



The Open Balkans and the Impact on EU Membership

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Abstract

One of the EU strategies to address the challenges associated with EU membership, and in itself a precondition for membership, is regional co-operation and good neighborly relations. De facto interdependence and cooperation between neighboring countries in one area (such as infrastructure, transport, energy, free trade) is expected to lead to further cooperation in a wider range of areas, but also to regional stability, reconciliation and ultimately towards European integration. Lessons can be learned from examples of co-operation between Visegrad and the Baltic states, but for the Western Balkans, given their ethnic differences and past armed conflicts, building close regional ties and trust is even more important. Although not all countries in the region have opened membership negotiations, they are all involved in the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), a framework that aims to prepare them for eventual membership. The SAP places particular emphasis on regional co-operation and good neighborly relations. Regional co-operation has advanced and 'taken root' in the Balkans for a number of reasons and has been 'a transformative experience'. In addition to economic arguments (faster economic growth in general and smoother EU integration), there were also political reasons for strengthening regional cooperation. The need to create permanent conditions for security, stability, peace and development has been a major driver. Since the 1990s, numerous formats and initiatives for regional cooperation have been established in the Western Balkans covering a wide range of areas. Starting with the 1999 Stability Pact for Southeast Europe, the Western Balkan countries have joined in a range of formats and initiatives with a wide range, including economic, functional, political and security co-operation. The initiative to create Open Balkan or otherwise known as Mini-Schengen was first proposed by the former Prime Minister of Albania, Fatos Nano in the early 1990s. Nano's idea was to create a common economic zone on the Balkan Peninsula. But this idea was not elaborated due to the start of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Such an initiative was returned to the table by the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama during the meetings held in the framework of the Berlin Process. In 2018, Rama proposed such an idea to improve political relations between the countries of the region. The successful implementation of the Open Balkans Initiative may be accompanied by several challenges. For example, the abolition of border controls could exacerbate drug trafficking and various criminal activities. The European Commission has already stressed that the so-called Balkan route is one of the main entry points for various types of illegal drugs in the EU. Accompanied by a high level of corruption, with organized crime and officials often involved in acts of corruption with impunity, abandonment of border controls can turn out to be fertile ground for criminal activities. Moreover, in a borderless region, it may be almost impossible to keep track of the entry and importation of citizens' goods by third parties from different markets. Given that the former place the heterogeneous visa regimes of the participating countries under great stress, the latter would be particularly challenging in the light of different customs policies and import duties. If these challenges are not addressed properly, they can be an obstacle to deepening regional cooperation. If the strong commitment to this initiative continues, solutions can be found to the challenges presented. At the Skopje Summit, the troika announced that steps to establish a joint software and information exchange system are already under way. Together with a high level of coordination between interior ministries, the risks of increasing the volume of cross-border criminal activities can be mitigated. On the other hand, the exchange of information alone is not enough to prevent third-country nationals from entering a country without visa restrictions and then simply moving to another where such

agreements with the country of origin do not exist. Establishing a joint visa regime may be the only solution. The same logic can be applied to goods entering a borderless market if they are required to pay customs duties of different levels for each country. However, in this case, just harmonizing customs policies would not suffice as countries would inevitably lose border revenues due to the lack of internal borders. Establishing joint regional institutions and external tariffs may be the required action. Otherwise, the participating countries of the Open Balkans endanger the porous borders like those between Norway and the EU, with common violations. It took Serbia nine years to finally fully implement the Integrated Border Management agreement by making the Joint Border Crossing Point operational. The functioning of the border crossing was part of the agreement between Kosovo and Serbia on economic normalization signed at the White House on 4 September. In 2011, Pristina and Belgrade signed the Integrated Border Management (IBM) Agreement as part of an EU-mediated dialogue with the parties agreeing to build permanent border crossings between the two countries, enabling the authorities of both places to work under one roof. When the agreement was signed, the Kosovo side claimed that with the IBM Agreement, Serbia recognized Kosovo's Independence, while the Serbian side insisted that IBM did not mean the recognition of Kosovo and continued to refer to border points as administrative lines. Although the EU-funded Joint Border Crossing Point in Merdare was finalized last year, the Serbian side refused to use the new facility with Serbian police and customs still working on temporary facilities. But the Serbian side finally agreed to relocate its staff to the new facilities. The move was welcomed by the US government and President Donald Trump's Special Envoy for Dialogue, Richard Grenell. A new agreement, part of the so-called "Mini-Schengen Initiative", this new agreement will allow freedom of movement between the two countries for Serbian and Albanian citizens without having to present a passport at border checkpoints: they will simply be able to present a national identity card to gain entry. The Mini-Schengen Action Plan for Freedom of Movement and a Common Regional Market between the Western Balkan countries now has the support of Serbia, Northern Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Montenegro as the only hostage. Between 2021-2024, the action plan aims to implement the four freedoms on which the European Union is based and which EU countries currently enjoy: goods, services and capital, in addition to freedom of movement. During the signing of the agreement, the leaders of the 3 countries present also signed a memorandum of understanding for cooperation in the fight against the new coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), which includes details about travel restrictions. Under this agreement, Serbia, Albania and Northern Macedonia have agreed that negative PCR tests for COVID-19 will not be required for trips between the 3 countries and that information on coronavirus cases in the 3 countries will be shared between them. This paper will address the initiative taken by the Albanian state for an open Balkans and other cases in the region.

Keywords: Open Balkans, regional institutions, EU membership, integration

1. Introduction

The mini-Schengen regional cooperation initiative, modeled on the Schengen Agreement, which allows passport-free movement between 26 European countries in the Schengen area, was first established by the 3 Western Balkan countries in October 2019. However, the program is not the first time the countries of the region make an agreement on economic cooperation. In fact, six Balkan countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Macedonia, have worked together under the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) for more than a decade. Through the CEFTA agreement, many of the countries involved have already seen a high foreign trade surplus, with Serbia exporting over 3.06 billion euros in goods to CEFTA countries and receiving imports worth over 978 million euros, in 2019. The signing of the Schengen mini-agreement is set only to strengthen the regional market, with Zeljko Sain, a professor at the Faculty of Economics in Sarajevo, claiming that the agreement gives the market an "opportunity to prove its competitiveness" and to improved ease. to import products from major industries. He also said that the ultimate goal of the agreement is mutual cooperation with the aim of exporting common products to third markets and eventually entering the European Union for the countries involved. If any of the participating countries join the EU, their membership in CEFTA will end.

The signing of the Mini-Schengen Agreement between Albania, Serbia and Northern Macedonia opens the possibility for the free movement arrangement to be extended to include countries that are already part of the European Schengen Area⁴⁵.

In addition to facilitating tourist travel between member states, the signing of the Schengen mini-agreement between Serbia and Albania looks like it could increase countries' chances of joining the EU and the Schengen Area in the near future. The five agreements signed are:

1. A common and free labor market between Albania, Serbia and Northern Macedonia.

⁴⁵ <https://www.etiasvisa.com/etias-news/mini-schengen-balkans>

2. Establishment of a joint electronic interconnection scheme for citizens in the Western Balkans.
3. Intergovernmental agreement between Albania, Serbia and Northern Macedonia on cooperation in the field of veterinary, food safety and phytosanitary in the Western Balkans.
4. Albania-Serbia Agreement on Mutual Recognition of the Economic Security Operator (AEOS).
5. Albania-Northern Macedonia Agreement on mutual recognition of the economic operator for security (AEOS).

2. Existing Agreements Between the Balkan States

The first agreement signed by Rama, Vucic and Zaev is on the terms of free access to the labor market. Other agreements relate to joint schemes for electronic identification of citizens at border crossings, cooperation in the field of food safety, mutual recognition and economic operators⁴⁶.

The Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama and some of the political leaders in Kosovo, both of the ruling parties and those in opposition, are continuing the long-distance clash over the idea of an open Balkans, or as it is now known, "Open Balkan"⁴⁷.

Even the chairwoman of the Parliamentary Group of the ruling party, Vetëvendosje Movement, Mimoza Kusari-Lila, said that all parties in Kosovo have expressed their opposition to the initiative "Open Balkans" (Open Balkans), because according to her, this initiative is "detrimental" to the fact that Serbia is the backbone of this initiative. axis of an initiative, such as the case of 'mini-Schengen' and (now) 'Open Balkan' ", said Mimoza Kusari-Lila after a meeting of the Presidency of the Assembly of Kosovo. The "Open Balkans" initiative has so far been supported only from Albania, Serbia and Northern Macedonia. Kosovo Foreign Minister Donika Gërvalla refused to join the initiative, calling it a diversion of Kosovo's path to the EU⁴⁸. The Republic of Kosovo considers as dangerous the initiative of Novi Sad, in the meantime of the "mini-Schengen", and now of the "Open Balkans", because the impression is created that we have an alternative to our common path as a region, towards the EU -së. "We consider the transmission of this message more dangerous than the delays that may occur in the meantime during our integration process", said the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo, Donika Gërvalla⁴⁹.

The International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES [1]) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, regularly analyzes developments in the Middle East and the Balkans. In the framework of the summit of the leaders of the regional initiative "Open Balkan" in Tirana, IFIMES made an analysis of the current political situation in the Western Balkans. In early October 2021, during the Slovenian presidency of the European Union (EU), an unsuccessful EU-Western Balkans summit was organized in Brdo pri Kranj, as part of the EU's strategic cooperation with the Western Balkans. The summit reaffirmed the words of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic (SNS) from the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, when he said the EU "was a fairy tale on paper" and underlined that there is no great international or European solidarity. "

The EU's lack of interest in enlargement prompted the leaders of the Western Balkan countries to think about the future and seek optimal solutions to the complex situation. Recognizing the situation for the Balkan countries regarding the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, three leaders, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, the Prime Minister of Northern Macedonia Zoran Zaev (SDSM) and the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama (SP) decided in October 2019 that to "take matters into their own hands" and came up with a visionary idea to create a "mini Schengen". At the end of July 2021, this idea evolved into a regional initiative "Open Balkans". The initiative is not a substitute for EU membership, but a path to accelerated membership and exploiting existing but untapped potential that will facilitate economic prosperity. The leaders of the regional cooperation initiative "Open Balkan" met on December 21, 2021 in Tirana / Elbasan to sign several agreements that will facilitate the movement of people, goods, capital and services between the three countries, as well as facilitate the operations of business. They signed an agreement on work permits that will enable workers from Albania, Northern Macedonia and Serbia to more easily obtain the necessary work permits and documents. The agreement on integrated electronic systems should enable citizens of the three countries to submit applications to other countries from each country. Also, the four agreements related to veterinary and phytosanitary inspections, which have been signed, will facilitate the trade of livestock, as well as products of plant and animal origin.

⁴⁶ <https://www.trt.net.tr/shqip/balkani/2021/12/23/samiti-i-tiranes-open-balkan-mbeshtetet-nga-be-1751585>

⁴⁷ <https://www.dw.com/sq/p/C3%ABrplasje-n%C3%AB-distanc%C3%AB-kosov%C3%AB-shqip%C3%ABri-p%C3%ABri-iden%C3%AB-e-open-balkan/a-58839239?maca=sq-Facebook-sharing>

⁴⁸ <https://www.dw.com/sq/p/C3%ABrplasje-n%C3%AB-distanc%C3%AB-kosov%C3%AB-shqip%C3%ABri-p%C3%ABri-iden%C3%AB-e-open-balkan/a-58839239?maca=sq-Facebook-sharing>

⁴⁹ <https://www.dw.com/sq/p/C3%ABrplasje-n%C3%AB-distanc%C3%AB-kosov%C3%AB-shqip%C3%ABri-p%C3%ABri-iden%C3%AB-e-open-balkan/a-58839239>

Economic prosperity is unimaginable without good neighborly relations and regional cooperation. Most of the goods trade takes place in the region, which is a strong impetus for improving bilateral and regional relations. There is no leadership and prosperity in an insecure and distrustful neighborhood. Given that in recent history the region has experienced tragic armed conflicts, it is important that states provide adequate coping with the past and eliminate hate rhetoric that creates tensions and hinders regional cooperation. Therefore, it is important to stop the abuse of universal powers in relation to the prosecution of war criminals and to allow prosecution to take place in the state in which the crime was committed and / or in accordance with the mediated agreement between the states, without secrecy. Or arrest warrants and unilateral arrests. The one-sided referral of war crimes cases by Serbia to the BiH judiciary is a new practice and a positive contribution to the process of confronting the truth and developing mutual trust.

The Open Balkans Initiative is a regional initiative for the Balkans for the 21st century, as it will eliminate border controls and other barriers to facilitate movement (people, goods, capital and services) in the region, enabling citizens to travel using only their identity card as a travel document. Furthermore, the initiative will enable citizens to be employed anywhere in the region, if they have evidence of their qualifications, as well as provide for the recognition of diplomas and better cooperation in the fight against organized crime and response to natural disasters. Experience with the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the importance of cooperation and the current energy crisis the importance of mutual solidarity. The exchange of experiences and assistance provided between the countries of the region in the framework of EU integration is valuable.

The countries of the Western Balkans need to establish stronger political, economic, scientific, cultural, sports and any other form of cooperation and act towards the EU as a group of countries with clearly defined demands and interests. With regard to the EU enlargement process, it is necessary to determine when enlargement will actually take place, as the EU cannot postpone enlargement indefinitely. In this context, it is important to note that regional cooperation does not mean that the countries of the region have given up their European path and EU membership.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić called on all members of the so-called "Six of the Balkans" (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Albania and Serbia) to join the "Open Balkans" initiative, despite all the differences that exist regarding the issue of recognizing Kosovo's independence.

In its operation, the Open Balkans Initiative can build on the experiences of co-operation within the so-called Visegrad Group of States (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), which often pursue a common approach within the EU framework, clearly articulated requirements and attitudes. Moreover, the Visegrad Group (V4) was formed so that the respective countries could more easily and quickly become members of the EU and NATO, which they had achieved. Therefore, it is important for countries in the region to pursue a common approach to the EU and / or other foreign policy initiatives with a single voice, because the actions of individual countries are insufficient and do not guarantee success.

Problems with regional co-operation are still present in the Western Balkans. The Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti (LVV) has refused to participate in the "Open Balkans" initiative, explaining that Kosovo already has a clearly defined path, which is membership in the EU and NATO. In fact, Kosovo officials, including Prime Minister Kurti, had stated that this was an attempt to create a fourth Yugoslavia and a "Greater Serbia". Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović (DPS) and several leaders from Bosnia and Herzegovina offered similar reasons for refusing membership in the initiative. It is surprising that the current Montenegrin government, which has not yet made a significant departure from Milo Đukanović's policies and attitudes, has taken a similar stance. At the same time, some political leaders in the region believe that the initiative aims to create a "Greater Albania".

The current President of Albania, Ilir Meta, said that "[the project for] Greater Serbia failed and that for Greater Albania is not possible."

Dissemination of information on so-called hegemonic projects, be they for a greater Serbia, a greater Albania, a greater Bulgaria, a greater Hungary or a greater Croatia, prevents the region from pursuing the necessary co-operation in all areas and create the necessary spirit of cooperation and union

Kosovo is the most isolated area in Europe. Broadly speaking, Kosovo does not have a visa-free regime with EU member states. In fact, it does not even have a visa-free regime with Bosnia and Herzegovina, which causes great damage to Kosovo and its citizens. Kosovar leaders must be aware that cooperation must be established and unity built in the region, as on the global stage the actors are the regions, not the states. The EU is a regional integration, while the "Open Balkans" is an emerging economic group. It is no longer a question of when the remaining countries will join the "Open Balkans" initiative, as any delay will bring huge losses to their economies and businessmen, who as taxpayers pay the most to the countries' budgets, relevant. It is unacceptable for Kosovo to declare a 20-month state of emergency due to a lack of electricity supply, instead of being able to seek assistance on a solidarity basis within the "Open Balkans".

There can be no economic prosperity if good neighborly relations are not developed and cultivated. The leaders of Serbia, Northern Macedonia and Albania were fully aware of this when they launched the "Open Balkans" regional initiative in a historic effort to promote closeness, co-operation and unity. The perspectives of the Western Balkans are in mutual understanding, interconnection and cooperation. Achieving the three requires lasting peace and stability. When the six countries of the Western Balkans follow a common approach and speak with one voice for the EU, this will be a new quality and strength. Numerous opportunities for synergy and cooperation have remained untapped. Economies of scale are an important element in the context of regional cooperation. Open Balkan is an emerging economic group and will create a competitive advantage for member countries and the region. The Open Balkans is a peace project.

It is a choice between the past and the future. At the Tirana summit, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said, "think less about the past and more about the future." Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro still need persuasion⁵⁰.

Viola Von Cramon estimates that there is no equality between states and that according to her those who have launched this initiative aim to benefit more than other countries.

"The OpenBalkan initiative does not seem right to me because I do not see equality between the countries of the Western Balkans. Those who have launched this initiative aim to benefit at the expense of other states and demand more attention." To me, the Berlin Process is "fair, because it has the support of most of the European Union, and the framework for regional cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans is clear⁵¹."

2.1 *In the framework of EU membership can be grouped into four areas of activity as follows:*

- **Approximation and harmonization with EU legislation**

Through the adoption of laws, the Assembly ensures the transposition of the EU acquis into the legal system of Kosovo. The Assembly also oversees the implementation of adopted legislation, as well as the European Reform Agenda.

- **Detailed monitoring and review**

The Assembly authorizes the government to represent the country's positions in the membership process and closely oversees government activities throughout the process. Although the government is a key player in the enlargement process, detailed parliamentary scrutiny ensures the widest possible political consensus.

- **Information sharing activities**

The Assembly is a source of information for the general public regarding EU integration. Through its activities, it is responsible for strengthening the values of transparency and information exchange.

- **International and inter-parliamentary cooperation**

Parliamentary diplomacy is a value in the enlargement process, for strengthening the international reputation and support for Albania. Regular contacts with the European Parliament and the parliaments of the EU member states, as well as regional parliamentary cooperation, are key to the success of the integration process.

- **Schengen Mini Area**

At first it was called Mini-Schengen, but it is called the Balkan Open Initiative. However, the nickname is useful to explain what the goals of the initiative are. The regional co-operation project aims to eliminate many of the border restrictions between non-European Balkan states. Restrictions that slow down the movement of people, goods, capital and services⁵².

However, so far only three of the six states in the area have decided to sign the agreement. The three are Albania, Northern Macedonia and Serbia. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo are therefore missing from the complaint. The initiative, born in 2019, should start in January 2022 and end by 2023. Regardless of and which other states decide to join. On July 29, the Economic Forum for Regional Cooperation was held in Skopje. On this occasion, the three leaders Edi Rama, Zoran Zaev (recently resigned) and Aleksandar Vuciq. Signed an Interstate Agreement and two Memoranda of Understanding. The aim is to deepen political and economic ties between the three countries.

The agreement is about co-operation in disaster prevention and protection. This will include mutual assistance measures in the event of earthquakes, fires, pollution, shipwrecks, radioactive accidents, pandemics and industrial

⁵⁰ <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2022-open-balkan-one-voice-and-an-opportunity-for-all/4978#:~:text=Recognizing%20the%20situation%20for%20the,in%20their%20own%20hands%E2%80%9D%20and>

⁵¹ <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2022-open-balkan-one-voice-and-an-opportunity-for-all/4978#:~:text=Recognizing%20the%20situation%20for%20the,in%20their%20own%20hands%E2%80%9D%20and>

⁵² <https://www.unimondo.org/Notizie/Open-Balkan-la-Mini-Schengen-che-divide-217639>

disasters.

The latest agreement signed between Albania and Serbia marks the start of the Schengen Mini Zone, but this move has come a short time ago. Meetings between the two countries and Northern Macedonia to discuss the establishment of a free travel zone began in 2019. An agreement was signed in October of that year to launch a "mini-Schengen" initiative.

At that stage, the following 6 Western Balkan countries were expected to make up the final list of the Schengen Mini Area: Serbia, Albania, Northern Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Although relations between Serbia and Kosovo have been historically tense, September 2020 saw the signing of "Kosovo-Serbia economic normalization agreements", in which both countries committed to join the Mini Schengen Area. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, however, are trying to join the EU and are unlikely to join the new bloc if their applications are successful. Launched by Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014, the Process aims to encourage co-operation between the six non-European Balkan states, with a view to future membership in the 27th Club. One aspect of the plan is precisely the Common Regional Market. Moreover, the Berlin Process includes more elements than the Open Balkans: digital structures, innovation and a single investment policy in line with EU standards. In addition, there is the 2007 CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement) and bilateral agreements. In short, so far all three have remained skeptical about the need for further "duplication".

The most critical of the three is Kosovo, according to the voice of Prime Minister Albin Kurti. It should be remembered here that Serbia does not recognize Kosovo's independence. And the car license plate dispute in September provided a measure of tension between Pristina and Belgrade. Tension such that special police forces were deployed at checkpoints⁵³.

The new **Mini Schengen** area got its name from the Schengen Area because of the similar idea of an open travel region, but this is where the connection ends. The 2 regions are distinct and are unlikely to share any members. The Schengen area consists of countries such as Spain, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Iceland and Germany.

The new Schengen Mini Zone will consist of Serbia, Albania, Northern Macedonia, Kosovo and possibly other Balkan countries. The future European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) will not be valid for trips to the Mini Schengen area. However, third-country nationals traveling to the Schengen Area will need to complete an ETIAS online application form prior to departure, starting in 2022.⁵⁴

Many factors can contribute to cooperation in any given region. These include: geography and physical proximity; shared history and heritage; cultural and social cohesiveness in terms of ethnic, racial, religious or popular culture; economic cohesiveness in terms of trade models and economic complementarity; joint membership in international organizations or common intentions to join the same international organizations; External pressures from influential states and international organizations; common and regional issues and problems; an economic relationship with a legal framework; the need to establish a security regime in an area of potential instability and conflict. Some or all of these factors, at one time or another, may contribute to more advanced forms of cooperation⁵⁵.

Common geography and immediate neighborhood are the first and most obvious factors contributing to cross-border cooperation in SEE. Moreover, most Balkan countries share some common historical experiences such as the Ottoman occupation, which bequeathed to the region a cultural cohesiveness mostly reflected in a common popular culture (Todorova, 1997). The most recent communist experience had a common impact on the political culture and economic structures of the Balkan countries, which today face similar developmental features and transition. This enables governments and peoples in the region to better understand each other and to appreciate each other's needs and interests.

The existence of regional issues and common problems arising from the transition, underdevelopment and lack of security in the region is recognized as a key stimulus factor for cooperation. Regional issues are understood as those that require collective and multilateral action by some or all states in the region to achieve benefits that cannot be achieved by individual states operating in isolation (East West, 2001). As such, the development of regional infrastructure related to transport, energy and communication networks emerge as key regional incentives for cooperation and convergence. After the wars in Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo and FYR Macedonia, post-war reconstruction has added an extra dimension to the region's common needs. Security problems and external influences caused by wars such as crime, corruption, illegal immigration and environmental damage cross-border are considered regional in nature and, consequently, are treated in

⁵³ <https://www.unimondo.org/Notizie/Open-Balkan-la-Mini-Schengen-che-divide-217639>

⁵⁴ <https://www.etias.info/balkan-states-mini-schengen-zone/>

⁵⁵ <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/5706/1/policyPaper2.pdf>

a regional context⁵⁶.

It is clear that the maneuver aims to favor the economic development of the area and attract foreign investment. In this sense, free movement would facilitate investment and stimulate trade. Therefore, partner countries would become more attractive and internationally competitive. While the initiative may sound positive, some have pointed out the challenges of such a project, which can turn into significant constraints if not properly managed.

In a post from the European Policy Center (EPC), the author, Dusan Ristic, explains that lifting border controls - even given the level of corruption - could favor criminal organizations and drug trafficking. Not to mention that this would also complicate customs controls for citizens and goods from third countries. In fact, a heterogeneous visa regime (visa) would be established for member countries, while customs policies and the imposition of differentiated tariffs would be put to the test. In July, the Rama-Zaev-Vucic trio announced their intention to work at a high level of co-ordination between the various ministries. This would involve creating software to share information. But simply sharing data seems like a pretty weak response to the scale of the challenges⁵⁷.

The EU administration has negatively assessed the "Mini Schengen" initiative, also known as the "Open Balkans", of the leaders of northern Macedonia, Serbia and Albania, and believes it undermines the region's European integration. The European Commission considers that the initiative of Edi Rama, Aleksandar Vucic and Zoran Zaev is completely incompatible with the initiative for regional development together with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo, according to diplomatic sources from Brussels. According to the European Commission, this initiative should not be supported, because it hinders the strategic partnership between the EU and the Balkan countries.

A joint meeting was held between the Government of Kosovo and the Government of Northern Macedonia. "Any improvement in relations between neighboring countries brings stability and prosperity throughout the region. "For this reason, we welcome the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo and we must support a decision that is acceptable to both countries," said the Prime Minister of Northern Macedonia, Zoran Zaev. The Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti assessed the joint meeting of the governments of the two countries as a historic event in the year when Northern Macedonia celebrates the 30th anniversary of independence and the Republic of Kosovo the 13th anniversary of independence⁵⁸.

Northern Macedonia and Kosovo signed 11 agreements on cooperation in cross-border projects, cooperation in the energy sector, etc. The two countries agreed to facilitate border control. They are also considering opening a new Tetovo-Prizren border crossing. Northern Macedonia and Kosovo will complete the joint ski project that connects the ski resorts Brezovica and Popova Shapka in the Sharr Mountains, reports the website lokalno.mk. The new defense co-operation agreement between Greece and the US will be signed for a five-year term. stated the Prime Minister of Greece Kyriakos Mitsotakis during the 85th Thessaloniki International Fair. According to him, this is a confirmation of the US presence in Greece and the strategic partnership between the two countries. "This does not close the door to other strategic defense agreements, such as the one with France." Greece spends more than 2% of gross domestic product on defense, "recalled Prime Minister Mitsotakis in an interview with ERT 1. Athens and Washington. sign a defense agreement in 2019 that allows US forces to make more use of Greek military / BNR facilities⁵⁹.

Serbia knows that its EU membership goes hand in hand with resolving the Kosovo issue, but a compromise decision is needed, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said during German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Belgrade. "The issue of Kosovo must be resolved before Serbia's membership in the European Union." There is still much to be done before Serbia and the entire region can finally become members of the European Union, as is our common goal, "he said. "We, who are already members of the EU, must bear in mind that there is an absolute geostrategic interest for us to include these countries in the European Union," said German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Serbia, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina will become members of the EU.

The Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), which includes most of the Balkan countries outside the EU, as well as Moldova, and in which Kosovo is still represented by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, was the only international agreement . . of this nature in the region. . However, with the pace of growth of the Open Balkans initiative, CEFTA seems to be becoming increasingly irrelevant, at least for three of the signatories. The initiative seems to be an attempt to imitate the EU and its values, but not members. In fact, accession to the EU by any of the three countries would mean the Union's own trade regulations and agreements that replace any pre-existing trade agreements. Therefore, if the three countries intend to join the EU in the near future, according to their previous claims, this agreement

⁵⁶ <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/5706/1/policyPaper2.pdf>

⁵⁷ <https://www.unimondo.org/Notizie/Open-Balkan-la-Mini-Schengen-che-divide-217639>

⁵⁸ <https://www.novinite.com/articles/211244/EU+Scoffs+at+Balkan+Mini+Schengen>

⁵⁹ <https://www.novinite.com/articles/211244/EU+Scoffs+at+Balkan+Mini+Schengen>

serves only as a temporary adjustment and training ground for their future obligations as EU members.

Meanwhile, CEFTA, the previous trade agreement between the Balkan states, has recently proven its worth. It was very useful during the pandemic period, with the creation of a corridor which was used to transport goods and other essential items without any delay in early 2020.

Another argument against Kosovo entering into a free trade agreement with Serbia is that this would prevent the kind of reciprocal trade measures imposed by Kosovo in the past, especially by applying tariffs on Serbian goods. The free trade agreement envisaged by the Open Balkans initiative would leave no room for Kosovo to exercise control over the market and its revenues, which should not be rushed and set aside until the dialogue enters the phase of his next. With so many legal and political issues to be finalized to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia, regional initiatives still cannot be fully implemented. These issues cannot be hidden under the rug and Serbia must face its past before it can work towards a better future. Ignoring them would create more problems on the road and could even complicate the already volatile and turbulent process of dialogue.

The Open Balkans Initiative cannot be comprehensive in the Balkans if it does not include all countries in the region. If anything, she has found that much more is needed to achieve lasting regional peace in the Balkans, which is riddled with various conflicts. Since the three missing states are still in doubt, it should be considered little more than an impractical political hoax.

Whether the project will contribute to expanding regional integration, give the Balkan economy an impetus to reach its full potential, despite numerous obstacles, remains to be seen.⁶⁰

3. Conclusions

The EU's lack of interest in enlargement prompted the leaders of the Western Balkan countries to think about the future and seek optimal solutions to the complex situation. Recognizing the situation for the Balkan countries regarding the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, three leaders, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, the Prime Minister of Northern Macedonia Zoran Zaev (SDSM) and the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama (SP) decided in October 2019 that to "take matters into their own hands" and came up with a visionary idea to create a "mini Schengen".

Problems with regional co-operation are still present in the Western Balkans. The Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti (LVV) has refused to participate in the "Open Balkans" initiative, explaining that Kosovo already has a clearly defined path, which is membership in the EU and NATO.

Many factors can contribute to cooperation in any given region. These include: geography and physical proximity; shared history and heritage; cultural and social cohesiveness in terms of ethnic, racial, religious or popular culture; economic cohesiveness in terms of trade models and economic complementarity; joint membership in international organizations or common intentions to join the same international organizations; External pressures from influential states and international organizations; common and regional issues and problems; an economic relationship with a legal framework; the need to establish a security regime in an area of potential instability and conflict. Some or all of these factors, at one time or another, may contribute to more advanced forms of cooperation.

Common geography and immediate neighborhood are the first and most obvious factors contributing to cross-border cooperation in SEE. Moreover, most Balkan countries share some common historical experiences such as the Ottoman occupation, which bequeathed to the region a cultural cohesiveness mostly reflected in a common popular culture (Todorova, 1997). The agreement is about co-operation in disaster prevention and protection. This will include mutual assistance measures in the event of earthquakes, fires, pollution, shipwrecks, radioactive accidents, pandemics and industrial disasters.

Free movement of citizens with ID cards has been established between Serbia, Northern Macedonia and Albania, an agreement on cooperation in prevention and elimination of the consequences of natural disasters has been signed. Agreements on co-operation in facilitating the import, export and movement of goods in the Western Balkans were also signed, as well as a Memorandum of Understanding and co-operation on free access to the labor market. It has been agreed between Serbia, Northern Macedonia and Albania that the border controls will be lifted from January 1, 2023. It is also planned to gradually create a common market for 12 million inhabitants, as many as these three countries together have - that is, to create a "single economic zone".

Whether the project will contribute to expanding regional integration, give the Balkan economy an impetus to reach its full potential, despite numerous obstacles, remains to be seen.

⁶⁰<https://prishtinainsight.com/open-balkan-project-of-no-interest-to-kosovo/>

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