



# OPEN BALKAN: OBJECTIVES AND JUSTIFICATIONS

## Open Balkan: objetivos y justificaciones

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The paper discusses Open Balkan, an initiative led by Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The starting point is a review of the historical developments of regional initiatives since 1996, which reveals the process tendencies such as ownership transfer from the EU to the region, overlapping goals among initiatives, and an agenda shift from fundamental to more comprehensive and progressive targets. The central argument of the paper is that while the founders of Open Balkan remain committed to the Berlin Process and RCC, they emphasize that the project is not dependent on the EU, implying that the Open Balkan project is not yet another ownership transfer to the local countries. Additionally, while the paper does not discard the possibility that the project is just political theatre, it suggests that the “race to Europe” fatigue accompanied by domestic issues might indeed pressure the three leaderships to explore an innovative approach.



Abstract

*El documento analiza el Open Balkan, una iniciativa liderada por Albania, Macedonia del Norte, y Serbia. El punto de partida es una revisión de los desarrollos históricos de iniciativas regionales que han surgido desde 1996, las cuales revelan las tendencias del proceso como la transferencia de propiedad de la UE a la región, la superposición de objetivos entre iniciativas, y un cambio de agenda de objetivos fundamentales a objetivos más integrales y progresivos. El argumento central del documento es que, si bien los fundadores de Open Balkan siguen comprometidos con el Proceso de Berlín y la CCR, ellos enfatizan que el proyecto no depende de la UE, lo que implica que el proyecto Open Balkan no es otra transferencia de propiedad a los países locales. Además, si bien el documento no descarta la posibilidad de que el proyecto sea solo teatro político, sugiere que la fatiga de la “carrera hacia Europa” acompañada de problemas internos, podría presionar a los tres líderes para explorar un enfoque innovador.*



Resumen

Open Balkan; Mini-Schengen; Albania; North Macedonia; Serbia.

*Open Balkan; Mini-Schengen; Albania; Macedonia del Norte; Serbia.*



Key words

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Fechas

## 1. Introduction

In October 2019, Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia announced the creation of the Mini-Schengen Area, later named Open Balkan. The initiative aims to improve ordinary people's lives and remove local obstacles to the economic prosperity of the region. While it remains a local initiative, Open Balkan comes under the umbrella of the Berlin Process. This implies that the initiative is not a replacement for enlargement but it might serve only as an intermediate step that provides politicians and citizens with tangible goals and benefits while instilling local responsibility.

However, not all Balkan governments share the same enthusiasm as Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Currently, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro have chosen to stay out of the project. While the leadership in Sarajevo is dealing with many domestic problems and is hardly able to find a consensus on even the most basic issues, Montenegro's government sees Open Balkan as having little value. Finally, while Kosovo<sup>1</sup> initially declined to join the block, its previous government committed to the project by signing the Washington Agreement. However, since the new administration in Kosovo views the Washington Agreement as nothing more than a "collection of points", there is no doubt that it will attempt to cherry-pick obligations from the Agreement. Therefore, in the current climate, it is a hard "no" from Kosovo.

Even though the designers of Open Balkan not only failed to unify the entire region but also provided few details on how the project fits the current initiatives, the idea is still worth examination, at least for the attention it receives in local media. However, one cannot afford to be overly excited since this is only one out of over 40 initiatives in the past 25 years in which the Western Balkan states have been involved (BRPG, 2021, p. 10). The central question of the paper is "are the objectives and political justifications of the Open Balkan different from the previous regional initiatives?" The point of departure will be a brief overview of the previous major projects, providing the historical context of Balkan initiatives. Then, taking into account the historical tendencies of such initiatives in the Balkans, the paper explores the Open Balkan project, its scope, objectives, and the political reasoning behind it.

*The initiative aims to improve ordinary people's lives and remove local obstacles to the economic prosperity of the region*

## 2. Overview of Balkan Initiatives

The 1990s were a tumultuous decade for Europe. While Western Europe started to complete its internal market, its Central and Eastern parts discarded the chains of the Soviet Union and committed to "back to Europe" future. Meanwhile, a small patch of Europe, today known as the Western Balkans, experience a different path. The collapse of communism left a void that was filled with the revival of nationalism, civil wars and consequently, the creation of new nations. If we view new regionalism as "the means by which new countries trying to enter the multilateral system [and] compete among themselves for the direct investments necessary for successful participation in that system" (Ethier, 1998, p. 1160), it is easy to understand why regional initiatives have been flourishing in the Balkans. Out of dozens, at least eleven of those prior to the Open Balkan project are worth our attention: Southeastern European Cooperation Process, Stability Pact, Southeastern Europe Transport Observatory, Central European Free

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<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

Trade Agreement, Energy Community, Regional Cooperation Council, Western Balkans Investment Fund, Brdo-Brijuni Process, Berlin Process, Regional Youth Cooperation Office, Transport Community, and Regional Economic Area.<sup>2</sup>

The Southeastern European Cooperation Process (SEECP) was initiated, firstly under the name “The process of good neighbourliness, stability, security and cooperation of the Countries of Southeastern Europe”, in Bulgaria in 1996. The initial declaration aimed to show that these countries were committed to transforming the region into an area of stability and contributing to a New Europe (Sofia Declaration, 1996, pp. 1-2). Since it came only a year after the end of the civil war in Bosnia, the authors of the Declaration primarily focused on curbing the risk of future conflicts. Therefore, the main goals were (a) enhancing good relations between neighbouring countries through security-building measures, (b) the development of economic cooperation in areas of infrastructure and transport, (c) the development of social contacts, and (d) cooperation to combat organised crime and terrorism (Sofia Declaration, 1996, pp. 2-8).

Following the success of the SEECP, the EU launched the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe (SPSE) in 1999, signalling that the Southeastern European countries are not alone in establishing and reinforcing peace and security. Subsequently, the EU also initiated another project in 2004: the Southeastern Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO). While the SPSE aimed to maintain stability and peace, the SEETO provided aid to local countries in the areas of infrastructure and transport. In other words, the EU created two organisations that served as operational arms to the SEECP and its four main goals. However, in order to transfer “ownership” to the local states, the SPSE was replaced in 2008 by the Regional Cooperation Council (Joint Declaration RCC, 2008, Annex 2, art. 1), and SEETO became the Transport Community (Treaty on establishing the Transport Community 2017, Preamble).

The Transport Community not only took over SEETO’s goal to establish and maintain railways and roads in the EES but also of “the development of the transport network between the European Union and the South East European Parties” (Treaty on establishing the Transport Community, 2017, art. 1). Similarly, RCC expanded from a project tied to peace and security to an ambitious organisation that facilitates the implementation of the Common Regional Market, targeting four main areas: trade, investments, digitalisation, industrialisation and innovations (RCC, 2020). The trade area refers to the four freedoms approach: free movement of goods, services, capital and people. The investments area aims to remove current obstacles for foreign direct investments by creating a “greater regional alignment of investment policies and better coordinated investment promotion” (RCC, 2020, p. 3). Further, the digital area implies preparation for joining the EU Digital Single Market through principles and practices such as free roaming, protection of data, smart cities. Finally, the regional industrial and innovation area encourages the WB countries to promote youth, green, and woman entrepreneurship.

As we can notice, the WB countries made a significant leap in the past couple of decades, changing their priorities from security issues toward sustainable development. However, there is no doubt that the region is still far cry from the membership: the 2004 average compliance with the *acquis* indicates that no WB country, except possibly North Macedonia, will meet the requirements to join the EU before 2035 (Böhmelt & Freyburg, 2017). Therefore, initiatives like the Berlin Process seems momentous since it contributes “to the region by refocusing the

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2 For a more comprehensive list, together with member states, see Balkan Research Policy Group (2021, pp. 33-34).

EU attention on it and putting the region continuously into the focus of active developments in the light of the EU integration process” (Tota, 2020, p. 164). The Berlin Process is based on similar goals to the previous initiatives, such as political and economic cooperation, with additional emphasis on youth and the civil sector, its, perhaps, most successful elements. On the other hand, critics note that the EU uses the initiative only to pacify the region while failing to reward countries that made notable advances (Prelec, 2017, pp. 1-3).

It is worth mentioning, however, that the EU has a long history of initiating processes that they later transfer to local members, such as in the case of the SPSE and SEETO. A similar trend can be observed with the Berlin Process where the initiative has been followed by two local projects — the Regional Economic Area (REA) and Open Balkan. While the REA is indeed a locally owned project proper, it merely reiterates previous goals — trade, investment, mobility, digitalisation, and moreover remains heavily dependent on the Berlin Process and the EU support.

Prior to the discussion of Open Balkan, it is important to mention the initiatives that act as supporting pillars, most notably, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), Energy Community, Western Balkans Investment Fund (WBIF), Brdo-Brijuni Process, and Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). CEFTA is an international trade agreement that prepares countries for future participation within the European Common Market. Energy Community is an initiative aiming to bring together the EU member states and the WB under a common energy market. The WBIF is a joint project of several EU bodies that provides financial support for the socio-economic development of the WB countries. Finally, the Brdo-Brijuni Process and the RYCO are two local projects: the first one is a high-politics annual meeting of both non-EU and EU countries in the Western Balkans, while the latter project promotes reconciliation and dialogue among youth through supporting and financing projects.

Even this simplified review of Balkan initiatives reveals several tendencies (a) transfer of power from EU-led projects to local countries; (b) the initiatives often pursue overlapping goals; (c) the agenda shifts from establishing and protecting peace to more progressive issues such as four freedoms and investments. The list, though uncompleted, provides us not only with the context of Balkan initiatives but also valuable points that help us to understand the differences and similarities between Open Balkan and previous projects.

### 3. Open Balkan

The leadership of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia launched the mini-Schengen/Open Balkan initiative in Novi Sad in October 2019. The three leaders, finding their inspiration from similar and successful models, like Benelux and the Nordic Region, expressed their will to strengthen regional cooperation in order to “generate economic growth, reduce unemployment, combat illegal migration, fight transnational organized crime, and improve the social welfare of our citizens” (Novi Sad, 2019, par. 4). Oddly enough, the designers of Open Balkan take Benelux as their inspiration, the union that belongs to the category of “pioneers”, a grouping that suggests that “the level of integration involved is ahead of that of the larger regional integration project” (Dangerfield, 2004, p. 207). Certainly, it would be more appropriate to compare the Open Balkan initiative to a “complementary instrument” such as the Visegrád Group in its first decade (Dangerfield, 2008, p. 636). Most likely, it is a technical mistake, not an expression of a belief that Open Balkan will achieve a higher level of integration than the EU.

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The document also reiterated the importance of free movement of goods, services, capital, and labour, with tangible targets, such as travelling with an ID and recognition of qualifications across the region. Finally, the document mentions the Thessaloniki Summit (2003), Trieste Summit (2017), and EU Strategy for the WB (2018), implying that Open Balkan is not a replacement for the EU membership. In short, there are two distinct elements of the Novi Sad Declaration. The foundation goals of the initiative, namely, security-building measures and economic and social cooperation, can be easily traced back to the SEECP (1996). Similarly, a reiteration of the four freedoms can hardly be news for the region. However, the signatories expressed nothing but enthusiasm. Zoran Zaev, then the prime minister of North Macedonia uttered that while the EU is welcome, “this initiative is focused on the interests of the countries in the region”, indicating that the region is mature to take the responsibilities for its citizens; words of Aleksandar Vucic, the president of Serbia, also echoed maturity — “[t]he fact that we have differences relative to Kosovo [...] has nothing to do with the flow of goods, people, services and capital” (Simic, 2019). On the other hand, Open Balkan prompted a substantial outrage among right-wing parties. In Albania, the opposing parties led by Kosovar Self-Determination expressed fear that the project “will increase Serbia’s clout in the Balkans” (Republica, 2019), while, in Serbia, a leader of Dveri claims that it “will contribute to the realization of the idea of a Greater Albania and that it is only a preparation for the entry/return of large numbers of migrants to Serbia and their settlement” (Đukanović and Đorđević, 2020, p. 609).

Following the Novi Sad Declaration, the three leaders signed two additional declarations in Ohrid on 10 November 2019 and in Tirana on 21 December. The first declaration aimed “to accelerate the implementation of Regional Economic Area by identifying a list of priority measures” (Ohrid, 2019) by creating a list of priorities concerning four freedoms. The main focus is on creating a system that enables citizens to travel with ID cards, recognition of diplomas, and work permits. Subsequently, the designers of this system believe that it would increase workforce accessibility and ease the movement of goods. Besides the list of priorities, the Ohrid Declaration reiterates the commitment of the three states to cooperate in combatting transnational crime and terrorism. In a joint conference, the leaders stated that there will be no “Yugoslavias” and invited other WB countries to join, as Edi Rama, the prime minister of Albania, pointed out that “[t]he key feature is that this document is an internal desire, not patronized externally” (B92, 2019a). Rama applied a similar tone during the Tirana meeting, stressing that the initiative is not imposed on anyone and that Kosovo’s refusal to join is incomprehensible and detrimental to Kosovo itself (Tirana – Joint Conference, 2019). Suddenly, during the press conference, his language became more direct — while people in Albania and Kosovo expect open borders, “it won’t open, not merely because people in Belgrade protest against it, but people in Washington and Brussels protest too” (Tirana – Joint Conference, 2019), implying that Open Balkan is the best chance for ethnic Albanians to reside in a common area. Vucic’s opinion of Washington and Brussels was even blunter: “[s]hould first pray to God and then pray to them just to open two or three negotiating chapters? No, I don’t like see myself and my people humiliated” (Tirana – Joint Conference, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the elections held in North Macedonia and Serbia, stalled the project in 2020.<sup>3</sup> However, in 2021, Open Balkan again gained momentum. In a joint statement, the leaders reiterated their commitment to the four freedoms, but it also brought more

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3 In 2020, there was only one video meeting, in addition to two meetings among technical personnel.

details about the future actions such as programs to help businesses and workers, a VAT information sharing system, a Balkan Film Commission, a Balkan wine festival, and opportunities for school sports teams to compete with each other (Skopje, 2021).<sup>4</sup> This time, like in previous declarations, the authors reminded the world that the region remains committed to the Berlin Process and RCC, though without criticism directed towards Brussels.

The June 2022 Regional Economic Forum in Skopje, North Macedonia, saw the leaders of the three countries discuss the previously agreed projects. Additionally, the summit saw the participation of representatives of Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. While the Prime Minister of Montenegro, Dritan Abazovic, hinted that his country might change its course, Bosnia remains adamant. The presence of the EU representative was equally important with the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, praising the three leaders, and expressing hope that Open Balkan “is a possible lever for the region to change the realities on the ground [but] it can also be a lever to accelerate the way into the European Union” (EU Commission, 2022). EU support nonetheless relies on the fact that the Open Balkan initiative helps countries accelerate the adaptation of EU rules and norms.

One way of interpreting the Open Balkan project is that it is yet another example of an EU initiative transferred to local countries. However, there are two interconnected facts that challenge this view. Firstly, unlike during previous transfers from the EU to local actors, the EU’s praise and encouragement were absent at the beginning. Secondly, it is unprecedented that three Balkan statesmen engage in such political *braggadocio* — while inviting the EU to support the project, they openly claim that Open Balkan will succeed even without external aid. Therefore, even though the “transfer argument” is not yet to be discarded, it seems that it cannot entirely explain the development of Open Balkan. The other way of perceiving Open Balkan is that the project is nothing but a political stunt (Demjaha, 2019; Prelec, 2019). If it is yet another stunt by the Balkan elites, it is not a very successful one. While the three leaders have a record of paying lip service to the international partners and using populist rhetoric on their own turf, this project, if anything, did the opposite of securing support in Brussels or among voters. The EU distances itself from the project and there is no evidence that it attracted potential voters.

Without underestimating the two previous lines of reasoning, we still need to explore domestic arenas in order to fully understand the idea behind Open Balkan. For Vucic, “the initiative [Open Balkan] suits Serbia the most because Serbia is the one that is the most powerful, capable of selling more goods and services, being the most powerful in human resources” (B92, 2019b). While according to most estimates, North Macedonia would benefit the most economically, Serbia will undoubtedly gain the most in political terms. First of all, the EU effectively forced Serbia into signing several agreements with each acting as “a contribution to the renunciation of Serbia’s sovereignty or influence in Kosovo and Metohija” (Bazic, 2019, p. 320). In other words, even though, due to an internal split on Kosovo’s status, the EU cannot formally demand Serbia to recognise Kosovo as a sovereign state, there is a perception that Serbia will face a stark choice — “Kosovo or EU membership” — at the end of the journey. It seems that even Vucic is not ready to discard this view since, in recent years, he tied the compromise with Pristina to the question of Serbia’s survival (Semenov, 2022). Second, since the

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<sup>4</sup> The document also mentioned a 2.4 billion investment from the mining group “Rio Tinto” in lithium development in Serbia. However, Serbia annulled all contracts related to the group.



Brussels Process seems stale in the last several years, Vucic believes that Open Balkan project, if includes Kosovo, might be perceived as “normalisation” between Belgrade and Pristina. For Serbia, Open Balkan does not only remove one of the main obstacles to the EU membership but also potentially increases Belgrade’s influence in the region.

Vucic, thanks to the Trump administration, persuaded Kosovo’s previous leadership to sign the Washington Agreement. Besides repeating many already signed agreements from Brussels and adding unusual points that served Trump’s campaign, the Agreement also envisaged that Kosovo would join Open Balkan and share Gazivode/Ujmani Lake (Semenov, 2021). However, Albin Kurti, the new leader of Kosovo Albanians, believes that the Agreement is damaging to Kosovo’s interest and that there are no negotiations without Serbia’s full apology, recognition, and reparations (Crowcroft, 2021). In the same interview, he supported the idea of the unification of Kosovo and Albania, albeit acknowledging the fact that it would require changing Kosovo’s Constitution. Kurti, however, forgot to mention that such change is only possible with the approval of two thirds of ethnic minorities’ representatives, where currently Kosovo Serbs hold 10 out of 15 places.

Rama, on the other hand, takes a different approach. For him, an open border between Albania and Kosovo is possible only through Belgrade. The logic behind this is that Rama believes Albania has fulfilled its duties and in his words, the EU “does not have any problems with us, they [Europeans] have its own internal problems [and] they make up our problem” (Ilva et al., 2021). Albanian analysts and pundits echo these words “Albania has done more than Serbia, but is not even allowed to open negotiation talks” (Crowcroft & Ristani, 2021). The fear of the Albanian ruling elite that looms in the background is that the EU treats Albania in such a manner because the majority of its population is Muslim, and views it as “a bearer of Turkish influence” (Crowcroft & Ristani, 2021). Therefore, from Rama’s perspective, Open Balkan is the means to open borders between Albania and Kosovo and to tone down the impression of Albania as a Turkish puppet in the Balkans.

Even though North Macedonia is often labelled as the best student in the region, it does not face fewer or less powerful impediments than its neighbours. According to an empirical research model developed by Böhmelt and Freyburg (2017), North Macedonia is the only country that might comply with the *acquis* in the 2020s. However, the EU has not started official negotiations with North Macedonia. The change of the country’s name in 2018, which solved a 25-year-long dispute with Greece, brought nothing but resentment “since it was openly associated with the notion that the name was sacrificed in exchange for the EU accession” (Rajchinovska-Pandeva, 2021, pp. 105-106).<sup>5</sup> Instead of being placed on a fast track to the EU, North Macedonia has encountered another challenge. Bulgaria listed 20 demands for North Macedonia, such as the negation of the existence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, removal of the term “Bulgarian Fascist Occupier”, and naming the Macedonian language “Official language of Republic of North Macedonia” (Marusic, 2019). In recent months, Bulgaria’s leadership reduced the number to six, and while at first glance, the new demands appear reasonable, disputes on historical events leave significant room for interpretation (Marusic, 2021). Zaev, while still a Prime Minister, hinted at the direction of his government by saying that Bulgaria was not a “fascist occupier” during World War II.

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<sup>5</sup> On the importance of the name issue and its negative impact on the Macedonian economy see (Stojanovski, Marolov, & Ananiev, 2014).

According to Macedonian experts, this was one of the reasons for the poor performance of this party in the 2021 mayoral election: “The public was not prepared for another national humiliation and for [the government’s] very insensitive attitude that didn’t take into account [the public’s] collective memory and feelings” (Dimeska, 2021). “Lack of understanding”, and even more often, “humiliation”, are the terms Belgrade, Tirana, and Skopje use to describe the process of EU integration in the region. In that light, it seems that the creation of Open Balkan is an attempt to internalise (what the three sides view as) imposed external obstacles. The success of this attempt depends on many unknown variables such as whether the project becomes a threat to the EU enlargement policy, is Kosovo to join the block, are economic benefits enough to suppress opposing voices, and most importantly, whether Open Balkan will transcend its founders and become the project of the states.

## 4. Conclusions

The central question is how Open Balkan differs from previous initiatives in terms of goals and political justifications. The goals of the Open Balkan initiative bring nothing new to the region. Some of them — such as security-building measures, cooperation in the areas of infrastructure and transport, and the fight against organized crime and terrorism — have their roots in the agreements and initiatives of the 1990s. Others, such as the four freedoms and investments, are borrowed from more recent initiatives. However, Open Balkan is not interesting in terms of its goals, nor the fact that it is a project initiated and led by the local states. Instead, it is political justification that makes the project unique. Belgrade, Pristina, and Skopje share a common perception that their troubles are not domestic but foreign. The three leaderships believe that compliance with European norms is not enough and that making concessions only brings more demands. There is a notion that the challenges are “invented” and solutions do not rest entirely in the hands of the three governments. In other words, Open Balkan is an attempt to localize what is perceived as external impediments. Therefore, for Vucic, Open Balkan is an opportunity to normalize the relationship with Pristina. For Rama, it is a chance to dismiss a picture of Albanians as the vanguard of Turkish interest but also to open borders between Albania and Kosovo. Finally, after resolving a long-standing dispute with Greece, Skopje’s leadership received a “reward” in the form of a new demand list from Bulgaria, thus, for Skopje, it is an attempt to increase its leverage in international affairs. It is also worth stressing that Balkan leaders have a record of placing form above substance. Therefore, it would not be surprising if the project proves to be political theatre, either to distract voters from domestic issues or to create a platform for applying pressure on the EU. If this is the case, the founders did the opposite. The potential failure of Open Balkan will only prove the incompetence of local leaders and the need for EU supervision.

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