

MARKETING OPEN BALKAN" AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE EU

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Abstract

The "Open Balkan" initiative aims to fill the empty space until the desired entry into the EU, but it cannot and will not be a substitute for EU membership. If Kosovo, BiH and Montenegro remain ambivalent on the issue of this initiative, it will be their big geopolitical mistake. Unfortunately, it will be another one of the big mistakes made in history due to the lack of vision, the existence of political myopia of limited political leadership and the dominance of the particular political interest. The "Open Balkan" initiative is a good project because it is about the idea of integration, not about disintegration. It is about an initiative where there will be open instead of closed state borders, about facilitation instead of complicating procedures, about cooperation instead of antagonism and hostility, about progressivity instead of backwardness and rudimentaryness. It is about an excellent and modern inevitable initiative that is strongly supported by the EU and the USA.

Keywords: marketing open Balkan, EU, European future, EU region and single market

JEL classification: M16, F15, F51, O52

INTRODUCTION

One of the key practical issues that will facilitate the cooperation of our companies with European companies is related to access to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA). If the Macedonian economy becomes part of SEPA, the benefits for companies will mean reduced costs for cross-border payments for the benefit of businesses, strengthening trade and increasing the competitiveness of companies by reducing transaction fees, potential savings of 500 million euros by reducing the price of transaction costs, increasing the speed of payments, but also reducing the informal economy through simple cashless payments.⁸⁷ North Macedonia has already submitted its pre-application for SEPA membership in April, and it is expected that these benefits will become available to our companies in the next year.

The following example refers to the green corridors that were established during the Covid-19 pandemic to facilitate the movement of medicines and basic goods within the Western Balkans, but soon an initiative was launched to expand them to all border crossings that connect the region with the EU⁸⁸. Due to the lack of a legal basis on the part of the EU member states for the exchange of data with the non-member countries with which they border, green corridors began to be established at some of the key border crossings that connect the region with the EU, but only in one direction - the measures provided for by the New Growth Plan allow a full exchange of data, which will allow a significant reduction of the waiting time, but also mutual recognition of the powers of authorized economic operators.

The benefits of this for our companies will be huge - only in 2023, the permanent green corridors will already significantly contribute to reducing the waiting time at the border crossings, which will contribute to saving 20 years of waiting time at the border crossings on the basis of the intraregional green corridors. With fully functional green corridors and border crossings that connect the region with the EU, reducing the time of waiting at the border for three hours would be similar to reducing taxes by about 2 percent in all economies.⁸⁹

In addition, green corridors will contribute to ensuring the continuous functioning of supply chains, but will also contribute to stimulating trade and making the region more attractive to investors.

1. "MARKETING OPEN BALKAN" AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE EU AND FEAR OF POLITICAL DOMINATION IN SERBIA?!

Due to the current situation on the territory of the countries of the Western Balkans, the "islands" and "reserves" of Kosovo, Montenegro and BiH are legitimate, but not completely justified. Today many are asking the question. Why would better and more efficient regional connectivity threaten the accession of Western Balkan countries to the EU? Why are the countries of this region unable and unwilling to build better relations and better economic and political cooperation?

Is the initiative not an alternative to the failure of market promotion on the road to the EU, or is it an initiative that will really open the borders of the Balkans from 2023?! Many questions, and so far few answers and understanding.

⁸⁷ Gjorgi Tonovski, Temelko Risteski, Vesna Sijic, Challenges for the Macedonian Society on the path to the European Union, The Teacher of the future, Knowledge International Journal, Vol 31 No 5 (2019)

⁸⁸ Stevan RAPAIĆ, „Mali Šengen kao mogućnost nove regionalne ekonomske integracije”, UDK: 339.92(497), Biblid: 0025-8555, 72(2020) Vol. LXXII, br. 3, str. 566–594. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP2003566R>. Izdavač Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Beograd, 2020.

⁸⁹ Qorraj, Gazmend, „Towards European Union or Regional Economic Area: Western Balkans at crossroads”, *Naše gospodarstvo / Our Economy*, Vol. 64, Issue 1, 2018.

The perception that the "Open Balkan" is an alternative to the EU is wrong. The main goal of the "Open Balkan" is to create and improve the economy and economic relations between the countries of the region, without borders, without border restrictions and in the whole free trade and marketing perspective of propaganda, advertising, development of promotional relations between countries and a good concept of the quality of products and services.⁹⁰ This initiative is the only one that at this time represents a "salvation" for the countries in the region while the EU enlargement moratorium lasts. The "Open Balkan" project is a great opportunity, but also hope, responsibility and obligation to create a better and different future for this part of Europe. "Open Balkan" should be our idea, that is, our common answer to our problems that no one brought to us from outside.¹²

Regional cooperation and connectivity are key factors and not an alternative for Western Balkan countries on the road to EU membership. Cooperation and connectivity at the regional level are the key conditions for prosperity on the road to the EU. Every initiative for regional cooperation is of vital importance for the process of integration. No individual action or initiative in any country can have a greater and better effect than a joint initiative with promotional marketing tools. The fear of political domination of Serbia in the initiative is illusory and is an unconvincing justification that has no logical basis. Albania and North Macedonia are members of the NATO Alliance, and this is a satisfactory and serious mechanism for their protection and prevention of Serbian domination.⁹¹

Allegations and fears that in such a regional integration, the "strong Serbian economy" will destroy the economy of Macedonia and Albania are also unfounded and unsustainable due to the fact that upon entering the EU, these two countries will face even stronger economies like those of Germany, France, Italy, and the economies of other EU member states.⁹²

Public rumors and labels that the Open Balkans initiative is the creation of a new Yugoslavia led by Serbia as a dominant state are unsustainable because this initiative does not provide for the creation of an administrative union between the Balkan states, nor the determination of a new capital, but simply works for regional cooperation similar to that in the EU with full and due preservation and respect for the state sovereignty of each member state in the initiative.⁹³ Kosovo should be the most interested in membership in this initiative, because in this way it would directly enter into an alliance with Serbia on an equal basis, which on the other hand means an indirect and small-door recognition of The "separation" of Pristina from Belgrade. Also, the "Open Balkan" initiative could have a direct effect on the improvement of relations between Kosovo and BiH, considering that until now BiH has not recognized the independence of Kosovo.

2. "OPEN BALKAN" FOR THE EUROPEAN MARKETING FUTURE OF THE REGION

Regardless of all the obstacles, criticism and disagreements that were directed at Prime Ministers Rama and Zaev as well as President Aleksandar Vučić, they met again on July 29, 2021 in Skopje at the Economic Forum for Regional Cooperation held within the framework of the regional initiative "Mini-Schengen". At this forum, the initiative was given a new name, "Open Balkan" and a new dynamic was established at work.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Dragan Đukanović, Branislav Đorđević „Mali Šengen” – koncept, implementacija i kontroverze, UDK: 339.92(497) Pregledni rad Bibliid: 0025-8555, 72(2020), Vol. LXXII, br. 3, str. 595–618, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP2003595D>, Međunarodni problem ISSN 0025-8555 UDK 327, MP, 72, (2020), br. 3, str. 606, Izdavač Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Beograd, 2020.

⁹¹ Ilcho Cvetanoski, North Macedonia in the "mini Schengen" looking glass - analiza, <https://www.balkanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/North-Macedonia/North-Macedonia-in-the-mini-Schengen-looking-glass-198450>

⁹² Minić, Jelica, „Regionalni mehanizmi u procesu proširenja EU na Zapadni Balkan”, Spoljnopolitičke sveske, br. 1, 2019

⁹³ Лотар Алтман, <https://www.danas.rs/politika/altman-nece-biti-velike-koristi-od-promene-imena-mini-sengen>

⁹⁴ .Norbert Mappes-Niediek, <https://www.dw.com/hr/balkansko-%C4%8Dudoili-%C5%A1ibicarski-trik/a-51190819> 10.11.2019, 10.11.2019

At the forum in Skopje, the three political leaders fully agreed with the statement that the citizens of the Western Balkans do not have time to wait for the resolution of internal problems and disagreements in the EU, and therefore jointly signed several documents that should improve economic cooperation, trade, employment and protection from natural disasters in these three countries. We are working on one interstate agreement and two memorandums (Interstate agreement on cooperation, protection and rescue from catastrophe; Memorandum of understanding and cooperation in order to facilitate the import, export and movement of goods in the Western Balkans and Memorandum of understanding and cooperation with regard to free access to the labor market in the Western Balkans) which should greatly facilitate the life of the citizens and the business community of the Western Balkans.⁹⁵

At the 4th Summit of leaders of the "Open Balkan" initiative held in Ohrid on June 8-09, 2022, cooperation between these three countries was deepened through the adoption and signing of a new agreement and three memorandums of understanding and cooperation, namely: Interstate cooperation agreement in the Western Balkans in the field of mutual recognition of diplomas and scientific titles issued by higher education institutions and other authorized institutions; Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the area on tourism; Memorandum on cooperation in culture and Memorandum on understanding and cooperation on tax administrations in the Western Balkans.

Effective fight against crime and corruption and accountability and punishment of all political elites involved in these illegal activities.

If the initial idea of the "Mini Schengen" initiative is to be a regional economic zone and the first step towards the establishment of a higher level of economic integration, it is necessary to urgently develop and adopt an action plan for the creation and functioning of a new customs union as a basis for the functioning of the common market in the Western Balkans.⁹⁶

The dynamics of the implementation of the tasks set in the "Open Balkan" initiative must fully comply with the key strategic documents of the EU, the Berlin process and the Multi-Year Action Plan for the Regional Economic Area (MAP REA) as part of this process.

In the meantime, it is necessary to determine the priorities for the settlement of bilateral disputes between the countries of the Western Balkans, as a prerequisite for successful, efficient and prosperous regional cooperation.

In order for the "Open Balkan" initiative to be fully supported by the EU members, this region needs to show that its goal is not to be a product of the EU, and for that, serious and concrete reforms are needed in each of the Balkan countries in almost all areas, starting with labor legislation, especially in the payment of claims and respect for the rights of workers, which would be true for everyone in the region, in the area of immigration and customs policy, and finally to finalize the long-started ones. judicial reforms in almost all Balkan countries.⁹⁷

If all the countries of the Western Balkans accede to this initiative, it is necessary to urgently harmonize the various political goals, both between the countries in the region, and within some of the countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, where one entity (Federation of BiH) is in favor of joining the NATO alliance, while another entity (Republika Srpska) opposes it.

⁹⁵ „Đukanović o inicijativi Mali Šengen“, Tanjug, 19. januar 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fv71LqbPCaA>, 22/05/2020

⁹⁶ Regionalna saradnja na Zapadnom Balkanu, Komparativna Analiza Regionalnog Ekonomskog Područja, „mini-šengena“ i Zajedničkog Regionalnog Tržišta, - Politički izveštaj, Balkan police reseach group, Januar 2021.

⁹⁷ 7. <https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/nuland-and-alexander-soros-came-up-with-the-mini-schengen-idea-kosovan-paper-claims>

3. ECONOMIC CONNECTION AND SINGLE MARKET

Undoubtedly, the biggest gain and driver of the EU's economic development is the single market of half a billion consumers, through which the EU became a trade superpower. The EU's single market allows free movement of goods, services, citizens and capital without taxes, quotas and visas and free transfer of capital for individuals and legal entities.⁹⁸ The common market sets common values and standards, helps companies grow and supports innovation. The common market requires everyone to produce according to the same rules and standards, which creates consumer confidence in the quality of products, as well as confidence in the production process from the aspect of preserving the rights of workers and from the aspect of environmental protection. On the other hand, the single market is a chance for companies, especially small companies, to attract new customers and investments in order to grow further. This is very significant also from the aspect of the add-on chains that provide easy access to new add-ons. At the same time, the single market is part of the answer to global problems, such as climate change, through the development of the circular economy and the use of the benefits of the digital revolution, as well as innovative solutions.⁹⁹

David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantages said that everyone should produce what they have comparative advantages for, in order to achieve greater productivity through such specialization and reduce unit costs. On the other hand, according to Michael Porter's theory of competitive advantages, innovations, human capital, infrastructure and financial capital are seen as the driving force of growth. Looking through the prism of our economy, our enterprises entering the European market will be able to use the benefits of offering comparative advantages and achieving economies of scale during production, but they will also be encouraged to improve their products, to innovate, which will make them more competitive.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, the Government will contribute to improving the competitiveness of our economy, encouraging investments and accelerating economic growth by investing in infrastructure improvement, strengthening human capital, as well as supporting investments and innovations in the private sector.

Of course, I would add good governance here, both in terms of the rule of law, and in terms of strengthening the capacity of institutions and improving the quality of public services. According to these premises, the National Plan for Acceleration of Economic Growth contains mechanisms to support competitiveness and innovation of domestic enterprises, by providing access to finance and funds, as well as other tools to support exports and the development of companies.¹⁰¹ When it comes to regional connectivity, it should be mentioned that the Western Balkans has seen significant economic and social progress in the past two decades, and that with a population of 17.6 million citizens, the market is a challenge for the small developing economies that make it up. The initiative to connect in one market has been going on for years and certain steps have been taken. However, taking into account the benefits that can come from the further integration of markets in the region, the EU raises the question of a single market in the Western Balkans as a pillar in the plan for the development of the region. Access to new customers, strengthening and access to new supply chains, reducing export costs and strengthening the competitiveness of products in the region, increasing the attractiveness of foreign investors, as the only guard - all these factors would affect the economic strengthening of the region and the stimulation of economic growth.

⁹⁸ .Norbert Mappes-Niediek, <https://www.dw.com/hr/balkansko-%C4%8Dudoili-%C5%A1ibicarski-trik/a-51190819> 10.11.2019, 10.11.2019

⁹⁹ <https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/nuland-and-alexander-soros-came-up-with-the-mini-schengen-idea-kosovan-paper-claims/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/sto-se-krije-iza-nove-politicke-inicijative-mini-verzija-eu-ili-put-prema-politickoj-dominaciji-srbije-15094780>, 14.08.2021

¹⁰¹ Bjelić, Predrag i Dragutinović Mitrović, Radmila, Unapređenje pozicije Srbije u okviru „CEFTA 2006“, Fondacija za razvoj ekonomske nauke (FREN), Beograd, 2018.

Therefore, as in the case of the single market of the EU, the benefits of connection in the region should not be neglected, on the contrary, they are an important factor in the further development of the countries in the Western Balkans, as well as a condition for continuing on the European path. From the aspect of national policy, multilateral initiatives for connecting in the region have always been accepted with enthusiasm, while from the aspect of supporting companies for placement on the regional market, as in the previous case with the European market, we have more tools with which we would support them to enter it.

European integrations are my constant inspiration and as an author. Many times I have reviewed, both through economic theory and empirical analysis, the benefits of the common European market, the importance of membership for foreign investors, the promotion of competitiveness of domestic companies, the improvement of business conditions, the importance of pre-accession funds for the economy and living conditions, etc. "Bringing Europe home" has always been the axiom by which I was guided and invested in the creation and implementation of policies, keeping in mind the ultimate goal of integration, which is to ensure economic progress and well-being for our citizens. In this direction, our plan for accelerating economic growth is based on the same premise and has the same goal. With this in mind, and intrigued by the newly presented plan of the EU for the Western Balkans, I devoted this column to a comparative analysis of the two plans and the strategy that should be implemented, as well as the synergy that can result from the ongoing implementation of the national and European development plan.¹⁰² First of all, if we analyze the structure of the EU plan, it is aimed at economic strengthening and connecting the region, improving the competitiveness of the economy and increasing investments. If you look at the national growth acceleration plan, you can conclude that a large part of the structure is the same as the goals. Through the implementation of the two plans, the support of the European Union and the clear perspective for the final goal, "bringing Europe home", that is, ensuring the well-being of the citizens, will not be left behind.¹⁰³ The benefits of this for our companies will be huge - we will give as an example only some of the key areas identified as part of the first pillar of the Growth Plan.

One of the key practical issues that will facilitate the cooperation of our companies with European companies is related to access to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA). If the Macedonian economy becomes part of SEPA, the benefits for companies will mean reduced costs for cross-border payments for the benefit of businesses, strengthening trade and increasing the competitiveness of companies by reducing transaction fees, potential savings of 500 million euros by reducing the price of transaction costs, increasing the speed of payments, but also reducing the informal economy through simple cashless payments. North Macedonia has already submitted its pre-application for SEPA membership in April, and it is expected that these benefits will become available to our companies in the next year.¹⁰⁴ The following example refers to the green corridors that were established during the Covid-19 pandemic to facilitate the movement of medicines and basic goods within the Western Balkans, but soon an initiative was launched to expand them to all border crossings that connect the region with the EU. Due to the lack of a legal basis on the part of the EU member states for the exchange of data with the non-member countries with which they border, green corridors began to be established at some of the key border crossings that connect the region with the EU, but only in one direction - the measures provided for by the New Growth Plan allow a full exchange of data, which will allow a significant reduction of the waiting time, but also mutual recognition of the powers of authorized economic operators.

¹⁰²<https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/kurti-ne-se-prikluchavam-na-otvoren-balkan-se-dodeka-srbija-ne-go-priznae-kosovo/>, 14.09.2021

¹⁰³ Democracy for Development and Kosovo Foundation for Open Society „Mini-Šengen i Regionalna Saradnja: Šest zemlje su potrebne za saradnju na Zapadnom Balkanu“, www.d4d-ks.com.

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/mini-schengen-not-an-option-for-now/>

The benefits of this for our companies will be huge - only in 2023, the permanent green corridors will already significantly contribute to reducing the waiting time at the border crossings, which will contribute to saving 20 years of waiting time at the border crossings on the basis of the intraregional green corridors.¹⁰⁵

With fully functional green corridors and border crossings that connect the region with the EU, reducing the time of waiting at the border for three hours would be similar to reducing taxes by about 2 percent in all economies.

In addition, green corridors will contribute to ensuring the continuous functioning of supply chains, but will also contribute to stimulating trade and making the region more attractive to investors.



¹⁰⁵ Qorraj, Gazmend, „Towards European Union or Regional Economic Area: Western Balkans at crossroads”, *Naše gospodarstvo / Our Economy*, Vol. 64, Issue 1, 2018.

CONCLUSION

With the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, new opportunities for growth are opening up for the economies of the region, which are based on the possibility of access to the EU single market and the possibility of unrestricted access to the four freedoms on which the EU single market is based (free movement of goods, services, capital and people).

The request for such gradual access by the private sector of the region was raised more than 6 years ago, through the initiatives of the Comoros Investment Forum. Such access means a change in the basic paradigm in the relationship between the European Union and the countries of the Western Balkans, as candidates for membership in the Union," Stojanovski said at the press conference.

The principle of inclusive expansion, formulated as a request of the business community in 2018, is based on placing the countries of the Western Balkans in the position of future members of the Union, and not as simple trading partners with whom the Union has increased exchange. In addition, this principle means a departure from the classic format in which the accession negotiations for the accession of a country to the European Union are set - that the possibility of access to the Single Market is opened only when all formal legal steps for the accession of a country to the Union are completed.

The need to reduce the gap in economic convergence is more than obvious - according to the reports of the European Commission, the economies of the Western Balkans have not yet reached the level of a functional market economy, capable of withstanding the market forces and the competitive pressure that comes primarily from the European Union. Despite the positive changes in the past period, the average GDP per capita in the region remains almost a quarter of the average of the 27 EU members and approximately 40% of that of the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Despite the proximity and other favorable factors for promoting trade, the share of intra-regional exports in the region is only 14%. The EU remains the dominant export market for the Western Balkans, and for most of the region's economies, exports to the EU are 5 times higher than those in CEFTA countries. The main trade barriers are administrative and customs procedures, security requirements and certificates, including sanitary and phytosanitary measures and technical trade barriers.

According to the European Commission, it is necessary to actively work on the conclusion of mutual agreements to remove these barriers, as well as the introduction of the CE mark for the European certificate of conformity in order to comply with the EU standards for quality and safety of products.

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