

Road to Europe: Between the Berlin Process and the Open Balkan Initiative

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Abstract: *The Open Balkan initiative has been partially supported by the leadership of the Western Balkans. If years ago it seemed a political whim, currently it constitutes a highly conditional factor from a two-level perspective: firstly, in the bilateral relations between the Balkan countries and, secondly, in relation to the Euro-Atlantic orientation of these countries for which the EU foreign policy had implemented the Berlin Process since 2014. In fact, the two processes have key differences, since for the Open Balkan initiative the priority interest resides in economic cooperation, while the Berlin process seeks to resolve, before their accession to the EU, many divergences of the Western Balkan countries, issues of a more complex nature than that of economic and cross-border cooperation. The Balkans are a region of turmoil where two world wars started, which left us with indelible memories of human suffering. The initiative has remained a Balkans' troika due to its lack of support at the national level and beyond. The analysis based on a mixed-methods' approach, seeks to highlight which of these two processes, that of the Balkans leadership or that of the European politics, is the most suitable for a comprehensive integration, without inter-ethnic conflicts and the mutual influence of the economic expansion.*

Keywords: *EU integration policy, ethnic conflicts, Open Balkan initiative, Berlin Process, economic development.*

Introduction

In 2019, the leaders Edi Rama, Aleksander Vučić and Zoran Zaev introduced the idea of signing an agreement between the Western Balkan countries, which they labelled a “mini-Schengen” (B92, 2019). It is an international act which, at this stage, represents a mere declaration of intent and ideas and needs to be ratified by the respective parliaments of these countries. Regardless of the delay in the ratification process, the interest of the three Balkan leaders in finalizing this agreement is undeniable. Nowadays, taking into account the point of view of the sceptics, who want to allay once and for all the distrust and resentments that prevailed in the Balkans from time immemorial, it would be natural to consider the above-mentioned agreement as a pact that would help the economies of these countries to further develop and, eventually, to build bridges of a long-lasting peace in a war-ridden region.

Therefore, several questions need to be clarified: firstly, why was it called mini-Schengen initially, if the mention of Schengen is far from being accidental (in fact, this denomination expresses the ambition to mirror the most powerful economic link that keeps Europe united (Tirana Observatory, 2020). At this moment, the common feature

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that the mini-Schengen shares with the large Schengen is the perspective of ensuring the freedom of movement in the economic sphere. Secondly, every citizen of these countries is entitled to ask: why are we entering into this agreement and which are its benefits in terms of economic development? Thirdly, why was the mini-Schengen conceived as a crippled structure (and by that we mean that it does not include all the states from the Balkan region)? (B92, 2019). And, finally, if none of these questions is answered under the logic of Schengen, can it be hinted that we are dealing with a biased and unfruitful political initiative in terms of cooperation?

This agreement triggered many official and formal positions in favour of or against it and a multitude of opinions were expressed on this issue. In the first place, all the political stakeholders, at regional and international levels, are not against the development of economic relations that entail a customs union, a free trade area, and a free labour market established between the aforementioned Western Balkan countries. According to the same thesis, a cooperation of this type would set a precedent in this area, which might bring about the accession of all the Western Balkan states to a common organisation like the European Union. The issue already raises many questions about the timeliness of its proposal or the manner in which it relates to a previous initiative, that has been approved since 2014, when the EU launched the Berlin Process. Additionally, there are questions concerning the implementation procedures of such an agreement, especially between former belligerent countries, still stuck in an open inter-ethnic conflict, which cost thousands of deaths and led to court proceedings over the years.

In 2014, the Berlin Process was launched at the initiative of Germany and with EU support for a preliminary integration of these countries, first in relation to each other and then to Europe. The judgment was neither casual, nor superficial. It is generally acknowledged that the Balkans convey the impression of an unquenchable fire of inter-ethnic conflicts that burns behind the political scenes (Tirana Observatory, 2020). The idea of establishing an economic cooperation according to the Berlin Process was further escalated by the introduction of other coordinating pillars, such as the rule of law and a mechanism for the resolution of bilateral disputes, in an attempt to reduce litigations and leave the past behind.

Even if the Open Balkan initiative could be perceived as a *mea culpa* of Belgrade for the crimes committed in the Balkans, the Serbian domestic and foreign policy is clearly incompatible with the good neighbourliness principles that should be respected by the actors in the region. Given the circumstances, there is a dire need for composure in judgment and for an analysis based exclusively on irrefutable facts and persuasive arguments. It is required to compare the two above-mentioned processes and to conclude which of them could better address and resolve the differences in terms of politics, ideology, economic and cultural development in order to ensure the accession process is in full harmony with the multilateral interests specified or entailed by the agreement.

The Berlin Process versus the Open Balkan initiative

Although these two processes share a common goal (facilitating economic interactions and the freedoms of movement for goods, services and people), the political intentions behind the scenes differ on sensitive issues. Both initiatives have a positive outlook on the economic development and interactions, even though the Berlin Process

is more meticulous and builds on a concrete basis of ongoing investments. The European integration is a long process because it requires the adoption of certain economic standards by the candidate countries. Subsequently, some analysts remain sceptical concerning the capacity of the Western Balkans to rise to the challenge: firstly, in terms of conflict resolution and, secondly, in terms of development and pro-European cultural approach (Kalemaj, 2023).

The method we used to differentiate between these two processes and conclude which of them is more likely to be accepted, both regionally and internationally, is mainly the comparison. We compared, on the one hand, the objectives set in the framework of the respective processes and, on the other hand, the degree of their acceptance at national level in the states that either have joined these initiatives or will join them in the near future. If we analyse these two aspects, we should also take into account the time frame of their development and the rhetoric that accompanies it. The Berlin Process started in 2014 and, during the annual summits it has occasioned, we were offered a detailed account of what has been done (Tota, 2020), what requires more work and what needs to be changed or improved.

The Berlin Process seeks to build bridges of cooperation on many aspects and objectives, starting from the premise that the economy of the Western Balkan states is rather weak and couldn't do without the support of the EU, if it stays that way. These countries have great difficulty taking economic initiatives and implementing them. Therefore, in the Berlin Process, priority is given to economic initiatives, but tactfully, as this process also aims at conflict resolution between the member states of the Balkan region. The problem is that this is actually a very hard target to attain.

The European leaders are well aware that this process needs years of cooperation and, above all, it demands a deeper integration that will hardly be supported by the member states. Therefore, it is not only a matter of dismissing the memories of thousands war crimes that took place in the recent past, due to inter-ethnic conflicts in the Western Balkans. As long as the actors of yesterday's wars embrace only apparently the European initiatives and continue to incite the crowds to ethnic hatred and division, behind the scenes, the issue of regional integration remains open to debate. If there is no way of sanctioning them for these tendencies, one should at least reject them ideologically (Tare, I., Da Silva, C., & Crowcroft, O., 2021).

The European Union is clear in its vision of reconciled Western Balkan states and, naturally, it attaches a great importance to it, fact which is quite problematic in the researcher's opinion. In the case that the Western Balkan states reach the economic standards required by the EU integration, without solving their conflicts, it is very unlikely that the EU will accept their membership. The European Union is aware that if it grants membership status to countries with unresolved bilateral issues in this turbulent region, which has not been peaceful for centuries, this act might bring divisions and war on a wider scale. Bosnia is one of the states of the former Yugoslavia that paid the highest price (EU-WB, 2017) for their independence, followed by Kosovo. It is perfectly understandable that these two countries are reluctant to join the Open Balkan initiative. They have accomplished their dream of independence after centuries of struggle and they do not wish to see it jeopardised by a regional initiative, like the Open Balkan, which has no straightforward and transparent political goal.

Being in a critical and complex situation, the EU is attempting to rebalance its policies at the regional level, because there the EU integration process continues to be perceived as an unrealistic project (Kamberi, 2021). The EU acknowledges that Serbia maintains a superficial peace and has an apparent interest therein, while it continues to benefit from the support of Russia for its geopolitical interests. An essential issue that should be clarified is whether Serbia is genuinely adhering to this initiative and willing to abide by the rules that the Berlin Process imposes on the countries in the region. Meanwhile, the EU shares its fear that Serbia could become Russia's "Trojan Horse" within the EU (Bashkurti, 2022).

These insights, expressed through diplomatic channels, are not overt, and yet, in view of the above, the EU regarded with scepticism the Open Balkan initiative. Personalities within the EU took controversial stances on this initiative, considering it redundant, since all the aspects of inter-Balkan cooperation have been covered by the Berlin Process. And yet the opinions of the EU officials do not converge on this issue. When Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared he opposed any initiative which is not launched by the EU, the European Union seemingly embraced the position of Berlin, but subsequently, the EU slightly changed its outlook on the Open Balkan initiative, as Ursula von der Leyen's position on this issue suggests (Western Balkans, 2021).

The president of the European Commission does not openly disapprove of this initiative. She includes it in the framework of the Berlin Process and, using the diplomatic language, expresses the EU support for any economic initiative in the Balkans that might be compatible with the Berlin Process. It is worth mentioning that the EU does not provide economic and financial support to both initiatives. To date, the Open Balkan initiative is not backed by any open fund or investment from the EU, whereas the EU projects for the Western Balkans (the Berlin Process included) receive financing that amounts to nearly 30 billion euros. By being a "soft power", the EU is promoting a Euro-diplomacy (Bashkurti, 2022).

From the "Mini Schengen" to the Open Balkan initiative

Geographically, Schengen is a small municipality of Luxembourg which gave its name to an agreement signed in the distant year 1985 by five member states of the European Economic Community (EEC), with a view to ensure the freedom of movement. The Schengen Area comprises today 27 countries. Although their accession became effective at different times and moments, their incentive was unique and clear: free movement of goods and people, as a prelude to a union, which started from the economy and was followed by a United Europe. Behind every international agreement there are legitimate interests of political and geopolitical nature, implicitly or explicitly accepted by the countries which are parties to that agreement. The reason for which the Schengen Agreement was established and developed was based on the interest (shared by all the participating countries) to create a more efficient and barrier-free trade, laying the foundations of a flexible and profitable economy (Oxford Analytica, 2022).

By analogy with the Schengen Agreement, we searched for the reason of economic interaction in the mini-Schengen. Rama - Vučić - Zaev state that the reason for establishing a mini-Schengen lies in the hindrance to trade represented by the waiting times for trucks at the border crossing points. They mentioned that 28 million hours are

lost while waiting for the customs control (Dhimolea, A. 2022). Since mathematics is not an argument, we can infer that such a precise figure is actually the result of in-depth and joint studies accomplished by all the member states that will benefit from the removal of customs barriers. With a firm belief that Albanian experts also contributed to those joint studies, the common sense of the Albanian citizens is puzzled by the question: which are the Albanian exports and how many hours did the Albanian trucks wait at the Serbian customs? In 2019, according to the World Bank data, the only growing “economic index” in Albania was corruption (Freedom House, 2018-2023). Moreover, according to this Bank’s report on the Western Balkans, there is a decrease in economic growth in all these countries, that share a lack of efficiency in public spending and in the application of fiscal policies (World Bank, 2019).

In the framework of the reunion for the Open Balkan initiative, the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, the President of Serbia, Aleksander Vučić, and the Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, have signed 5 cooperation agreements, as follows: Agreement on the Conditions for Free Access to the Labor Market in the Western Balkans; Agreement on the Interconnection of Schemes for Electronic Identification of the Citizens of the Western Balkans; Agreement between the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania and the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia for cooperation in the Field of Veterinary Medicine, Food safety and animal feed and phytosanitary services in the Western Balkans; Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania on the Mutual Recognition of Authorizations of the Authorized Economic Operator; Agreement between the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania on the Mutual Recognition of Authorizations of the Authorized Economic Operator - safety and security (AEOS) (Tirana Observatory, 2020).

Hence, if we examine the statistics collected from international and politically unbiased institutions (BTI Transformation Index, 2018-2022), it results that Albania’s interest in the mini-Schengen, in terms of trade and economic movement, is of little worth or of no value. It can be argued that, from a legal and political perspective, an international pact of this kind would offer the Serbian economy the possibility to expand itself, since the only country with export potential is Serbia and because the mutual interest and the level of economic development of the countries that are parties to the mini-Schengen agreement are not well-balanced. In support of the above, data analytics from different sources, such as the World Bank, Freedom House or the BTI Transformation Index, show that Serbia’s economic index and growth are the highest, followed by North Macedonia’s, whereas Albania holds the lowest position, according to the official data for the year 2018.

And if this is not the main reason, one may wonder why it is called a mini-Schengen, a denomination meant to counterweight the large Schengen, made up of the giants of the European economy. In response to this paradox, the three leaders eventually made amends, by changing the denomination into “Open Balkan”. Thus, they subdued the implications of the initial name, which risked to be considered as a strong message to Europe for not accepting them in the phase of membership negotiations. In fact, the regional initiative of the Open Balkan (or the mini-Schengen) started as a result of the impasse that the European Union enlargement process is facing. “Until the EU decides, we have to find a way to continue the Europeanisation process”, Zaev said in the same year.

In the meantime, things have changed. Serbia has already opened 22 of the 35 chapters of the accession negotiations, while Albania and North Macedonia are in the screening process.

Broken fingers of the same hand. Why is Kosovo not a part?

Is it acceptable to use the same name of the Schengen treaty, even as a metaphor, for those countries which neither are part thereof, nor are geographically connected to the Schengen Area? The Schengen Agreement was signed in a village of the same name in Luxembourg. The village of Schengen is situated in the middle of the border triangle of France, Germany and Luxembourg. Therefore, following the same line of reasoning, the mini-Schengen should have taken the name of the convergence point of the triangle formed by Skopje-Belgrade-Tirana. The convergence point in this case would be Pristina.

And what explanations could be provided for the fact that other Balkan countries, like Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo, were left aside? Initially, these countries were invited to join the initiative, but they were not given sufficient time to reflect on it, to weigh on its importance, the pros and cons, and its impact in the Balkans, as the initiators had already followed these assessment steps. As a result, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro refused to join the initiative (Joint statement. O.B, 2021). They could not enter into an agreement without mature reflection on its scope. No matter how much we allude to the mini-Schengen as to an economic treaty, its geopolitical goal is crystal-clear. It is noteworthy that the benefits of this agreement and the economic exchanges between the parties are neither grounded, nor balanced (Bashkurti, 2022).

Subsequently, one is entitled to ask why should Albania participate in the mini-Schengen and which are the prospective advantages for the Albanian economy, faced with the worst collapse of exports in decades? Which are the benefits of the freedom of movement for the Albanian citizens in the mini-Schengen area, given the fact that, as history shows, the Albanians tend to migrate westwards, not eastwards. Furthermore, due to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, they are allowed to move freely to the large Schengen. If we accept the lack of economic development perspectives and the Albanians' lack of interest in the freedom of movement towards the east, we can conclude that the interest in the mini-Schengen agreement is strictly political.

The state of Kosovo was clear in its Customs policy regarding Serbia. It levied taxes on every product. No one but the state of Kosovo is entitled to judge whether this choice of the leadership of the Kosovo government was right or wrong, as Kosovo is an independent state now. Bearing that in mind, the reasoning circle is narrowed down to a single question: Why did the Albanian government support an initiative it cannot benefit from? An initiative that favours Serbia (EU-WB, 2017). Why did it not emphasize that in these negotiations Kosovo was also an indisputable geographical, economic and geopolitical factor? In this author's opinion, Albania should not foster an unjust policy. Our aim is, primarily, to stress the importance of the good neighbourliness principle and, secondly, to express our opinion as members of a nation which nowadays represents an important demographic factor among the countries that would constitute the mini-Schengen.

However, the leadership of the countries left out by the Open Balkan initiative may still entertain the idea of a potential membership. In this sense, the former deputy

Prime Minister of Montenegro at that time, Dritan Abazovic, invited by Vučić to a Summit, clearly indicated in his speech a flexibility in the foreign policy of Montenegro towards the initiative: "Personally, I believe that any regional initiative which can accelerate the European integration, not only of Montenegro, but of the whole region, is something we should accept. On the other hand, if someone wants to replace the European integration, we are not interested. But, I have yet to hear a valid argument that Open Balkan is not good for Montenegro". (Tare, I., Da Silva, C., & Crowcroft, O., 2021).

In the Balkans, Kosovo remains the only country who rejects the initiative for the clear reason that Serbia is part of it and would thereby increase its influence in the region. A reflection on this issue is worthwhile. Does the reluctance of Kosovo rest exclusively upon Serbia's economic influence? In that case, we should admit that Serbia's influence persists in this field. If Kosovo considers that the higher development of the Serbian economy would grant Serbia a domineering status in the Western Balkans, then the reluctance of Kosovo is also based upon the potential political influence that Serbia would thus obtain.

Lack of transparency in the approval process

At the national level, at least as far as Albania is concerned, this initiative did not go through with all the legal steps it should have followed, like all the regional and international agreements proposed in the Albanian Parliament. Neither was it presented to the parliamentary committee for foreign policy, nor to the Parliament, in order to be recognized, debated, subjected to the voting procedure and approved, under the provisions of the Constitution. This initiative was not even the subject of an open public debate that would have enabled the Albanians to better understand and discuss the strategic interests which have inspired it, and the manner in which an agreement of this type would benefit the citizens of Albania, in particular, and those of the Western Balkans, in general.

This non-compliance with the ordinary procedures and, especially, the fact that the aforementioned initiative was not subjected to public debate (in order to allow the different stakeholders to express their opinions on the topic) fuelled the speculation that the initiative was prompted by Belgrade (Dhimolea, A. 2022) in informal meetings and secretly supported by the leadership of Albania and that of North Macedonia. These conjectures are grounded in the short history of the democratic transition in Albania and the experiences the Albanians acquired during this period as well as the precedents set by the processes of recognition, approval and ratification of international agreements. Notwithstanding that the Albanian foreign policy has been less influential in the international arena, every international agreement ratified by Albania has been previously accepted by the foreign policy committee through a consensual procedure. The principles on which the Albanian foreign policy is based have been oriented towards the Euro-Atlantic structures, towards integration in the European Union, good neighbourliness, and regional cooperation.

There is clear evidence that Albania took part in all the initiatives at regional and international levels. Albania is party to a series of agreements, such as the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the Central European Initiative, the South-East European Cooperation Process, the Adriatic Charter, the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative. These facts do not only reveal the high interest in those

agreements, but also show they were not kept confidential or far from the public eye. Indeed, those agreements were brought to the knowledge of the stakeholders at national and regional levels. Given that, basically, all these agreements channelled the regional and wider cooperation to ensure economic stability, promote liberal democracy and finalize the European and Euro-Atlantic integration at common stages, it is peculiar that an agreement like the Open Balkan initiative was launched and adopted in a non-democratic manner, without taking into account the interests of all the parties involved.

A nationwide discussion would be necessary to identify the solutions that such an agreement could provide to current issues concerning the economy, the fight against corruption, the labour market and the quality of employment. The Albanian foreign policy and its strategic partnerships should also become a topic of public debate. Meanwhile, it is advisable for Albania to consult its strategic partners on the significant changes entailed by its accession to the EU, so that it can benefit from their input.

Another controversial aspect is the lack of transparency in the adoption of the Open Balkan initiative by the Albanian government. If the government had secured political approval at national level, this would have guaranteed a stable support for this initiative in the long-term. As mentioned above, the Open Balkan initiative was labelled by its initiators as an economic initiative for free trade between these countries. Yet, given the huge and indisputable disparities between Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania in terms of economic development and domestic production, it can be firmly stated that these economic exchanges will not be made in conditions of equality, as the levels of transportation and economic strength of the three countries are not well matched (Kalemaj, 2023).

Therefore, the fact that this initiative has not yet been accepted at national level in Albania is the direct outcome of a growing consciousness about two key aspects: firstly, the low level of economic development in Albania and, secondly, the scarcity of exports (their contribution to the state budget and to the Albanian monetary policy is negligible). The Open Balkan initiative was labelled, by the leaders of the countries that joined it, a win-win innovation which brings new opportunities to the consumers, to the labour force and to businesses from Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia, respectively. Opportunities in terms of exports, business growth and expansion of the labour markets in each of these countries. However, though we do not have precise economic indicators of future trends, it is likely that, within this framework, the benefits from exports will increase the state budget of one of the three countries that are parties to the agreement (in this case, Serbia), whereas the imports will create trade deficits in the other two (Albania and North Macedonia).

Geopolitics of the Open Balkan initiative: towards an economic expansion

As Pristina could be considered the convergence point of the mini-Schengen conceived by the Rama-Vučić-Zaev trio, Kosovo should become a member of this agreement in order to benefit from the reduction of waiting time at the border. Secondly, if the Government of Pristina does not accept the removal of customs duties with Serbia, neither should other Western Balkan states make such concession, as political balances can be hindered and this might lead to blockages in alliances.

An agreement implies mutual cooperation and not the circumvention of sensitive

issues to obtain unilateral benefits, as this might entail a future conflict in the region. If we analyse the economic sectors that can be included in the Open Balkan initiative, specifically the agricultural sector from Albania, we can observe that they are unlikely to generate profit, as long as the costs of customs, transport and trade are still high and not at all competitive in comparison to the Serbian and North Macedonian agricultural production.

The Albanian local producers fail to compete with the goods imported on the national market, thus facing difficulties in accessing the Serbian and North Macedonian markets. Removing tariff barriers would be detrimental to local producers. There is no short-term or medium-term feasibility study supporting the regulatory framework, and no provisions concerning the impact of the initiative in agriculture, energy and transport. Special attention should be paid to the long-term effects of the trade imbalances on the national income and the labour market. This initiative would offer a competitive edge to businesses in highly industrialised countries (that benefit from exports) over countries with a less competitive industrial sector, like Albania.

Although it is called the Open Balkan initiative, not all the countries in the region have shown willingness to join it. Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo have refused to be parties to this agreement. As the Western Balkans comprise six countries, an initiative launched by one country and accepted by two others cannot be considered representative for the entire region. One could consider this situation as a paradox between the principle of inclusion, that should underpin the agreement, and the reality of conflicting national interests. Although in its inception, this initiative aimed at reuniting all the Western Balkan states, it is not clear whether this derived from a rather utopian vision, or it was based on geopolitical reasons.

In the absence of a homogeneous political approach of the Balkans, the complete and correct understanding of this initiative is yet to be addressed, given that one of its initiators which has a strong background in regional conflicts (namely, Serbia) is actively seeking to build a regional relationship based on economic exchange. In these circumstances, the reasons behind the launch of the Open Balkan initiative, in tandem with the initiative for “a Serb World” in a broad sense, should be further explored (Dragas, 2023).

Serbia, like any other country, cannot enter into an agreement which implies the implementation of two sets of foreign policies. In doing this, the Serbs are setting out an alternative that aims at restoring Serbia’s lost position in the Balkans. Serbia’s foreign and domestic policy, outside of the Open Balkan initiative, has several aspects that strongly question the good and peaceful goal of having an inter-regional cooperation based on reciprocity and good neighbourliness policies. Among these aspects, we can mention the Kosovo issue, the status of the Serbian minority in the North and in the municipalities with a Serbian majority. Other aspects we should consider are the separatist policy of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the promotion of pro-Serbian nationalism in Montenegro (Kraske, 2023).

If nowadays a sceptical position of the neighbouring states can be observed in relation to this initiative, it can be traced back to their past interactions when these countries have suffered from the co-existence with Serbs under former Yugoslavia. The entire political structure of the two processes that aim at the integration of the Western

Balkans into the EU, the policy of the Berlin Process and the policy of the troika Vučić-Rama-Zaev, expressed via the Open Balkan initiative, should be closely connected. It is a contradiction in terms, if a country whose Constitution includes clear provisions concerning the Pan-Serbian doctrine, in the Balkans, publicly endorses the good neighbourliness principle in its foreign policy. In the wake of the bloody wars that shuddered the region for so many decades due to the Serbian assertiveness and willingness to prevail, the Serbian government persists in promoting, in full cohesion with all the local stakeholders, a set of policies aimed at expanding its presence and influence in the Balkans (Domenech, 2023).

A concrete proof of this line of action is the marginalization by the Serbs of the national minorities in the Serbian domestic politics and important decision-making processes, i.e. their attitude towards the Albanian community in the Presheva Valley. In contrast, the Serbian minorities in the Balkans are encouraged by Belgrade to political disobedience and to the advocacy of a separatist policy. As one can notice, there is a huge gap between the proclaimed good neighbourliness policy and the real goals that Serbia pursues in the Balkan states. In countries like Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the war crimes had a large impact on the population, the distrust in the Open Balkan initiative would undoubtedly lead to imbalances in the political and economic spheres (Kamberi, 2021).

By offering support to the Serbian minorities in many Balkan states, the initiative seeks to build a network of economic and commercial infrastructures with a view to empower the Serbian communities and turn them into decisive political factors in the near future. The events that we are witnessing in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro nowadays, are bound to take place in other countries of the Open Balkan initiative, countries that have effectively adopted it (Bushati, 2023).

Therefore, it is natural that the Open Balkan initiative brought divisions, instead of unity, among the Balkan states: half of the states in the region do not support it, being sceptical about Serbia and suspicious of this apparently friendly “gambit”, because Serbia still has irredentist tendencies, expressed in its doctrine of a Greater Serbia. In order to assess one country’s foreign policy, we should primarily pay attention to the way it acts towards its neighbours and towards the wider region, and secondly to its political rhetoric and official statements. The attitude of Serbia towards the Balkans, in general, and towards its neighbours, in particular, is not consistent with its public declarations (Simic, J. 2019).

The Berlin Process and the integration of the Western Balkans as a comprehensive policy

The Berlin Process is an initiative of the German government supported by the EU to enable regional cooperation between six Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The principle on which the EU seeks to connect these countries is a simple one, insofar as it has placed the “connectivity agenda” at the centre of this cooperation. Since 2014, several summits have been successively held in Berlin (2014), Vienna (2015), Paris (2016), Trieste (2017), London (2018), Poznań (2019) and virtual summits were organised by Bulgaria and North Macedonia in 2020 and by Germany in 2021. The 2022 summit was held in Berlin again, and over the years different priorities have been given to the different pillars of

cooperation between these countries. (Jovanovic, B. & Holzner, M., 2023)

The main difference between the intergovernmental cooperation initiative and the Open Balkan initiative is, precisely, the establishment of a clear and detailed agenda on various directions of cooperation, an agenda that gives priority to the economic cooperation, without neglecting other essential aspects (Tota, 2020). The connectivity agenda is, undoubtedly, the most important one and all the stakeholders have allocated funds and other resources to implement it. This process is a follow-up to the policy that the Council of the European Union presented in 2000, policy according to which the Western Balkan states are included in the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) and offered the prospect of obtaining EU membership.

By the year 2000, the inter-ethnic conflicts had ceased, but the economic development of the Western Balkan states was far from the average income of the EU member states. The SAP initiative of the European Union had an implicit political background, with the promise of a close or distant EU membership, that requires a genuine reconciliation of all the stakeholders from the Balkans. In the same spirit, the EU policy is also clear about the growing influence of other external factors, such as the Russian Federation or China or even the countries of the Persian Gulf, actors that might play a major role in the economy and, someday, in the politics of the Western Balkan states (Domenech, 2023). The Berlin Process basically aimed at strengthening the cooperation between these states at regional level, by promoting change especially on three pillars: youth, the legislative power, and the power of the civil society.

During the various meetings, that spanned from Paris to Poland and followed closely the agenda of the Berlin Process, one can notice an interest in bringing some changes to the aforementioned pillars of cooperation. Without modifying the main structure, new topics of interaction between Western Balkan states were added, concerning i.e., the rule of law and the inter-ethnic conflicts. If all these aspects are analysed as a whole, we can infer that what has started as an economic interaction at macro level will lead to a future interaction at political level that might, actually, ensure a decrease in the inter-ethnic conflicts. As far as the youth cooperation is concerned, the creation and functioning of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is now considered, by all the actors and stakeholders involved, to be a successful initiative. RYCO is self-managed and financed at the regional level and aims to promote youth cooperation in the Western Balkans, since it is recommended to address the issue of the longed-for reconciliation among the new generations and to cut at the roots the inter-ethnic distrust (GIZ, 2018). Through this initiative (which is part of the strategy of the Berlin Process exclusively), mobility and exchange programmes are implemented with a view to involve the youth from different WB countries in the political decision-making process. Its implementation brought together the leadership of various NGOs (Stojanovski, 2014). It is a success story which shows that the political will of the Balkan states can materialize in collaborations which build credibility for the agenda of cooperation in other areas as well.

Given the approach that the EU itself has envisaged for these areas of cooperation, it is not a coincidence that we are dealing with a three-pillar structure: youth, policy-making process, and civil society, the focus being on educating the young people (less influenced by the painful past of the 1990s Balkan wars), as they represent the future of these countries. Focusing on the young people and their endowments for a political

dialogue of the future, RYCO (BRPG, 2021) could be a strong experiment on the acceleration of the reconciliation process in the war-torn and resentful Western Balkans. This organization, directed and supported at the regional level, seeks to work with young people by developing their reasoning, offering them employment opportunities, instilling in them the cultural values of Europe, so that they can acquire a solid base for integrity, reconciliation and good friendship (Bashkurti, 2022). Thanks to the connectivity agenda, the EU has set aside a fund amounting to 1 billion euros to enable investment projects and technical assistance.

Therefore, several key structures have emerged, such as the South-East Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO), the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), and the Energy Community Secretariat (ECS), in order to include these processes of economic interaction at regional level. Leaving aside other equally important factors, the novelty and uniqueness of the Berlin Process lies in the fact that it tackles the interaction of the Balkan states in all its dimensions, ranging from the economic to the political aspects of present and future policies.

The inclusion and progression of all these objectives, from economy to conflict-reduction, make it a comprehensive approach that encompasses and analyses all the aspects of interaction, by simply dividing them into objectives, without setting priorities as the “Open Balkan” process does (Simic, 2019). The implementation agenda is ongoing and dynamic, even though some steps are incomplete and need political intervention and influence at the state level. The political dimension is an indispensable factor for the attainment of some objectives of this process, such as the resolution of bilateral disputes which is a work in progress.

The international arena between the Berlin Process and the Open Balkan initiative

We can analyse these issues from a double perspective, taking into account, on the one hand, the official position of Albania as founding member of the Open Balkan initiative and, on the other hand, the position of other stakeholders at the regional and international levels. If we focus only on Albania, we notice that there are two conflicting positions on the political scene: the official position of Tirana that we have already elaborated on, when we mentioned the troika that initiated and endorsed this initiative, and a more realistic, down-to-earth position, expressed by the political opposition and shared, in general, by the population. From this latter perspective, the initiative was met with distrust by the Albanian analysts and politicians. There are three main arguments they dwell on, when they voice their doubts and objections (Kalemaj, 2023).

Firstly, the economic and diplomatic cooperation between Albania and Serbia would have a negative impact on the still unresolved issues that cause disagreements between Serbia and Kosovo; secondly, the removal of customs duties would create a competitive edge of the Serbian market over that of the other countries, somehow enabling its economic expansion in the entire region, and, thirdly, the unconfirmed alliance of Serbia with the Russian Federation constitutes a risk, which might lead to the unequivocal influence of the latter in the Western Balkans.

Evidence of Russia's interest, however little formalized, in supporting the Open Balkan initiative, can be found in the statement of the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey

Lavrov, at the Ohrid Summit (B92, 2019). In his statement, Lavrov overtly criticised NATO and the European Union for not allowing his aircraft to use the airspace of some Balkan countries, on his way to the summit. It is noteworthy that it was the first time a Russian official mentioned the Open Balkan initiative. During the past decades, under the leadership of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, the US diplomacy towards the Western Balkans favoured, initially, a pro-Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo approach, for reasons grounded in the aftermath of the 1990s Balkan wars, and then switched to a more balanced approach of the Balkans, according to the policies of Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

However, the agreement signed in Washington required the government of Kosovo to accept joining the “mini-Schengen”, which was later on renamed the Open Balkan initiative. To date, the government of Kosovo has not yet joined this initiative, for reasons that depend either on the internal changes of its politics or on the lack of enthusiasm towards it. One may allude that the US would be interested in the withdrawal from the Open Balkan of the member states, so that the Western Balkans gear towards the Euro-Atlantic integration rather than towards the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, the US has supported the initiative and the idea of the free movement of goods, services, capital and persons on the markets of these countries. According to Kurt Bassuener, the United States is in favour of the initiative, insofar as: “a regional economic integration that precedes membership in the European Union can have multiple advantages for the citizens of the initiative” (NED, 2019).

He also argues that the American foreign policy has always promoted the principles of a free market economy, that implies the removal of economic barriers and is based on the theory of economic cooperation, which, in the case of the Western Balkans, may indirectly reduce the political divergences and lead to a conflict-free EU accession. However, the USA considers that the willingness of the six Western Balkan states to join this initiative and to embrace the idea of the common markets is a prerequisite for its success. The US foreign policy is based on the same principles and directions set by the Berlin Process (BRSP, 2021). It remains to be seen how the narrow interests of Kosovo and Serbia can be accommodated, these two being the most important stakeholders in the region in terms of current conflicts.

If the Open Balkan initiative does not extend, so that all the countries in the region become members with full rights, in spite of their differences, it will probably die out like any other pioneering initiative undertaken in the Western Balkans. Many critics and international affairs analysts agree that a merely economic initiative would not suffice to reduce the divisions in the Balkans. And even if the states in the region agree to join the Open Balkan initiative, what are the chances that they put aside all their conflicts and implement all the agreements, beginning with the recognition of Kosovo by Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, at least (Kamaberi, 2021)?

Conclusions

The methodology used in this research paper consists of case studies and discourse analysis, which determine us to conclude that the peace processes and the unresolved bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans have encountered many difficulties. The characteristics of the historical background and the geopolitics of this region point

to the fact that the Western Balkan countries need to be guided by an organisation with political and economic power, such as the European Union. The short and long-term history of the Balkans, torn by wars and inter-ethnic conflicts, reveals that international support has seldom been unconditional, due to biased political interests.

At the end of the last century, the history of the Balkan states was duly recognized for the first time. Thanks to the intervention of NATO, the joint support of the USA and the European Union, the rights of the citizens were restored in the war-ridden countries of the region. There are two aspects we should bear in mind. Firstly, the unjust wars that Serbia waged against the other Western Balkan states opened wounds, which are not healed to this day. Secondly, the Euro-Atlantic factor was decisive in the 1990s Balkan wars.

That is why any process that requires the cooperation of these former belligerent countries, in a bilateral or regional format, would need the support of the international actors that stood by them through the most difficult times. In contrast to the Open Balkan initiative, the Berlin Process is guided by the values of humanity and democracy in all its dimensions (economic, geopolitical, cultural and ideological). The Berlin Process is very specific when dealing with sensitive issues and conflicts: it includes them in a more forward-looking ideological vision, preparing the ground for the natural integration of the Western Balkans, an integration that will be accepted by all the stakeholders in the long run.

Thus, providing opportunities for economic development, as well as for the education and full employment of the young people, in the Balkans and beyond, and fostering strategic development targets, the Berlin Process constitutes a necessary stage prior to the accession of the Western Balkan states to the EU. In comparison with this process, the Open Balkan initiative not only lacks transparency, ideological orientation and clear objectives, but it is also ambiguous concerning the predominant role of Serbia. Serbia might claim such a status, either on the basis of its potential for economic expansion or on the basis of its strategic and geopolitical plans backed by Russia.

However, new issues should be included on the political agenda of the Berlin Process, besides the technicalities and concrete measures (triggered by the political and economic priorities of the Berlin Process) which might influence overall the initiative. The main work in terms of political stability should be done at national level. Thus, the actions taken will be considered legitimate and representative of national interests. These procedures require a twofold analysis of the internal policy and of the diplomacy of the Western Balkan states. In domestic political matters, as shown by the data collected, there is a common index for the Balkans which provides basic statistical data and indicates that the corruption of the leadership is responsible for the lack of support towards the executive power. Due to the way they are perceived, the leaders of the Western Balkans cannot secure the approval of their citizens and their support for different policies. Citizens of North Macedonia, of Albania or of Serbia are equally sceptical about the efficiency of an intergovernmental initiative, such as the "Open Balkan", because they nourish doubts about the capacity of their leadership to defend their national interests.

Finally, it is for the Balkan stakeholders to decide whether they want to endorse the European values and cooperation, or to remain captive of resentments and chauvinistic tendencies. Following a sincere reflection, one should acknowledge that the Open Balkan initiative is bound to fail, if it is promoted solely on an economic base, while avoiding the

resolution of the sensitive issues that divide the countries in the region.

Indeed, in the international arena, the Berlin Process should pay more attention to the inter-ethnic reconciliation, as a *sine qua non* for the stability and the development of the policies of the Western Balkans. If some countries in the region do not attach much importance to the reconciliation process in the near future, others are still haunted by indelible memories of war crimes and human suffering. Such is the case of Kosovo, whose independence has not been recognized by Serbia. The process of reconciliation in the Western Balkans, though included on the Berlin Process agenda, is not given sufficient importance. In the author's opinion, it should constitute one of the priorities of the agenda to facilitate the full implementation of this process by all the stakeholders. To sum up, the philosophy behind the endeavours of RYCO² to reconcile the youth of rival communities should not diminish the importance of reconciling the elders, otherwise the prospects of genuine cooperation in the Western Balkans remain bleak.

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² RYCO (Regional Youth Cooperation Office) is an independently functioning institutional mechanism, founded by the Western Balkans, namely by: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, aiming to promote the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between the youth in the region through youth exchange programs.

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