



The Regional Cooperation of the Western Balkans and the Challenges on the Path of Integration in the European Union

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Received: 26 September 2022 / Accepted: 29 November 2022 / Published: 20 December 2022
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Doi: 10.56345/ijrdv9n4s215

Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the importance of regional cooperation in the Western Balkan countries and the difficulties on the path to European Union integration. The objectives of the study are to emphasize the advantages of regional collaboration; the aspiration of the Western Balkan nations to join the EU as a catalyst for cooperation by opening up fresh avenues for political, social, and economic advancement; initiatives, processes, and agreements are undertaken under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission for co-operation between them and preparation for EU integration; as well as obstacles and challenges to effective regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The research method is based on Desk research and includes the study of literature, analysis, and monitoring conducted by independent institutions and bodies on regional cooperation and integration and integration into the European Union. Membership in the European Union as a common goal of the Western Balkan countries has promoted the whole Region for economic, social progress, and regional stability. Greater economic cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans could be one of the main sources of economic growth in the coming years. The methods of regional cooperation have been the subject of frequent criticism by the governments of individual countries, which considered them arbitrary and unrelated to their reality. The situation created after the Russian attack on Ukraine has made all countries, regions, and international structures re-evaluate the aspects of economic development, political, social, local, regional, and global security.

Keywords: Western Balkans, European Union, Regional Cooperation

1. Introduction

In the relations between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans, the notion of development, integration, and international security is closely linked to the idea of multilateral cooperation, which aims at balanced social, political, and economic development of the countries of the region.

The term "Western Balkans" appeared in the EU administrative vocabulary shortly after the end of the armed conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. This term indicates not only the common aspiration to integrate into the EU but also they're facing a common set of political, social, and economic challenges related to the ongoing economic,

political and social transformation, the lack of democratization and the issues still to be resolved. unresolved, dealing with past conflicts.

Successfully integrated regions, including Europe, have been created in conditions of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and behavioral diversity, partly enabled by the desire to stop these differences that lead to conflict.⁴⁶ Approaching development challenges as a joint action through integrated institutions has proven more successful than unilateral action. Member countries with very similar or complementary characteristics can work better together than alone to find solutions to common challenges such as integration and security, energy, the fight against organized crime, and so on. Regional cooperation creates frameworks to discuss issues by increasing the opportunity to mitigate potential conflicts earlier. Members of regional cooperation can find solutions that are "well suited to the specific needs of the region".⁴⁷ There is no doubt that a precondition for the dynamic growth of regional cooperation would be to prioritize the integration of the countries of the region into the EU, despite the complex problems and difficulties of today's reality.

The aspirations of the Western Balkan countries for EU membership represent a good incentive to cooperate and create new perspectives regarding the role of the whole region in the European geopolitical sphere regarding increasing security. From a European perspective, regional cooperation can foster policy convergence when member states in a region agree on common criteria. Cooperation must be deeply rooted in a local socio-political and economic practice, while convincing both political elites and society, which is in fact a promising method of easing tensions and reaching agreement on the most pressing issues, without any need for external authorities. Cooperation between the Western Balkan countries is expected to become a necessary part of political stability, consolidate proper neighborly relations, and help overcome nationalism and intolerance. The realization of this expectation will pave the way for the economic development of free markets in the region and the further economic and social consolidation of the countries of the region on the path of integration into the European Union.

2. Regional Cooperation as a Regional Added Value

Regions are political and imaginary constructions just like nations, formed both by the concepts of identity and connections of local countries and by the way foreigners see and react to them. Fractured regions can have integrated political systems in some ways, but fragmented in others. While elites, economic and political, in such regions are able to organize their activities region-wide, thereby ripping the benefits of regionalism, the societies are largely excluded from such opportunities.⁴⁸ The perpetual chase for external patrons by governmental elites often undermines the stakeholders of bottom-up regional integration.⁴⁹

Fractured regions can have integrated albeit illegal flows of people, capital, and arms, often lacking in basic capacities of regional governance. In such regions, regional organizations are proliferating, yet regional governance processes fail to materialize. Fractured regions are institutionally thick. They are plural rather than state-centric: many actors, state and non-state, have the capacity to produce and perpetuate regional fracture between states and their societies.

States in fragmented regions suffer from weak governance structures and poorly consolidated democratic institutions, rendering their functional ties embryonic and uneven, with cooperation more pronounced in "practical" and no security areas than in the security environment.⁵⁰ In addition to low levels of intraregional trade, regional fragmentation is manifest in (1) poor border management that inhibits trade, but is porous to criminal networks; (2) regional problems ranging from environmental degradation to drug trafficking, with a dearth of regional cooperation to address them; (3) divided economic space and fragmented markets, making it harder for individual states to participate effectively in globalization; and (4) silencing and disempowerment of those who would benefit from regional integration. Importantly, fractured regions impose.

A study by the World Economic Forum concludes that "no one part of the region can be stronger than its

⁴⁶ A high level of integration helps in a practical way by giving ethnic groups similar rights, whichever sovereignty they live under, and allowing full freedom of movement.

⁴⁷ De Jong and Egenhofer, 2014. *Exploring a Regional Approach to EU Energy Policies*, available at: http://www.ceps.eu/system/files/SR%20No%2084%20Energy%20Schengen_0.pdf

⁴⁸ Anna Ohanyan, *The Global Political Economy of Fractured Regions*, *Global Governance* 24 (2018) 371–390, p. 372

⁴⁹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "Linkage Versus Leverage: Rethinking the International Dimension of Regime Change," *Comparative Politics* 38, no. 4 (2006): 379–400.

⁵⁰ Ohanyan, *Networked Regionalism as Conflict Management*.

weakest link, thereby making regional solidarity a matter of rational as well as ethical importance.”⁵¹ Paul Collier echoes this by arguing that neighbors matter.⁵²

Successfully integrated regions, including Europe, have been created in conditions of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and behavioral diversity, partly enabled by the desire to stop these differences that lead to conflict. Joint action through integrated institutions has proven to be more successful than unilateral action by countries in a region.

Other approaches to development challenges such as joint action through integrated institutions have proved more successful than unilateral action. It is important to understand what regional added value the different approaches offer by comparing possible alternatives. In this context, logic and evidence suggest that local and inclusive approaches can provide legitimacy, provide a framework for long-term, self-sustaining effort, and have a greater impact than the impact of each individual, especially when deeper integration effects are achieved. At the same time, these approaches to joint and integrated action have their strengths and weaknesses as the difficult character of consensus decision-making.

Regional cooperative approaches have many benefits however, the clearest advantages are identified in addressing long-term priorities for inter-state peacebuilding, the promotion of democracy and human rights, and transnational challenges such as environmental pollution and the fight against organized crime. The low level of development of the relatively small economies of the Western Balkan countries makes it necessary and useful for them to operate together through various forms of networking and regional cooperation.⁵³ One of the most pressing issues facing all Western Balkan countries is how to develop a sustainable growth model that will provide jobs and prosperity in the long run.

The speed of growth will depend on the pace of addressing the challenges that prevent the region from developing its full potential. Regional cooperation is a key element in improving much-needed coordination of member countries, policy convergence, and moving towards the creation of an internal market, without completely relinquishing national sovereignty in an "uncontrolled" way. There are potential benefits of regional cooperation for member countries, at the European level, and for consumers. Member countries with very similar or complementary characteristics can work better together than alone to find solutions to common challenges such as integration and security, energy, the fight against organized crime, and so on.

Regional cooperation creates frameworks to discuss issues by increasing the ability to mitigate potential conflicts earlier. Members of regional cooperation can find solutions that are "well suited to the specific needs of the region"⁵⁴. For broad-spectrum issues, if countries share certain views, they can move forward and implement solutions directly, without the consent of less ambitious countries.⁵⁵

Undoubtedly, a precondition for the dynamic growth of regional cooperation would be to make the integration of the countries of the region into the EU a priority. Cooperation must be deeply rooted in local, social, political, and economic practice, while convincing both political elites and society, which is in fact a promising method of easing tensions and reaching agreement on the most pressing issues, without the need to turn to outside authorities. It is expected that cooperation between the Western Balkan countries will become a necessary part of political stability, consolidate proper neighborly relations and help to overcome nationalism and intolerance.

At the moment, it is difficult, after over a dozen years since the Stability Pact, multilateral cooperation seeks to form a new political value or eliminate the influence of factors that disintegrate regional relations. However, the number of resolutions on regional cooperation, the form, and the process of their formation are invaluable.⁵⁶ They undoubtedly converge with the necessity of establishing communication channels, the continuous exchange of information, and also the development of an EU dialogue taking into account the interests of all parties involved. Such co-operation is certainly without precedence in a communist heritage region, where not far off the neighbors were involved in armed conflict.

Of course, for the countries of the Western Balkans, it is the anticipation of functioning within the European Union,

⁵¹World Economic Forum, *Scenarios for the South Caucasus and Central Asia* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014).

⁵²Paul Collier, *Æ Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵³Regional Cooperation In Western Balkans: A View From Inside The European Union. *The Premises and Obstacles*, 2007 Jędrzej PASZKIEWICZ, p. 1

⁵⁴ De Jong and Egenhofer, 2014. *Exploring a Regional Approach to EU Energy Policies*, available at: http://www.ceps.eu/system/files/SR%20No%2084%20Energy%20Schengen_0.pdf

⁵⁵ Umpfenbach et al., 2014. *Regional cooperation in the context of the new 2030 energy governance*, available at: http://www.ecologic.eu/sites/files/publication/2015/regional-cooperation-energy-2030_2.pdf

⁵⁶Cvete Koneska, 'Regionalni Identitet: Faktor Koji Nedostaje u Saradnji u Oblasti Bezbednosti na Zapadnom Balkanu', *Bezbednost Zapadnog Balkana*, No 7–8, 2007–2008, pp. 117–118.

even if there are still many unresolved issues on the path to full cooperation. From a European perspective, regional cooperation can foster policy convergence when member states in a region agree on common criteria. This bottom-up convergence can better secure political acceptance. In addition, new specific cross-border effects policies could be developed, before potentially increasing them at the European level. Important customers can benefit from regional cooperation. In the absence of a fully functioning internal market across the EU, consumers can access a wider variety of products within a region as a first step.

Quite important is the fact that if member states within a region use their potential together by allocating most of the support where there are more resources available, they can reduce support costs, costs, and imports. This in turn can lower consumer prices. Redistribution of investments through increased regional cooperation should be balanced with a decentralized approach, following the principle of "as much decentralization as possible, as much centralization (i.e. regional distribution of investments as needed)".⁵⁷ Greater economic cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans could be one of the main sources of economic growth in the coming years.

3. Membership in the European Union as a Common Goal of the Western Balkan Countries

The aspirations of the Western Balkan countries for EU membership represent a good incentive to cooperate and create new perspectives regarding the role of the whole region in the European geopolitical sphere regarding increasing security. The countries of the Western Balkans and our country Albania as an integral part of it, which after the 1990s strongly aspire to be part of the European Union and have found for this, the active support of the European Union. Since the late 1990s, the EU has worked to persuade the Western Balkan countries to join forces in creating equal, peaceful solutions in politics and economics, aimed at regional consolidation, as a vital part of membership in the EU.

The foundation of this policy lies in the concern to raise the level of security in Europe as a whole, and in particular to avoid the migration of issues related to the complicated relations between the post-Yugoslav countries in the EU.⁵⁸ Due to its conflicting history, dominated by ethnic and religious affiliations, after the fall of the former Yugoslavia the peaceful stabilization of the entire region has been assessed as a vital necessity for the economic and social development of the Region.

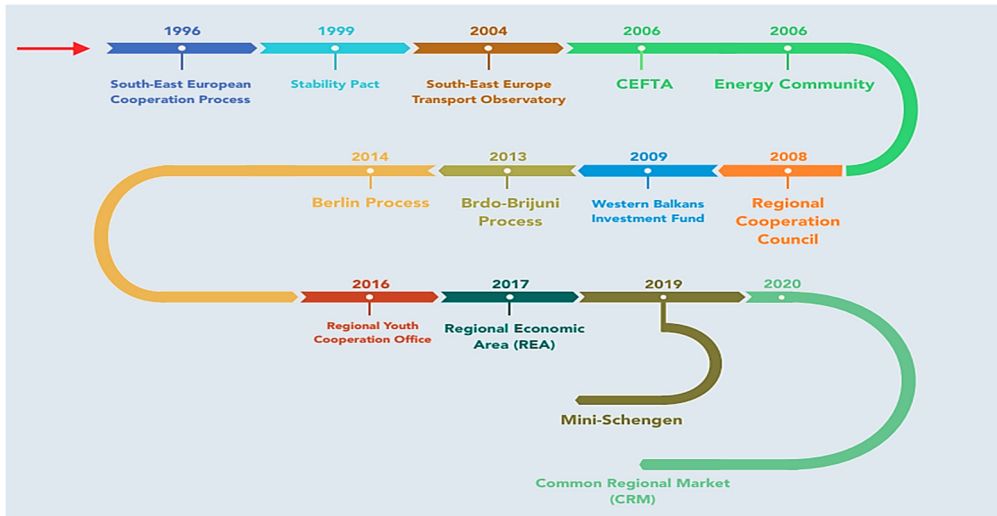
The lack of political stability in the region has had a devastating impact on the security of the newly formed countries. Unresolved territorial claims have contributed to political bodies throughout the region committing themselves to confront the claims of neighboring adversaries. Membership in the European Union as a common goal of the Western Balkan countries for almost three decades has driven the entire Region for economic, social progress, and regional stability. In relations between the EU and the Balkan countries, the notion of international integration and security is closely linked to the idea of multilateral cooperation, which, according to its creators, aims at balanced social, political, and economic development of the countries of the region.

Regional cooperation can be considered as a tool for the evaluation of the six countries of Western Balkans, not only for their path towards EU integration but for regional economic integration between the neighboring countries. Among the many regional initiatives, the most debated have been — the Regional Economic Area (REA) and the so-called "Mini-Schengen", and most recently — the Common Regional Market (CRM). (look at the Figure below)

⁵⁷ [http://www.reshaping-res-policy.eu/downloads/Quo\(ta\)-vadis-Europe_RE-Shaping-report.pdf](http://www.reshaping-res-policy.eu/downloads/Quo(ta)-vadis-Europe_RE-Shaping-report.pdf). See on cost savings in a balanced approach between centralized and decentralized RES investments Greenpeace International/Energynautics GmbH, 2011. *Battle of the Grids. How Europe can go 100 % renewable and phase out dirty energy*, available at: <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/publications/reports/Battle-of-the-grids/>

⁵⁸ Sandro Knezović, 'Postkonfliktni Okviri Regionalne Sigurnosti i Suradnje u Jugoistočnoj Europi – Inicijative Europske Unije', *Politička Misao*, Vol. 43, No 2, 2006, p. 80.

3.1 Regional initiatives in Western Balkans cooperation



Source: BPRG, (2021), Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans, "Regional Economic Area, the "Mini-Schengen" and the Common Regional Market Policy Report, January 2021

The Stability Pact for Southeast Europe (SPSEE), established by the European Union in June 1999, obliged the so-called post-Yugoslav states as well as Albania, as aspiring countries, to improve internal Balkan relations by establishing and developing co-operation programs. regional.⁵⁹

The Central European Initiative (CEI, 1989) and the Adriatic Ionian Initiative (AII, 2000) are important factors supporting Balkan multilateral cooperation in areas such as borders, scientific and cultural exchange, and ecology.⁶⁰ The need to establish mechanisms for international cooperation that would favor economic growth and strengthen democratic structures in all countries of the region was the foundation of the Stability Pact,⁶¹ which was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in 2007. The Western Balkans, in the framework of the Stability Pact at the joint table with neighboring EU member states and the most well-known international financial institutions became part of the process of democratization and human rights, legal and trade cooperation, economic growth and security for the restoration of EU-inspired regional relations. Within the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) the main areas of cooperation were economic and social growth, infrastructure and energy, justice and home affairs, cooperation for greater security and the improvement of quality of human resources.

The main task of the Council is to support development in all the above areas as well as to ensure regional cooperation with perhaps the most unified organizational framework.⁶² In 2001, the countries of the region signed a pact on the development of the regional transport network and the introduction of infrastructure projects, with the aim of

⁵⁹Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, *From Stabilisation to Integration. The Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe* (Wien: Böhlau, 2010), pp. 11–23.

⁶⁰Meetings of the Heads of Governments and their respective Foreign Affairs Ministers are held annually. CEI cofinances three so-called supportive funds, used to develop the projects with diversified funding; Milica Delević, pp. 21–22; Dalibor Kekić, 'Jadransko-Jonska Inicijativa', *Međunarodni Problemi*, Vol. 55, No 3–4, 2004, pp. 413–433.

⁶¹Together with European Commission and many international organizations (NATO, UN, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE, Council of Europe, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund), Switzerland, Norway, Russia, U.S.A., Japan took part as supporting states and Ukraine as an observer; Sandro Knezović, p. 105.

⁶²During the two years of the Council's activity a number of task groups have been created in order to deal with the research-and-education exchange (Task Force Fostering and Building Human Capital, TF FBHC, June 2008), the cooperation in the area of employment and social welfare (Employment and Social Policy Network Fostering and Building Human; ESPN, 2009) as well as the educational support for private entrepreneurs (South East European Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning; SEE CEL, October 2008); Hermine Vidovic, pp. 146–147.

establishing a unified communication system in the region. The established system of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has been considered successful. The greatest success has been achieved in the field of transport and energy, as well as in specific areas of social, economic and police policy cooperation.⁶³ The Investment Compact for Southeast Europe was set up under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission.⁶⁴ to provide support to governments in preparing and evaluating economic reforms. The so-called Bucharest Process was established in October 2003 to support social reforms.⁶⁵

Border security and the fight against organized crime are important areas of regional cooperation between the Balkan countries. Their joint efforts fit within the framework provided since 1999 by the Regional Center for Combating Cross-Border Crime under the auspices of the South East European Cooperation Initiative (SECI).⁶⁶ The fight against corruption was regulated by the Stability Pact Anti-Corruption Initiative (SPAI) in 2000 which aims to facilitate police force reforms and support anti-corruption measures at various levels in all countries of the region. The Regional Weapons Control Verification and Enforcement Center (RACVIAC) was introduced in 2000 to control arms trafficking.⁶⁷

The Regional Initiative for Migration, Asylum, Refugees (MARRI), 2004, has been tasked with establishing an integrated border traffic control system in the region. In 2006, the signing of the Convention on Police Cooperation in South East Europe by the Balkan countries was revived with the long-term goal of unifying border control regulations and establishing a management system for the required persons and facilities, based on the Schengen Information System (SIS).⁶⁸ All the above-mentioned initiatives relate to significant areas of activity and constitute a general cooperation program, which aims to include the activity of the region as a whole within the existing conditions of EU cooperation. According to the EU, the RCC aims to play a vital role in creating a conducive space for international cooperation, serving to reduce the impact of the still-living divisions, inherited mainly from the Yugoslav conflicts, on the overall picture of Balkan issues.

The work of the RCC is of great importance for the countries of the region, as it is in the competence of the Council to distribute the funds, provided for multilateral projects e.g. under the Multi-Beneficiary Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (MBIPA), implemented in 2010.⁶⁹ The Berlin Process is a German-led initiative in 2014, which aims to facilitate regional cooperation between the six the countries of the Western Balkans - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia - with the vision of helping to meet the criteria for membership in the European Union.

The most important component of the Berlin Process is the so-called "Connectivity Agenda", which initially aims for the six countries of the Western Balkans to cooperate with each other in the fields of transport and energy, and later this connection will be extended to the exchange. for youth and economic cooperation. Summits held in Germany, Austria, France, and Italy helped establish communication between Balkan leaders, as well as designing several infrastructure projects and regional initiatives. However, many issues that create tensions remain unresolved, and even cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans has not progressed enough. Approved projects for each Western Balkan country are funded in part by EU mechanisms and in part by these countries themselves. The Connectivity Agenda combines policies and infrastructure, linking WB6 countries to each other and to the EU: governments have established a basic and comprehensive regional infrastructure network, making the Western Balkans part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T).

The Berlin Process has also generated regional link initiatives, such as energy cooperation, the Regional Office for Youth Cooperation (RYCO), the creation of a Regional Economic Zone, and the signing of the Transport Community Treaty.⁷⁰ The programs and initiatives of the Berlin Process seem to be difficult and are being implemented slowly. As

⁶³E. Busek, B. Kühne, pp. 255–272. See also: Nenad Nikolic, *SEE Core Regional Transport Network Development, Southeast Europe Transport Observatory (Brussels, SEETO, 2010)*.

⁶⁴Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, pp. 237–242. See also: <http://www.investmentcompact.org> (12.06.2012).

⁶⁵Hermine Vidovic, Vladimir Gligorov, Renate Hauptfleisch, Mario Holzner, Katja Korolkova, Monika Natter, 'Developing Efficient Activation Approaches and Identifying Elements for Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans', *Research Reports. The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies*, no 374, 2011, pp. 146–147.

⁶⁶The Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI) was created in 1996 as a forum for international cooperation in the fight against organized crime.

⁶⁷Milica Delević, pp. 60–93.

⁶⁸Erhard Busek, Björn Kühne, p. 107–108.

⁶⁹IPA. Multi-annual indicative planning document 2011–2013, p. 10; www.ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/mipd_multibeneficiary_2011_2013_en.pdf (11.06.2012).

⁷⁰ https://balkansgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Procesi-i-Berlinit-p%C3%ABr-Balkanin-Per%C3%ABndimor_P%C3%ABrfitimet-dhe-sfidat-p%C3%ABr-Kosov%C3%ABn_Shqip-2.pdf

always, the governments of the region are contradictory and have poor performance. The lack of competence of governments has hampered all previous initiatives, and this has led to a decline in commitment to the Berlin Agenda and other integration processes. Regional governments have a high level of distrust of the European Commission. Attractive regional projects and the good intentions of the Berlin Agenda failed to get governments in the Western Balkans to accelerate reforms and increase cooperation and development.⁷¹

Greater economic cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans could be one of the main sources of economic growth in the coming years. As mentioned above, one of the results of the Western Balkans Summit in July 2017 in Trieste was the adoption of a consolidated multi-annual action plan for a regional economic zone in the Western Balkans. The aim is to move the six Western Balkan countries beyond the existing free trade agreement and towards more comprehensive economic cooperation, within the framework of the Berlin Process. All countries are committed to further deepening their cooperation under the current regional free trade agreement (CEFTA) to the point where goods, services, investments, and skilled people can move freely within the region without tariffs, quotas, or non-tariffs. other unnecessary, and other, barriers. The private sector and international organizations are expected to play an important role in the development of the Regional Economic Area (REA). The former must respond and accept the reforms, and the latter are expected to align their assistance programs with the needs identified in the plan. There are four components of the Regional Economic Zone that will be addressed by the action plan: (i) trade, (ii) investment, (iii) mobility, and (iv) digital integration. Trade under REA, the Western Balkan countries have pledged to further deepen their cooperation in areas such as trade liberalization, e-commerce, and trade dispute resolution.

The Open Balkans Process is a process that was born because the Berlin Process began to lose its impact and what was decided and put back on the table of the Berlin Process was not implemented by the Western Balkan countries themselves. The joint initiative of Albania, Serbia, and Northern Macedonia is not being supported by Kosovo, although the Washington Agreement provided that Belgrade and Pristina would join the "mini-Schengen", while Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro despite the invitations have stated that they will remain spectators. The "Open Balkans" initiative is a continuation of the Balkan "mini-Schengen", which Kosovo has opposed before. The idea of "mini-Schengen" was presented in Novi Sad, Serbia on October 10, 2019, by the leaders of Serbia, Northern Macedonia, and Albania, and on July 29, 2021, it was renamed the Open Balkans, at an economic forum held in Skopje, where the three participating countries called on all countries in the region to join the initiative and sign agreements on liberalization of trade, unification of the labor market and co-operation against disasters.

Five agreements have been signed between Albania, Serbia and Northern Macedonia in the framework of the "Open Balkans" initiative,⁷² 1) A common and free labor market between Albania, Serbia, and Northern Macedonia; 2) The Establishment of a joint electronic identification interconnection scheme for citizens in the Western Balkans; 3) Intergovernmental agreement between Albania, Serbia and Northern Macedonia on cooperation in the field of veterinary medicine, 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). Albania and Serbia, as well as Albania and Northern Macedonia, signed bilateral agreements on mutual recognition of authorized economic operators, in relation to security and safety (AEOS). The forum of Agriculture and Regional Cooperation was held, focusing on the new interaction between the countries, with the participation of entrepreneurs in the field of agriculture, as well as academics, rectors, and deans of agricultural universities of the participating countries.⁷³

The signed agreements are expected to facilitate the lives of citizens and increase their well-being. Their implementation aims to ensure the opportunity and the right of all citizens to have immediate and equal access to work and residence permits. The agreement for the integrated electronic system of services gives the opportunity to the citizens who want to receive certain services to do it online, without moving from home.

To provide the opportunity for citizens to cross freely at the respective borders and customs, after having the opportunity to obtain 3 times the same documents, related to the import-export of agricultural and livestock products. According to the leaders of the three participating countries, the Open Balkans represents taking concrete stepstoward the citizens, because it has more to do with their income and well-being by ending many bureaucratic procedures; noting the fact that the 'Open Balkans' is an authentic process for the benefit of all countries in the region; which makes our market bigger and more ready for further competition; for citizens to feel direct economic benefits; that Europeanize the

⁷¹ https://balkansgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Procesi-i-Berlinit-p%C3%ABr-Balkanin-Per%C3%ABndimor_P%C3%ABrfitimet-dhe-sfidat-p%C3%ABr-Kosov%C3%ABn_Shqip-2.pdf

⁷² <https://www.monitor.al/balkani-i-hapur-firmosen-pese-marreshje-mes-tre-vendeve/>

⁷³ <https://www.aa.com.tr/sq/balkani-i-balkani-i-hapur-%C3%ABsht%C3%AB-nj%C3%AB-kontribut-p%C3%ABr-rajonin/2453666>

region and bring a better life to citizens who can no longer wait to enjoy European standards; because all our countries are super interested in new markets. All of these are described by the countries of the Open Balkans as "agreements which are neither more nor less than those of the European common market" and as an implementation unit of the "Berlin Process" and the "Common Market". "Regional", adding that "This is why we have joined this initiative."⁷⁴

The support for the principle of "every initiative that enhances regional cooperation" by the EU, but also by some member states, has been understood and used by the supporters of the "Open Balkans" initiative as direct support for this initiative. It includes initiatives such as "regional collectivity" and the common market, which were worked on in the EU in the framework of the Berlin Process. But in some European regions, there are reservations about this initiative and in the EU they say that "there was no such direct support for it". There is no clear position in the European Union regarding the "Open Balkans" initiative, an initiative that has provoked mixed reactions not only in the Western Balkans region but also in international circles. The European bloc, on the one hand, supports any initiative that affects the growth of European cooperation, but on the other hand, they see this initiative as a duplication of some processes, which are already ongoing.

In fact, the problem with the "Open Balkans" initiative is seen in the fact that this initiative has not provided regional inclusiveness. "There should be more political will, readiness, and courage to implement existing agendas," said diplomatic sources in Brussels, rather than, as they call them, "initiatives that could provoke new divisions." The EU special envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and Western Balkans issues, Miroslav Lajcak, was also quoted as saying that this initiative "is an unhealthy competition" for the European integration process of the countries in the region. But, when directly asked the EU whether it is for or against the "Open Balkans" initiative, they constantly answer that they understand the desire to move forward in regional cooperation, but it is necessary to have a process that includes the entire Western Balkans."

The main goal of the EU is "the creation of a common regional market, in accordance with the rules of the European Union, as a political obligation from the joint EU-Balkan summit in Sofia". The Berlin Process itself - a German initiative supported by several important EU countries - although it aimed to help the countries of the region develop and thus prepare for EU integration future, is not an initiative that is included in the EU framework. Precisely in the Berlin Process, all countries in the region are treated in the same way, including Kosovo. This does not happen on the part of the EU due to the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by five member states of the European bloc. While Kosovo, in fact, is in an enviable international position and opposes the open Balkans as a policy that does not contribute to the issue of recognition of Kosovo by Belgrade, calling any approximation with Belgrade, even in economic terms, as a strategic mistake without solving the problem.⁷⁵

4. Criticisms and Obstacles to Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans

The high level of sensitivity present in Balkan countries and societies about anything related to ethnic or religious issues, as well as the impact of historical memory, creates very indignant attitudes towards discussing issues of concern in a multilateral forum. These are significant barriers to cooperation that undermine the chances for a lasting improvement in relations in the region.⁷⁶ The methods of regional cooperation have been the subject of frequent criticism by the governments of individual countries, which considered them arbitrary and unrelated to their reality. However, many issues affecting the entire Western Balkans are held in the field of bilateral relations and governments, and many contentious issues have been excluded from multilateral discourse due to a lack of political courage. This attitude is in itself an obstacle to the creation of EU-oriented dialogue projects.

Regions that are integrating without the U.S. can be seen by both participants and the U.S. as an attempt to balance U.S. power or at least mitigate U.S. intervention. As they gain confidence, local groups can and do reach out to others they consider to follow or want to encourage, their following collaborative models - thus spreading the collaborative model further. At the same time, the weaker states, especially in the disorganized parts of the world, can reasonably worry about the strengths of the larger groups that are turning against them: an atmosphere of this kind still demonizes the efforts of NATO and the EU to "reach" the Mediterranean. So it is noticed that there can always be questions about how the rooting of integrated regional cooperation adapts to the increasingly global nature of security aspects, with the consequences of traditional security diseases like conflict and disasters like terrorism and disease. Responses should be

⁷⁴<https://www.aa.com.tr/sq/balkani-ballkani-i-hapur-%C3%ABsht%C3%AB-nj%C3%AB-kontribut-p%C3%ABr-rajonin/2453666>

⁷⁵<https://ekonomiaonline.com/opinione/edi-rama-dhe-balkani-i-hapur/>

⁷⁶Roberto Belloni, 'European Integration and the Western Balkans: Lessons, Prospects and Obstacles', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 11, No 3, 2009, p. 62.

positive if regional results can be shown to promote rather than interfere with common global goals.

Compliance can be a facilitator, and cultural diversity should not be seen as a crucial obstacle if strategic interests are strong enough and differences are not protected as political goods in themselves but mediated by a culture of compromise.⁷⁷ According to many observers directing their attention to the Balkans, the process of economic and political cooperation action in the Western Balkans has still been incapable of changing local relations based on traditional mistrust or, worse, mutual hostility.

From the local point of view, the main political objective is to achieve maximum compliance with EU conditions with minimal involvement in the process of cooperation with neighboring countries. Underlying this dissatisfaction with the strengthening of regional cooperation outside the EU is the fear that this would turn the tendencies towards hegemony in mutual relations as well as the conviction that on their way to integration into EU structures each country must act in his own interest, without worrying too much about his neighbors.⁷⁸ Also, multilateral cooperation is hampered by the impact of competition between countries aspiring to membership. The exchange of experiences in this field would be in favor of the general political atmosphere and the coordination of a range of political activities.

In reality, however, such a process would require countries, especially those that are more advanced on their path to the EU, to share their achievements with their Balkan partners. Linking the issue of membership with the issue of stabilization and regional co-operation in the EU strategy for the Western Balkans has brought general anxiety, in terms of European integration, to local societies. Representatives of the governments of the Western Balkan countries have emphasized that what should be considered vital in assessing EU accession procedures was the individual efforts of the candidates and not the degree of involvement in mutual cooperation within a broad regional structure, which includes countries differed greatly in their advancement on the path of European integration.⁷⁹

The Republic of Kosovo, which unilaterally declared independence in 2008, is still considered a "rebel province" by the Serbian government and is represented by leaders of the international administration, established in 1999 by the UN with Resolution no. 1244 of the Security Council.⁸⁰ Due to the 2008-2010 economic crisis, the European Union reduced funding to support local development programs, which met with criticism in the Balkans and weakened regional cooperation.

However, it is necessary to emphasize the regional needs to be identified through careful research, by consulting with the parties involved in creating a strategy for establishing a coherent system of regional cooperation. In addition, cooperation needs to gain wider approval from the public including local societies to a greater extent on cooperation issues.

5. Conclusions

Greater economic cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans could be one of the main sources of economic growth in the coming years. Membership in the European Union as a common goal of the Western Balkan countries has promoted the whole Region for economic, social progress, and regional stability. The lack of political stability in the region has had a devastating impact on the confidence-building, security, and cooperation of the newly formed countries.

In relations between the EU and the Balkan countries, the notion of integration is closely linked to the idea of multilateral cooperation, which aims at balanced social, political, and economic development of the countries of the region.

Approaching the challenges of political stability, security, economic, political, and social development as joint action through integrated institutions has proved more successful than unilateral action.

Cooperation must be deeply rooted in a local social, political and economic practice, while convincing both political elites and society, which is in fact a promising method of easing tensions and reaching agreement on the most pressing

⁷⁷Experience shows, however, that there are pitfalls in trying to create active security communities over very large areas where the true commonalities in culture as well as governance become too weak to sustain the weight of common standards laid upon them—an issue familiar from the debate over EU and NATO expansion.

⁷⁸Vladimir Gligorov, 'Southeast Europe: Regional Cooperation with Multiple Equilibria', IBEU Research Project. Working Papers, No 4.1, 2004, p.

⁷⁹Robert Manchin, 'Balkan Public Opinion and EU Accession', Institute for Security Studies. Chaillot Paper, No 126, 2011, pp. 163–168

⁸⁰Simona Mameli, pp. 21–25. UNMIK is also the representative of Kosovo in the other forums concerning the regional cooperation in the Southeastern Europe.

issues, without any need to turn to external authorities. The methods of regional cooperation have been the subject of frequent criticism by the governments of individual countries, which considered them arbitrary and unrelated to their reality.

Linking the issue of membership with the issue of stabilization and regional co-operation in the EU strategy for the Western Balkans has brought general anxiety, in terms of European integration, to local societies. It is necessary to emphasize the regional needs from the consultations with the parties involved in creating a strategy for creating a coherent system of regional cooperation. Cooperation needs to gain wider approval from the public, involving to a greater extent local societies in matters of cooperation.

The situation created after the Russian attack on Ukraine has made all countries, regions, and international structures re-evaluate the aspects of economic, political, and social development, as well as local, regional and global security.

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