

## WHAT ARE THE REALISTIC CAPABILITIES OF THE BERLIN PROCESS AND THE OPEN BALKANS INITIATIVE?

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### ABSTRACT

In the Western Balkans, two initiatives currently stand out and, in a way, compete: the Berlin Process and Open Balkans. Both initiatives emphasise the European perspective and the strengthening of regional cooperation. On the one hand, for most countries in the region, the prospect of joining the European Union seems too distant, uncertain, and fraught with many obstacles. On the other hand, regional cooperation is gaining momentum, with numerous agreements recently reached. But, so far, some Western Balkans countries have been unwilling to participate in the Open Balkans. The paper analyses the real capabilities of these two initiatives, both in terms of creating opportunities for the countries of the Western Balkans to come closer to the postulates of the European Union and progress on the path of joining it, as well as in terms of strengthening and facilitating regional cooperation between the respective countries. For that purpose, the authors used content and comparative analysis. The authors conclude that although both initiatives are hybrid, i.e., both contain political and economic interests, they will not significantly contribute to faster integration into the European Union or stronger regional integration or, in the last case, to the process of resolving existing disputes between countries.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received:  
December 30, 2022

Accepted:  
February 20, 2023

### KEYWORDS

Berlin Process, Open Balkans, Western Balkans, European Union integration, regional integration, Common Regional Market, Single Market.

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The paper presents the findings of a study developed as a part of the research project “Serbia and Challenges in International Relations in 2023”, financed by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, and conducted by the Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade.

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The authors would like to express special thanks to Timothy Less, the lead researcher at the Centre for Geopolitics at the University of Cambridge, for the critical insight and research assistance on certain topics that are covered in the paper.

## Introduction

The Berlin Process was established in 2014 as an initiative of several member states of the European Union (EU) under German leadership to engage with six partners from the Western Balkans (WB6), consisting of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and to promote regional cooperation and the European perspective of the region. The Process functions as a platform for high-level cooperation between high-level official representatives of the WB6 and their counterparts in EU host countries. The Berlin Process takes place through annual summits and numerous meetings of high-level politicians but also involves EU institutions (European Commission, European External Action Service), international financial institutions, civil society in the region, youth and businesses, etc. It is designed to accelerate the closer alignment of the entire region with the EU. In this context, the Berlin Process focuses on areas such as infrastructure development and connectivity, business, regional youth exchanges, reconciliation, and science. The EU member states included are Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom.

The first founding Western Balkans Summit within the Berlin Process was held in Berlin on August 28, 2014; the second on August 27, 2015 in Vienna; the third on July 4, 2016 in Paris; the fourth on July 12, 2017 in Trieste; the fifth from July 9 to 10, 2018 in London; the sixth from July 3 to 4, 2019 in Poznan; the seventh from November 9 to 10, 2020 online (Sofia/Skopje); the eighth on July 5, 2021 again in Berlin; and the ninth summit of the Berlin Process was on November 3, 2022, also in Berlin, but this time organised by the new German chancellor.

The main achievements of the Berlin Process are the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the Agreement on the Development of a Common Regional Market, the signing of the Regional Roaming Agreement, and the creation of the so-called “green lanes” to speed up border procedures with key goods during the COVID-19 pandemic. Elements of the action plan for the Common Regional Market should also be taken forward.

On the other hand, the Regional Open Balkans Initiative, formerly unofficially known as Mini Schengen, was envisioned as a new type of regional economic integration. The formalisation of this initiative was promoted in Novi Sad in October 2019 with the so-called Novi Sad Declaration, which is a joint declaration of the President of the Republic of Serbia, the Prime Minister of the

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\* All references to Kosovo in this document should be understood in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

Republic of Albania, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia on the implementation of the four EU freedoms in the Western Balkans region. Later, at the Ohrid Summit in November 2019, three leaders from Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia signed the Ohrid Declaration to accelerate the implementation of the EU's four freedoms in the Western Balkans. In this Declaration, they agreed to accelerate the implementation of the Regional Economic Area by identifying a list of priority measures that can be further expanded in order to achieve practical and visible results for all citizens as soon as possible. In the Declaration, the full respect of existing commitments, which were undertaken within the framework of the CEFTA, the REA MAP, or the Transport Community Treaty, was highlighted, but it was emphasised that the initiative shall be built on them in the spirit of deepening regional economic integration. The Tirana Declaration was adopted at the summit in Tirana in December 2019, and due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, two online meetings were held in October 2020 and June 2021.

At the summit in Skopje in July 2021, the official name of the Open Balkans Initiative was promoted. In addition, the leaders signed the following documents: the Memorandum of Understanding on Trade Facilitation, the Memorandum of Understanding on Work Permits, the Memorandum of Understanding on Disaster Cooperation, and the Skopje Declaration. At the summit in Belgrade in November 2021, leaders agreed to speed up coordination between governments to fully implement agreements that would make a clear difference in doing business and everyday life in the context of improving the business climate and conditions. At the summit in Tirana in December 2021, multiple agreements were signed: on the conditions for free access to the labour market in the WB, on the interconnection of electronic identification schemes for citizens of the WB, on cooperation in the areas of veterinary, food and feed security, and phytosanitary areas in the WB, and on the mutual recognition of certificates of authorised economic operators (AEOS) between Albania and Serbia and between Albania and North Macedonia (the agreement between Serbia and North Macedonia is already implemented). In addition, the Agreement on Cooperation of Accredited Bodies of three parties was signed. The Ohrid Summit held in June 2022 brought an Agreement on Cooperation in the Western Balkans in the Field of Mutual Recognition of Diplomas and Scientific Grades Issued by Higher Education Institutions and Other Authorized Institutions, and Memoranda of Understanding on Cooperation in the fields of tourism, culture, and tax administration in the WB. At the Belgrade Summit in September 2022, the Agreement on Mechanisms for Ensuring the Unhindered Supply of Basic Foodstuffs in the OB was signed, followed by the Operational Plan in the Field of Civil Protection between three countries, the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Cinematography and Audio-Visual Activities, and a

bilateral agreement on cooperation in the field of energy between Serbia and Albania. The three potential members of the Open Balkans are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo\*.

From a methodological point of view, the paper will be based on analysis, where content analysis, functional analysis, as well as indispensable comparative analysis, will be applied. In fact, the comparative method that is most applicable for this research is a case study, which will analyse the efficiency and effectiveness of the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative, as well as the contribution of these initiatives to the economic integration of the region and overcoming existing regional political challenges. When it comes to operational methods that are key to conducting the research itself, content analysis of documents and qualitative content analysis, which would include analyses of the existing political discourse, expert opinion, and existing data from this domain, are highlighted.

### **The Berlin Process as an accelerator of EU integration?**

As previously stated, the Berlin Process is a platform for high-level cooperation between the leaders of the Western Balkan countries (WB6), consisting of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and the Berlin Process host countries<sup>3</sup>, which include regional civil society, youth, and businesses. It started in 2014 and was introduced as a four-year platform but continued its activities after 2018. From a political point of view, the annual summits of the Berlin Process and the numerous meetings related to them intensified the interaction between the EU and the WB high-level politicians and managed to make the significant challenges of the Western Balkan states in relation to regional cooperation the subject of discussion, as well as keep the WB6 on the agenda of the EU states and institutions (GIZ n. d.). Since its launch in 2014, the focus of the Berlin Process has been related to deepened sectoral cooperation, the development of regional infrastructure, and increased cooperation in the field of security, but it has gradually moved to other economic issues in the Western Balkans (Minić 2019, 27-28).

In the political sense, the Berlin Process has encouraged regional cooperation in solving problems of common relevance. Among the thematic areas are the infrastructure gap, youth unemployment, low competitiveness of

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<sup>3</sup> The governments of the following EU member states are implied to be host countries under the Berlin Process: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Poland, and the United Kingdom (EU member until January 2020).

the economy and distant perspectives of economic convergence with the EU, slow progress in reconciliation, bilateral issues, education and research, Roma integration, and environmental issues (GIZ n. d.). According to Nechev and Velinovska, the Berlin Process was launched in 2014 when the European integration process came to a standstill, so this initiative, according to them, represents the best chance for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, which could contribute to the resolution of bilateral disputes and EU membership (Nechev and Velinovska 2022). Also, the European Parliament declared that the Berlin Process enjoys the support of the region and the EU as an initiative that brings a new perspective and impetus to the enlargement process. “It has brought a positive momentum for regional cooperation, notably through its projects which are expected to have an economic and social impact that will complement the EU membership ambitions of the individual countries”, said a 2014 European Parliament briefing (Lilyanova 2016, 1). Also, according to Griessler (2020), the Berlin Process aimed to inject new energy into the dormant EU enlargement process at a time when the path to membership in the EU was particularly arduous for the WB countries and slow progress had created frustration among applicant countries. Director for South-East Europe and Turkey at the German Federal Foreign Office, Susanne Schütz, said while explaining the benefits of the Berlin Process that it was designed to be a platform for all six Western Balkans states and to act as a catalyst for faster EU integration as well as regional integration. At the same time, Schütz took the opportunity to compare the Berlin Process with the Open Balkans Initiative, saying that, so far, the Open Balkans is an initiative that works for three countries, while they believe that the inclusiveness of the process is important and that there should be no duplication between the two initiatives (Ruci 2022). According to Musliu (2021), the Berlin Process began as an intergovernmental diplomatic initiative and set several broad and ambitious goals, such as strengthening regional cooperation, resolving bilateral issues for good neighbourly relations and stability, strengthening good governance, implementing reforms aimed at strengthening the independence of the judiciary and increasing competitiveness, boosting investment and economic growth in the region, and improving connectivity in the energy, transport, and digital sectors.

On the one hand, if we look at the ambitious goals of the Berlin Process, it could be concluded that most of them are also part of the so-called Copenhagen criteria, to be met by the WB6 on its way to full EU membership. In this context, we could understand the political weight of the Berlin Process in addition to its initial economic goal of creating a common market within the Western Balkans. Intensifying regional cooperation, solving bilateral issues, strengthening good governance, implementing reforms aimed at strengthening the independence

of the judiciary, and increasing competitiveness, including boosting investments and economic growth in the region as well as transport and connectivity in the energy, transport, and digital sectors, are topics that we also notice in the annual reports of the European Commission for the candidate countries of the Western Balkans, set as different criteria on the way to European integration. Such a context shows that there are no doubts about the role of the Berlin Process if we marginalise the thesis that it is a substitution for EU integrations and that it was set up as an accelerator of the European path of WB6 from different perspectives, including political and economic, as well as in the process of solving current regional issues. But, according to some scholars (Kamberi 2021, 63), the Berlin Process experienced a debacle at the very beginning of its existence when the President of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, announced a five-year moratorium on the admission of new members of the Union (Juncker 2014). Then Euroscepticism began to grow in the Western Balkans. Jean-Claude Juncker's statement had the greatest impact on public opinion in the Western Balkans, but also within the club of political representatives who lost the political opportunity to represent the EU as a strategic and key foreign policy goal in the process of creating sustainable and strong economies because they could not talk about EU membership in the period when Brussels officially declared that there will be no EU enlargement in the coming period.

In such circumstances, the symbolic and real capacities of the Berlin Process were called into question because it contained numerous initiatives but lacked a clear perspective, or more precisely, a clear goal. The thesis that this process represents a substitution of EU membership was increasingly in focus because, on the one hand, official Brussels publicly declared that there would be no enlargement in the next five years, while, on the other hand, the Berlin Government, as one of the founding and most influential members of the EU, continued to nurture the Berlin Process as an opportunity for prosperity in the Western Balkans. Such circumstances contributed to changing the essential role of the Berlin Process in reality. Namely, the Berlin Process represents an initiative with initially economic goals that, in fact, should indirectly contribute, that is, influence the resolution of other, precisely political challenges faced by the Western Balkan partners through the creation of a certain mutual trust between the political elites in the region. Currently, the situation on the ground is such that political relations determine economic flows, and vice versa. In this context, the role of the Berlin Process as an accelerator of the currently unpredictable European integration of the Western Balkans countries represents a definition of this process that could be confirmed or rejected depending on whether the achievement of its goals as an initiative will be followed by EU membership of the Western Balkans partners.

In the ideal case, if all the goals of the Berlin Process are achieved, this still does not mean that the WB6 will receive EU membership as a reward. There are no guarantees of membership, nor does the Berlin Process promise that those countries that meet the conditions and progress step by step will ultimately gain that membership. Since the establishment of the Berlin Process until today, the European Union has been facing various internal issues that push the focus on enlargement policy aside. The accession criteria for EU membership are a key condition for the potential membership of the Western Balkans. But the newly created circumstances within the European Union, as well as within the European continent, in the political, economic, security, and energy spheres, put the whole process of EU enlargement at the bottom of the Brussels agenda. This is one of the leading reasons that could lead us to a potentially unclear answer to the question: Does the Berlin Process today still remain a kind of accelerator for the region's accession to the EU?

### **The precarious role of the Berlin Process in deepening regional economic integration**

Accession to the European Union is declared to be Serbia's main foreign policy goal. Serbia's negotiations for joining the European Union have so far been very complex and demanding, as well as slow. Serbia received the status of a candidate for EU membership on March 1, 2012. In September 2013, a Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Serbia entered into force. On January 21, 2014, the first intergovernmental conference was held, which officially started Serbia's accession negotiations (Jelisavac Trošić 2018, 268). However, just at that time, due to Juncker's announcement of a five-year moratorium on new EU member admissions, the difficult reforms that should have been undertaken with the promise of EU membership dissipated, and the entire process of accession became diluted and lost focus.

With the Berlin Process, the focus shifted from EU accession to regional cooperation and reconciliation. Since then, joining the EU has become a distant and hazy goal, while regional cooperation, reconciliation, and the strengthening of their economies have become the main focus of the WB6. In the Final Declaration from the summit of the Berlin Process in Trieste on July 12, 2017, the establishment of the Regional Economic Area (REA) was mentioned for the first time. At the summit, the joint initiative of the leaders of the Western Balkans for the acceleration of regional economic cooperation and the development of the REA was welcomed. It is envisaged that the REA will be based on the already existing arrangements of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), as well as on EU regulations and standards, but also on individual Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs) (Declaration by the

Italian Chair 2017). Such an economic area should ensure the full “implementation of the four freedoms of the European Union” – the free movement of goods, people, labour, services, and investments. The Multiannual Action Plan (MAP) of the REA was also adopted in Trieste (Regional Cooperation Council 2017). At the same time, it was emphasised that this initiative is not a replacement for the WB countries’ European integration, nor is it a parallel process, but rather a specific accelerator of the entire process, including European integration, regional cooperation, and reconciliation and resolution of regional disputes. In the declaration from the summit, it was also stressed that everything related to the formation of the REA must be in accordance with the economic criteria of EU accession, as well as the implementation of the EU *acquis*. It was agreed that the REA will progressively enable an increased free movement of goods, services, investment, and skilled workers, in full coherence with each country’s trajectory. The European Commission has announced support actions worth over EUR 7 million to help turn the Regional Economic Area into concrete business opportunities (EWB 2017).

The London Summit was the last of the originally intended 5-year Berlin Process, and from this point on, the entire Berlin Process became more uncertain without a clear strategy for its continuation or future prospects. Boris Johnson resigned as the UK foreign secretary just a few minutes before he addressed the summit participants as host, which added uncertainty to the future of this process and, in some way, showed a lack of desire to bring it to a positive outcome. One of the main goals of this summit was to contribute to increasing economic stability in order to improve the business environment, encourage entrepreneurship, address the issue of youth unemployment, and promote regional inter-connectivity (Nechev et al. 2018, 7). The main economic issues of the Berlin Process were discussed in Vienna, six days before the London Summit, where smart growth and regional economic integration were given the most space, which led to the Chairs’ Conclusions of the Economy Ministers’ Meeting of the London Western Balkans Summit on July 4, 2018 (Nechev et al. 2018, 5).

Later, the main topics of the Poznan Summit focused on the following areas: transport and energy, digital technology, the economy, security, and good neighbourly relations. The summit welcomed the entry into force of the Regional Roaming Agreement on July 1, 2019, which represented an important achievement of the Digital Agenda for the WB and an example of the benefits of regional cooperation. The European Commission continues to support the region’s own plan to develop a REA and welcomed the endorsement of the Mutual Recognition of Academic Qualifications Agreement (European Commission 2019).

At the Sofia Summit, the WB6 agreed on the Declaration on the Common Regional Market (CRM) as a catalyst for deeper regional economic integration

and a stepping stone towards the EU Single Market. It is said to be an evolution of the MAP REA that will address its shortcomings (coordination, adequate financial and technical support, demanding agendas, etc.). They also adopted the Action Plan for the period 2021–2024, which is based on the EU four freedoms (EWB 2020). The common market of the Western Balkans would function on the same principles as the internal market of the EU, which represents a significantly higher level of economic integration than a free trade zone such as CEFTA 2006.

The Action Plan for the CRM targeted actions in four key areas:

1. regional trade area (Table 1): free movement of goods, services, capital, and people, including cross-cutting measures such as the Green Lines, to align with EU-compliant rules and standards and provide opportunities for companies and citizens;
2. regional investment area (Table 2), to align investment policies with EU standards and best international practices and promote the region to foreign investors;
3. regional digital area (Table 2), to integrate the Western Balkans into the pan-European digital market; and
4. regional industrial and innovation area (Table 2), to transform industrial sectors, shape the value chains to which they belong, and prepare them for today’s reality and tomorrow’s challenges (Regional Cooperation Council 2020).

Table 1: Regional Trade Area based on four freedoms

<b>Cross-Cutting Trade Measures</b>	<b>Goods</b>	<b>Services</b>	<b>Capital</b>	<b>People</b>
Maintain the Green Lanes and streamline BCPs/ CCPs controls	Mutual Recognition Programmes (MRPs)	Additional Protocol 6 (AP6) on Trade in Services	Development of a modern payment system	Mobility of students, researchers, and professors
Elimination of Non-tariff Barriers (NTBs)	Risk Management	Tourism	Strengthening regional cooperation and coordination on COVID19 response as part of relief, recovery, and resilience	Mobility of individuals on the basis of IDs

<b>Cross-Cutting Trade Measures</b>	<b>Goods</b>	<b>Services</b>	<b>Capital</b>	<b>People</b>
Trade related aspects	System of Electronic Exchange of Data SEED+	Financial services		Portability of social rights and removal of working permits
Private sector dialogue	Harmonisation and cooperation with the EU	Postal services		
Reduction of trade costs and transparency		Professional qualifications		
		Enabling environment		
		Electronic commerce		

Source: Regional Cooperation Council 2020.

The CRM action plan for 2021-2024 specifies tangible and concrete results, where deliverables should be achieved in two to three years. There are activities, indicative timelines, and coordination and implementation responsibilities within each of the priority areas. The plan envisages that already existing regional organizations play an important role in the coordination and implementation of activities, such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), CEFTA, the Energy Community, and the Western Balkans Transport Community. Also, on behalf of the European Commission, the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) works with all these organizations, providing them with political, financial, and technical support. Chambers of Commerce from the WB6 are also involved as representatives of the private sector and are responsible for implementing the action plan in their respective countries.

Table 2: Regional Investment, Digital, Industrial and Innovation Area

Regional Investment Area	Regional Digital Area	Regional Industrial and Innovation Area
Regional investment promotion	Digital infrastructure and connectivity	Regional innovation
Regional investment policy reforms	Digital skills and competence	Regional industry development
Regional investment retention and expansion	Digital economy in the era of new ICT technologies	Automotive industry value chains
	Trust and security	Green & circular economy value chains
		Agrifood industry development
		Creative industry
		Metal processing industry
		Sustainable tourism

Source: Regional Cooperation Council 2020.

The CRM is expected to bring an additional 6.7% of GDP growth to the region, make it more competitive in the EU and global markets (more than individual 6), allow people to travel, work, study, and do business without borders, and provide consumers with more options at lower prices (Regional Cooperation Council 2022). The goal of the CRM is to economically integrate the WB6 by 2025 based on the rules of the EU Single Market, solving obstacles to the implementation of the CRM, primarily an agreement on unhindered travel in the region with only ID cards of member states or an agreement on the recognition of professional and university degrees and diplomas.

The Berlin Process gave an additional push to reforms and investments in the areas of transport and energy, digitalization, trade, investment, and the labour market, always in coordination with the relevant EU institutions and regional organizations and specialised bodies formed by the European Commission (Nechev et al. 2018, 8). The momentum of deepening regional cooperation between the WB6, initiated by the Berlin Process, is probably the most important achievement of the same. The Berlin Process provided a timetable and space for the WB6 to meet and discuss open issues, initiatives, disputes, needs, and ideas. In this way, it certainly encouraged dialogue.

The interesting fact is that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the twin green and digital transitions. The “Green Corridors” within the six CEFTA countries, which established the priority of passage and short customs procedures at the border for food, medicine, and protective equipment, quickly manifested their positive effects, above all in the stabilisation of national markets with key resources (Jelisavac Trošić et al. 2021, 255-266). This is a concrete example of how good coordination between different border administrations of the WB had a very positive impact on the flow of goods during the most critical first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, at the same time, there are many obstacles to the realisation of the plans of the Berlin Process. For example, Hoxhaj (2022) finds that the action plan to establish the CRM is flawed, as it did not take into account the high level of corruption and the lack of the rule of law in the WB6, and argues that corruption and the lack of the rule of law could be a major obstacle for the proper functioning of the CRM.

One of the major shortcomings that should be mentioned is the noticeable absence of a strong and continuous commitment by the entire region to continue deepening regional economic integration. These countries also have a large number of different interests, especially in the political, foreign policy, and security contexts, so the coordination of policies and activities appears to be a big problem. Therefore, the question arises whether the Berlin Process initiative concretely contributes to the strengthening of regional cooperation.

### **The Open Balkans: a “controversial” initiative with incomplete inclusiveness**

Since the beginning of the development of post-conflict regional cooperation in the Balkans, no newly established initiative has ever caused as many reactions, controversies, and contradictions as Mini Schengen at the end of 2019, i.e., the Open Balkans from 2021 (Đukanović and Đorđević 2020). Namely, every political proposal, initiative, or idea within the Western Balkan region has had a political connotation since its appearance, most of which are negative or primarily negative instead of affirmative. According to Rapačić (2020, 568), the idea of Mini Schengen has its roots in the Berlin Process, conceived as a new type of regional economic integration, and primarily caused by the necessity of abolishing administrative barriers in intra-regional trade. The Open Balkans builds on the ideas of the REA and CRM while maintaining their strong economic focus. The biggest advantage of this initiative, even though it borrows many aspects from mechanisms under the supervision of the EU, is that it was led and carried out exclusively by the local regional actors, from its very conception and creation. This initiative is truly regional. However, the biggest

drawback is that the entire region is still not covered. The Open Balkans failed to get on board all the countries and entities from the region, thus failing to ensure inclusiveness. Some of the countries were reluctant to join, believing that it would slow down the already slow pace towards full EU integration.

The Open Balkans Initiative, launched by Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, after promotion, faced the same approach. The leaders of the three mentioned countries organised a meeting in Novi Sad on October 10, 2019, where they announced the formation of the so-called Mini Schengen Initiative,<sup>4</sup> with the aim of establishing the freedom of movement of goods, services, capital, and people within the Western Balkans by the end of 2021. Based on the Mini Schengen Initiative of Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia, the idea related to the attempts to “deepen” the Regional Economic Area, is being revived (Schengen Visa n. d.). The original concept of the initiative aimed at implementing the four freedoms of the European Union in the Western Balkans after the meeting of the Mini Schengen Initiative in October 2019 had the idea to ensure the creation of a regional market based on full freedom of movement with a valid identity card throughout the region, but also full freedom of labour movement (Đukanović 2022b).

In the post-conflict Western Balkan area, there is a constant need to strengthen multilateral cooperation among the WB6, and there is always a need for functional cooperation. It seems that the focus of the Open Balkans at the moment is primarily on the freedom of movement of people, i.e., the workforce (Đukanović 2022a). In fact, it is a project with an economic sign that, from the very beginning, took on a huge political connotation, which is probably conditioned by the existing political challenges in the Western Balkans in the last thirty years.

According to Đukanović (2022b), the prevailing reasons for opposing the integration into the Open Balkans are related to the essential mutual distrust of the elites and the dominant spheres of society, but also to the noticeable non-complementarity of the foreign policy efforts among the countries of the Western Balkans. In fact, it is about the opposing views of the ruling political elites in Podgorica, Priština, and Sarajevo (primarily representatives of the Bosnian and Croatian people), who claim that this is an initiative that is contrary to their national interests. In this regard, the most visible resistance to the Open Balkans comes from Montenegro and, to some extent, Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily among the Bosnian and a slightly smaller part of the Croatian public

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<sup>4</sup> The Prime Ministers of Albania and North Macedonia, as well as the President of Serbia, announced on July 29, 2021 in Skopje that the initiative, colloquially known as Mini Schengen, would be renamed the Open Balkans in the future.

there (Đukanović 2022b). That is why the issue of (non)accession to the Open Balkans is considered a key national problem linked to relations with other Balkan actors (Vlahović 2021). But this initiative has faced similar controversies as the Berlin Process since 2014. In fact, since its establishment. For certain regional political elites, but also the general public, the Open Balkans represents a conundrum: whether it is a project that will lead to faster European integration or a kind of replacement for the region's primary foreign policy goal - full EU membership.

But we should not ignore the potential challenges of the Open Balkans Initiative within the existing framework and participating countries. The fact that North Macedonia and Albania are NATO members and have different foreign policies in certain key segments in relation to Serbia, particularly when it comes to the issue of the status of Kosovo\*, raises the question of whether such foreign policy disagreements, some of which are directly related to Serbia's leading national interests, can represent a potential point of contention that, without a doubt, can represent a limiting determinant regarding the economic potential of the Open Balkans.

The essence of the problem in this initiative actually lies in the possibilities of its inclusiveness, which directly puts it in a subordinate position in relation to the Berlin Process, which, as we stated earlier, includes all six actors of the Western Balkans. The continuous refusal of Bosnia and Hercegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo\* to participate in this initiative makes it less attractive on the international and European level, i.e., the perception that is being built in international relations expresses strong restraint precisely because of the absence of participation of all Western Balkan subjects in it.

The United States of America has supported the idea of the Open Balkans since its inception. Also, this initiative got significant support from the representatives of certain non-governmental organizations in Serbia: the Atlantic Council and the Open Society Fund (Đukanović 2022b). This is also supported by the statement of the president of the Foundation for Open Society, Aleksandar Soros, who stated that the Open Balkans Initiative could contribute to the resolution of long-standing disputes in the region (Demostat 2022). This characterised the attitude of President Donald Trump's administration towards the Western Balkans in general, and it was especially highlighted in September 2020 in the "Washington Agreement" in which Kosovo\* committed to joining this regional arrangement (Muharremi 2021). However, Kosovo\* did not become part of the Open Balkans Initiative even two years after the signing of the so-called Washington Agreement, although the Washington administration support for this initiative has continued even after the coming to power of the new American administration led by President Joseph Biden. In this context, evidence is provided by the statement of the US Special Envoy for the Western Balkans,

Gabriel Escobar, who stated at the Open Balkans Summit in Ohrid in June 2022 that the United States supports the Open Balkans as an economic initiative aimed at creating greater opportunities for people in the region. “The US supports the Open Balkans to remain an economic initiative. It is not a political project but an important economic project, and it is important that it remains and that we focus on creating opportunities for people in the region” (*Politika* 2022). With this statement, the American official emphasises not only Washington’s support when it comes to the Open Balkans Initiative but also sends a certain message to the political elites in Podgorica, Sarajevo, and Priština that it is an economic and not a political project, as these three subjects in the region interpret it.

The European Union, on the other hand, expresses somewhat more reserved support in relation to the Open Balkans. In the beginning, even the leaders of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania emphasised the significant support of the European Union for this project, but there was never a clear statement from Brussels about it (Đukanović 2022b). There have always been ambiguities about whether the European Union supports this initiative, how it views it in relation to the Berlin Process, and whether it actually perceives it as a competition to the Berlin Process. But, if we interpret the statements of European Union officials, regardless of which member state they come from, we will find out that the Open Balkans enjoys the support of the European Union, at least in the official context. European Commissioner for Enlargement Oliver Varhey said that the Open Balkans initiative can be an opportunity to speed up the region’s path towards the European Union. “I think the Open Balkans is not just a good idea, it is an opportunity for the region to change reality, to overcome the challenges it faces. This initiative can be an opportunity to speed up the path to the EU”, Varheji said at the Open Balkans summit in Ohrid (*Beta* 2022).

On the one hand, it is a project beset by political disagreements and mistrust, but it also possesses significant economic potential. However, the impossibility of exploiting the economic potential in regional frameworks due to political disagreements, both about the initiative itself and over existing historical and current disputes, represents its biggest problem. Viewed from today’s perspective, the capacities of the Open Balkans are limited precisely because of its incomplete inclusiveness. In fact, regional political disputes are, on the one hand, the main determinant of its limited economic activity, while, on the other hand, the lack of strong support from the European Union also represents a significant determinant of the possibility of its full inclusiveness, which would also lead to its full effectiveness.

On the other hand, the scepticism and fears of certain leaders in the countries of the region about the initiative will not in any way affect the acceleration of the process of integration of those countries into the EU. Among

other reasons, there is a visible reluctance for new enlargements, and that is related to numerous internal problems – first of all, such as Brexit or a potential economic recession (Đukanović and Đorđević 2020, 612), but also due to the pervasive security, economic, and political effects of the Ukrainian war.

### **The Open Balkans: a new hope for business based on the shattered illusion of the EU?**

Despite the overall macroeconomic stabilisation in the region, the WB6 is still lagging in becoming high-income countries, and in the case of this region, development largely depends on leaders and institutions. Those are the key actors that can ultimately enable regional entrepreneurs and companies to establish closer cooperation and become more productive and connected (Zoppi 2022, 23-51). In this way, thanks to these actors, who are key for the WB region, and their activity, there can be an increase in income in the countries of the region. The activity and initiative of the WB leaders led to the creation of the latest initiative, the Open Balkans.

We can interpret the Open Balkans Initiative as a substitute for the previous lack of commitment by the EU to extend its membership. We can say that the disappointment caused by the postponement of the opening of EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia led to the strengthening of the idea of the “Open Balkans”. Unfortunately, there is a high level of mistrust among the WB6, and it is difficult to establish an atmosphere of trust between them, even in situations that are mutually beneficial.

This initiative seeks to achieve “four freedoms” in the Western Balkans: the flow of goods, people, services, and capital. The underlying idea is to create an economic area in the Western Balkans that will ensure the implementation of full freedom of movement of people, services, goods, and capital, modelled after the European Union. The MAP REA, which was established as part of the Berlin Process at the 2017 Trieste Summit, and the goals of the Open Balkans on the freedom of movement of goods, services, people, and capital, overlap. It is important that the REA gathers all the WB6, and the Open Balkans only three WB. However, it is also clear that since the beginning of the Berlin Process, the Western Balkans region has changed, and, as a consequence, there have been reflections on the need to adjust the initial attitudes and goals. The Open Balkans strives to bring more practical results, first of all for the easier conduct of business between the businessmen of these countries, enabling quick and simple but also effective solutions. The Chambers of Commerce of Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia are the bearers of the institutional framework of this initiative, and, at the same time, the Chambers are the direct link with

entrepreneurs and companies, which shows us that it is more oriented towards practical solutions and pragmatic goals that would help the economy.

We must bear in mind that this is only one of over 40 initiatives in the past 25 years in which the countries of the Western Balkans have been involved (BRPG 2021, 10). This initiative calls for more intensive cooperation in the Western Balkans, to which all the economies in the region can join. The Open Balkans was conceived as a support for the current regional initiatives, their implementation, and a response to the demands of the economy, companies, and real life. Given that many declarations and agreements were signed in a short period, this gives the Open Balkans a legal framework and the foundations for concrete activities and facilities (CCIS 2022a).

The three participating countries have about 12 million people (Table 3), which, when establishing a single market, would enable easier movement of labour, capital, investments, goods, and services. There are different stages of development among these WB economies. GDP and the GDP per capita of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia are not equal, and it is noticeable that in this area Serbia has the most favourable initial position.

Table 3: Population, GDP and GDP per capita in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia

Country	Albania	North Macedonia	Serbia
Population (in million)		2,1	7
GDP (in EUR billion)	15,4	11,7	53,3
GDP per capita (in EUR)	5,456	5,664	7,784

Source: CCIS 2022b.

This initiative represents support for existing regional cooperation initiatives and is a response to the needs and demands of the economy and citizens to facilitate business, trade, travel, and employment in the Western Balkans. This initiative has so far produced five declarations: Novi Sad (October 2019), Ohrid (November 10, 2019), Tirana (December 21, 2019), Skopje (July 29, 2021), and Belgrade Declaration (September 2, 2022).

Here is the list of the signed agreements within the Open Balkans Initiative:

- July 2021: Memorandum of Understanding on Trade Facilitation, Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation Related to Free Access to the Labour Market in the Western Balkans, Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Protection Against Disasters in the Western Balkans.

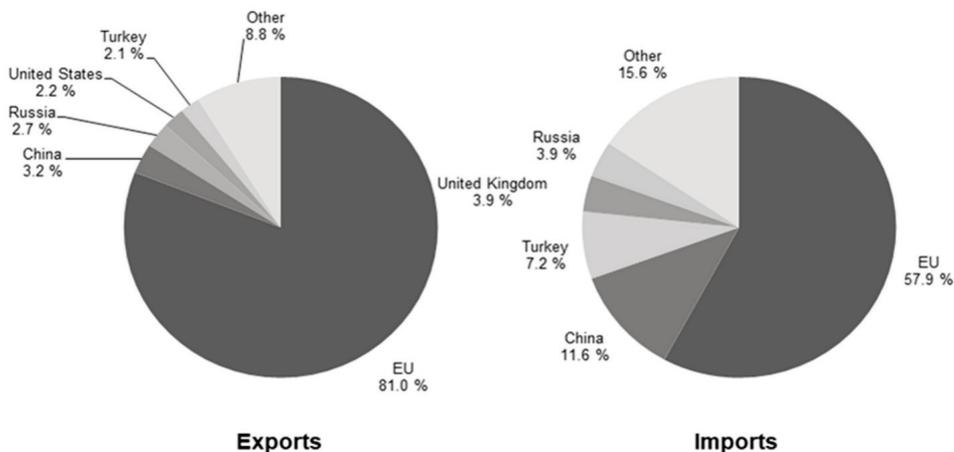
- December 2021: Agreement on Conditions for Free Access to the Labour Market in the Western Balkans, Agreement on the Interconnection of Electronic Identification Schemes for Citizens of the Western Balkans, Agreement on Cooperation in the Areas of Veterinary, Food and Feed Security and Phytosanitary Areas in the Western Balkans, Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Certificates of Authorized Economic Operators (AEOS) Between Albania and North Macedonia, Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Certificates of Authorised Economic Operators (AEOS) Between Albania and Serbia, Trilateral Agreement on Cooperation Between General Directorate of Accreditation of the Republic of Albania (DPA), Institute of Accreditation of the Republic of North Macedonia (IARNM) and Accreditation Body of the Republic of Serbia (ATS).
- June 2022: Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Academic Qualifications, MoU on Cooperation in the Field of Tourism in the Western Balkans, MoU on Cooperation in the Field of Culture, MoU on Cooperation in the Field of Tax Administrations in the Western Balkans (CCIS 2022c).
- September 2022: Agreement on Food Security between the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia, Memorandum of Understanding in the Field of Cinematography and Audio-Visual Activities in the Western Balkans, Agreement on Energy and Mining Cooperation, The Inter-Operational Plan on Civil Emergencies between the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania (Albanian Government Council of Ministers 2022).

Critics say that the Open Balkans Initiative seems quite attractive, but in geopolitical terms, it looks more like Serbia's aspiration for influence in the entire region than regional cooperation (Kamberi 2021, 60-71). The basic idea of Mini Schengen is expressed precisely in the creation of a single labour market, i.e., the free movement of workers in the member countries, which would maintain a low minimum wage and ensure the stability of the inflow of labour to Serbia in order to retain the existing foreign investors and attract new ones (Rapačić 2020, 566).

The economic connection within the WB is not so high for several reasons: political tensions and disputes are one thing, and the economic focus of these countries on the EU is another (Zakić 2023, 232). The economies of the WB are already closely integrated with the EU, which is their largest trading partner, the largest source of incoming foreign investments and other financial flows, and the main destination for migration abroad (Dabrowski and Myachenkova 2018, 2). Among non-Western Balkan partners, the EU is the main partner in both exports (81.0%) and imports (57.9%) (see Figure 1). China is a significant import partner (11.6%) for the WB but has a small share in its exports (3.2%).

Trade among countries of the WB accounted for 9% of the total (intra plus extra) imports of the WB and 15% of their exports (Eurostat 2022).

Figure 1: Western Balkan countries trade with main partners, 2021 (%)



Source: Eurostat 2022.

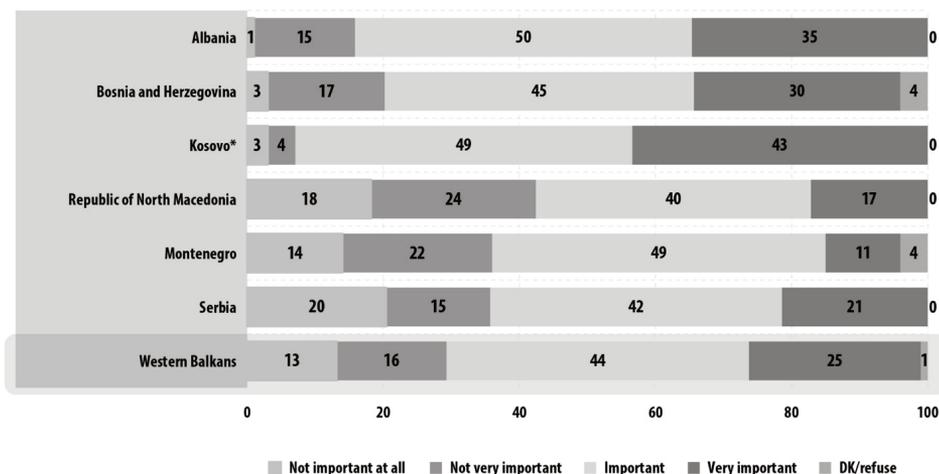
Nikolić's research showed that there is no strong justification for the deepening of economic cooperation among the WB states, as trade structures among the WB states can be regarded as unfavourable given the improvement of the export structure of these states to the rest of the world or the EU. That research revealed low and declining indicators of intra-industrial trade between the WB and divergences between the WB trade structures were detected, thereby indicating no room for the acceleration of bilateral export and import flows (Nikolić 2020, 3470). Such data lead us to the conclusion that the trade exchange relations within the Western Balkans are still at a basic level, so in that context, the Open Balkan Initiative, as a mechanism, could play an important role. To support that claim, we can see the Toshevska-Trpchevska et al. (2022, 23) research, which shows that deepening trade integration through different regional initiatives could have a positive influence on increasing mutual trade.

Within the WB, there are bilateral investment agreements, but the commitments made in the documents do not correspond to the actual flows in terms of intra-regional investment flows. Investment flows within the Western Balkans are also at a low level. In reality, there are still no adequate mechanisms that could accelerate intra-regional investment flows and pave the process of dynamizing regional economies from that perspective as well, which could be the chance for the OB.

In the annual survey of the Balkan Barometer for 2022, the share of respondents who believe in regional cooperation is constant: 25% said that the quality of regional cooperation was very important, followed by 44% who marked it as important (see Figure 2). Although there have been different public discussions about regional agendas and ideas, the share of respondents who consider the quality of regional cooperation as not important at all has shown a slight increase from 10% in 2020 to 13% in 2021 (Zorić 2022, 36).

However, within the region, regional cooperation is strongly perceived. For example, respondents in Kosovo\* and Albania led the way regarding regional cooperation as very important (43%) and (35%) respectively, which is different from last year when these two economies were more hesitant about regional cooperation. On the contrary, business representatives of North Macedonia were more hesitant about regional cooperation and considered it not very important (24%). The actions also reflect Serbia's pessimism, as regional cooperation is regarded as unimportant by a sizable percentage (20%), 9% higher than the previous year (Zorić 2022, 36).

Figure 2: How important is the quality of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans to your business?



Source: Zorić 2022, 37.

“Given that the Open Balkans follows EU values, the principle of cooperation between border regions could be applied, as well as the formation of cross-border regions. The emphasis here is on developing territorial cooperation, which, for example, can solve the current problems of energy supply in the

Western Balkans and environmental challenges. In fact, this treatment of the Open Balkans enables “training” in the application of European standards and values in the case of the countries of the Western Balkans while they await full EU membership. The regional cooperation initiative Open Balkans encourages and strengthens the cooperation of the countries of the Western Balkans in terms of their faster progress in the process of European integration” (Rikalović et al 2022, 48).

An interesting point of view can be seen in this paper by Semenov, which reveals process tendencies such as the transfer of ownership from the EU to the region, the overlapping of goals among initiatives, and the shift of the agenda from fundamental to more comprehensive and progressive goals in the WB initiatives for cooperation (Semenov 2022, 24).

The Open Balkans creates a platform for exerting pressure on the EU, but the potential failure of this initiative will prove the incompetence of local leaders and the need for EU supervision (Semenov 2022, 31). It is clear that the initiative remains incomplete as long as it is limited to only three out of the six WB. The Open Balkans can still be seen as an initiative that overpromised and underdelivered, but it may well be true that it has yet to deliver.

### **Concluding remarks: what will the future bring?**

The Berlin Process and the Open Balkans were launched at a time when the prospects for the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU suffered a major setback. In the aftermath of Juncker’s declaration that there would not be a new round of enlargement under his mandate as President of the European Commission, the Berlin Process was established. Similarly, after the French blockade of EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, the Open Balkans Initiative was promoted.

Both initiatives have similar goals, among which the two most important stand out: the path to EU accession and the strengthening of regional cooperation. When we get into the details, what differentiates them in a way is that the Berlin Process emphasises the development of cross-border infrastructure, while the Open Balkans emphasises the elimination of administrative barriers.

The Berlin Process was launched to get the region back on track for EU accession, and it has brought certain results. But the Berlin Process has reached a point of saturation and dissatisfaction with the speed of progress and implementation of what was agreed upon. The convergence of the countries of the Western Balkans in terms of socio-economic and political development

represents the essence of the EU admission process. However, the pace of progress is not satisfactory for the population of the region.

If the Open Balkans Initiative achieves concrete results in practice that all residents of this region can see in the future, this initiative's credibility and attractiveness to other countries in the region will increase, and the initial flywheel effect will benefit all participants. This initiative has feasible objectives, regional ownership, and control and responsibility in the hands of three leaders. But it is a double-edged sword because it is uncertain if the Open Balkans will stand the test of time and become an initiative of the states after the departure of the founding leaders. Leaders and institutions can be the main drivers of development, but they can also be the main obstacles, especially in this part of Europe.

The improvement of political and socio-economic development in the WB6, regardless of the initiative by which they were realised, is worthy of attention. There has always been a problem of political issues and unresolved problems in previous WB initiatives. Regardless of the perspective of EU integration, which has not seemed more certain over the years (on the contrary), developed and everyday regional cooperation, both political and economic, would bring benefits for all participants. Regional initiatives and regional cooperation can bring a synergy of results, stimulating each other, leading to new solutions, and overcoming obstacles through stronger and more frequent direct communication. Any form of regional cooperation within the WB is indeed very welcome, especially since it is one of the conditions for EU membership.

But the high level of mistrust of politicians in the region, abuse of interstate disputes in political marketing, and insufficient political readiness to assume responsibility, lead to the conclusion that it is very difficult to expect essential integration, in terms of depth and breadth, within the framework of the Open Balkans without more concrete assistance from "outside". On the other hand, when it comes to the Berlin Process, this project has already faced a kind of fiasco, even during the mandate of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was the main sponsor. With all its shortcomings and without a precise definition of whether it is a project that will speed up the European integration of the Western Balkans or will serve as a kind of substitute for full membership in the EU, its future is also very questionable, i.e., its effectiveness is realistically questioned in the essential sense of integration, both at the economic and political levels.

We do not see any of these initiatives going anywhere. The main issue with these two regional initiatives is their goal. In other words, the main question that arose when the Berlin Process was established but also when the Open Balkans was made official — will this initiative speed up the European integration of the region or is it a replacement project for full membership in the European Union — remains unanswered. In the current situation, finding an answer to this burning

fundamental question is nearly impossible. The European Union's enlargement policy is on the margins of the political agenda in Brussels, while current security challenges are an additional determinant of the Union's reservations towards the enlargement policy. What is an open question that can be answered with regional and European political readiness and will is how to make the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans complementary, inclusive, and effective without being used as a tool of political struggle within the Western Balkans, as well as on the lines of the Western Balkans and the European Union.

The WB6 should give up its illusions and finally realise that these initiatives will not significantly contribute to faster European integration or stronger regional integration because the EU is losing interest in the Balkans and is not very interested in EU enlargement in general. With that realisation comes another: the countries should turn to themselves and strengthen their capacities, including cooperation with neighbours based on common interests, and initiatives like the BP and the OB can help in this sense.

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#### КОЈИ СУ РЕАЛНИ ДОМЕТИ БЕРЛИНСКОГ ПРОЦЕСА И ОТВОРЕНОГ БАЛКАНА?

*Апстракт:* На Западном Балкану се тренутно издвајају, а на неки начин и такмиче, две иницијативе – Берлински процес и Отворени Балкан. Обе иницијативе истичу европску перспективу и јачање регионалне сарадње. Са једне стране, за већину земаља у региону, изгледи за придруживање Европској унији изгледају превише далеки и неизвесни, и испуњени су многим препрекама. Са друге стране, регионална сарадња добија на замаху, уз бројне недавно постигнуте споразуме, али поједине земље Западног Балкана и даље оклевају да учествују у Отвореном Балкану. Рад анализира колики су заиста реални домети ове две иницијативе, како у правцу стварања могућности да се земље Западног Балкана приближе постулатима Европске уније и напредују на путу уласка у исту, тако и у правцу јачања и олакшавања регионалне сарадње између земаља у питању. У ту сврху аутори су користили анализу садржаја и компаративну анализу. Аутори закључују да без обзира што су обе иницијативе хибридне, и обе сажимају политичке и економске интересе, оне неће у значајној мери допринети нити бржој интеграцији у Европску унију, нити јачој регионалној интеграцији, односно у крајњој инстанци процесу решавања постојећих спорова између држава.

*Кључне речи:* Берлински процес; Отворени Балкан; Западни Балкан; ЕУ интеграције; регионалне интеграције; заједничко регионално тржиште; јединствено тржиште.