



On the Inter-Regional Initiative: The Open Balkans Case study: Open Balkans, an Alternative to the European Union?

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Abstract

This paper aims to present the main goals that the "Open Balkans" initiative aims to achieve, for regional cooperation, the first advantages and shortcomings from a civic perspective. The initiative system for regional cooperation is the free movement of women, without stopping at border crossings between Albania, Serbia and Northern Macedonia, the establishment of an illegal system for inter-company transfers, freedom other than the recognition of professional qualifications, freedom of goods and services. As part of this initiative, the EU member state, according to the media, is divided into two camps, congratulating this initiative, but also assessing it as a copy of the existing Berlin process. An objective of the study is to highlight its conclusion therefore, the benefits that make this country, their perceptions regarding the EU membership process. The guiding principle of the paper is that coordinating the initiative with intent for the region and not the individual country to have initiatives that want a faster, smoother communication of goods and others that are related to others.

Keywords: region, Balkans, cooperation, EU, membership, trade

1. Introduction

Regional co-operation has become a tool for assessing the six Western Balkan countries not only on the path to EU integration, but also on regional integration economic between neighboring countries. All regional initiatives aim to align with EU principles, values and agendas. And as such, the European Union treats it regional cooperation as one of the main standards for the EU integration process Western Balkan countries.

Currently among the most discussed initiatives in regional cooperation is the Regional Economic Zone, called the "Open Balkans".

At the heart of the "Open Balkans" is the creation of a common area of free movement capital, goods and people. Consequently one of its ultimate objectives is to create freedom of access to the regional labor market. Thus, the labor market will be provided to all citizens of the region with the same conditions. This aims to revitalize the labor market by allowing the exchange of experience, increasing competition, as well as meeting the needs for certain job specialties. At the same time, to facilitate the movement

of goods and people between countries, border control will not exist more fully, zeroing the waiting time at customs points.

The creation of this unified economic space would be based on more interaction good of our economies, which

taken separately may not always be self-sufficient, but as complementary to each other will constitute a market of significant with over 20 million inhabitants, and as such an attractive space for large investments of international capital.

In 2019, such an initiative has brought back to the table the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama for the improvement of political relations between the countries of the region, for the first time the meeting was held on October 10, 2019 in Novi Sad, Serbia.

The concretization of the "Open Balkans" came on July 29, 2021 in Ohrid, Vucic, Rama and Zaev signed the agreement on the liberalization of trade, unification of the labor market and cooperation against disasters.

Such models of cooperation between the Balkan countries, but not only we have used different countries for the purpose of regional economic development.

But what is the most strategic priority for our country, to commit to consolidating and accelerating the process of integration into the European Union and meeting the established criteria, or the creation of a "mini" EU in the region, described as a process imposed by necessity to increase the economic capacity of our country.

1.1 Purpose and objectives of the study

This study aims to highlight the priorities of the "Open Balkans" initiative, the goals and objectives of our country in the framework of economic development and foreign policy, regional cooperation between the WB countries, namely Serbia, RMV, Kosovo.

We will also note the opinion of citizens on the signed agreements, such as free movement of citizens without stopping at border crossings, freedom of goods and services, freedom of services through recognition of professional qualifications, but also concerns raised about regional cooperation with Serbia.

The objectives of the study are:

- To identify whether the initiative for regional cooperation is a necessity to increase the economic capacity of our country.
- To record the evaluation and opinion of the citizens for the benefits of the services provided in the framework of the creation of this common economic space.
- Identify the main challenges of BP such as economic stability and security of the region.
- To highlight the main problems that not only our country has but also BP, which are really hindering the EU

2. Search Questions

In the formulation of research questions I have been helped by the study of literature related to this issue as well as discussions with students and citizens, various intellectuals and specialists who have long work experience in the study of the BP region.

Based on the research objectives and given the important role of regional cooperation and related issues, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Does the Open Balkans have its origins in the delay of the integration of the Western Balkan countries in the European Union?
2. Will this initiative bring about the revitalization of the labor market, allowing the exchange of experience, increasing competition and meeting the needs for certain occupations?
3. Is the Open Balkans a regional initiative for economic, not political, cooperation and should it remain so?
4. Are the geostrategic goals of the Balkan states (Serbia, Northern Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina) the same?
5. Does this initiative convey the message that the region has an alternative to the EU?

Researching the opinions of citizens and leaders and specialists, as above, is useful for clarifying the situation.

To answer the above questions, the analysis of the data provided by their survey has been done. A questionnaire with open and structured questions was drafted for the interview, which is located in the Annex.

2.1 Study contributions

The study can be useful to understand the logic of the Open Balkans, the main goals of this initiative and the importance of informing citizens to become part of public opinion.

First, the opinions of citizens, leaders and specialists on important aspects of the interregional initiative will be demonstrated. The study can provide new insights into economic policies at the central but also regional level of government.

In terms of practical contribution, the study seeks to provide specific valuable information to citizens, the mechanism of this cooperation in accordance with the requirements and needs of our country's economy.

3. Study Methodology

The study method consisted of studying the literature and collecting and analyzing data. For this purpose, I contacted the central government institutions for more official information, but I did not receive any response from them. Citizens who were randomly selected, mainly students from three different faculties, were interviewed to get their opinions and suggestions regarding the Open Balkans interregional initiative and its role in the region.

Data collection was based on:

- Online survey - Google form

To get the answers asked by the interviewers, what they think about the common regional market, efficiency for economic development, harmonization with EU laws, I used the qualitative interview technique for each of the interviewed individuals.

Data processing consists of:

- in data classification,
- in the preparation and presentation of result

3.1 Method of determining the selection and its size

The survey method is a probabilistic survey, where the online survey format was sent to many students at the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Faculty of Economics in Tirana, and the Faculty of Political and Legal Sciences in Durrës. Thus, the selection method is based on the concept of random selection and meets the representativeness criterion.

Random selection complies with the law of statistical regularity, according to which, if on average a selected sample is probabilistic, then this selection will have the same characteristics as the target population to which it belongs and is considered the best technique for it. I elected a representative champion.

Determining the measure of selection is an important decision in the study methodology. The data analyzed in the study are in the range of 100-150, so the sample size is sufficient to give a rigorous assessment.

3.2 Questionnaires used for the study

Data collection will be done through a structured online format, thus providing primary data. Through the survey we aim to highlight the evaluations, attitudes and perceptions of the respondents.

The questionnaire is divided into three sections:

In the first section we asked for general information about demographic data such as: age, gender, education, employment status, place of residence.

In the second section we asked for information on how they assess the economic development of our country, but also the region within a common regional market.

In the third section we asked for information on how they assess the foreign policy of the Open Balkans initiative towards EU values, norms and standards.

3.3 Data collection

By completing the online survey format, I have tried to provide complete data and information to conduct this study, which addresses the problems not only of our country, but also of the region, where with these answers I have managed to identify the information that possess, but also their position on the matter.

We chose to interview adults (18 years and older). The survey format was sent to several groups of students, where equal participation was guaranteed, without setting limits or conditions.

The survey was conducted during April 2022

4. Western Balkans

4.1 *The Western Balkans as a region*

The Western Balkans is a term used in the European Union in the late 1990s to denote the territories of the Balkan states that lagged behind in the European integration process, such as: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Albania.

The Western Balkans is a place where a large number of ethnic groups with religious traditions unite and people have coexisted with each other for centuries, but also there have been armed conflicts, revolts, genocides, mass deportations of the population. Some political and security issues have always been at the heart of the conflicts in the Western Balkans:

- Unresolved problems of interstate and minority borders,
- Presence of intolerance, pathological nationalism and xenophobia
- Undeveloped democratic-political culture, lack of compromises
- Variety of non-military threats to regional security and stability (bad governance, corruption, organized crime, trafficking).

The geopolitical shifts in the 1990s and the crisis of neutralization and disunity have led to a radical political and military reconstruction in the Balkans, as well as in the region's relations with foreign powers. Most importantly, the Balkans are no longer a powder keg for Europe, but still remain a source of costly unrest and unrest.

After the 1990s, the WB countries have long focused on strengthening national security, minority issues and are therefore experiencing delays in the EU membership process.

Today in the Western Balkans important steps have been taken in the process of democratization, protection and human freedoms as well as a free market economy. The region still has many unresolved issues, but it is seen that there is more cooperation and the will to make progress on the path to EU membership prevails.

Regional governments are making changes in their policies by supporting reforms that guarantee security in the country, increase welfare, establish partnerships in various fields, which will guarantee European integration.

Many regional initiatives have been built in the Western Balkans in recent years and continue to emerge every few years. Their structures remain weak to political shocks and bring about very limited changes in regional cooperation and benefits to citizens and the region. The break-up of Yugoslavia brought a wave of initiatives which needed to define a new system of relations throughout the Western Balkans. The European Union sought to clarify these relations through a regional approach.

After the first meeting of the Balkan Foreign Ministers in Belgrade in February 1988, with the beginning of the internal developments in Yugoslavia and the political events in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, in the framework of strengthening the liberalizing spirit in the relations between the two superpowers, in the Balkans, there are several new developments that led to the beginning of a political, economic, and cultural cooperation with the participation for the first time of all Balkan countries, despite the participation of four of them in NATO or the Warsaw Pact.

In this meeting, Albania expressed its idea that the second meeting of the Balkan MFA be held in Tirana during 1990. At the first meeting of the regional MFA in Belgrade, February 1988, the Albanian side put forward the idea of reactivating the Balkan Understanding Committees, which had been set up since 1960 and were attended by members of civil society, intellectuals and personalities from the arts, education and science.

The two proposals of the Albanian side were supported. The meeting of the Balkan Committees of Understanding and Cooperation took place on 18-19 October 1989, which decided that the meeting of the Balkan MFA would be held in autumn 1990. After lengthy bilateral consultations, on 1 September 1990, Foreign Minister Malile sent a letter to all his counterparts in the region, where he informs them about the date of the meeting, October 24-25 and the set agenda, an element that was missing in the first meeting in Belgrade and was criticized by the Albanian side. The meeting took place on October 24-25 with the full participation of the Balkan MFA.

The European Union established the Stability Pact for South East Europe (SPEE) in 1999 to promote peace, democracy, respect for human rights and economic prosperity to ensure stability in the region.

The concept of new regionalization had arrived too late in the Western Balkans due to unfortunate events, but was quickly offset by 40 regional initiatives undertaken in recent decades.

4.2 *The concept of new regionalization*

Regional cooperation was very natural in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but always much more difficult for the Western Balkans in many respects.

All Western Balkan countries have the ambition of joining the European Union and have expressed the will and desire for regional cooperation. However, unresolved conflicts and bilateral disputes have led to mistrust prevailing in the region, which often becomes a source of instability, undermining cooperation and progress in regional initiatives. If there is this deep mistrust between the six countries of the Western Balkans, it will be challenging to achieve proper regional economic integration and with it, also EU integration.

Following the EU's Eastern Enlargement in 2004 and the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, the EU enlargement process began to show great apathy and there was no longer any interest in new members. This had serious consequences for the promise of EU accession for the Western Balkans.

With a fading promise from the EU, the countries of the region had to re-engage, and this was accomplished by Chancellor Merkel's Berlin Process initiative, a political push for cooperation aimed at connecting the BP6 countries together in the areas of transport and energy and subsequently expanding into youth exchanges and economic ties.

As part of the Berlin Process, in July 2017, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) presented the Multiannual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkans (MAP REA) during the Berlin Process Summit in Trieste, Italy. Two years later, the initiative was criticized for insufficient progress which could be shaped by economic growth and further integration.

In parallel, in October 2019, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Prime Minister of Northern Macedonia Zoran Zaev launched the so-called "mini-Schengen", and now the "Open Balkans" in order to advance economic integration between them through free movement of people, goods, services and capital.

The Open Balkans Initiative was launched on the premise of good neighborly relations and economic cooperation in the Western Balkans. So far, only three countries have joined: Serbia, Northern Macedonia, Albania (the three initial signatories).

The three remaining countries, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, have stated that they will stay out of this initiative on the premise that the Open Balkans and European integration are mutually exclusive. This has created obstacles to the implementation of the initiative.

4.3 *Goals of the Open Balkans Initiative*

In essence, the "Open Balkans" was conceived as a cooperation for the countries of the Western Balkans, although so far only three countries are part of it, Serbia, Albania and RMV.

On October 10, 2019, in Novi Sad, Serbia, a new parallel process began when Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and the Prime Minister of Northern Macedonia Zoran Zaev announced the so-called "mini-Schengen" that seeks to establish the movement of people, goods, services and capital in the Western Balkans using only identity cards by the end of 2021.

Further meetings were held on 10 November 2019 in Ohrid, Northern Macedonia and on 21 December 2019 in Tirana, Albania to discuss proposals for achieving the 'four freedoms' including the adoption of a framework agreement on civil emergencies known as the Durrës.

At its center is the creation of a common area of free movement of capital, goods and people. Consequently one of its ultimate objectives is to create freedom of access to the regional labor market. Thus, the labor market will be provided to all citizens of the region with the same conditions. This aims to revitalize the labor market by allowing the exchange of experience, increasing competition, as well as meeting the needs for certain job specialties. At the same time, to facilitate the movement of goods and people between countries, border control will no longer exist completely, zeroing in on waiting times at customs points.

Connecting the markets of the region and facilitating business and other communications would raise the level of business culture of each country individually, but also for all together, enabling a faster exchange of goods and faster circulation of money, thus raising the general standard of living of the people of this region.

The key to strengthening the cooperation of the countries of the region is to ensure full compliance of any economic activity financed by investors outside the Balkans with EU values, norms and standards, especially in key areas such as rule of law, public procurement, environment, energy, infrastructure and competition.

Steps taken so far by the "Open Balkans" initiative:

- Memorandum on free movement of people using only ID cards and unification of procedures for issuing work permits for all citizens in BP6 countries.
- 24-hour operation of border controls for phytosanitary and veterinary controls. Negotiations completed between Northern Macedonia and Serbia and for the construction of the new border crossing Lojane - Miratovac,
- Agreement between the customs administrations of Northern Macedonia and Albania for a One-Stop-shop at the Kjafasan border crossing point, and with Serbia at the Tabanovce border crossing point with the aim of becoming a Non-Stop-Shop (crossings border without stops).
- Introduction of a paperless system to simplify customs procedures.



Figure 1: Political map "Open Balkans"

- Member States
- Potential countries to join

- Member countries
- Albania
- Serbia
- Northern Macedonia

Sipërfaqja totale	131.935 km ²
Popullsia (2022)	11.786.310
GDP (PPP)	\$ 255.658 bilion

Table 1: General profile "Open Balkans22"

Leaders from Albania, Serbia and Northern Macedonia signed the "Open Balkans" initiative, inviting B&H, Kosovo and Montenegro to be part of the initiative and sign an agreement in their favor. As stated in the press conferences of the heads of state, the purpose of this initiative is not a political union, to form a new Yugoslavia, but will be an economic benefit and not only, for citizens and businesses, to who will be able to circulate more easily across existing borders.

The "Open Balkans" is an initiative that will focus on strengthening cooperation, recognizing standards and taking soft "measures" to remove customs barriers and prioritize the free movement of goods, services, people and capital. , between signatory states similar to the four EU Market Freedoms. However, these objectives are already part of the European Commission's agenda for countries aspiring to be part of the European Union, and as CEFTA signatories, the Western Balkan countries are beneficiaries of some of these freedoms.

The three initiating countries have signed the next agreements to implement this initiative, but it is facing strong challenges both in the domestic political aspect of the countries, but also in the region. The Government of Kosovo is quite skeptical, especially from the ongoing problems with Serbia. Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina see regional integration within the "Common Regional Market", not being included in the Open Balkans initiative.

4.4 Trade of the Countries of the Region

The "Open Balkans", as an initiative that will focus on strengthening cooperation, taking measures to remove customs barriers and giving priority to the free movement of goods, services, people and capital, gives countries the opportunity to reduce points of border control.

4.5 Trade with Serbia and the region

Open Data Albania is researching the trade balance with Serbia and the region during the five-year period 2016-2020. The analysis focuses on the presentation of the trend and the dynamics of the trade balance according to each group of goods categorized. The source of information is the Institute of Statistics. The trade balance between Albania and Serbia in million Lekë results in a deficit, which shows a lower value of exports (outflow of goods) compared to imports (entry of goods) with this country. In 2020, exports between the two countries amounted to 6.3 billion Lekë while imports reached the value of 23 billion Lekë. As a result, the value of the trade deficit marked ALL 16.7 billion.

Table 2: Albania-Serbia trade balance value in 000 000 ALL, 2016-2020.26

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Trade balance	-13,368	-20,164	-13,675	-17,667	-16,692

The main group of goods in exports recorded during the five years 2016-2020 are minerals, fuels, electricity. In import the main commodity group is food, beverages, tobacco.

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019
Exports	4.700	4.833	8.035	5.386
Imports	18.069	24.997	21.710	23.053

Table 3: Albania-Serbia Export, Import value in million Lekë, 2016-2020.27

4.6 Trade with Kosovo and the region

The trade balance between Albania and Kosovo in million Lekë is positive, which shows a higher value of exports compared to imports to Kosovo. In 2020, exports between the two countries amounted to 26.2 billion Lekë while imports amounted to 8.3 billion Lekë. As a result, the value of the trade balance amounted to ALL 17.9 billion.

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Trade balance	10,786	12,480	18,184	22,078	17,942

Table 3: Albania-Kosovo trade balance value in million ALL, 2016-2020.28

The main group of goods in exports recorded during the five years 2016-2020 are textiles, footwear, while in imports are construction materials and metals. Exports in the amount of million ALL higher for the group of textile goods and shoes during this five- year period, were recorded in 2019. Imports related to the group of goods, construction materials and metals, have marked the maximum value in 2018.

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Exports	16.605	20.924	27.093	29.812	26.247
Imports	5.819	24.997	8.909	7.735	8.305

Table 3: Albania-Kosovo Export, Import value in million Lekë, 2016-2020

After all the research we notice that Kosovo is the main partner of Albania among the countries of the region in terms of exports realized during the period 2016-2020. While in imports Kosovo ranks third after Serbia and Northern Macedonia.

The decline in exports to Serbia was marked in 2019, a year which has a significant increase in the trade deficit with Serbia. If we look at the position of Albania-Serbia trade relations, compared to other countries in the region, exports to Serbia rank third after Kosovo and northern Macedonia, while imports with this Republic occupy the first place in the region, followed by Macedonia and Kosovo. . In short, we can say that the

Trade Republic of Albania with the Republic of Kosovo, Open Data Albania <https://ndiqparate.al/?p=12916>

Trade Republic of Albania with the Republic of Kosovo, Open Data Albania

Republic of Albania buys goods in the Republic of Serbia and in five years has increased the volume of purchases from Serbian markets more than any other country in the former Yugoslavia.

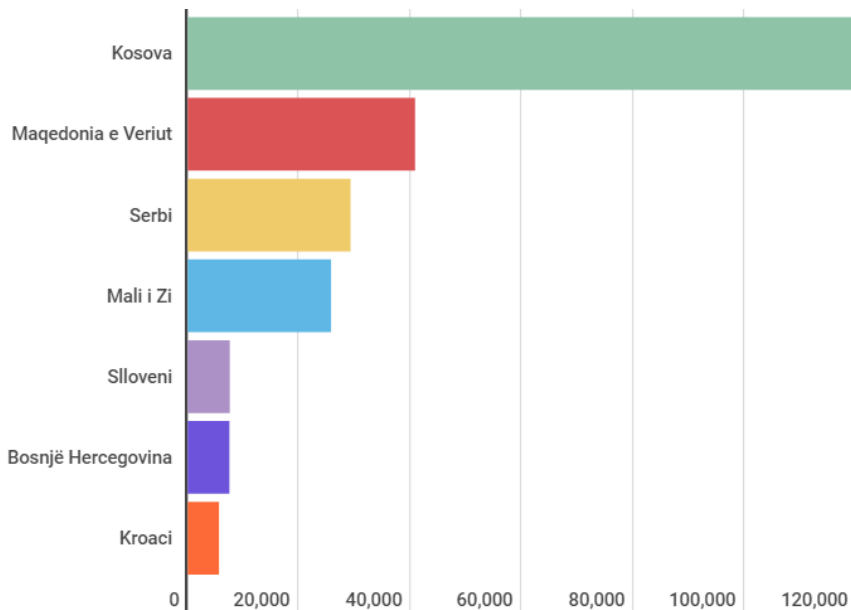


Table 4: Exports Albania-countries of the Region in million Lekë, 2016 – 2020

James O'Brian, the American diplomat, says that in the region he sees that only Serbia is receiving large investments. The Serbian workforce is not able to afford all the work that is being offered to it and to be able to continue to develop, Serbia has to send workshops and factories to other countries, or it has to take workers from other countries.

4.7 Regional Common Market

The Common Regional Market (CRM) aims to create a regional market based on EU rules and procedures and bring the Western Balkans closer to the European Single

Market and was approved by the leaders of the six Western Balkan countries at the Berlin Process Summit in Sofia, Bulgaria on 10 November 2020.

The plan envisages a series of measures, such as: reduction of cross-border bank fees, removal of technical trade barriers, coordination of investment policies, recognition of professional qualifications throughout the region and promotion of e-commerce.

The aim of the interconnection of countries and economic and technological communication between countries is the main idea of the Berlin Process. Through this cooperation mechanism, the EU aims to convey the responsibility that it has so far implemented in part and not in accordance with the requirements and needs of the economies and budget systems of the Balkan countries. Encouraging this interaction, senior EU politicians seek to increase the region's attractiveness and competitiveness and help turn it into an investment hub, also of interest to global investors seeking to close the gap on EU markets.

The common regional market can work immediately to harmonize regulations — mutually and with Europe, harmonizing certificates and procedures, working hours and inspection services, recognizing and exchanging cross-border documentation electronically. This would allow e.g. that a veterinary or phytosanitary certificate, work permit, residence visa for foreigners, diploma, qualification or other documents relevant to the business issued in an economy be valid throughout the region.

Instead of Balkan companies having the same certificate six times that differs only by a different stamp, following different but also complicated procedures, for carriers who spend hours (in some places even days) at border crossings, this arrangement mechanism can address and provide direction for relief and removal in some cases.

Table 5: Common Regional Market and areas that will implement its actions

1. Regional Trade Zone	Free movement of goods, services, capital and people, including cross-cutting measures, such as Green Lanes / Green Corridors, to comply with EU-compliant rules and standards and to provide opportunities for businesses and citizens.
2. Regional Investment Zone	Approximation of investment policies with EU standards and international best practices and promotion of the region for foreign investors.
3. Regional Digital Area	Integrate the Western Balkans into the pan-European digital market
4. Industrial Zone and Regional Innovation	Transform the industrial sectors, the formation of trade chains to which they belong.

Its main challenge for the Regional Common Market remains its implementation. Since most of these issues are technical, they should be well considered by the region to prepare for gradual implementation in the national context. This is easier said than done as most of the problems between Kosovo and Serbia and Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are technical issues which in most cases require political solutions first.

The Common Regional Market will find it difficult to overcome existing bilateral disputes between the countries of the region. Bilateral disputes still need to be resolved and obstacles removed. Moreover, governments struggle to meet their agendas and they are vulnerable to internal challenges. Without addressing these issues in parallel, CRM will remain difficult to implement and will share the same fate as other regional initiatives.

4.8 Comparative analysis of "Regional Common Market" and "Open Balkans"

Both regional initiatives - "Open Balkans" and the Common Regional Market, in one way or another, copy the "four freedoms" of the European Union in the Western Balkans and they only differ in form, not in substance. However, unlike the "Open Balkans" and the Common Regional Trade Market, they all aim to ensure the free movement of goods, services, investments and professional people without tariffs, quotas or other unnecessary barriers.

Issues such as vehicle registration plates, rules of origin, reception of stamps at the border, diplomas from universities accredited in Kosovo, etc.

In this regard, the "Open Balkans" aims to facilitate this by using identity cards, a concept which has also recently been adopted by the Common Regional Market.

CRM aims to create a Regional Digital Zone to integrate the Western Balkans into the pan-European digital market. On the other hand, the "Open Balkans" is less specific on these topics.

Business	Free movement of Free movement of goods, goods, services, services, capital and people investments and skilled based on identity cards, persons facilitated by including cross-cutting measures the operation of 24-hour such as 'Green Lanes / border controls for Corridors'. Phytosanitary and veterinary controls, One- Stop Shops at the border crossing in order to become Non Stop Shops (border crossings without stops) and a paperless system to simplify customs procedures.
Investments	Establishment of a regional investment zone and harmonization of investment policies with EU standards.
Mobility	Free movement of Free movement of people based people using only on ID, including mutual identity cards and recognition of academic and unification of procedures professional qualifications for for issuing work permits certain professions. to all citizens in the Western Balkan countries.
Digitization	Establishment of a Regional Digital Zone to integrate the Western Balkans into the pan- European digital market.
Infrastructure	Construction of a new border crossing Lojane - Miratovac.

Industry & Innovation

Creating a regional innovation and industrial zone to form valuechains;

Table 6: Comparative analysis of "Common Regional Market" and "Open Balkans"

While regional initiatives have stimulated co-operation in the Western Balkans and facilitated communications, they have done little to help bring the region closer to the European Union so far or to improve the social, political and economic environment. Due to unresolved bilateral disputes, they have produced only limited results. As such, resolving past conflicts remains a key precondition for progress in regional co-operation in the Western Balkans. So far, no genuine reconciliation efforts have been made, and many previous regional initiatives have largely failed to build peace and foster cooperation.

5. Data Analysis and Results

5.1 Data collection

Data collection was conducted through the online survey process, randomly selecting several student groups. The interview process lasted for a period of three weeks.

The questionnaire is divided into three sections:

In the first section we asked for general information about demographic data such as: age, gender, education, employment status, place of residence.

In the second section we asked for information on how they assess the economic development of our country, but also the region within a common regional market.

In the third section we asked for information on how they assess the foreign policy of the Open Balkans initiative towards EU values, norms and standards.

Within the selected primary unit there is a specific methodology according to which they are selected to do an interview, "Random route methodology". I chose to interview adults (18 years old and older).

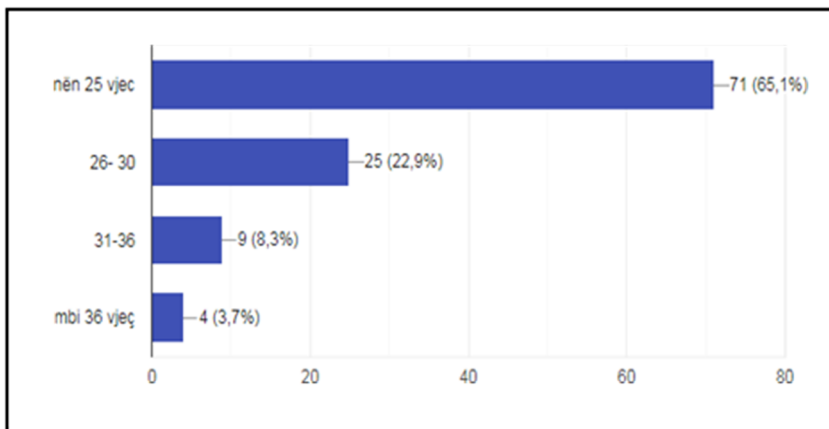
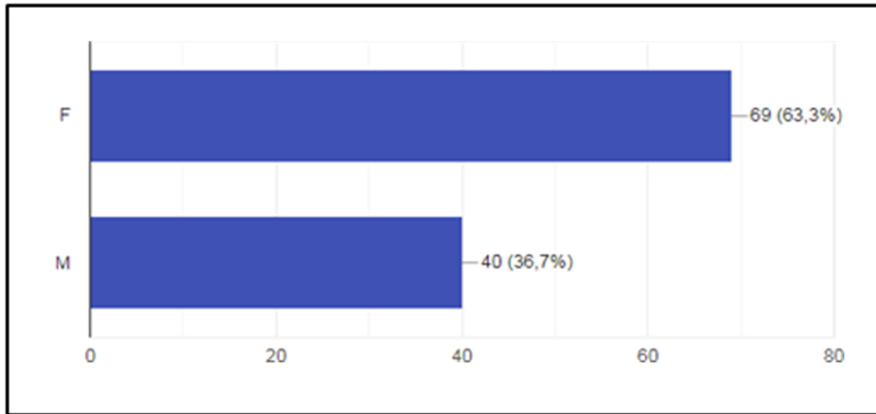
Interview time is March, 2022.

The online survey link was sent to 430 students, but only 109 had completed and submitted the survey response.

5.2 Analysis by demographic characteristics

In the first section, general information on demographic data, profile of respondents is required. It describes age, gender,

education and employment. Respondents are from all categories of age, gender, level of education and employment status.



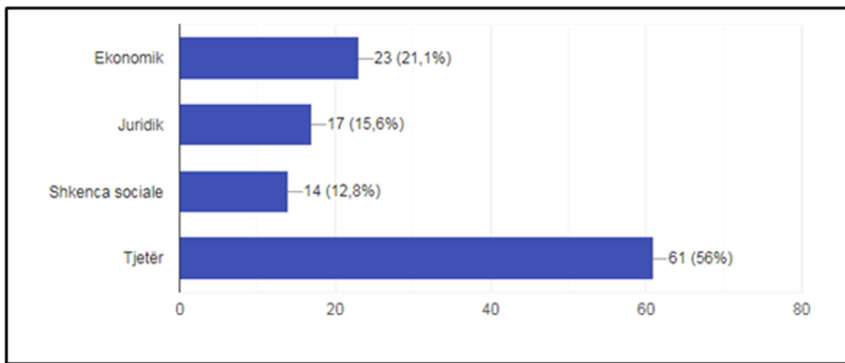
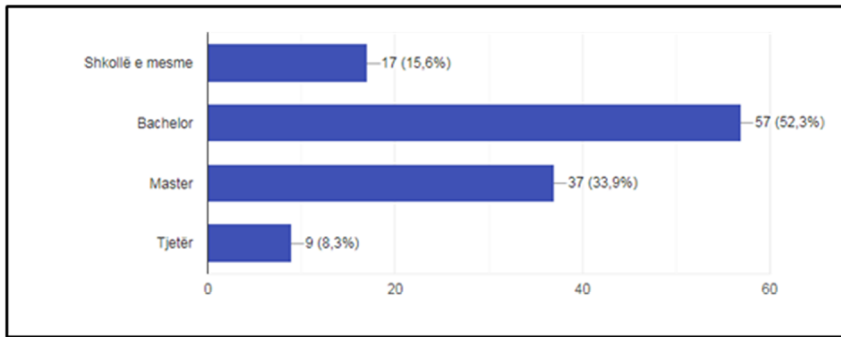
Data source: From the questionnaire

The data collected and analyzed in Graph 1 show that 36.7% are male and 63.3% female. While according to age 65.1% of respondents are under 25 years old, 22.9% are 26-30 years old, 8.3% are 31-36 years old, and 3.7% are over 36 years old.

From the first demographic data we notice that 65% of the respondents are 25 years old, and this corresponds to the student age, and the largest participation 63% is female.

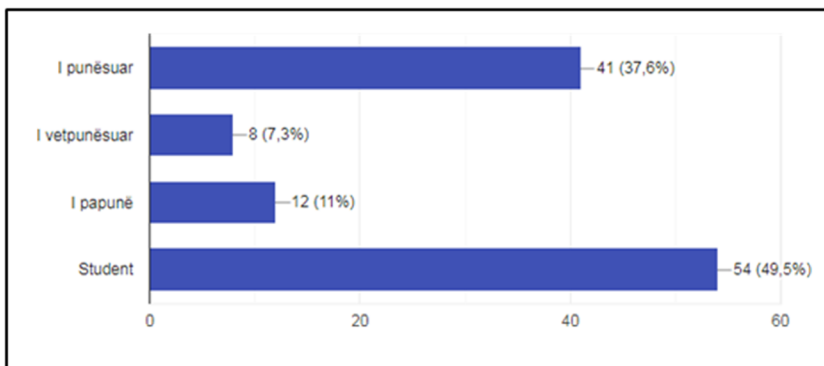
Regarding education, 52.3% of respondents have a bachelor's degree, 33.9% have a master's degree, 15.6% have a high school education and only 8.3% have determined.

The inclusion of respondents with high school education comes as a result of the distribution of online surveys also with relatives.



Data source: From the questionnaire

The analysis of the data on the characteristics of the respondents regarding the employment situation is shown in the graph below, where 49.5% of them are students, and 37.6% are employed.

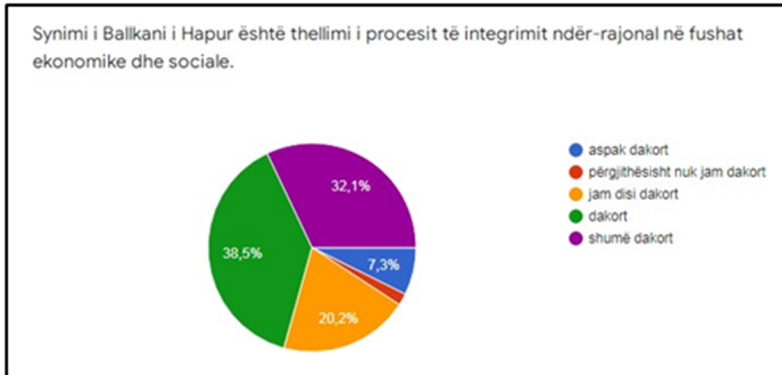


Data source: From the questionnaire

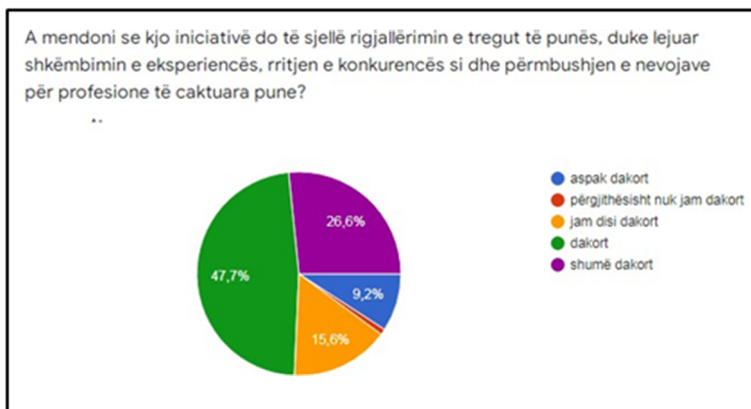
5.3 Descriptive analysis of measurement scales

In the second section, information is required for their assessment regarding the economic development of our country and the region within a common regional market, such as the Open Balkans. Citizens give their opinions on whether this

initiative will bring the revival of the labor market, allowing the exchange of experience, increasing competition and meeting the needs of certain occupations in the region.



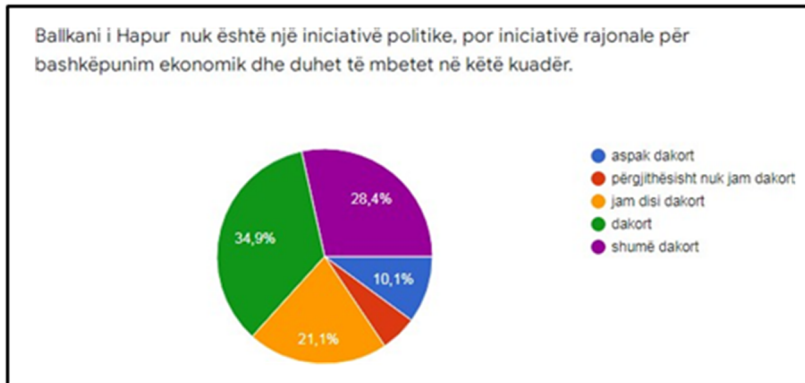
Data source: From the questionnaire



From the % of graph 1 & 2 regarding the aim of the initiative for deepening the integration process and the validity of the

investment in a common area, the respondents agree / strongly agree or somewhat agree with almost 90% of their answers.

The labor market in our country is one of the main problems, and precisely in this question, whether this initiative will bring the revival of the labor market through exchanges of experience, the opportunity to move to seek a better labor market, citizens with 90% of their answers somewhat agree / agree / strongly agree, while only 9.2% strongly disagree.

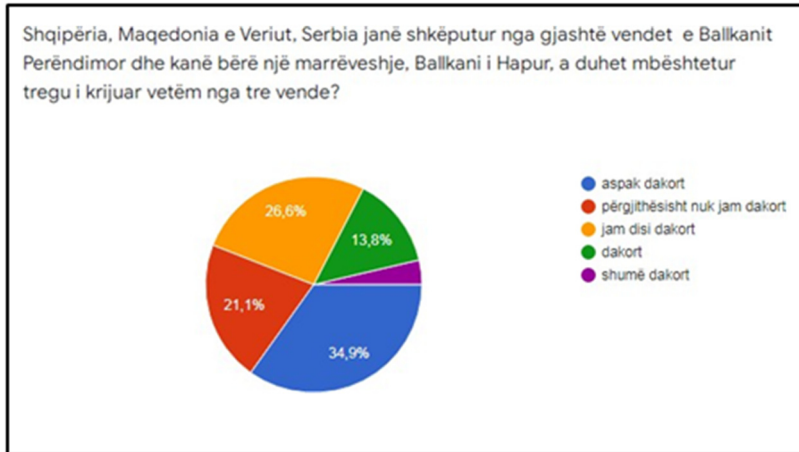


Data source: From the questionnaire

The initiative has been described as a process imposed by the necessity to increase the economic capacity of countries in the region, ie as an economic cooperation, but other countries have stepped in, such as Kosovo, seeing it as a political cooperation, which resembles Yugoslavia. Respondents, asked if this initiative should remain only in the framework of an economic cooperation, 85% somewhat agree / agree / strongly agree.

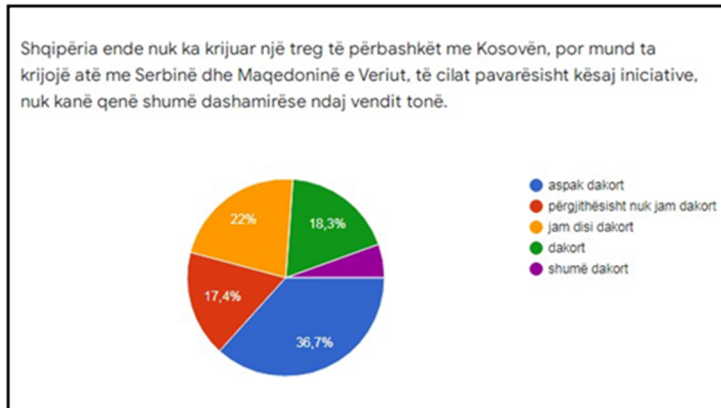


The problem of the energy crisis in the region is thought to be solved by the initiative, but according to the respondents 69% agree / somewhat agree and 22% do not agree at all that this initiative can alleviate this problem.



Data source: From the questionnaire

The approval of the six BP countries to join the initiative has not been achieved, but the International Community has asked them to create a common market, and for this reason countries such as Albania, Serbia and Northern Macedonia have made tripartite agreements by opening the way for others too. 57% of respondents do not agree at all / generally do not agree that this agreement should be supported by only three countries.

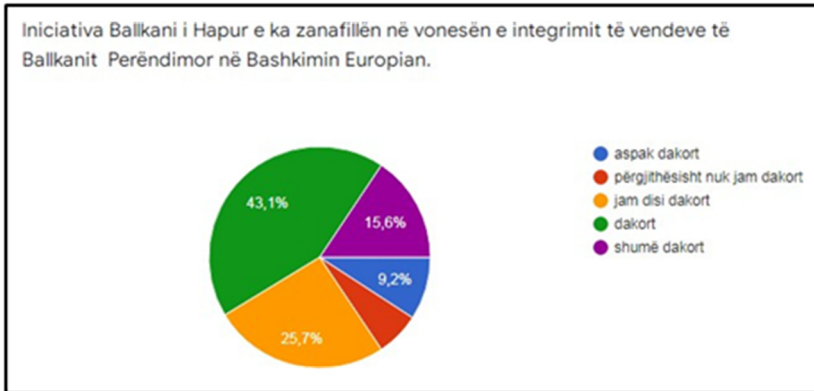


Data source: From the questionnaire

The third section asks for the opinion of the respondents regarding the political developments in the region, the foreign policy of the Open Balkans initiative towards EU values, norms and standards.

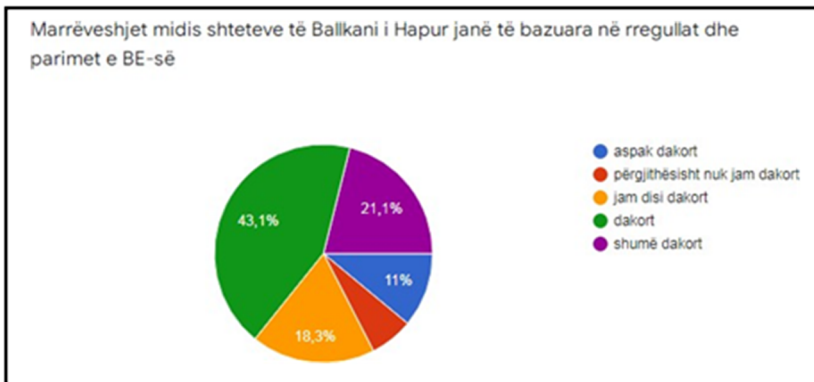
Described as an economic rather than a political agreement, the scholars draw a parallel with the EU, just as it started, with the coal and steel agreement and concluded with the joint parliament and the joint border control.

This kind of "fear" is pushing other countries to become part of the agreement, while countries like Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina see their integration within the Common Regional Market.

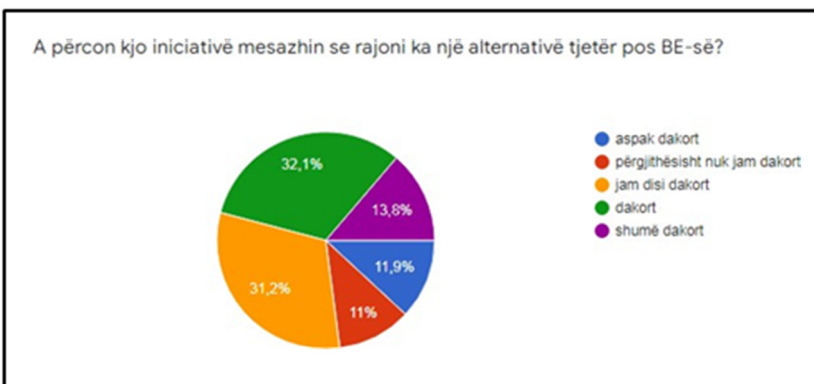


Data source: From the questionnaire

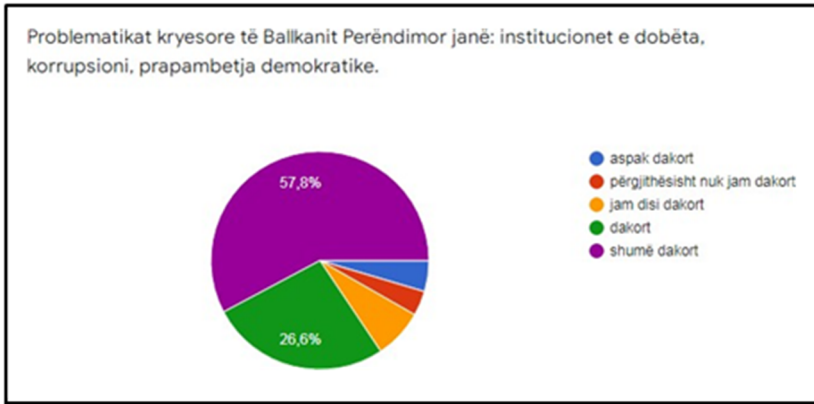
Often described as a necessary initiative for the region due to the delays that the EU is developing with the WB countries, 85% of respondents cite BiH as its cause.



Meanwhile, in terms of the principles on which BiH is built, 80% of respondents somewhat agree / strongly / strongly agree that BiH is based on EU rules and principles.



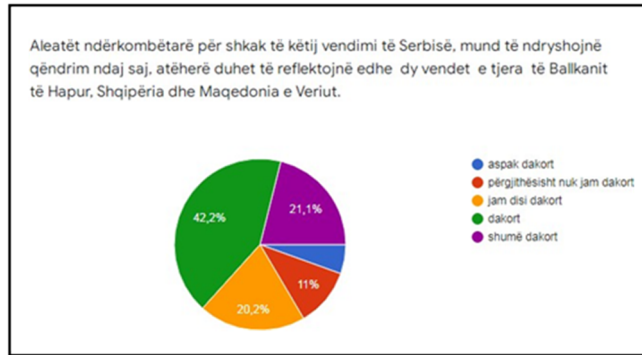
The research question of our study is does this initiative convey the message that there is another alternative than the EU to be pursued? Almost 70% of respondents consider it somewhat agree / agree / very agree that in the eyes of the international community this initiative seems like an alternative.



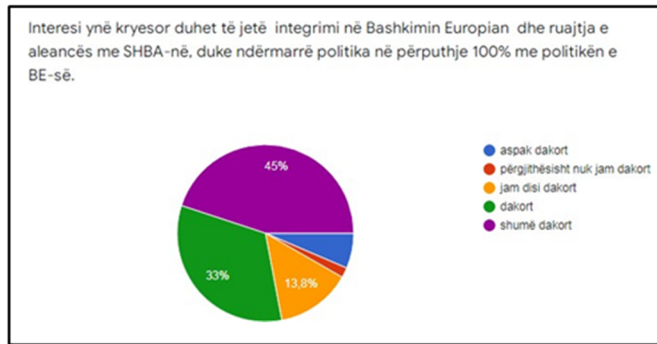
In the last 20 years, fundamental and democratic human rights are guaranteed in the BP, but the reduction of the standard of living and the loss of social rights, the spread of corruption, bring about political debates which necessarily require change within states, internal policies. According to this survey 95% somewhat agree / strongly / strongly agree that these are the main problems of BP.



The non-imposition of sanctions on Russia by Serbia was accompanied by much debate, calling into question the Open Balkans initiative. Serbia's foreign policy is closer to the East than to the West, which has been described by various scholars as Sefer Selimi from the Democracy Lab.



Almost 60% of respondents do not agree at all that Serbia's position does not affect the region, and 82% somewhat agree / agree / strongly agree that our country should reflect and change its position from Serbia as international allies can do.



Our main strategic interest is EU integration, maintaining the alliance with the US, and if their attitude towards Serbia changes, this should be reflected in the other two member states in BiH. At this very dynamic geopolitical moment, where the security order, economic flows are endangered, it is very important for the region to develop understanding, good neighborliness and 95% of respondents somewhat agree / agree / very much that this should be the main interest of our country.

Respondents regarding the benefits of the initiative for our country have expressed 70% that they somehow agree / agree that this initiative does not bring benefits to Albania.



6. Conclusions from Data Analysis

Based on the results of the analysis of primary data of this study, we draw the following conclusions:

80-90% of respondents estimate that it would be valuable for the region to invest in a common area for the movement of people, goods and services.

75-90% of respondents think that this initiative will bring revitalization of the labor market, allowing the exchange of experience, increased competition and meeting the needs of certain professions.

60-85% estimate that the Open Balkans is not a political initiative, but a regional initiative for economic cooperation and should remain in this context.

45-60% of respondents think that they do not agree at all that the market created by only three countries should be supported.

60-75% of respondents think that the Open Balkans initiative has its origins in delaying the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the European Union.

45-60% of respondents agree that this initiative conveys the message that the region has an alternative other than the EU.

80-90% think that the main problems of the Western Balkans are: weak institutions, corruption, democratic backwardness.

50-60% estimate that Serbia's stance on not imposing sanctions on Russia affects the region.

85-95% of respondents think that our main strategic interest is EU integration, maintaining alliance with the US.

55-70% of respondents estimate that the "Open Balkans" initiative does not bring benefits to Albania.

In essence, the "Open Balkans" was conceived as a cooperation for the countries of the Western Balkans, although so far only three countries are part of it, Serbia, Albania and RMV. At its center is the creation of a common area of free movement of capital, goods and people. Consequently one of its ultimate objectives is to create freedom of access to the regional labor market.

In order to achieve the most lasting stability in the Balkans, the most important initiatives for the region are regional and Euro-Atlantic integration, which must be strongly supported by increasingly serious and concrete commitments. It also means accelerating the implementation of common economic policies and programs, which would normally aim at creating a free trade area, aligning fiscal legislation, unifying customs and creating a common market. regional.

The creation of this unified economic space would be based on the best interaction of our economies, which taken separately may not always be self-sufficient or self-generating, but as complementary to each other will constitute a market of size significant and as such an attractive space for large investments of international capital.

The initiative is also facing issues of international recognition, with important international actors such as the US and the EU, which on the one hand give positive signals, but on the other hand emphasize the importance of the involvement of the six BP countries.

This initiative can also contribute to creating opportunities for the development of new value models and increasing interest in foreign direct investment in the region, including from the EU. The key to strengthening the cooperation of the countries of the region is to ensure full compliance of any economic activity financed by investors outside the Balkans with EU values, norms and standards, especially in key areas such as rule of law, public procurement, environment, energy, infrastructure and competition.

7. Recommendations

The core of the interregional initiative was the cooperation of the Western Balkan countries to create a common area of free movement of capital, goods and people. While regional initiatives have stimulated co-operation in the Western Balkans and facilitated communications, they have done little to help bring the region closer to the European Union so far or to improve the social, political and economic environment.

1. The Open Balkans Initiative is very important to coordinate with the main goal of helping and developing the region, and not individual countries.
2. The Open Balkans Initiative should be integrated into a set of regional initiatives and organizations involving and participating from all Western Balkan countries, EU, Member States and USA should be fully coordinated, support joint regional initiatives and avoid unilateral processes.
3. Prioritize the settlement of bilateral disputes as a precondition for successful and advanced regional cooperation. Kosovo's international status, including its non- recognition by the two Western Balkan countries

and the five EU member states, has prevented its membership in many international organizations and regional initiatives.

4. The governments of the six Western Balkan countries should work to identify key areas, countries and mechanisms for establishing regional cooperation that are workable and produce impactful change for the citizens of all countries.
5. Involvement of civil society and expert groups in thematic issues of regional cooperation related to domestic and European agendas.

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