Project 74**

The general objective of MediPIET is to enhance health security in the Mediterranean and Black Sea countries, by supporting capacity building for prevention and control of natural or man-made health hazards, posed by communicable diseases and CBRN threats through the roll-out of a sustainable field epidemiology training program, the training of trainers and the dissemination of experience, knowledge and skills among the network members and the active collaboration with other projects/networks.

Currently, 15 new fellows from Public



Project 67: Pictures from waste treatment facility in Montenegro

Health Institutes along 18 Mediterranean and Black Sea countries are enrolled in the third cohort of the 2-year Field Epidemiology Training Program (Advanced

FETP). As a workplace learning program, fellows gain the knowledge and skills to do their job better; the international dimension enables to bring them together,



Project 74: Training module on "Computer tools for outbreak investigation" that took place in Belgrade





and with other EU experts, for cross-fertilization and harmonized approaches. A total of 11 fellows are in the SEE region and are part of their countries' national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, participating in surveillance, screening at ports of entry, development of guidelines and communication materials, training of health professionals and information sharing with the general public. Overall, the MediPIET FETP and network have contributed to improve preparedness and response against cross-border threats such as SARS-CoV-2.

**Project 75**

The second phase of the MediLabSecure project has been launched in January 2019 including an extension of its geographical coverage and a broadening of its actions to enhance preparedness and response capacities to emerging biological risks.

As such, since the beginning of the COVID-19 sanitary crisis, the project has been directly involved in the epidemic preparedness within the MediLabSecure network by supporting the initiation of

their SARS-CoV-2 diagnostic capacities through the sharing of technical information and diagnostic tools to the COVID-19 reference laboratories. Thanks to this support, initial cases were diagnosed by national reference laboratories in partner countries of the SEE region. An External Quality Assessment exercise on coronavirus including the SARS-CoV-2 new virus is currently in progress in several partner countries of the SEE region in order to assess the proper implementation of the SARS-CoV-2 diagnostic.

Support during the COVID-19 confinement period

For the purpose of reducing unexpected negative consequences linked with the COVID-19 confinement and quarantine measures enforced by many countries, the EU CBRN CoE Regional Secretariat for SEE region continued rendering its support to 10 countries in order to meet their expectations. This work was conducted in close cooperation with the European Commission's (EC) Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), EC Joint Research Centre (JRC), National Focal Points (NFP), National Experts, project consortia members and On-Site Technical Assistance key experts.

**Webinars and workshops**

Joint efforts in this direction demonstrated adaptability to existing conditions and offer a variety of webinars to our partner countries based on their needs and priorities. Fourteen webinars and expert tele-workshops were organized by MediPIET, UNICRI, Regional Secretariat right after beginning of confinement in April and lasted till the end of July 2020. Some of these webinars and workshops were offered to all regions of the CBRN CoE Initiative.



Webinar backdrop used for Case & Contact Management



Webinar backdrop used for Clinical Case Management and Infection Detection & Control



Within the framework of the EU CBRN Centres of Excellence Initiative, the Regional Secretariat for South East and Eastern Europe have launched a series of webinars aimed to help partner countries with management of the COVID-19 crisis. Following active participation and valuable contribution of relevant experts from the Central Asian region and the Regional Secretariat for Central Asia, these webinars have become inter-regional. Two Inter-Regional Webinars were conducted for partner countries of the South East and Eastern Europe region in July and September 2020 respectively:

- COVID-19 Case and Contact Management
- COVID-19 Clinical Case Management and Infection Detection & Control.

### Virtual online meetings

The Regional Secretariat for South East & Eastern Europe region organized three virtual online meetings. These meetings were closely coordinated with the JRC, Regional Secretariat and Projects 53 and 67 consortia. Partner countries were encouraged to express their individual country needs within the framework of the project on Strengthening the National Legal Framework and Provision of Specialized Training on Bio Safety and Bio Security. They were also updated on progress made on project entitled Strengthening CBRN Waste Management Capabilities Project in SEE region.

### Information and Guidance

Eighteen pieces of guidance information and instructions, leaflets and documents were shared with our NFPs with request to disseminate further to relevant end users useful to perform their professional activities during and post COVID-19 pandemic confinement. The primary objective of this information was to send it to the right persons at right point in time received from diverse sources of information.

### Training Modules

In order to strengthen the surveillance and protection capacities of healthcare workers, the MediLabSecure public health working group coordinated by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS) developed an off-

line training course on Preparedness and Response to the Health Emergency from Novel Coronavirus SARS CoV-2 structured into three learning units:

**1**  
**Features of SARS CoV-2 emergency: Preparedness and Response to the Health Emergency from novel Coronavirus SARS CoV-2.**

**2**  
**Surveillance, identification and management of suspects and cases: Preparedness and Response to the Health Emergency from novel Coronavirus SARS CoV-2.**

**3**  
**Information for the health personnel on prevention, identification and control in clinical and community settings: Preparedness and Response to the Health.**

### Reallocation and reconfiguration

In order to better address needs and expectations of partner countries, the European Commission ensured quick reallocation of existing budget and extension of existing project beyond Central Asia towards South East & Eastern Europe region, reinforcement of existing training modules, adapting them to current realities, organizing interregional workshop on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and addressing immediate needs of countries in terms of consumables and small number of equipment.

## Recovery Plan

The beauty of the EU's CBRN CoE Initiative resides in the so called "bottom-up" methodology based on voluntary approach, which advocates for tailored method in identifying country needs with priorities and turning them into reality, whereby initiative comes from the beneficiary member states. Following this logic, the Regional Secretariat disseminated the "EU CBRN CoE Survey on National Needs and Support During the COVID-19 Crisis"

to all countries of the Initiative aimed with the purpose to identify individual country needs and priorities.

### Project 53

Strengthening the National Legal Framework and Provision of Specialized Training on Bio Safety and Bio Security was launched in December 2015 to cover Central Asian region. Given the urgent



Project 53: Training activity

need expressed by the SEE region it was agreed to extend this project to the SEE region in order to address existing training needs and provide some small-scale supplies. This project will also raise awareness and promote collaboration regarding the Biosafety, Biosecurity, emergency response and incident management issues among the national, regional and international stakeholders. Additionally, an EU CBRN CoE – BACAC (Biosafety Association for Central Asia and Caucasus) conference on "Challenges for Biosafety/Biosecurity Lessons Learned from Coronavirus Crisis" will be conducted with experts from CA and SEE regions, EU and international organizations.

### LIONSHIELD-2: Field Exercise

Another activity aimed to enhance the CBRN capabilities of the SEE Region is the continued planning of a follow-up Field Exercise to LIONSHIELD-1. It was agreed to initiate another practical exercise after successful implementation of the LIONSHIELD-1: Field Exercise on Nuclear Security, held in Tbilisi, Georgia in June 2018. In the aftermath of Covid-19, Ukraine kindly offered to host the second field exercise with a focus on biosafety/biosecurity. Moreover, all National Focal Points of the SEE Region agreed that there





LIONSHIELD-1 Field exercise

will be the third LIONSHIELD exercise in Serbia in order to maintain the momentum and this time it will cover chemical security issue. In conjunction with the LIONSHIELD-2 exercise in Ukraine, the EU is also planning a series of visibility events to not only highlight this exercise, but also the decade of achievements of the EU CBRN Centres of Excellence programme in Ukraine.

**New Project on CBRN medical emergencies**

Additional new project is currently being considered by the European Commission to be funded from the 2020 budget in near future. Given the COVID-19 pandemic situation worldwide this project will be very much beneficial for the SEE region which is aimed to strengthen and enhance medical emergency preparedness and response capabilities in our region.

Majority of the SEE participant countries lacking sustainable training systems to ensure regular standardized and recognized training and education for first medical and paramedical responders as well as hospital emergency staffs and emergency medical managers. It will help

partner countries to ensure minimization of health consequences and human losses following the CBRN accident and/or emergency. Several CoE partner countries have developed activities addressing this concern at national level or in collaboration with international organisations. The improvement is expected in CBRN Medical Emergency Preparedness and Response with support of EU legislation, regulations, good practices and technologies. Also, horizontal cooperation among services at national as well as international levels CBRN Medical Emergency Preparedness and Response can be improved.

Terms of reference for this project was jointly developed by national experts of the SEE region together with the OSA key expert and eventually submitted to the European Commission's consideration in February 2020.

**Biosafety Association for Central Asia and Caucasus (BACAC) conference in SEE**

Since its establishment in November 2008, the BACAC made significant progress aimed towards strengthening biosafety and biosecurity and establishing an effective regional network of world-class experts in the Central Asia and Caucasus regions. As part of its professional mandate the Association facilitates exchange of information, conducts training activities, shares international best practices, and promotes research and cooperation.

In 2021 the South East and Eastern Europe region will host the next BACAC Conference which will be dedicated to Challenges for Biosafety and Biosecurity, based on lessons learned from Coronavirus Crisis. Georgia gatiously offered to be the host of this important event, which will get together experts from international organizations and countries far beyond the region of Central Asia and Caucasus. □



**BACAC**  
BIOSAFETY ASSOCIATION FOR CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS



Biosafety Association for Central Asia and Caucasus (BACAC) logo.





# Embracing Diversity

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