

Open Balkan – the end of the initiative or a new beginning?

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Abstract

Established as an initiative aimed at fostering economic integration among Western Balkan (WB) countries, the Open Balkan encountered significant opposition and criticism both within the countries where it was implemented (Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia) and among remaining regional partners. This policy paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Open Balkan initiative. It also addresses key questions regarding the initiative's significance or lack thereof.

This policy paper argues that despite regional cooperation agreements and moments of interest, the initiative began and continued its work without ever becoming fully inclusive. Significant geopolitical developments and tensions in the WB, particularly in the Northern part of Kosovo, made it impossible to focus solely on regional economic relations without prior consideration of political ones.

Lastly, the development of the Berlin Process summit in Tirana perhaps expedited the end of an initiative that had always been articulated as complementary to the Process, rendering it seemingly redundant. A deeper understanding of the entire trajectory of the Open Balkan initiative would help address future challenges that may arise in future regional endeavors.

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This analysis was produced within the Think Visegrad Non-V4 Fellowship programme. Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform is a network for structured dialog on issues of strategic regional importance. The network analyses key issues for the Visegrad Group, and provides recommendations to the governments of V4 countries, the annual presidencies of the group, and the International Visegrad Fund. For more information about Think Visegrad and its members visit www.thinkvisegrad.org.

Introduction

Announced in October 2019 initially under the name "Mini-Schengen" and renamed "Open Balkan" only in 2021, this initiative of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia was created to provide impetus to the implementation of the Berlin Process in the WB. The leaders of the countries that joined the initiative made it clear from the outset that it was intended to push forward the advancement of the free movement of goods, capital, people and services, or the four freedoms upon which the European internal market is built. It was to be focused solely on developing further economic integration in the region.

Regional cooperation initiatives have been perceived by the European Union as being a tool for peace and security in the WB.¹ Despite the fact that there have been dozens of regional initiatives involving the WB in the last three decades,² the Open Balkan as an internal initiative of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, drew significant attention. While the emphasis was placed on bringing the Western Balkans closer economically, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo were not part of the initiative. This sparked immediate criticism for the exclusivity of such an initiative from the opposition in the three founding states, and from the remaining WB states not included in the project. Precisely because other initiatives with a focus on economic integration of the region, such as CEFTA or REA, had been created in the past, the need of having yet another initiative on this matter was going to be analysed thoroughly by the media in the WB countries.

The participating states emphasized that the Open Balkan, as its name implied, was open to all WB countries and non-member states could become part of it based on their political will. Open Balkan was seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with the lack of progress of the Berlin Process. In October 2019, just one month before the first Mini-Schengen summit,

¹ Policy Report, Balkan Policy Research Group, January 2021, www.balkansgroup.org.

² These include: South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) 1996; Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) 2006; Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) 2008; Brdo-Brijuni Process (2013); Berlin Process (2014); Regional Economic Area (REA), established by the Berlin Process in 2017; Common Regional Market (CRM), established by the Berlin Process in 2020.

Albania and North Macedonia received another negative response regarding the start of membership negotiations, which was also condemned by the leaders of the EU institutions.³ The lack of progress in the EU accession process for Albania and North Macedonia seemed to give rise to an initiative⁴ that was to intensify meetings and agreements in the years to come.

By July 2022, Albania and North Macedonia would officially start accession negotiations with the EU. In June 2023, after the arrest of three Kosovo police officers by Serbia, the Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama publicly stated that the relations of Albania with Serbia from that moment on were dedicated only to the episode of the arrest of the Kosovo police officers, implying that without a solution to the crisis between Kosovo and Serbia, there would be no communication with Serbia and there would be no further meeting within the Open Balkan framework.⁵ Just a month later, Rama would declare Open Balkan had achieved its goal, and it was time to focus on the Berlin Process summit to be held in October in Tirana, for the first time outside the EU borders.⁶

After Rama's comment, different important media started referring to the Open Balkan in the past tense, considering it the end of the initiative.⁷ Interestingly, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić declared that he did not believe that Rama had made such a statement.⁸ Rama's absence at the Wine Vision fair by Open Balkan in Serbia in November 2023, where he only conveyed a video message of greetings for the participants, further raised questions about the continuation or discontinuation of the initiative.

³ J. Rankin, *EU failure to open membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia condemned*, "The Guardian", 18 October 2019, www.theguardian.com.

⁴ E. Muminović, *Mini-Schengen, Regional Economic Area and Common Regional Market: What is what?*, European Western Balkans, 15 December 2020, www.europeanwesternbalkans.com.

⁵ J. Delia-Kaci, *Rama: Pa kthimin e tre policëve në Kosovë, s' mund të shtensionohet situata në veri*, "Radio Evropa e Lire", 23 June 2023, www.evropaelire.org.

⁶ Rama: *Ballkani i Hapur e kreu misionin, para kemi Procesin e Berlinit*, "Euronews Albania", 1 July 2023, www.euronews.al.

⁷ J. Delia-Kaci, *Pse përfundoi Ballkani i Hapur dhe çfarë prodhoi?*, "Radio Evropa e Lire", 5 June 2023, www.evropaelire.org.

⁸ "Ballkani i Hapur e kreu misionin", *Vuçiç vë në dyshim deklaratën e Ramës: Nuk besoj se e ka thënë, uroj ta takoj së shpejti*, "Balkanweb". 2 July 2023, www.balkanweb.com.

Reactions to the Open Balkan initiative

Open Balkan has been the subject of debates both within the participating states and beyond since its inception. Despite the insistence of the leaders of the Western Balkan states involved that the initiative primarily has an economic focus, its interpretation has faced criticism from various political parties and political actors.

In Albania, the opposition vehemently opposed Open Balkan, arguing that there should have been a more comprehensive discussion involving all stakeholders to consider all aspects of the initiative. Protests, specially convened discussions on the initiative, and parliamentary sessions were used by the Albanian opposition to label Open Balkan as an anti-national endeavor aimed at undermining EU initiatives in the region. In December 2021, Sali Berisha, former Prime Minister and a key figure of the opposition, organized a protest against the initiative, considering the Open Balkan a project aiming to establish Serbian hegemony in the region.⁹ The Albanian opposition viewed Open Balkan as a Serbo-Russian plan, alleging that it omitted Kosovo, thus redrawing maps of the region without Kosovo as an independent state. Economic arguments were also presented by the Albanian opposition, suggesting that they believed the initiative would not benefit the Albanian economy. On different occasions, Berisha has referred to George Soros as the ‘godfather’ of the initiative and called on the United States to halt Soros’ policies in the Western Balkans.¹⁰

In North Macedonia the initiative faced also strong opposition. The key opposition grouping VMRO-DPMNE blocked the approval of several laws related to Open Balkan in parliamentary committees under their control. Even within the Albanian opposition parties in North Macedonia, criticism of Open Balkan closely mirrored that of Kosovo. Key political

⁹ I.Vata, *Protestë e thirrur nga Berisha kundër “Ballkanit të Hapur, “ATA”*, 20 December 2021, www.ata.gov.al.

¹⁰ *Berisha: I call on the US to stop all Soros's policy in the Balkans*, “TiranaPost”, 20 December 2021, www.tiranapost.al.

parties and figures within the Albanian opposition in North Macedonia considered from the very beginning the initiative a Serbo-Russian project.¹¹

In Serbia, the initiative was met with greater enthusiasm compared to other participating countries. In cases where it faced criticism from the opposition, the critiques were often tied to concerns about the creation of a Greater Albania under the umbrella of Open Balkan.¹² Serbia, being the country with the largest economy in the region, was expected by analysts¹³ to have a more significant influence within Open Balkan. Interestingly, the fear of Serbian dominance in the region has not been expressed when states discussed economic integration under the Berlin Process.

Despite changes in Kosovo's leadership after the start of the initiative, opposition to joining Open Balkan remained largely unchanged. The only moment Kosovo seemed to consider entering the initiative was after the meeting between Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti and President Vučić at the White House in 2020, where, in the presence of U.S. President Donald Trump, they signed the Washington Agreement, which included Kosovo's entrance in the initiative. However, subsequent political changes, including the replacement of Prime Minister Hoti with Prime Minister Albin Kurti, a strong opponent of Open Balkan, hindered Kosovo's progress in joining the initiative. In general, in Kosovo there was a consensus between politicians, analysts and the public that such an initiative was not in the interest of the state.¹⁴ It was difficult to find feasible to participate in an initiative that did not recognize the reality of an independent Kosovo and lacked involvement from trusted external actors to ensure it did not favor one party or another.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, representatives of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina joined those who suspected the Open Balkan might eventually lead to a second Yugoslavia with Serbia at its center. Meanwhile, representatives of Republika Srpska supported the

¹¹ Z. Haxhiu, "Ballkani i Hapur" kryetëmë në Maqedoni, opozita shqiptare e quan projekt serbo-rus, "21TV", 17 July 2023, www.tv21.tv.

¹² Serbia në promovim të Ballkanit të Hapur, "Portalb", 19 July 2023, www.portalb.mk.

¹³ E.P. Joseph, *Open Balkan(s) is Not Just Unwise. It's Dangerous*, *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*, 15 June 2022, www.balkaninsight.com

¹⁴ *Policy Report*, Balkan Policy Research Group, op. cit.

initiative precisely because they considered it an initiative which benefits Serbia. While Montenegro has not joined the Open Balkan, it participated as an observer from 2022. Former President Milo Djukanović, during his tenure, strongly criticized the initiative, suggesting that it would lead to the disappearance of Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia.¹⁵ However, the current President Jakov Milatović holds a different view, considering Open Balkan as a complementary initiative to the Berlin Process. Former Prime Minister Dritan Abazović, a supporter of the initiative, stated in 2021, during his time as Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro, that the idea of Open Balkan was not well explained in the country.

Achievements

The agreements signed within the Open Balkan include free labor market access, cooperation to facilitate imports, exports, and the movement of goods, interconnection of schemes for the electronic identification of citizens. Despite interpretations regarding whether the initiative has ended, whether Albania will withdraw, or whether there will be a reconfiguration of the initiative with other members, at no point have any of the states withdrawn from the agreements signed so far. Supporters of the Open Balkan list as a success story the assistance the three countries have provided to each other during major natural disasters or other crises that have affected these countries since 2019. The establishment of so-called green lanes for the trucks of the Open Balkans countries at border crossings has eliminated triple controls, facilitating faster movement of agricultural and food products among the countries.

Several crises, including the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the ensuing energy crisis, would challenge the true nature of the Open Balkan. For this reason, it has been seen as an instrument to address emergencies in the region. Back in December 2021, at the Summit of the Open Balkan in Tirana, Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia signed, among

¹⁵ E. Elezi, 'Open Balkan' could worsen political problems in region, "DW", 18 August 2022, www.dw.com.

other things, an agreement on Food Security Mechanisms in the Western Balkans. The purpose of this agreement was to ensure cooperation among participants of the Open Balkan initiative in preventing and mitigating crises related to shortages of important products in the agricultural sector. When grain supply became a priority in Europe in 2022, Rama declared that the import of grain with Serbia was made possible through Open Balkan.¹⁶

Vučić also expressed similarly positive sentiments towards the initiative. When discussing about Serbia's reaction to the crisis, Vučić stated that Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia would help each other, and that the success of the Open Balkan would determine the strengthening of peace and stability in the region.¹⁷ Among the Open Balkan states, agreements were also signed to help address potential emergency energy crises and in various other fields, including agriculture and culture.

On 21 December 2021, at the Tirana Summit, several agreements were signed among the Open Balkan countries. Among other things, an agreement was signed on conditions for free access to the labor market in the Western Balkans and an agreement on the interconnection of schemes for electronic identification of citizens. The purpose of the electronic identification agreement was to enable citizens of the three Open Balkan countries to access electronic services of all three countries. This would be achieved through the implementation of the Open Balkan ID number, which would be issued to all citizens of these countries. With the Open Balkan ID, citizens would be able not only to move easily with this document in all three countries, but also to work in the private sector without a work permit, not need residence permits, and would have reduced costs for administrative services.

¹⁶ Rama: Pa "Ballkanin e Hapur", nuk do firmoseshin kurrë marrëveshjet e sotme, "ABC", 2 September 2022, www.abcnews.al.

¹⁷ Open Balkan 2022: A Crisis Response Tool – Winter 2022/23, "IFIMES", 5 October 2022, www.ifimes.org.

Despite Albanian Prime Minister Rama's statement that the implementation of the agreements would begin immediately after signing,¹⁸ and further statements by other leaders predicting that the Open Balkan ID would be implemented by 2023,¹⁹ the actual implementation has not been as straightforward to realize. After Rama declared that the mission of Open Balkan is fulfilled, it is clear that the dedicated ID will not be implemented in Albania as a product of the Open Balkan initiative. This probably will impact the whole implementation of the ID in Serbia and North Macedonia as well. Although the agreements for the ID have been made in the context of the Open Balkan, it is possible though to have them implemented or reframed at a second moment and under a different umbrella.

Regardless the insistence of the leaders of the Open Balkan countries to view it solely from an economic perspective, the political interpretation of the initiative has been prevalent, as highlighted above. The formation of it came at a time when it seemed that the process of integrating Western Balkan countries into the EU had stalled. Dissatisfaction, as a result of a lack of concrete progress in the integration processes, was clearly reflected in the statements of the governments that were part of the initiative. Open Balkan has been seen in this context, as a signal from a group of Western Balkan states that they have reached a higher level of maturity²⁰ and to show that they need a clearer vision for the region's integration.

It should be noted that the European Union, as well as the United States, have supported the initiative, seeing it as complementary to the Berlin Process. The U.S. Special Envoy to the Balkans, Gabriel Escobar said that the United States supports initiatives that aims to integrate further economically the region and as long as such initiatives are open to all the countries of the Western Balkans.²¹ While statements from high-ranking EU officials were

¹⁸ Rama, Zaev and Vučić sign multiple agreements at the Open Balkan summit in Albania, "European Western Balkans", 21 December 2021, www.europeanwesternbalkans.com.

¹⁹ Single Toll Collection for Trucks and Economy from July 21 – "Open Balkan ID" by September at the Latest, Corridor 10 Agreed to Go to Skopje and Greece, "Ekapija", 17 July 2023, www.ekapija.com.

²⁰ 2022 Open Balkan: The future belongs to the peoples of the Balkans, "IFIMES", 6 July 2022, www.ifimes.org.

²¹ Gabriel Escobar: We support the "Open Balkan", "Sarajevo Times", 8 December 2021, www.sarajevotimes.com.

in support of the Open Balkan, some analysts²² have seen the initiative as being perceived by the EU as a potential threat to duplicate the Berlin Process.

Caught amidst criticisms, a series of agreements, some of which have begun to be implemented, and some still in the preparatory phase, the progress of Open Balkan is yet to be seen. Political tensions have shown they can impact directly an initiative created in an economic dimension. For the moment, the integrative developments in the region in 2022 and 2023, including holding the Berlin Process in Tirana and Germany's significant engagement to give the process a fresh impetus, may have brought a dose of missing energy and enthusiasm towards EU integration, making Open Balkan not as crucial for some countries, such as Albania. In these circumstances, without a consistent reduction in tensions in Northern Kosovo, it seems difficult for Albania to return to being a prominent player in the initiative, as it was just a short time ago.

Lessons learned

It is important to draw some lessons on how initiatives such as the Open Balkan can better fulfil their mission. Open Balkan, with all the criticisms, comments, and reactions it encountered, yields several valuable lessons not only for the Western Balkan states but also for others. First and foremost, any initiative aiming to be regional should be created or launched with the consent of all parties from the outset. The Open Balkan suffered from the absence of the three Western Balkan states in the beginning.

The announcement of the initiative was also surrounded by doubts. Given the existence of other similar initiatives, which were not only all-encompassing but also created by the European Union or with the participation of external actors in relation to the Western Balkans, it seemed not clear the need for a new initiative that essentially recreated an

²²"Open Balkan" or the Berlin Process: Why do they in the EU think that there is no place for both initiatives?, "Kosovo-Online" 16 September 2023, www.kosovo-online.com.

externally established initiative, this time without the involvement of all actors. Many of the criticisms came in this direction.

Open Balkan was articulated by the leaders of the member countries as an initiative focused solely on economic integration among states. In this regard, it seems that the pronounced political differences between states are impossible to ignore. Therefore, any attempt to create an economic initiative without considering political divisions will always be accompanied by contradictions and attacks that hinder further advancement of the initiative.

In the case of the Berlin Process, the presence of major EU member states overseeing the entire process was seen as sufficient assurance for Western Balkan states to prevent political conflicts from interfering with the process. However, the absence of an arbitrator, as in the case of the Open Balkan, easily created room for political conflicts to intervene in an economic initiative.

Lastly, from day one, the initiative has been seen as inadequately conveyed. Clear communication of the achievements and successes of Open Balkan should have been articulated in a way that made it increasingly difficult to argue that this initiative was detrimental to the states that were part in it. Meanwhile, the lack of transparent communication led to the opposite. The fact that Rama announces that the mission of Open Balkan is fulfilled, and Vučić speaks enthusiastically of its continuation, is indicative of the lack of coherence among the leaders of the initiative, consequently undermining its image. The Open Balkan, in its original version, namely with Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia, is unlikely to have a long journey ahead, given the developments in the second half of 2023. However, a potential entry of countries like Montenegro into the initiative could give a different dynamic to the project and reshape it, opening the path for its continuation.

Regional initiatives in the Western Balkans have been viewed over the last three decades as an opportunity to bring the countries of the region closer together, thus becoming a

guarantee for more peace and stability. The Open Balkan initiative offers valuable lessons in the importance of having an inclusive approach and transparent communication in fostering trust among neighboring states, while building regional projects. It also exemplifies how political crises can impact initiatives that are primarily created for economic purposes.