

OPEN BALKAN - A REAL DEVELOPMENT MARKETING OPPORTUNITY OR A POLITICAL POTENTIAL FOR PREVENTED DEBATE FOR NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE EU

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Abstract

Despite several subsequent recommendations of the European Commission to start the pre-accession negotiations of the Republic of Macedonia and Albania with the EU, this did not happen until the beginning of July 2022. The opening of negotiations for these two Balkan states at the end of 2019 was openly opposed by French President Emmanuel Macron, as well as by the Republic of Bulgaria in relation to Republic Macedonia. Aware that accession to the EU will not happen in a short time, the prime ministers of the of Macedonia and Albania and the president of the of Serbia signed the Declaration on the establishment of "Mini Schengen" in October 2019 in Novi Sad. This initiative aimed to finally make the Western Balkans function as a region where free trade would take place and to create a common regional market. The regional initiative "Mini Schengen" at the Economic Forum for Regional Cooperation held at the end of July 2021 in Skopje received a new name "Open Balkans". All the countries of the Western Balkans have a problem with historical prejudices, with the rule of law, with the fight against crime and corruption and the protection of the freedoms and rights of man and citizen. If free trade is established between all the countries of the Western Balkans, it can lead to the strengthening of democracy and the rule of law in these countries. The solution of the mentioned problems will bring all the countries of the Western Balkans one step closer to full membership in the EU and to the realization of the basic four freedoms on which the EU is based (freedom of movement of people, goods, services and capital).

Keywords: *integration, region, free trade, negotiations, regional market, initiative and marketing.*

JEL classification: *F15, F51, M16, K38*

INTRODUCTION

As a result of the unrealized promises for the accession of the countries of the Western Balkans to the EU, as well as due to the appearance of "fatigue from the enlargement of the EU", former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier launched the "Berlin Process" initiative in 2014. The initiative was an attempt to revive the European perspective of the Balkan region by facilitating regional cooperation between the countries of this region. (Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Severna Makedonija, Crna Gora and Serbia) in order to help these countries to fulfill the criteria for joining the EU faster and easier. In addition to Germany, France, Croatia, Italy, Poland, Austria and several other EU members were involved in this process, which have serious (political and economic) cooperation and communication with the Western Balkan countries.

At the III Summit of the Berlin Process held in 2016, it was stated that the future of the countries of the Western Balkans lies in the EU through economic cooperation within the borders of this region, and therefore, in 2017, European Commissioner Johannes Khan proposed the creation of a common market for the Western Balkans, which would function according to the same principles as the internal market of the EU, at the Summit of the States of the Western Balkans held in Sarajevo. At the last summit of the Berlin process held online on July 5, 2021, the problems facing this region were highlighted and emphasized. the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, the situation in BiH and the dispute between Bulgaria and the Republic of Northern Macedonia.

Two conclusions were drawn from this virtual summit hosted by Germany. The first is that the future of the Western Balkans is in a united Europe, and the second, the full integration of the countries of the Western Balkans into the EU should be a natural process, and the region should become a pillar of long-term peace and stability in this part of the world and Europe.

With all this in mind, the President of the Republic of Serbia and the Prime Ministers of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania signed the Declaration on the establishment of "Mini Schengen" in Novi Sad on October 10, 2019. This initiative was originally supposed to be a free economic zone between Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo, which Montenegro and BiH would later join. towards the realization of the four main European freedoms.

Regional political and economic cooperation are the key elements for economic progress and growth of all countries in this part of Europe, which would lead to a higher level of cross-border and multilateral cooperation and the initiative for joint investments, as well as to a higher level of connection between the citizens of these countries.

1. MARKETING CONTROVERSIES ON THE INITIATIVE "MINI SCHENGEN" ("OPEN BALKANS")

In order to promote this idea as a real regional idea, but also to make it more effective in practice, Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania insisted and insist that the rest of the Western Balkan countries join the initiative. Unlike the other previous regional initiatives that included all six Balkan countries from the beginning, the "Open Balkan" initiative was unsuccessful in this regard. It failed to establish itself and gain wider political support as a separate and original indigenous initiative.¹¹⁴

The reason for this is of course the political and other developments that took place during this period. On the membership negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia, as well as on the diplomatic initiative of Serbia, the countries that have recognized the independence of Kosovo should withdraw their decisions on recognition.

¹¹⁴ Minić, Jelica, „Regionalni mehanizmi u procesu proširenja EU na Zapadni Balkan“, Spoljnopolitičke sveske, br. 1, 2019.

Unfortunately, this initiative was adopted with great skepticism not only in Kosovo, but also in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Crna Gora. Political authorities of BiH and Montenegro saw this initiative as something "already seen", as one of the many ideas aimed at alleviating the disappointment caused by the postponement of the accession negotiations of Albania and North Macedonia with the EU. That is why these two countries, like Kosovo, were in a dilemma (and still are) whether to join the initiative, considering that it would slow down their already controversial movement towards full integration into the EU. After numerous offers, BiH accepted it. On the initiative of the action plan 2021-2024, Montenegro has not yet made a decisive statement, while Kosovo categorically rejects it.

The following facts must be kept in mind when gathering and writing about the "reserves" for the initiative. Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to its internal divisions and misunderstandings and way of functioning, is quite careful and moderate for now. According to the Dayton Agreement of 1995, when working on any strategic foreign policy initiative, all three entities (Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian) in BiH must give their consent to it, and in this situation it is almost impossible.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, in relation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Serbia is still quite unclear and contradictory, considering that high-ranking Serbian officials are constantly talking about the secession of the Republic of Serbia from Bosnia and Herzegovina and its unification with "Mother Serbia". In addition to the Criminal Code of BiH, which prohibits and punishes any denial of the genocide in Srebrenica, as well as the glorification of war criminals.¹¹⁶

The position of Montenegro in relation to this initiative is quite unclear and uncertain. Senior government officials from Montenegro attended the initiative meetings held in Ohrid and Tirana during 2020, claiming that they needed a little more time to study and analyze the implications that could affect the process of accession of Crna Gora to the EU.¹¹⁷ The Montenegrin authorities consider that as a small country, Crna Gora should not allow itself to divert its resources (intended for EU integration) to the deepening of some new regional initiatives. Montenegro has already fulfilled a significant part of what was planned and included in the "Open Balkan" initiative.

We are working on the fact that Montenegro has opened all 35 chapters in the negotiations with the EU, of which three chapters are temporarily closed. In this sense, it is ahead of Serbia and Turkey as well as other countries from the Western Balkans.¹¹⁸ As the second argument for the indecision to accede to the initiative, Crna Gora points out Serbia's attitude towards it as a sovereign and independent state. Namely in Serbia, but also more widely, Crna Gora is openly spoken of as a "second Serbian state" or "Serbian exit to the sea", thus publicly denying the sovereignty and state-cultural difference of Crna Gora from Serbia, and denying the special ethnic identity of Montenegrins.

The events surrounding the enthronement of the metropolitan of Montenegrin-Primorski Joanikie in the monastery of St. Petar Cetiński" on Cetinje in September 2021 further complicated the situation in view of making a decision on the accession of Montenegro to the "Open Balkan" initiative.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Bjelić, Predrag i Dragutinović Mitrović, Radmila, Unapređenje pozicije Srbije u okviru „CEFTA 2006“, Fondacija za razvoj ekonomske nauke (FREN), Beograd, 2018.

¹¹⁶ Qorraj, Gazmend, „Towards European Union or Regional Economic Area: Western Balkans at crossroads“, *Naše gospodarstvo / Our Economy*, Vol. 64, Issue 1, 2018.

¹¹⁷ Европска комисија - „Каква е макрорегионалната политика на ЕУ“, 2017, ISBN 978-92-79-76609-1 doi:10.2776/620271 KN-07-17-103-MK-N.

¹¹⁸ 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.

¹¹⁹ Regionalna saradnja na Zapadnom Balkanu, Komparativna Analiza Regionalnog Ekonomskog Područja, „mini-šengena“ i Zajedničkog Regionalnog Tržišta, - Politicki izvestaj, Balkan police reseach group, Januar 2021.

Regarding Kosovo, the Republic of Serbia still does not recognize the sovereignty and independence of Kosovo and still considers (only verbally and theoretically, but not de facto) that Kosovo is part of Serbia. Despite the non-recognition of Kosovo by the Republic of Serbia, President Aleksandar Vučić has repeatedly stated publicly that in relation to joining the initiative, recognition is irrelevant because it has nothing to do with regional cooperation and trade. On the other hand, Kosovar political leaders are strongly opposed to this idea, until the 2020 Washington Agreement, which agreed that Belgrade and Pristina will join the mini-Schengen zone. But, after the departure of Donald Trump from the position of the President of the USA, almost no one is talking about this agreement in Kosovo today, and the resistance to the "Open Balkans" is growing.

The Washington Agreement was concluded on September 4, 2020 at the White House. The resolution called on the government of Kosovo led by Prime Minister Albin Kurti to implement this agreement and prepare an action plan for its implementation. Only 24 deputies voted for the Resolution, and 57 abstained, and these were mainly deputies of Prime Minister Albin Kurti's "Self-Determination".¹²⁰ It is also necessary to note that the Kosovo authorities have not yet attended any meeting of this initiative, and have not signed the Memorandum to fight against COVID-19 adopted during the fall of 2021.

2. DOES THE INITIATIVE REPRESENT A DUPLICATION OF THE STARTED PROCESSES, A POLITICAL CIRCUS OR A NECESSITY?

The region of the Western Balkans has been burdened with various conflicts and misunderstandings, hatred, frustrations and other abnormalities for decades, and therefore any form of regional cooperation and connection is extremely welcome because it is one of the conditions for full membership in the EU. The ignorance of all the countries of the Western Balkans, the unsatisfactory and precisely defined goals and some other contradictions in the content of the Declaration on the foundation of the initiative could lead to "Open Balkan" being perceived as a political trick and a substitute for the delayed and uncertain membership of the Balkan countries in the EU.¹²¹ and creating an image of good-neighborly cooperation in the eyes of the EU. This position is supported by the fact that for this part of Europe there is an Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area, MAP-REA, established at the summit on July 12, 2017, within the framework of the Berlin process enabling this region to become *попривлечен за* investment and trade. This institution offers acceleration of the process of rapprochement with the EU and prosperity of the citizens of the Western Balkans. That's why critics of "Open Balkan" claim that its goals completely overlap with the goals of MAP REA action plan, which means that there is unnecessary duplication of already ongoing processes.

The second reason for pessimism about the "Open Balkan" initiative is the fact that, unlike the MAP REA plan, "Open Balkan" is in its initial phase and lacks mechanisms for coordination and implementation of the agreement. In order for the initiative to become a reality, a real and sustained strategy, indicators, measures are needed, as well as having sufficient financial resources and qualified administrative personnel, which are not currently available. The representatives of the Regional Cooperation Council, RCC (Regional Cooperation Council)¹⁴ claim that the "Open Balkan" initiative has brought certain political dynamics aimed mainly at the key goals of MAP REA and therefore propose several practical interventions in the economies of the countries of the Western Balkans that are currently fully integrated into the CRM system (Customer relationship management). CRM can direct and integrate all the programs that are part of the "Open Balkan" initiative, although it develops and many other areas such as marketing digital transformation, industry and innovation, etc.

¹²⁰Western Balkans 2019: The Balkan initiative for the 21st century - <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/western-balkans-2019-the-balkan-initiative-for-the-21st-century/4493>, Analiza – IFIMES

¹²¹ Prosirenje EU u jugoistocnoj Europi u doba pandemije, Mateo Bonomi (Rim), Albana Merja (Tirana), Terezija Tegelhofer (Berlin) i Dušan Reljić (Brisel) Politička analiza sačinjena na predlog Ditmira Bušatija, bivšeg ministra spoljnih poslova Albanije, izdavač: Friedrich Eberth Stiftung, Oktobar 2020. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/16971.pdf>

In this segment, it is necessary to ask the question why instead of the "Open Balkan" there is no work on the creation of a common regional market for which an agreement in principle was reached in 2020 under the closure of the Berlin process?

The common regional market implies the realization of all the goals as those of the "Open Balkan" in that it would include all the EU member states except the six countries of the Western Balkans.¹²² This should represent a serious and useful establishment of a wider economic marketing zone between the EU and the Western Balkans, with economic ties similar to those that the EU has with Iceland and Norway.

All these criticisms, dilemmas and opportunities and marketing promotion thoughts and views are answered by the joint statement of the leaders of the countries of the Western Balkans (except Kosovo) on the margins of the summit of the "Mini Schengen" initiative held in Ohrid on November 10, 2019.¹²³ In this statement, it is especially emphasized that it is necessary to respect all the permanent initiatives of the Multiannual Action Plan of the Regional Economic Area (MAP REA), CEFTA and the Transport Community of Southeast Europe. At this summit, a joint working group was formed, which has the obligation to prepare all the documents for the next meetings of the initiative, and the member states of the summit (Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, as well as representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro) have committed to provide funds (from their own sources and funds from international financial institutions) for the work of the initiative.

The joint working group has the task of giving its proposals and adopting the Multi-Year Action Plan for the Regional Economic Area (MAP REA 2). It is especially emphasized that there is a need for complete marketing and promotional complementarity of the initiative with the Regional Promotional Economic Area (REA), the Berlin process and the aspirations and goals of the EU, and that the "Open Balkans" should not be seen as a substitute for EU membership, but that the initiative is fully complementary to the aspirations of the Union towards the Western Balkans. Open Balkan is not only an economic initiative, but also a world initiative.

Each country in the Balkans must face its own past and build a system of mutual trust, because that is the only way to achieve mutual reconciliation. Unresolved conflicts and bilateral disputes have led to the dominance of mistrust in the region, and this is often a source of instability and is violated by any form of insult to cooperation and progress of any regional or other initiative.¹²⁴

The illusion that the realization of the megalomaniacal dreams of any Balkan nation can be realized at the expense of its neighbors must not be nurtured. The political leaders of the Balkans must immediately and without delay stop giving chauvinist and nationalist statements and aspirations and finally establish good-neighborly and friendly relations. All those who during the war committed war crimes and serious damage to human freedoms and rights must face their own criminal responsibility.¹²⁵ The success of an initiative implies that all subjects of the initiative should be involved on an equal basis in the realization of tasks and obligations, while the past, stereotypes and prejudices must not be stronger than the present and reality.

¹²² Проф. Жарко Кораћ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/sto-se-krije-iza-nove-politicke-inicijative-mini-verzija-eu-ili-put-prema-politickoj-dominaciji-srbije-15094780>

¹²³ <https://mia.mk/bih-po-analiza-vo-rok-od-30-dena-e-odluchi-dali-e-pristapi-na-mini-shengen/>

¹²⁴ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/11/09/north-macedonia-albania-and-serbia-signed-amemorandum-to-fight-coronavirus>

¹²⁵ 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).

The states of the Western Balkans will have to seriously work on resolving bilateral disputes and improve their mutual relations, as the main prerequisite for the progress of regional cooperation in the region. It is necessary to improve the capacities for marketing and implementation of cooperation, and it should take a high place on the political agenda of all the political authorities of the countries of the Western Balkans.¹²⁶



¹²⁶ Dragan Đukanovic, 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
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CONCLUSION

Taking into account everything written above, the conclusion that the European blockade for the expansion of the EU with the countries of the Western Balkans is not at all a random and naive issue and that the expansion will go on is still controversial. The most obvious example is the Republic of North Macedonia. While this vacuum lasts for the integration of all the countries of the Western Balkans into the EU, the countries of the Western Balkans need brave and visionary steps, freed from prejudices, stereotypes and historical enmities. Therefore, instead of waiting for good wishes, mercy or sympathy from EU member states, it is better to take the initiative as Prime Ministers Zaev and Rama and President Vučić did. If the "Open Balkan" initiative gives the first concrete positive results by the middle of 2023 and starts to implement the agreed upon in practice, it will be the strongest asset and a confirmation that the three signatory countries of the initiative are fully ready for EU membership because they have shown and continue to show a European mentality. In this difficult crisis period, regional connectivity and integration, cooperation and solidarity in the joint struggle for a better life for citizens, faster development of the region and saving people's lives is a challenge and imperative. In the third decade of the XXI century, the mind and spirit of the Balkans should not be earned in the past. The Western Balkans must finally become a real economic community of all countries and citizens of this geographical area, and not continue to remain a mere collection of nations and states that cannot reconcile, understand and cooperate with each other. It will not be easy to achieve the goals of the "Open Balkan" initiative, as evidenced by the numerous failed examples of previous initiatives and agreements.

The main reasons or obstacles (but also challenges) for the participation of all six countries from the Western Balkans in the "Open Balkans" initiative are related to the lack of capacity and financial resources to implement the agreement, mutual distrust and unresolved relations between neighbors. The free cross-border movement of citizens based only on the control of personal documents is not a special news because almost all countries in the region have already concluded bilateral agreements on the basis of which citizens have been traveling with an identity card for many years.

The adherence and full implementation of the agreed decisions of the "Open Balkans" initiative is a positive step on the way to full membership in the EU, but without the participation of all countries in the region in the initiative, the idea as such will be incomplete and will have a symbolic meaning and weak effect.

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