

THE OPEN BALKAN: CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABILITY AND UNFINISHED INCLUSION

Context

Since the beginning of the development of post-conflict regional cooperation in the Balkans, no initiative has provoked as many reactions, numerous controversies, and contradictions as the *Little Schengen (Mini-Schengen)* after 2019, or the *Open Balkan* since 2021.¹ There are several very important facts to keep in mind when it comes to the creation and development of the Open Balkan. Namely, the idea was formalized at the founding meeting in October 2019 in Novi Sad, when the leaders of the three Western Balkan countries – Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia – gathered.² They initially stressed the European Union's strong backing for the project, but Brussels has never stated so explicitly. There were rumblings that this, like others, was the brainchild of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She was the driving force behind various other proposals for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, such as the Berlin Process and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office that it encompassed.³ It should be emphasized that, after discovering that the initiative's original notion of "originality" was unrealistic, the Berlin Process took over the establishment of the Common Regional Market after November 200, effectively "pulling" it out of the Little Schengen framework.⁴ The United States, on the other hand, has been a strong supporter of the Open Balkan concept since its beginnings, as have representatives of certain non-governmental organizations from this country, such as the Atlantic Council and the Open Society Foundation.

Since the very appearance of the idea of full implementation of the four freedoms of movement of people, services, capital, and goods in the Western Balkans, i.e., colloquially named the Little Schengen, significant resistance has emerged in the region.⁵ They are, in particular, founded on a reciprocal lack of confidence between local states and societies, but also linked to particularly poor interpersonal interactions among regional officials. There are also numerous unresolved processes (dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, internal relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the political crisis within Montenegro), as well as numerous never-before-resolved problems predominantly related to the breakup of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the otherwise insufficiently developed relationship between Serbia and Albania.

Being on the European periphery, the Western Balkans, so far, has been unable to absorb any form of regional cooperation based on the decisive role of local actors without the control and monitoring of external actors. All attempts at regional cooperation, which would be based entirely

¹ Dragan Đukanović, Branislav Đorđević, „Mali Šengen – koncept, implementacija i kontroverze“, *Međunarodni problemi*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP2003595D>, God. LXXII, br. 3, Beograd, 2020, str. 595–618.

² “Joint Declaration by the President of the Republic of Serbia, Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania and the Prime Minister of the Republic North Macedonia on Implementing the EU Four Freedoms in the Western Balkans“, Novi Sad, October 10, 2020. Internet: <https://api.pks.rs/storage/assets/deklaracija-tri-predседnika.pdf>.

³ See: <https://www.rycwb.org/>

⁴ “Chairs Conclusion“, Sofia, November 10, 2020. Internet: https://www.transport-community.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Chairs-Conclusions_Sofia-2020.pdf.

⁵ Dragan Đukanović, Branislav Đorđević, „Mali Šengen – koncept, implementacija i kontroverze“, *op. cit.*, 609–611.

on "regional ownership", have not really yielded results during the former transformation of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe into the Regional Cooperation Council in the period 2006–2008.⁶

The fact that there is no complementarity between the foreign policy goals of the Western Balkan countries should not be overlooked. Unlike the openly defined Euro-Atlantic goals and priorities of most of the Western Balkans countries, Serbia, but also Bosnia and Herzegovina (due to the Republic of Srpska entity), are not entirely clear about their essential geopolitical commitment.⁷ The conflicts that began with Russia's attack on Ukraine at the end of February 2022 were reflected in the situation in the Western Balkans region through full harmonization regarding the condemnation of this act and the introduction of sanctions against Russia, with the exception of Serbia, and the opposition of the Republic of Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result, the Western Balkans' already-existing mutual mistrust and antagonism have become even more extreme. Given that acute processes such as electoral reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina (failed attempts in January and March 2022) and the completely frozen dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo since 2017 have not ended, it is also questionable how much the European Union and the United States will continue to focus on the Western Balkans.

In addition to the above-mentioned and sometimes diametrically opposed foreign policy and geostrategic perceptions evident in the Western Balkans, it should be borne in mind that other concepts are emerging and challenging the realities of successful regional cooperation and an ambitious regional cooperation project such as the Open Balkan. In this regard, there are often estimates that it is *via facti* an attempt at some kind of Serbian-Albanian agreement on the division of their respective spheres of interest in the Balkan Peninsula and/or the manifestation of the "Serbian World" policy or pan-Albanian efforts.⁸ The parallelism of regional cooperation policies in the European environment, such as the Open Balkan, on the one hand, but also the emphasis on these types of pan-national policies, create resistance among many actors in the region.⁹ The most visible in this regard are the resistance to the Open Balkan in Montenegro and, to some extent, in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Bosniak and, to a lesser extent, the Croatian public. This type of dichotomy, as well as frequently contradicting messages associated with the European Union's vision of regional cooperation, produce public confusion and more radical internal forms of resistance. Therefore, the issue of (non) accession to the Open Balkan is considered a key national problem that affects relations with other Balkan actors.¹⁰

Thus, the most significant problems for its operation are the lack of minimal mutual trust in the Western Balkans, the direct lack of coordination of the Open Balkan initiative by the European Union and the United States, as well as the dominant forms of regional cooperation that already exist, such as the South-East European Cooperation Process, the Regional Cooperation Council, and the Berlin Process. In addition, the impossibility of a real projection of the regional Balkan identity appears as a significant problem, as does the feeling of certain supremacy in the local

⁶ Dragan Đukanović, *Balkan na posthladnoratovskom raskršću (1989–2020)*, Drugo dopunjeno izdanje, Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Službeni glasnik, Beograd, 2020, str. 149–151.

⁷ *Ibidem*, str. 111–130.

⁸ Dejan Ilić, „Šta je nama srpski svet?“, *Peščanik*, Beograd, 14. oktobar 2021. Internet: <https://pescanik.net/sta-je-nama-srpski-svet/>.

⁹ Marija Jovičević, „Popov: Ne idu 'srpski svet' i 'Otvoreni Balkan' zajedno“, *Pobjeda*, Podgorica, 21. februar 2022. Internet: <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/ne-idu-srpski-svet-i-otvoreni-balkan-zajedno>.

¹⁰ Miodrag Vlahović, „'Otvoreni Balkan' – da se Vlasi ne sjete“, *Portal Analitika*, Podgorica, 21. avgust 2021. Internet: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/otvoreni-balkan-da-se-vlasi-ne-sjete>.

public concerning the region, because it is considered imposed and superfluous.¹¹ It is also considered meaningless when there are extremely strong ethnic identities. This has been particularly obvious in Montenegro in recent years, when, as a pioneer in the European integration process, the country has made a concerted effort to avoid the "Balkan roads" at all costs.¹² This sometimes false sense of superiority to the rest of the region is unrealistic, especially given the European Union's enormous restraint toward the entire Western Balkans in the previous decade and at the start of this decade.

This position could change if the global crisis surrounding Ukraine inspires the EU, as well as the North Atlantic Alliance, to play a larger role in ensuring that the sphere of Western influence is completely fulfilled throughout much of Europe, including the Western Balkans.¹³ This was announced by the joining of the military-neutral Scandinavian countries to NATO (Finland and Sweden), but it is also confirmed by the accelerated accession of Switzerland, otherwise politically neutral, to sanctions against the Russian Federation imposed due to the war in Ukraine in February 2022. However, one should be very careful given the fact that the resistance in the EU is related to future enlargements and the perception of the Western Balkans as a zone that could pose a potential additional problem for the internal unity of the Union. The situation is similar in terms of NATO enlargement, taking into account the radical opposition of Milorad Dodik and the Republic of Srpska's leadership in BiH, but also the undefined status of Kosovo at the United Nations, which prevents NATO from quickly integrating it, despite Pristina's intentions and the US's frequently reiterated views on the possibility.¹⁴

As a result, the perception of the Open Balkan's scope and future success cannot be perceived beyond wider regional, European, and global events and actors. It is important to remember the Russian Federation's enormous influence on the political situation in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska entity. At the same time, these refer to a significant part of Montenegrin society that relies on official Moscow. It should be emphasized that the existing concept of Russian foreign policy entails, above all, the creation of certain reservations by South-East European countries towards NATO and also the EU.¹⁵ This is followed by persistent attempts to dismantle their internal unity to show the necessity of the definitive "collapse of the West" and the "victory" of the Russian Federation. The same can be said for existing forms of regional cooperation in this part of Europe, which is clearly influenced by either the EU or the US.

It should also be underlined that the EU has failed to support pro-European forces in the Western Balkans in recent years but, on the contrary, has managed to strengthen Euroscepticism and anti-Europeanism through its (non) actions. Therefore, any more developed concept of regional cooperation is considered a substitute for EU membership and is increasingly creating resistance

¹¹ There is great resistance in significant parts of technocratic circles in Montenegro and Serbia, above all, to connecting their European integration processes with the rest of the region in any way.

¹² „Đukanović u Budvi: Evropska stabilnost ili povratak u balkanska bespuća“, *Portal Analitika*, Podgorica, 4. oktobar 2016. Internet: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/246083--dukanovic-u-budvi-evropska-stabilnost-ili-povratak-u-balkanska-bespuca-1>.

¹³ „Borel za DW: Sada je kritičan trenutak za proces proširenja“, *Deutsche Welle*, Berlin, 16. mart 2022. Internet: <https://www.dw.com/sr/borel-za-dw-sada-je-kriti%C4%8Dan-trenutak-za-proces-pro%C5%A1irenja/a-61145638>.

¹⁴ „Kurti: Verovatno je da će Kosovo pre ući u NATO nego u Evropsku uniju“, *KoSSev*, Kosovska Mitrovica, 9. april 2022. Internet: <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/kurti-o-delfi-forumu-razgovarano-o-odnosima-srbije-i-rusije-i-mogucnosti>.

¹⁵ “European Parliament Resolution on the Russian aggression against Ukraine“, 2022/2546 RSP, February 28, 2022. Internet: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2022-0123_EN.html.

related to multilateral cooperation and integration. There are also fears that the Common Regional Market, which is being developed under the auspices of the Berlin Process and the Regional Cooperation Council, will serve as a "consolation prize" for EU membership, i.e., for some type of economic cooperation in the Western Balkans and integration into the European Single Market outside of other forms of integration already in place in the EU.¹⁶ Therefore, the Open Balkan is also perceived in this light, and resistance to the project is deepening and strengthening, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, but also in Kosovo. Similar attitudes prevail among portions of the public in today's Open Balkan member nations, particularly in Serbia.

Development of the Open Balkan concept and key challenges (2019–2022)

After the Little Schengen initiative in October 2019, the original concept of the initiative aimed at implementing the four freedoms of the EU in the Western Balkans was to ensure the creation of a regional market, full freedom of movement with a valid ID card throughout the region, as well as full freedom of movement of the labour force. Due to the opposition of the authorities in Pristina and Podgorica, a certain part of these ideas was "transferred" to the Berlin Process, which, unlike the then Little Schengen, has been inclusive since its launch in 2014.¹⁷ The authorization of the Little Schengen has been successively expanded at meetings till the end of 2019 in various areas of cooperation, ranging from the green agenda to cooperation in emergency situations in the aftermath of the earthquake that struck Durrës and a large portion of Albania's Adriatic coast.¹⁸ Thus, the initial formation of a special body was planned, which was supposed to coordinate the entire initiative.¹⁹ However, a major portion of the responsibilities assumed by the founding countries of the Little Schengen were not met.

On the other hand, the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020 caused a certain suspension of concrete activities of the initiative. Moreover, after the start of the pandemic, the focus was on maintaining regional green corridors with the aim of timely and successful supply of the Western Balkan countries in a crisis that threatened to go beyond the health framework and move to a broader economic one. However, the concept of the development of the Little Schengen has not been abandoned despite the reduced volume of meetings of the leaders of this initiative during 2020. Moreover, since the end of this year, the focus of the initiative has gradually shifted to ensuring the possibility of full freedom of movement, primarily for the labour force as well as goods.

¹⁶ Dragan Đukanović, Milan Krstić, „Regionalna saradnja na Zapadnom Balkanu – dugoročno čekanje na članstvo u Evropskoj uniji i/ili 'Balkanska unija'”, *Srpska politička misao*, DOI <http://doi.org/10.22182/spm.7112021.1>, COBISS.SR-ID 102782215, broj 1, godina XXVIII, Beograd, 2021, str. 9–26.

¹⁷ „Kurti: EU da se okrene Berlinskom procesu“, *KoSSev*, Kosovska Mitrovica, 6. februar 2022. Internet: <https://kossev.info/kurti-eu-da-se-okrene-berlinskom-procesu-nemacki-poslanici-o-ocuvanju-teritorijalnog-integriteta/>.

¹⁸ “Chair’s Conclusion“, Tirana, 21 December 2019. Internet: <https://api.pks.rs/storage/assets/final-tirana-declaration.pdf>.

¹⁹ “WB6 Ohrid Summit – 10 November 2019: Accelerating the Implementation of the EU Four Freedoms in the Western Balkans“, Ohrid, 10 November 2019. Internet: <https://api.pks.rs/storage/assets/wb6-ohrid-summit-declaration.pdf>.

It should be noted that the Little Schengen, as an initiative, has its roots in considerations from the previous decade related to the interconnection of countries in the Western Balkans characterized by joint life in the former common state, but also to the very difficult dissolution of Yugoslavia.²⁰ The United States' backing for the Little Schengen has been apparent since the initiative's inception. This was the general stance of President Donald Trump's administration toward the Western Balkans, and it was specifically referenced in September 2020 in the "Washington Agreement," in which Kosovo agreed to join this regional structure.²¹ That, however, did not happen. The Atlantic Council, and the Open Society Foundation, provided significant support for the project by hosting conferences on the occasion. Through diplomatic efforts, the new US administration of Joseph Biden is attempting to persuade the governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro to join this project. According to Gabriel Escobar, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, in addition to the two fundamental "pillars" (EU and NATO membership), the US foreign policy toward the Western Balkans includes regional cooperation as the third pillar, with the Open Balkan playing a key role.²²

It should be noted that, in addition to significant and/or predominant public opposition from some countries, such as Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, strong resistance to this initiative also existed in Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia. This opposition was primarily based on political views and less on economic ones. The Little Schengen has been interpreted in Serbia as a reflection of potential Albanian dominance in the Balkans, a "refuge for migrants" and eventually an undesirable "nailing" of Serbia to the Western Balkans, rather than to a more desirable EU membership.²³ In North Macedonia, these oppositions were not overly strong, but were related to the views expressed by the oppositional VMRO-DPMNE.²⁴ Their argument also disputed the concept of closer cooperation with Albania and Serbia, which would put EU membership in the background. The Albanian public also did not look too favourably or uniformly at the emergence and development of the Little Schengen. Significant resistance to this initiative came from the oppositional Democratic Party of Albania, which argued that it was a mimicry of potential Serbian dominance in the Western Balkans.²⁵

The later development of the Little Schengen initiative, which changed its name to the Open Balkan in the middle of 2021, with an obvious attempt to rebrand the original concept, did not indicate a clear framework for continuation. Some broad guidelines for its development were given at the summit held in Skopje on July 29, 2021, with special emphasis on the necessity of

²⁰ Dragan Đukanović, Marko Dašić, „Modeliranje regionalne saradnje na Balkanu nakon 1999. godine: evropska iskustva i njihova primena“, *Međunarodni problemi*, br. 4, DOI <https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP2104617D>, Vol. LXXIII, Beograd, 2021, str. 617–636.

²¹ Robert Muharremi, „The 'Washington Agreement' between Kosovo and Serbia“, *American Society of International Law*, March 21, 2021. Internet, <https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/25/issue/4/washington-agreement-between-kosovo-and-serbia>.

²² „Eskobar: Otvoreni Balkan treći stub američke strategije za Balkan“, *Gradski.me*, Podgorica, 16. februar 2022. Internet: <https://gradski.me/eskobar-otvoreni-balkan-treci-stub-americke-strategije-za-balkan/>.

²³ Dragan Đukanović, Branislav Đorđević, „Mali Šengen – koncept, implementacija i kontroverze“, *op. cit.*, str. 600–602.

²⁴ „Николоски: ВМРО-ДПМНЕ има резерви за Отворен Балкан, а ДУИ е за“, Skoplje, 2.februar 2022. Internet: <https://mk.tv21.tv/nikoloski-vmro-dpmne-ima-rezervi-za-otvoren-balkan-a-dui-e-za/>.

²⁵ „U Tirani protest protiv Otvorenog Balkana i Vučića; paljenje zastave i dogovor o vanrednim situacijama“, *Danas*, Beograd, 20. decembar 2021. Internet: <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/stotine-u-tirani-na-demonstracijama-protiv-otvorenog-balkana-i-vucica/>.

cooperation in emergency situations, the movement of the labour force, and complete freedom of movement of goods.²⁶ At the same time, large investments in member countries (especially Rio Tinto in western Serbia) were praised, and ideas for organizing the Balkan Wine Festival and initiating the Balkan Film Commission were also mentioned.²⁷ The necessity of cooperation between the higher education accreditation bodies of the three member states of the Open Balkan was also pointed out. At the same time, it was emphasized that the Berlin Process and the Common Regional Market, which was gradually emerging within it, received unequivocal support.²⁸ Therefore, at the mentioned Open Balkan Summit in Skopje, there was no expansion of the powers of this initiative.

The Open Balkan Summit held on November 4, 2021, in Belgrade did not include the extension of the competencies of this regional initiative.²⁹ Then, in the middle of the same month, a multi-day meeting of representatives of line ministries in the governments of the three countries was held in Nis to define priorities in the field of harmonization of certain activities and legal acts, but also the implementation of activities agreed in previous years.³⁰ After that, the national parliaments were handed a series of agreements that needed to be adopted. The goal in this regard was to abolish all customs controls between the three countries as early as the beginning of 2023.

In the meantime, Serbia has ratified agreements on free access to the labour market and mutual recognition of economic entities' approvals for security and safety.³¹ The same applies to the agreements on veterans, phytosanitary and food security in the Western Balkans, as well as the agreement on linking electronic identification schemes.³² The Memorandum of Understanding on work permits, as well as on the export and import of goods in the Western Balkans, which was ratified in Serbia, is also very important.³³ North Macedonia and Albania have yet to do so because it would necessitate the modification of some systemic laws.

At the beginning of 2022, the problems related to the Ukrainian crisis began, revealing the stratification of the Open Balkan member states. While Albania and North Macedonia supported the entire set of sanctions directed against the Russian Federation, Serbia did not, despite

²⁶ "Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Open Balkan", Skopje, 29 July 2021. Internet: <https://vlada.mk/node/26063?ln=en-gb>.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ "Joint Statement of the participants in today's meeting of the Open Balkans Initiative: The future of enlargement – a view from the region", Belgrade, November 4, 2021. Internet: <https://vlada.mk/node/26945?ln=en-gb>.

³⁰ „Siniša Mali posle skupa u Nišu: Potpisan Zaključak sa radnih sastanaka o inicijativi 'Otvoreni Balkan'“, *Novosti*, Beograd, 13. novembar 2021. Internet: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/ekonomija/1054997/sinisa-mali-posle-skupanisu-potpisan-zakljucak-radnih-sastanaka-inicijativi-otvoreni-balkan>.

³¹ "Agreement on Conditions for free access to the Labour Market in the Western Balkans", Tirana, Decembar 21, 2021. Internet: <https://api.pks.rs/storage/assets/sporazum-o-uslovima-za-slobodan-pristup-trzistu-rada-na-zapadnom-balkanu.pdf>. „Споразум између владе Републике Србије и Савета министара Републике Албаније о узајамном признавању одобрења овлашћених привредних субјеката за сигурност и безбедност (АЕОС)“, Тирана, 21. децембар 2021. Internet: <https://api.pks.rs/storage/assets/sporazum-izmedju-vlade-srbije-i-saveta-ministara-albanije-o-uzajamnom-priznavanju-odobrenja-ovlaschenih-privrednih-subjekata-za-sigurnost-i-bezbednost.pdf>.

³² "Agreement on Cooperation in the field of Veterinary, Food and Feed Safety and Phytosanitary in the Western Balkans", Tirana, Decembar 21, 2021, "Agreement on Interconnection of Schemes for Electronic Identification of the Citizens of the Western Balkans", Tirana, Decembar 21, 2021.

³³ "Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation on Facilitation of Imports, Exports and movement of Goods in the Western Balkans", Skopje, July 29, 2021. Internet: <https://api.pks.rs/storage/assets/mou-trade-facilitation-final-rs.pdf>.

supporting a UN resolution condemning the Russian aggression.³⁴ This can cause, in a way, (additional) mistrust between the parties involved in this arrangement. At the same time, the permanent mentioning of the "Albanian Little Schengen" or the "Serbian World" is followed by a cyclical review and challenge of this initiative. However, in addition to the above, it should be noted that the US believes that the Open Balkan remains an important constituent of the so-called third pillar of its foreign policy towards the Balkans, which is confirmed by the meetings held in Washington.³⁵ The reliance of the dominant public in the Open Balkan on *de facto* support for certain parties in the Ukrainian war also creates significant problems for its future activities.

At the same time, the EU has not quite determined how it sees the future of the institutionalized relationship with the region, namely the Berlin Process and the Open Balkan.³⁶ Although there are indications that the new Federal Government in Germany will support the predominant actions of the Berlin Process, it should be noted that only at the very end of her term, former Chancellor Angela Merkel supported the Open Balkan without significant hesitation, which was a characteristic of her earlier stance.³⁷ The new German Secretary of State, Ana Lirmann, pointed out that Kosovo must be included in the work of the Open Balkan, which can be considered a certain type of (indirect) support for this arrangement.³⁸ However, Chancellor Olaf Scholz clearly avoided saying such a thing at a press conference on April 12, 2022, after a meeting with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama.³⁹

As the Ukrainian crisis escalated, Serbia soon announced the suspension of flour, oil, and other food exports at the end of February 2022, which created new problems related to the Open Balkan, but later these statements were relativized towards certain neighbours.⁴⁰ There is no doubt that the war in Ukraine will also affect the world economy and, above all, the supply of wheat. Albania and North Macedonia, as "enemy states" of the Russian Federation, as well as Montenegro, are therefore in a different position compared to Serbia, which does not have that status.⁴¹ Simultaneously, there are beliefs that the Russian Federation will not be able to use this "hole" and differences between the Open Balkan members to export its products through Serbia.⁴² Despite the complex geopolitical circumstances and the obvious lack of confidence in the Western Balkans,

³⁴ „Rusija objavila spisak neprijateljskih zemalja, među njima i Crna Gora”, *NI*, Beograd, 7. mart 2022. Internet: <https://rs.n1info.com/svet/rusija-objavila-spisak-neprijateljskih-zemalja-medju-njima-i-crna-gora/>

³⁵ „Open Balkan coordinators meet Escobar in Washington DC: Support for the Open Balkan and it's expansion, the initiative brings results for citizens and companies”, March 4, 2022. Internet: <https://vlada.mk/node/27983?ln=en-gb>.

³⁶ „Augustin Palokaj: Da Vinčijev kod je lakše dešifrovati od stava EU o Otvorenom Balkanu”, 27. decembar 2021. Internet: <https://www.info-ks.net/vijesti/gledista/133637/palokaj-da-vincijev-kod-je-lakse-desifrovati-nego-stav-eu-o-otvorenom-balkanu>

³⁷ Biljana Matijašević, „Merkel: Otvoreni Balkan se zasniva na modelu EU, što se više država odluči da saraduje to će biti bolje za region“, *Vijesti*, Podgorica, 14. septembar 2022. Internet: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/566328/merkel-otvoreni-balkan-se-zasniva-na-modelu-eu-sto-se-vise-drzava-odluci-da-saradjuje-to-ce-biti-bolje-za-region>.

³⁸ „Nemačka državna sekretarka: Otvoreni Balkan treba da uključi Kosovo“, *Blic*, Beograd, 22. januar 2022. Internet: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/nemacka-drzavna-sekretarka-otvoreni-balkan-treba-da-ukljuci-kosovo/nydrbvg>.

³⁹ „Scholz ignorira Otvoreni Balkan“, *Politički.ba*, Sarajevo, 14. april 2022. Internet: <https://politicki.ba/vijesti/scholz-ignorira-otvoreni-balkan/22604>.

⁴⁰ Dušan Komarčević, „Ruska invazija iskušava 'Otvoreni Balkan'“, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, Prag, 14. mart 2022. Internet: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-invazija-ukrajina-test-otvoreni-balkan/31752336.html>.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

there is a certain optimism in business circles, particularly among national chambers of commerce, that the Open Balkan initiative will develop further.⁴³

Key attitudes of state officials and the dominant public about the Open Balkan in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro

From the very beginning of the Open Balkan initiative, there has been more than noticeable resistance in some countries to this multilateral form of cooperation. It was a reflection of the long-standing and continuous lack of mutual trust between the leading actors and the political elites in the region. Right from the start, there have been reactions that the idea of the Little Schengen/today's Open Balkan represents the return of the "regional package" in opposition to the individual one that otherwise exists within the Stabilization and Association Process from the late 1990s. In addition to the foregoing, there has been speculation that the aforementioned initiative represents the renewal of the Yugoslav state framework nearly three decades after its demise. The second set of concerns also alluded to particular actors' attempts at dominance, whether it was the concept of the "Serbian world," as indicated by some Belgrade authorities, but also Banja Luka, or "Pan-Albanian efforts".

Thus, the predominant reasons for opposing integration into the Open Balkan are related to the essential mutual distrust of elites and dominant spheres of society, but also to the noticeable non-complementarity of foreign policy efforts between individual Western Balkan countries. Also, there is a different attitude towards the East and the West, which is significantly radicalized by the crisis in Ukraine and the unclear attitudes of certain actors who promote themselves as "neutral" in this dramatic situation.

In an atmosphere of multilateral mistrust, it is very difficult to determine the perspective of a project such as the Open Balkan, but also of other existing forms of regional cooperation. With the departure of Chancellor Angela Merkel from the German Federal Government at the end of 2021, the question of sustainability brought the Berlin Process into question, which was equally ambitiously designed, but objectively did not result in any significant achievements in the period after 2014. Namely, this initiative was designed as a temporary replacement for full EU membership, but apart from the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, the abolition of roaming between countries in the region, and the initial creation of the Common Regional Market, it did not achieve any of the previous extremely ambitious ideas and tasks. In that sense, the work of the South-East European Cooperation Process and the Regional Cooperation Council has been *de facto* overshadowed by the Berlin Process and the dynamics of multilateral relations and cooperation in the region over the past eight years.

The failure to resolve outstanding issues in the Western Balkans region, as well as all relations between Serbia and Kosovo, remained a further impediment to multilateral cooperation. Moreover, there is almost no segment of political life in Kosovo that approves entry into the Open Balkan, except for the Serbian List (Srpska lista).⁴⁴ Although it was an obligation stemming from the Washington Agreement of September 2020, the issue of joining this arrangement has not been raised in any way in the past year and a half. The current, and also former, Prime Minister of

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ „'Otvoreni Balkan': koga nema u projektu povezivanja suseda“, *BBC na srpskom*, Beograd, 30. jul 2021. Internet: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-58019630>.

Kosovo, Albin Kurti, insisted on supporting the Berlin Process but stated that he considered the Open Balkan as an attempt to create a "new Yugoslavia" with the undoubted dominance of official Belgrade.⁴⁵ Strict opposition to the Open Balkan from the Albanian political spectrum in Kosovo was more than clear. After a meeting with Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski on December 15, 2021, the President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani, also confirmed that she was explicitly against Kosovo's participation in this initiative until relations between Kosovo and Serbia were regulated.⁴⁶ The President of North Macedonia, Pendarovski, also expressed scepticism regarding the entire Open Balkan initiative until it became a fully inclusive relationship of all six subjects in the Western Balkans.⁴⁷

The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro is almost similar. Namely, the opposition to the Open Balkan comes from the predominantly political spectrum, and less from the circles of the business community and the economy. It should be noted that in the BiH entity of the Republic of Srpska and among the Serb representatives in state bodies, there is a strong belief that the participation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in this arrangement is very important.⁴⁸ This is to be expected because the authorities in Banja Luka are largely in line with the current foreign policy efforts of Serbia, for which the Open Balkan as a project of regional cooperation is very important. The Republic of Srpska's business community is also evidently committed to facilitating procedures and deepening the framework already provided for in the Agreement on Special Parallel Relations with Serbia (1997, 2006).⁴⁹ Facilitating the border crossing procedure in the Western Balkans, but also the movement of the labour force, would therefore be important for the citizens of the Republic of Srpska, who, in addition to using this opportunity with Serbia, are very interested in neighboring Montenegro.

The importance of Bosnia and Herzegovina's entry into the Open Balkan was especially emphasized during the visit of Gabriel Escobar, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, to Sarajevo in early November 2021.⁵⁰ In Escobar's talks with two members of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this topic was one of the dominant ones and, in addition to the very sensitive political and security challenges in this country, it was conditioned by attempts to suspend certain state powers and lower them to the Republic of Srpska entity level.⁵¹ Thus, Bosniak and Croat elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina are quite reserved towards the concept of the Open Balkan. Although Šefik Džaferović, a member of the Presidency of BiH, pointed out that the Open Balkan was a rather interesting initiative at the end of 2021, there was no operationalization of the country's potential entry into this regional initiative but rather focusing on the Berlin Process.⁵² Similar things were said by Željko Komšić, a member of the Presidency of BiH, after he met with the American envoy, Escobar. He emphasized that the initiatives related to regional cooperation

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ „Osmani i Pendarovski izrazili rezerve prema inicijativi 'Otvoreni Balkan'“, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, Prag, 15. decembar 2021. Internet: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/otvoreni-balkan-osmani-penderovski/31610480.html>.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ „BiH ne smije propustiti voz za Otvoreni Balkan“, *RTV BN*, Bijeljina. Internet: <https://www.rtvbn.com/4018466/bih-ne-smije-da-propusti-voz-za-otvoreni-balkan>.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ „Komšić i Džaferović sa Escobarom“, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, Prag, 8. novembar 2021. Internet: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/komsic-escobar-dejton/31550914.html>.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² „Džaferović: Zapadni Balkan nema drugi put, osim članstva u EU i NATO“, CDM, Podgorica, 3. decembar 2021. <https://www.cdm.me/politika/dzaferovic-zapadni-balkan-nema-drugi-put-osim-clanstva-u-eu-i-nato/>

were acceptable to a certain extent, "including the Open Balkan initiative".⁵³ Therefore, there are fundamental re-examinations of the relationship between the Open Balkan and the Berlin Process, but also an obvious unwillingness to enter into this arrangement in full capacity.⁵⁴

In her statements, Bisera Turković, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of BiH, expressed significant reservations but also a certain resistance to the Open Balkan, emphasizing the country's Euro-Atlantic efforts, which, on the other hand, were disputed by one part of the BiH public, primarily related to the country's membership in NATO.⁵⁵ She also emphasized the importance of the more important roles of the Berlin Process and the Common Regional Market, which were emerging within it, in relation to the Open Balkan.⁵⁶ At the same time, Minister Turković did not give the official position of the Presidency of BiH regarding membership in the Open Balkan.

Within the business community in the Federation of BiH, and having in mind the successful economic cooperation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with its neighbours, it is believed that additional benefits in the economic sphere would be suitable for the economic system of this entity. However, certain circles in the business community of the Federation of BiH indicate, for example, the existing uneven relationship in the economic exchange of BiH, primarily with Serbia, and the difficulty of accessing the market of this country.⁵⁷ Serbia's numerous, allegedly protective economic measures have contributed to this. In some ways, this was indirectly confirmed by the situation related to the supply of flour and sunflower oil in the Western Balkans, with the sudden announcement by Serbia that it would suspend exports at the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis.⁵⁸ This only confirmed the suspicions that the Open Balkan was somehow very ambitiously designed, but without a real foothold to face several potential problems. Although there was a later relativization of this announcement from Serbia, the impression remained that the Open Balkan would remain an unreliable arrangement when it comes to certain crises, which may arise due to the war in Eastern Europe.⁵⁹

On the other hand, in the civil society of the Federation of BiH, it is pointed out that this initiative is of the "protocolar type" and without clear coordination, but also that the lack of mutual trust is more than noticeable.⁶⁰ When tensions between states and their leaders happen almost daily, and the distances between local societies only widen and deepen, the Association of Independent Intellectuals "Krug 99" believes that this can be a huge problem for initiatives such as the Open Balkan.⁶¹ In addition to the above, it is emphasized that there is no necessary external "supervision" and control over the Open Balkan, and there is a certain fear of "hidden agendas" of certain actors

⁵³ „Escobar se sastao sa članovima Predsjedništva“, *Al Jazeera Balkans*, Sarajevo, 8. novembar 2021. Internet: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/11/8/komsic-ocjena-escobara-je-da-je-u-bih-stvorena-vjestacka-kriza>.

⁵⁴ „Komšić: Ako se odustane od Zapadnog Balkana, on će kao zrela kruška pasti u ruke Putina“, *Aktuelno.me*, Podgorica, 27. novembar 2021. Internet: <https://www.aktuelno.me/region/komsic-ako-se-odustane-od-zapadnog-balkana-on-ce-kao-zrela-kruska-pasti-u-krilo-putina/>.

⁵⁵ „Otvoreni Balkan': koga nema u projektu povezivanja suseda“, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁷ Mirza Imamović, „Krug 99: Inicijativa 'Otvoreni Balkan' je zamka za BiH“, TV Hayat, Sarajevo, 6. Mart 2022. Internet: <https://hayat.ba/krug-99-inicijativa-otvoreni-balkan-je-zamka-za-bih/620476/>.

⁵⁸ „Srbija stopira izvoz brašna, ulja, kukuruza i pšenice“, 8. Mart 2022. Internet: <https://bizlife.rs/najveca-kriza-od-1945-srbija-stopira-izvoz-brasna-ulja-kukuruza-i-psenice/>.

⁵⁹ BETA, „Srbija ukida zabranu izvoza žita, brašna i ulja u Severnu Makedoniju“, *Danas*, Beograd, 22. mart 2022. Internet: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/srbija-ukida-zabranu-izvoza-zita-brasna-i-ulja-u-severnu-makedoniju/>

⁶⁰ Mirza Imamović, „Krug 99: Inicijativa 'Otvoreni Balkan' je zamka za BiH“, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ *Ibidem.*

in this arrangement.⁶² There are, on the other hand, interpretations that any kind of regional economic cooperation is good for suppressing nationalist tensions and aspirations. At the conference on the Open Balkan, held in Belgrade and organized by the Center for Foreign Policy and the Hanns Seidel Foundation on February 8, 2022, prof. Dr Žarko Papić said that the Open Balkan arrangement carries the possibility of reducing the capacity of now very strong ethnonationalism, not only within the Western Balkans but also between its states.⁶³

Within the widest range of political parties based in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the civil opposition has not made a clearer statement about the Open Balkan. The leader of the Union for a Better Future of BiH, Fahrudin Radončić, on the other hand, unequivocally supported this initiative.⁶⁴ Political circles associated with Dragan Čović and the Croatian Democratic Union hold similar views and appear to take a slightly different approach to the Open Balkan than Bosniak politicians, though they have not been clear on the issue.

The main objections, coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina, are related to the perspective of the Open Balkan, the areas of cooperation that will be covered by this initiative, and the means of its full coordination. In this sense, they can be predominantly labelled in relation to the political sphere, not the economic one. That is why the process of Bosnia and Herzegovina's rapprochement with the Open Balkan is long-term and completely uncertain, especially due to its internal problems (unfinished reform of election legislation and new announcements of the transfer of powers belonging to the BiH to the Republic of Srpska entity). That is why, despite the evident insistence of US officials to join the Open Balkan, Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal policy concerns have entirely removed this topic from the table in recent months.

In Montenegro, the issue of joining the Open Balkan is in a way reflected in the otherwise deep divisions of society around so-called identity issues, both internal and external.⁶⁵ From the very beginning of the earlier Little Schengen initiative, the previously ruling Democratic Party of Socialists and the President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, abstained, and later openly opposed membership in this initiative.⁶⁶ As for the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion in the Parliament of Montenegro from the end of 2019, relations between Podgorica and Belgrade have further deteriorated due to the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding its religious buildings in Montenegro. Almost at the same time, the Little Schengen initiative was launched, and everything was reflected at the level of multilateral cooperation. At the time, the dominant discourses surrounding Montenegro's membership in the Little Schengen caused primarily concerns about slowing down Montenegro's pace of European integration as a regional leader in this process and a return to the predominant Balkan component of its foreign policy.⁶⁷ Although relations between Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama were very good, it was unrealistic to expect Montenegro's rather sceptical attitude towards the

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ „Otvoreni Balkan biće potpun uz svih šest ekonomija Zapadnog Balkana“, TANJUG, 8. februar 2022. Internet: <http://www.tanjug.rs/full-view.aspx?izb=715611>.

⁶⁴ „Avaz: Radončić bio u pravu za Otvoreni Balkan; Džaferović i Komšić pretvaraju BiH u evropsku Gazu“, *KoSSev*, Kosovska Mitrovica, 10. Avgust 2021. Internet: <https://kossev.info/avaz-radoncic-bio-u-pravu-za-otvoreni-balkan-dzaferovic-i-komsic-pretvaraju-bih-u-evropsku-gazu/>

⁶⁵ Dragan Đukanović, „‘Identitetska pitanja’ i linije unutrašnjih podela u Crnoj Gori“, *Međunarodni problemi*, DOI: 10.2298/MEDJP1404395D, god. LXVI, br. 3–4, IMPP, Beograd, 2014, str. 395–422.

⁶⁶ Dragan Đukanović, Branislav Đorđević, „‘Mali Šengen’ – koncept, implementacija i kontroverze“, *op. cit.*, 609–611.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, str. 610.

Open Balkan to change. Despite the president of Montenegro's attendance at the Little Schengen meeting in Tirana in December 2019, no progress was made, and he stated that Montenegro's membership in the EU could not be an alternative for any regional concept of economic or other cooperation.⁶⁸

In 2020, i.e., before the parliamentary elections in Montenegro at the end of August, relations between Belgrade and Podgorica were very good on the economic level. However, on the political level, they were reflected in strengthened mutual rhetoric, mostly related to the heated election campaign. There was an expectation, particularly in the period following the formation of the Montenegrin government in the second half of 2020, that the new government would quickly improve relations with Belgrade. In that sense, Montenegro's rapid entry into the Mini Schengen and joining Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia was expected. However, after only a few months of the short-lived government, it was obvious that relations with Serbia would not be easily consolidated, and the increasingly clear distancing of new Montenegrin government officials regarding the Open Balkan was evident. The Prime Minister, Zdravko Krivokapić, and Montenegro's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Đorđe Radulović, both expressed strong reservations about the initiative.⁶⁹ In this regard, the discourse on the Open Balkan was identical to the previous one, i.e., it was said that participation in this arrangement would mean slowing down Montenegro's European path, with the addition that primacy should certainly be given to the Berlin Process.⁷⁰

During an official visit to Belgrade in November 2021, Montenegro's Prime Minister, Zdravko Krivokapić, stressed that joining the Open Balkan initiative would not be good for the country and that Montenegro could quickly become a member of the EU.⁷¹ Despite an open offer to participate in a meeting of Open Balkan leaders, Prime Minister Krivokapić met with them informally.⁷² Only a few days later, Gabriel Escobar, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, visited Podgorica to point out the importance of considering Montenegro's entry into the Open Balkan.⁷³ On that occasion, he met with the President and the Prime Minister. However, the dominant political actors in Montenegro have kept virtually the same positions when it comes to the non-acceptance of participation in the Open Balkan. At the same time, at the end of December 2021, the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, called on Montenegro, but also on Bosnia and Herzegovina, to join the Open Balkan.⁷⁴

However, a political turnaround soon followed in Montenegro and the announcement of the fall of the government formed at the end of 2020. Just before the vote of no confidence in the government at the beginning of February 2022, Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić said that Montenegro's

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, str. 606–609.

⁶⁹ „Crna Gora nije protiv Otvorenog Balkana, ali slični procesi već postoje”, *RTV Vojvodine*, Novi Sad, 4. novembar 2021. Internet: https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/krivokapic-crna-gora-nije-protiv-otvorenog-balkana-ali-slicni-procesi-vec-postoje_1285710.html. „Đorđe Radulović: Svi različito gledamo na Otvoreni Balkan”, *Euronews Serbia*, Beograd, 12. novembar 2021. <https://www.euronews.rs/evropa/region/24836/dorde-radulovic-svi-razlicito-gledamo-na-otvoreni-balkan/vest>.

⁷⁰ „Crna Gora nije protiv Otvorenog Balkana, ali slični procesi već postoje”, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ Ivana Šundić Mihovilović, „'Sačekuša' za nesnađenog Krivokapića“, *Danas*, Beograd, 5. novembar 2021. Internet: <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/sacekusa-za-nesnadjenog-krivokapica/>

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ Predrag Tomović, „Eskobar: SAD stoje uz sve koji podržavaju suverenu i građansku Crnu Goru”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, Prag, 11. novembar 2021. Internet: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/escobar-crna-gora-eu-nato/31556832.html>

⁷⁴ „Varhelji: Važno je da se u 'Otvoreni Balkan' uključe i drugi sa Zapadnog Balkana”, *TANJUG*, Beograd, 21. decembar 2021. Internet: <http://www.tanjug.rs/full-view.aspx?izb=706090>.

non-accession to the Open Balkan was one of the key reasons for that, alluding to the extremely strong influence of Western political factors.⁷⁵ As the crisis in Ukraine unfolded in mid-April 2022, Prime Minister Krivokapić pointed out that there was, as he said, a certain possibility of pressure from official Belgrade towards Montenegro regarding wheat imports, bearing in mind Serbia's decision that it could only be exported to countries participating in the Open Balkan.⁷⁶ Krivokapić called it a certain type of blackmail, but the authorities in Belgrade quickly denied it.⁷⁷

During the very long process of forming the minority government of Montenegro, the issue of the Open Balkan, along with the politicized issue of the census and the future conclusion of the Fundamental Contract with the Serbian Orthodox Church, was one of the priorities for its formation, but also between the parties that would form the government and those that would support it in parliament. Thus, the Civic Movement URA and the Socialist People's Party, the basic backbones of this government, emphasized the consideration of joining the Open Balkans, while, on the other hand, the Democratic Party of Socialists, Social Democratic Party, Social Democrats, and minority parties had significant reservations and sought decisions on this issue either by a two-thirds majority or by consensus. Thus, in a series of draft programs of the new government, the status of the Open Balkan changed from a clear mention in the first version,⁷⁸ through stating the necessary consensus in the second version⁷⁹ to an impersonal promotion of regional cooperation.⁸⁰ The final agreement states that this issue will be decided by a two-thirds majority, but that there must be "*consideration of regional initiatives in the context of a key priority, i.e., faster membership of Montenegro in the EU*".⁸¹ Aside from the aforementioned, it is emphasized that the future government's good-neighborliness policy and regional cooperation are one of the foundations of its foreign policy.⁸²

This confirmed the fundamental and deep divisions in Montenegrin society regarding the Open Balkan, unlike all previous initiatives for regional cooperation, which found significant support in the pro-European and Euro-Atlantic segments of the political spectrum. Some parties that are not a part of the new government, such as the Democrats, did not comment on the Open Balkan. However, this has become noticeable and common for this political party on other issues. Significant support for the Open Balkan therefore comes from the pro-Serbian Democratic Front

⁷⁵ „Krivokapić: Otvoreni Balkan je jedan od razloga zbog kojih ova vlada mora da padne“, *Euronews Serbia*, Beograd, 27. januar 2021. Internet: <https://www.euronews.rs/evropa/region/34997/krivokapic-otvoreni-balkan-je-jedan-od-razloga-zasto-ova-vlada-mora-da-padne/vest>.

⁷⁶ „Krivokapić: Zbog Otvorenog Balkana Srbija je htjela da nas ucjeni osnovnim životnim namirnicama“, *CDM*, Podgorica, 15. april 2022. Internet: <https://www.cdm.me/politika/krivokapic-zbog-otvorenog-balkana-srbija-pokusala-da-nas-ucijeni-osnovnim-zivotnim-namirnicama/>.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸ „Ekskluzivno: Platforma manjinske Vlade – građanska država i reforme“, *Dan*, Podgorica, 17. januar 2022. Internet: <https://www.dan.co.me/vijesti/politika/ekskluzivno-platforma-manjinske-vlade-gradanska-drzava-i-reforme-5102350>

⁷⁹ „Antena M ekskluzivno objavljuje sadržaj sporazuma na osnovu koga treba da bude formirana manjinska vlada“, *Antena M*, Podgorica, 16. Mart 2022. Internet: <https://www.antenam.net/politika/237544-antena-m-ekskluzivno-objavljuje-sadrzaj-sporazuma-na-osnovu-koga- treba-da-bude-formirana-manjinska-vlada>.

⁸⁰ „SDP i URA usaglasili sporazum o prioritetima 43. Vlade: O popisu dvotrećinskom većinom, preispitati sve odluke Vesne Bratić, reforma službi bezbjednosti...“, *CDM*, Podgorica, 15. April 2022. Internet: <https://www.cdm.me/politika/sdp-i-ura-usaglasili-sporazum-o-prioritetima-43-vlade-o-popisu-dvotrecinskom-odlukom-clanova-vlade-preispitati-sve-odluke-vesne-bratic-reforma-sluzbi-bezbjednosti/>.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

and, above all, its two political parties, the New Serbian Democracy and the Democratic People's Party, and their leaders.⁸³

In the eyes of the Montenegrin public, the most common reasons for refusal to join the Open Balkan are economic concerns. Economists and business circles in Montenegro argue that the Open Balkan's activities are plagued by a plethora of unknowns. First of all, the Open Balkan will strive to establish a single customs area, i.e., a kind of customs union. The fact that Serbia is not a member of the World Trade Organization, while Albania and Montenegro are, would be an impediment.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Montenegro and Albania have a slightly more flexible customs policy than Serbia, which also has a slightly more closed market.⁸⁵ It is also frequently stated that for the Open Balkan concept to be implemented, it is necessary to define how the legislation in the countries will be amended and governed. There is also the issue of alignment with European legislation and, on the other hand, the potential framework of the Open Balkan, which could cause significant conflict.⁸⁶ The question of how to regulate this when member states are at different stages of the dynamics of European integration and numerous harmonizations of their legislation with the European *acquis* also arises. Lawyers and politicians often raise the issue of borders being open and fighting regional security challenges (corruption, organized crime, etc.). Former Montenegrin Prime Minister Igor Lukšić pointed out that the potential removal of borders could be a problem because, with the entry of certain actors into the EU, they must be strengthened again.⁸⁷ The potential way of leaving this initiative, as well as the entry of new members into the Open Balkan, is not legally regulated.⁸⁸ There are also persistent doubts regarding why barely half of the regional parties participate in this multilateral format, as well as what the multilateral format's future realistic successes are.

In addition to the above, it is said that Montenegro does not have strong enough administrative capacity to implement the designed plans of the Open Balkan, which include more intensive work and the possibility of employment in customs and other personnel at the border crossings. Therefore, there is additional talk about the need to open certain issues and ambiguities related to the Open Balkan, which need to be clarified before potential entry. The question remains whether the memoranda can be a relevant legal framework for the Open Balkan due to the degree of their binding nature.⁸⁹ Who and how will regulate potential misunderstandings and, without a doubt, future disagreements remains to be seen. This does not imply that Montenegro abandons the concept of regional cooperation, which can be realized through the initiatives in which it participates, most notably the Berlin Process and the Regional Cooperation Council.

When it comes to the four EU freedoms of movement of people, services, goods, and capital, it is frequently stated in Montenegro that in the Open Balkans, only the freedom of movement of people

⁸³ V. K., „Mandić podržao inicijativu 'Otvoreni Balkan': Vlada propustila dobru priliku da Crna Gora bude deo važnog projekta“, *Večernje novosti*, Beograd, 30. jul 2021. Internet: <https://www.novosti.rs/crna-gora/vesti/1022282/mandic-podrzao-inicijativu-otvoreni-balkan-vlada-propustila-dobru-priliku-crna-gora-bude-deo-vaznog-projekta>.

⁸⁴ „Reflektor: Crna Gora i Otvoreni Balkan“, TV Vijesti, Podgorica, 25. januar 2022. Internet: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Myo-mKevbNU>.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ „Lukšić: Crkva prenebregava da je Crna Gora nezavisna, manjinska Vlada neprirodno iznudeno riješenje“, *Portal Analitika*, Podgorica, 14. februar 2022. Internet: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/luksic-crkva-preneregavala-da-je-crna-gora-nezavisna-manjinska-vlada-neprirodno-iznudeno-rjesenje>.

⁸⁸ „Reflektor: Crna Gora i Otvoreni Balkan“, *op. cit.*

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

and labour force, and to a lesser extent, goods, predominates, while the freedom of movement of services and capital is not clearly defined and specified. The question remains whether and how economic entities will be able to compete in other countries' tenders, for example. As stated, emphasizing the free movement of the labour force may cause some damage to Montenegro because the domestic labour market would be flooded with personnel from other Western Balkan countries, which may lead to an increase in unemployment. When it comes to allowing citizens to travel with their ID cards, Montenegro was one of the first to do so with all of its neighbours, but no one should expect a total suspension of border crossings.

When it comes to the relationship with the EU, Montenegro expects its clear determination on this issue and full coordination of the Open Balkan with the administration in Brussels.⁹⁰ Furthermore, Montenegro does not want the Open Balkans to be just another round within the concept of "Europe at higher speeds," as this would limit the true full integration of this part of Europe into the Union.

There are also some issues with Montenegro joining the Open Balkan which are related to the fact that some Open Balkan member states are also members of the North Atlantic Alliance, whereas Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, are not.⁹¹ If taken as relevant, this type of argument would then relativize other inclusive regional initiatives. However, the issue of various forms of visa liberalization, which the EU, for example, did not approve for Kosovo, could pose a problem for the rest of the region in terms of the full and free labour force movement.⁹²

Gordana Đurović, a professor at the Faculty of Economics in Podgorica, does not agree with the introduction of electronic identification of citizens within the Open Balkan because it might already move towards a certain confederate or even stronger union of the – "Balkania".⁹³ She also underlines that the potential "hyperliberalization" of the labour market is unfavourable to Montenegro because it could exacerbate difficulties in the national labour market.⁹⁴ The same applies to the further liberalization of imports into Montenegro, which would additionally jeopardize the status of economic entities in the country.⁹⁵ Also, Professor Đurović wonders what would happen if one of the member states of the Open Balkan is under the regime of certain sanctions, and how that would reflect on the entire arrangement and other members. At the same time, she connects the whole concept with the dominance of two regional actors, Serbia and Albania, in relation to the rest of the Western Balkans, but also that certain political actors within Montenegro draw their external support from the emphasis on joining the Open Balkan.⁹⁶ However, she also thinks that there is a space for the EU, probably together with the US, to take over this Open Balkan project and harmonize it in principle with the European *acquis* and fundamental freedoms.⁹⁷

⁹⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁹¹ *Ibidem.*

⁹² *Ibidem.*

⁹³ „Đurović: Političari da ne kupuju podršku Zapada sebi, prihvatanjem Otvorenog Balkana“, *Aktuelno.me*, Podgorica, 17. februar 2022. Internet: <https://www.aktuelno.me/politika/djurovic-politicari-da-ne-kupuju-podrsku-zapada-sebi-prihvatanjem-otvorenog-balkana/>.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁹⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁹⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁹⁷ *Ibidem.*

A significant part of Montenegrin civil society is either indifferent or *via facti* against Montenegro's entry into the Open Balkan, such as the Montenegro Lawyers Association, the European Movement in Montenegro and the Atlantic Council in Montenegro.⁹⁸ In this regard, especially from the end of 2021 and beginning of 2022, it was noticeable that a kind of broader consensus would be reached within Montenegro on non-entry into the Open Balkan, which is based on predominantly political reasons of potential danger from the hegemonic role of certain actors within this regional initiative. That kind of observation goes towards the potential pro-Russian influence, which would additionally strengthen in Montenegro in the case of entering the Open Balkan and, above all, through neighbouring Serbia.⁹⁹

Extremely exclusive existing viewpoints on Montenegro's admission to the Open Balkan, as well as arranging the census and signing the Fundamental Contract with the Serbian Orthodox Church make a broader discussion on this and related matters difficult. This is certainly further complicated by the need for an announced two-thirds majority in the minority government of Montenegro. In addition to the foregoing, the frequently heightened and exaggerated campaign against Montenegro's accession to the Open Balkan through media appearances and analyses, primarily due to the emphasis on potential negative economic, but also political, influences, does not contribute to a more realistic debate. This is especially evident during the past six months. The traditional deep intra-Montenegrin division on certain issues, from key elements of identity to foreign policy orientations, has only been further strengthened by another reason for disagreement. However, the commitment of the US, and potentially of the EU, on the issue of further functioning and inclusion of the Open Balkan can change that and, in a way, relativize such rigid attitudes.¹⁰⁰

Recommendations:

The Open Balkan, but also the whole complex of regional initiatives that have emerged over the past two and a half decades, should become connected, inclusive, long-term, and self-sustaining forms, such as the Benelux, Nordic forms of cooperation (primarily the Nordic Council), or the Visegrad Group. Also, the Baltic republics have a similar format for regional cooperation, i.e., the Baltic Assembly.

Starting from the fact that, for now, there is no full inclusion of the Open Balkan, and having in mind the significant resistance to future aspirations of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro to join this arrangement, there is a possibility to change the situation by removing certain negative attitudes of the local public about this initiative.

To this end, it is important that:

1. The full inclusion of the Open Balkan will not be ensured without some kind of external oversight and coordination of this initiative. In this regard, networking with the Berlin

⁹⁸ „Radulović: Crna Gora bi bila zatvorena u ‘Otvorenom’ Balkanu“, Portal Analitika, Podgorica, 12. februar 2022. Internet: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/radulovic-crna-gora-bi-bila-zatvorena-u-otvorenom-balkanu>. *Nova inicijativa na Zapadnom Balkanu*, Atlantski savjet, Podgorica, februar 2022, str. 4–8.

⁹⁹ „Vlahović: Zalupite vrata Otvorenom Balkanu“, *Portal Analitika*, Porgorica, 13. Mart 2022. Internet: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/vlahovic-zalupite-vrata-otvorenom-balkanu>.

¹⁰⁰ “Our Strength is our Unity: Putin Chose War. We Remain United with Ukraine by DAS Gabriel Escobar”, U.S. Embassy in Albania, Tirana, January 12, 2022. Internet: <https://al.usembassy.gov/our-strength-is-our-unity-putin-chose-war-we-remain-united-with-ukraine-by-das-gabriel-escobar/>.

Process and the Regional Cooperation Council, as well as the South-East European Cooperation Process, is particularly important.

A potential new (re) branding of existing content would not ensure the possibility of accepting accession to this initiative by Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, but also Kosovo;

2. The concept of overcoming mutual distrust of the public and political actors of countries participating in the Open Balkan, or considering entering into this arrangement, must be based on liberation from any form of internal domination and hegemony. This would essentially mean:
 - full respect for the "Charter of Good Neighborly Relations, Stability, Security and Co-operation in South-East Europe" (2000) on which modern forms of regional cooperation are based, in particular the South-East European Cooperation Process,¹⁰¹
 - clear confirmation of the Agreement on Regional Representation and Cooperation between the authorities in Belgrade and Pristina of 24 February 2012,¹⁰²
 - full confirmation of the existing borders and constitutional structures of the subjects and the absence of their mutual dispute and any kind of hostility,
 - development of the Open Balkan in full complementarity with the Euro-Atlantic and European efforts of the Western Balkan countries,
 - establishment and future development of the Open Balkan based on European principles and standards, and
 - coherence and full coordination of actions with existing regional initiatives.

3. The deepening of economic forms of cooperation and benefits at the interstate borders is an important focus of the Open Balkan, but certainly insufficient *per se* for enhanced regional cooperation. The non-paper on the then-new concept of regional cooperation from 2013 foresaw the expansion of regional cooperation in several areas. So, in addition to the economy, it was also conceived in the field of security (*BALPOL*) because of cross-border security challenges such as organized crime, corruption, terrorism, illegal migration, etc.¹⁰³ The format of cooperation between the representative bodies of the Western Balkan countries was also strengthened through *the Parliamentary Assembly of the Western Balkans*.¹⁰⁴

Freedom of movement of the labour force and goods is therefore important, as is an insistence on the Common Regional Market. However, when it comes to the obvious problem in the functioning of the Berlin Process due to the change in the German

¹⁰¹ https://www.rcc.int/files/user/docs/2013.10.03_CHARTER_SEECD.pdf.

¹⁰² <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/kosovo-metohija/168200>.

¹⁰³ "Non-paper on the new concept of joint performance of the Western Balkan countries aimed at intensifying EU integration (Western Balkan Six – G6)", April 2013. Internet: https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/2015-i-pre/Non_paper_on_the_Western_Balkan_Six_G6_ENG_MEU.pdf.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

government, numerous obstacles appear. That is why it is necessary to revitalize the Berlin Process as soon as possible and coordinate the activities of the Open Balkan with it.¹⁰⁵

The existing health systems of the Western Balkans should also be opened and made available to all citizens of the countries participating in the Open Balkan. It is possible to deepen and cooperate in the fields of universities, national academies of science, technology and innovation, but also in the realization of scientific projects and research and employee mobility.

4. There are many other areas where more intensive regional cooperation would be of common interest. Of course, this mainly refers to energy, telecommunications, and digitalization. Intensive cooperation between the chambers of commerce of the Western Balkans region, which is already very well established, makes a significant contribution to certain types of cooperation.

Strengthening the transport infrastructure and connecting the countries of the Western Balkans is also very important, including the railways, air traffic, and the corridor network.

The Open Balkan can also achieve an additional form of cooperation on environmental issues (*the Western Balkans Green Agenda* has already been discussed), as well as climate change issues. At the same time, the issue of social cohesion in the Western Balkans region is also very important to ensure the possibility of a more balanced development.

The Balkan Film Commission and the Balkan Wine Festival are some of the activities that have been planned in the current dynamics of the evolution of the Open Balkan, especially in the middle of 2021. However, they have not been realized yet. There are also potentially many other cultural, tourist, sports, and entertainment activities that can positively brand an otherwise unfavourable image of the Western Balkans region in the wider European context, but also bring the citizens of the Open Balkan closer together.

5. In addition to functional intergovernmental cooperation, the Open Balkan should provide unequivocal support to local and regional authorities for strengthening cross-border cooperation and further facilitating border crossings for citizens of the Open Balkan. Special attention should be paid to projects related to cross-border cooperation in the most underdeveloped border rural areas;
6. Since the Berlin Process paid special attention to monitoring potential solutions to mutual bilateral issues in its early years, the Open Balkan should also have this as one of the focuses of its work. Particular attention should be paid to monitoring the implementation of minority issues, i.e., attempts to improve trust between the members of the Open Balkan through joint interstate and cross-border projects related to the status of minority ethnic communities. Additional emphasis should be given to the position of Roma in the Western Balkans, as was the case with the Berlin Process in 2021.
7. An attempt to form the Western Balkans Battlegroup would be significant. There were many different ideas regarding this at the beginning of the past decade.¹⁰⁶ This would

¹⁰⁵ See the Conclusions from the Berlin Process Summit held in July 2021 – <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975232/1939778/34c78ddbfdaddb3701635b1be6751816/2021-07-05-westbalkan-1-data.pdf?download=1>.

¹⁰⁶ See: Filip Edjus, Marko Savković i Nataša Dragojlović, *Ka borbenoj grupi Zapadni Balkan: Vizija odbrambene integracije Srbije u EU 2010–2020*, Centar za civilno-vojne odnose, Beograd, maj 2020, str. 3–47.

improve mutual trust between the countries of the Open Balkan and connect them in sensitive areas of cooperation such as defence.

8. In order to bring the widest spheres of the public closer together and improve mutual relations, the cooperation of public RTV services is of special importance. It can be realized through the formation of a special association of public broadcasters of the Open Balkan, the exchange of program contents, and the realization of joint projects.
9. It is important for the harmonization of numerous activities and priorities of the Open Balkan to form a body like the Joint Working Group mentioned at the end of 2019, with the aim of easier communication with the institutions of the initiative member states, but also the Berlin Process and the Regional Cooperation Council. This small operational body would also contribute to the preparation of meetings of heads of state/government and representatives of line ministries within the Open Balkan.

It is very necessary to use the existing administrative capacities, primarily of the Regional Cooperation Council, in order to avoid initiating the creation of new bureaucratized structures of the Open Balkan, which existed in the two and a half decades of regional cooperation on the Balkan Peninsula.

The Open Balkan Joint Working Group can also intensify relations with similar forms of cooperation across Europe – the Visegrad Group, the Benelux, the Baltic Assembly, the Nordic Council, etc.¹⁰⁷ In addition, the Joint Working Group can more clearly coordinate the appearance of economic entities in third markets and also further attract foreign investment to the Western Balkans region.

The perspective of the Open Balkan development is unequivocally in the shadow of the events on the European continent and, above all, the current crisis and the war in Ukraine. Thus, in fact, the stability of the Balkan Peninsula and the Western Balkans depends on the development of the situation in this country and the epilogue of the war that is being fought in it. The (re) activation of the Open Balkan and its full inclusion can be stimulated by the EU and the US before all other Western actors. That is why a comprehensible and, above all, final and unambiguous position of the EU on the relationship and coordination of activities of other formats of regional cooperation with the Open Balkan is very important. All prior ambiguities and doubts about the EU's position on the Open Balkans are unwanted and, in some ways, have the potential to paralyze it in the long run, both in terms of action and possible enlargement to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo.

In this regard, the leaders of the Open Balkan initiative addressed the new Federal Government of Germany in a text released in the German press on December 20, 2021, in order to garner explicit support for this regional initiative.¹⁰⁸ So far, the German government has not provided a

¹⁰⁷ Similar solution was also stated in “Non-paper on the new concept of joint performance of the Western Balkan countries aimed at intensifying EU integration (Western Balkan Six – G6)“, op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ „Vučić, Rama i Zaev traže podršku za Otvoreni Balkan“, *Deutsche Welle*, Berlin, 20. decembar 2022. Internet: <https://www.dw.com/sr/vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-rama-i-zaev-tra%C5%BEE-podr%C5%A1ku-za-otvoreni-balkan/a-60196210>.

straightforward answer as to how they see the future, not only of the Open Balkan, but also of the continuation of the Berlin Process, initiated by the former Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Functional regional cooperation should be the aspiration of everyone in the Western Balkans region, but it must be conceived in such a way that it is not an "imposed framework" on anyone, but a completely adequate form of intensive intergovernmental cooperation. This excludes any attempts to establish dominance, homogenism, or majoritarianism between individual actors in this part of Europe. Such regional cooperation should be long-term and (self) sustainable even after the potential accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU, as a reflection of joint efforts and regional specifics.

That is why, in very sensitive European circumstances, the redefinition of the entire regional cooperation in the Western Balkans should be approached rationally, and the numerous existing European experiences of the new regionalism should be taken into account. In this sense, the future of the Open Balkan should be considered as an initiative that, together with the Berlin Process, the Regional Cooperation Council, and the South-East European Cooperation Process, can contribute to more comprehensive, efficient, and functional regional cooperation.