

The regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and the Open Balkans initiative

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Abstract

The paper examines the efforts to enhance regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and how this has increased engagement between the EU and the Western Balkans.¹ The regional initiatives are more present when the European Union (EU) shows little interest in the Western Balkans region. However, these efforts have yet to address all the concerns adequately and have not brought to life tangible results despite many political declarations.

One of the most commented initiatives, like the Open Balkans, has caused concern in the region and caused tension between Kosovo and Albania over the past few years. The paper enlightens the challenges of regional cooperation during the last years, the contribution of this process in the integration process, and the role played by Albania. Also, the paper tries to analyze the success and failures of the “Open Balkan” initiative and the Regional Common Market.

Furthermore, the paper framework examined the progress of regional cooperation initiatives and the region’s attention to the European integration process. Additionally, the paper seeks to determine whether regional cooperation is a viable alternative for the region or merely an external-driven initiative and the role of the EU in promoting regional cooperation.

Keywords: regional cooperation; Open Balkan; European integration.

Introduction

The Balkan region has been associated with instability and independence conflicts for many years, where differences have taken precedence over similarities. As Milica affirms, “the region is a group of countries sharing space without sharing time.”² In this scenario, finding collaborative common ground on a peninsula characterized by stigmas, stereotypes, historical divisions, and political turmoil was challenging. Due to these factors, the European Union is considered the most influential actor in fostering stability and enhancing relations between the Balkan states. Regional cooperation in

¹ This article has been written in the Jean Monnet Center of Excellence framework: *The Europeanization of Public Policies in Albania 101048064 – EPPAL- Erasmus-JMO-2021-HEI-TCH-RSCH.*

² Delevic, Milica, “Which Region, What Cooperation?” *Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans.* European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2007. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07032>. p. 4.

the Western Balkans mainly originated from external actors, including the European Union (EU), the United States (US), and international economic institutions. This was the consequence of prolonged periods of discord and insufficient cooperation, particularly in the aftermath of the Yugoslav succession conflict. The cooperation in the region was met with skepticism by the local populace, as the neighboring countries were perceived as the “other” and adversaries rather than allies. The progression had been driven by these extrinsic agents as opposed to historical or political forces intrinsic to the region.³

The European Union (EU) has been the primary actor in the region since the conflict in Bosnia. It has actively fostered regional cooperation and strengthened inter-state ties as a prerequisite for EU integration. In doing so, the EU has demonstrated its normative power and exerted significant regional influence. The EU’s normative influence in the region is shown through its application of conditionality, which has facilitated the adoption and in some cases the implementation of structural reforms in every country within the region. The normative influence in the region affects and disseminates the European Union’s fundamental values. Cooperation between neighbors’ countries is a fundamental aspect of the European Union’s identity; the cooperation between the six neighboring countries in coal and steel production progressively fostered integration and further collaboration in other policy areas.⁴

Drawing upon this efficacious paradigm, the European Union (EU) aspires to enhance the cooperation among adjacent nations within a particular domain, with the overarching objective of fostering regional stability, reconciliation, and ultimately, the EU region integration. The European CARDS Regional Strategy Paper in 2021 reflected this theory with the following statement: “Enhanced collaboration with neighboring nations provides a pathway to growth and stability at both the national and regional levels.”⁵

However, many regional cooperation initiatives were initiated outside the region without significant contributions from domestic actors. The Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, for instance, was an initiative that originated from outside. Established by the European Union in June 1999, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe (SPSEE) compelled Albania and the post-Yugoslav states, aspiring members, to establish and advance regional stability.⁶

³ Dimitar Bechev, "Carrots, sticks and norms: the EU and regional cooperation in Southeast Europe," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Taylor & Francis Journals, vol. 8(01), pages 27-43

⁴ Institute for Security Studies, *The European Future of the Western Balkans: Thessaloniki@10 (2003-2013)*, ed. by Eviola Prifti, 2013, p. 65 https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/182359/thessalonikiat10_01.pdf

⁵ European Commission, *CARDS Assistance Program to the Western Balkans – Regional Strategy Paper 2002-2006*, 2001, p.4 https://wbc-rti.info/object/document/7691/attach/0374_EC_CARDSRegionalStrategy2002-6.pdf

⁶ Jędrzej PASZKIEWICZ, *Regional Cooperation In Western Balkans: A View From Inside The European Union. The Premises and Obstacles*, *Faculty of Arts and Sciences Journal of Social Sciences*. 2012, p.150

However, the first regional cooperation initiatives didn't include a variety of actors like civil society or areas like energy and infrastructure development.

The cooperation in the region after the Thessaloniki Summit

After the first decade, the Thessaloniki Summit 2003 provided a tangible European expectation to the region's countries.

Since the European Union established regional cooperation as a prerequisite for integration, the Western Balkans states were driven to establish a vast network of regional relations by the strong incentive of EU membership, which was the most wanted objective of all the countries in the region. The European Union (EU) acted as a catalyst to establish and strengthen collaboration, thus the initial relations between the countries were solely shaped by the EU and the country's political establishment. The process of integration continues to be an essential target in the external politics of the region's countries, particularly Albania. A few inconsistencies, nevertheless, surfaced during this process.

The initial inconsistency was the "contradiction in terms" of the process. On the one hand, the regional approach necessitated countries to collaborate to advance towards EU membership. On the other hand, the EU enlargement itself was a bilateral endeavor, independently administered by each country.⁷ The lack of consistency raised the importance of bilateral relations with the European Union, which is far more significant than those with regional counterparts or even the region's interaction with the EU. This inconsistency became more theoretical than practical when the EU transformed regional cooperation into a necessary condition to progress toward European integration. The consequence was that cooperation in the area came to be regarded not solely as a prerequisite to satisfy a request from Europe, but also as a vital component of the region to promote social, political, and economic progress. This was a step forward in bringing together the people of the region.

Furthermore, an additional barrier to regional cooperation was the absence of a collaboration mentality, as most states maintained a negative attitude toward each other.⁸ Today, after the torment of years after the Balkan conflict, the predisposition of people and the political elite is mainly positive toward regional cooperation initiatives. This has successfully overcome the formerly prevailing negative inclination.

In recent years, citizens have shown a notable inclination towards endorsing regional collaboration, as indicated by the Balkan Barometer survey conducted in 2023.

⁷ Vladimir Gligorov, *Southeast Europe: Regional Cooperation with Multiple Equilibria* "Integrating the Balkans in the European Union: Functional Borders and Sustainable Security (IBEU Research Project)", Working Paper n.4.1., 2004, p.2.

⁸ Othon Anastasakis & Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, *Balkan Regional Cooperation & European Integration*, July 2002, p. 48. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Hellenic-Observatory/Assets/Documents/Publications/Past-Discussion-Papers/Balkan-Regional-Cooperation.pdf>

Specifically, a substantial majority of 76% of respondents expressed their belief that regional cooperation yields positive economic outcomes and that the process could help in the development of the region's political, economic, and security conditions; support for regional cooperation has remained substantial and consistent over the past six to seven years.⁹ The political elite is additionally motivated to advance regional cooperation initiatives by the favorable disposition of the general public toward such initiatives.

Indeed, a significant majority of 69% concur that uniting people across the region is far more important than what divides them. There is strong support for regional cooperation by young people aged 18-24.¹⁰ Additionally, this includes an awareness of young mobility and interest in neighboring countries. The Western Balkan Funds and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office in Tirana have been instrumental in advancing various initiatives and regional mobility within this context.

Individuals and economic operators support this belief: 74% of regional businesses consider regional cooperation crucial to their operations, a 5% increase from 2022.¹¹ This support is an optimistic sign for forthcoming initiatives and reflects the support of regional cooperation by the political elite and the backing of the region's people. As a result, the notion of the "other" has become less contentious, and the area is better connected and a step further into the integration process. This development has the potential to foster stronger economic ties in the region and improve connectivity for businesses operators and service providers. Undoubtedly, greater connectivity and competitiveness within the wider European economic sphere are imperative for the region.

Following the Thessaloniki Summit, regional cooperation has assumed greater significance because of enhanced internal political stability and improved mutual sentiments and as a prerequisite for the integration process. Additionally, this significant event marked the first time that the Balkan region perceived a distinct European perspective on its future.

The Berlin Process, initiated in 2014, has provided significant momentum to the regional cooperation. This successful initiative has fostered closer relations among regional countries, facilitated political and economic engagement, and effectively shaped regional collaboration by establishing the "Western Balkans Six" framework. Motivated by the European Union's "enlargement fatigue" and after the Juncker declaration, the initiative emerged to foster regional integration.¹² In the beginning,

⁹ Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer*, <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home#infographics-1>

¹⁰ <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home>

¹¹ <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home>

¹² Florent Marciacq, *The European Union and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process*, Dialog Sudosteuroopa Sarajevo 2017 <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf>, p.5

the process was perceived as a viable alternative to the European integration of the region, considering the stagnation of the EU enlargement policy toward the region. The process enabled the European Union to reestablish its presence in the area and maintain the countries' motivation to pursue reforms despite the lack of substantive involvement in the enlargement process. Given the diminishing of the distinct European perspective because of both internal EU factors and external international political factors, this was the most effective approach to engage in the region.

Promoting the European Union's agenda along three key axes—economic growth and connectivity, fostering positive neighborly relations and regional cooperation, and promoting civil society development and interpersonal connections—is the objective of the Berlin Process.¹³ Regional cooperation aims to impact not only the economic progress of the area but also the interconnectivity of its people. The distinctive characteristic of the Process is its incorporation of numerous actors, including members of civil society; thus, regional cooperation is an inclusive Process and not merely a political or bottom-up initiative. The Berlin Process has facilitated the development of regional cooperation initiatives, encompassing various sectors such as civil society organizations, youth initiatives, and business communities. Significant examples are the Civil Society Forum, which serves as a platform for engagement among civil society organizations, and the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) in Tirana, which focuses on fostering collaboration among young people. The Secretariat of Chambers of Commerce of six Western Balkan economies promotes interaction and cooperation between business communities.¹⁴

Furthermore, it has facilitated the exchange of ideas and discussions among scholars from academic institutions and think tanks, particularly within the Western Balkans Reflection Forum context.

The “Open Balkans” initiative

Regional cooperation acquired momentum after 2014 because of the Berlin process; some critical initiatives were organized in the context of this process, like the Multi-Annual Action Plan and the Common Regional Market, aiming to boost economic cooperation in the region. Also, the regional cooperation initiatives were not solely driven by the EU. The Balkan states also initiated regional initiatives. In addition to the state's desire for cooperation, these initiatives intended to serve as a “push factor” in the direction of the EU.

¹³ F. Marciacq, *The European Union...*, p.7

¹⁴ Matteo Bonomi, *Off Track.: The EU's Re-Engagement with the Western Balkans*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2019, p.4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19665>.

Regional economic integration, which will result in a common regional market, and the “mini-Schengen” that subsequently evolved into the Open Balkan process, a comprehensive regional effort, have been the two most-discussed initiatives in the region over the past few years. Over the course of recent years, both public opinion and the political elite have been occupied with the two initiatives and they have been divided if the cooperation is to continue beyond the European framework.

Establishing the regional economic area was an extension of the Berlin Process’s objective to strengthen regional economic cooperation.¹⁵

The Regional Cooperation Council, at the request of the Western Balkans countries, supervised the development of the Multi-annual Action Plan for a regional economic area in the context of the Berlin Process. The Trieste Summit in 2017 formally endorsed the Plan, which additionally secured financial support from the European Commission.

The objective of the Plan is to facilitate the unhindered movement of capital, products, services, and highly skilled labor; enhance the region’s appeal for investment and trade; and expedite convergence with the European Union, thereby fostering prosperity for the inhabitants of the Western Balkans.¹⁶

The Plan outlined the strategies, objectives, and actions required to accomplish the goals in the four primary priority areas: investment, mobility, and digital integration. A benefit for the residents of the regions was the elimination of roaming fees in the WB; these fees are null and void starting in July 2021.¹⁷

Also, two significant memorandums of understanding between the six Balkan states have been reached since 2017: the trust services and interoperability and the 5G roadmap for the region’s digital transformation.¹⁸ However, despite these outcomes, the project has encountered criticism for its lack of advancement from the region politics like in 2019, in Novi Sad by the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama.¹⁹ He said that the action plan for the regional economic area was agreed upon at the Trieste meeting of the Berlin process, but despite two years, not enough had transpired to transform that agreement into economic growth, increased integration, and more

¹⁵ Balkan Policy Research Group, *Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans*, 2021, p. 6 https://balkansgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Regional-Cooperation-in-the-Western-Balkans_Regional-Economic-Area-the-mini_schengen-and-the-Common-Regional-Market-WEB-1.pdf

¹⁶ *Multi-Annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkans – Map* in https://www.rcc.int/priority_areas/39/map-rea

¹⁷ Regional Cooperation Council, *Roaming*, in https://www.rcc.int/priority_areas/53/roaming

¹⁸ *Multi-Annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkans – Map* in https://www.rcc.int/priority_areas/39/map-rea

¹⁹ The President of the Republic of Serbia, *President Vučić, meets the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania* 2019 <https://www.predsednik.rs/en/press-center/news/president-vucic-meets-the-prime-minister-of-the-republic-of-north-macedonia-and-the-prime-minister-of-the-republic-of-albania>

excellent interactions; thus, the “mini-Schengen” initiative was introduced.²⁰ The Mini Schengen was a new regional initiative initiated by a few of the region’s leaders following the favorable outcomes of the Berlin summit in Sofia in 2020. The Prime Minister pointed out that the European Union was consumed with internal reform and organization and that the region required more cooperation.²¹ Prime Minister Rama has voiced his apprehensions regarding France and the Netherlands’ veto on granting candidate status to Albania. The paralysis of the expansion process resulted in regional discontent, with the Prime Minister frequently characterizing the EU as uninterested in additional memberships.

This new and parallel initiative was followed by the Declaration on Common Regional Market, established the Regional Economic Area (REA) in 2020. The initiative was considered decisive for enhancing economic integration in the region and as a transitional phase towards the EU Single Market. Additionally, an action plan was endorsed for 2021-2024, founded on the four freedoms of the European Union.²² The Common Regional Market has integrated the “four freedoms of the “mini-Schengen into its structure, aiming to function as a “complementary bridge between regional initiatives” and being in complete accordance with the *acquis* of the European Union and also aims to boost the enlargement agenda.²³ These new regional cooperation initiatives would have facilitated their alignment to the EU *acquis*, cultivated confidence among Balkan states, and ultimately inspired a sense of local ownership and accountability.²⁴ The purpose of this new internal initiative or process in the Balkans was to bring the region closer to the EU.

Attempts and indications have been made to reconcile the two initiatives, the Open Balkans with the Berlin Process, as the leaders of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania have declared that the new initiative was “completely consistent with the Berlin Process.” These initiatives were considered attempts to motivate the region through enhanced political and economic collaboration and to prepare the region to a future integration.²⁵ The distinctive feature of the Open Balkan is its regional

²⁰ Top Channel, *Rama, Vucic e Zaev firmosin Shengenin Ballkanik*, <https://top-channel.tv/2019/10/10/rama-vucic-e-zaev-ne-novi-sad-firmosin-shengenin-ballkanik/>

²¹ Top Channel, *Rama, Vucic e Zaev firmosin Shengenin Ballkanik*, <https://top-channel.tv/2019/10/10/rama-vucic-e-zaev-ne-novi-sad-firmosin-shengenin-ballkanik/>

²² European Western Balkans, *Sofia Summit Conclusions: Western Balkans Leaders remain dedicated to regional cooperation*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/11/10/sofia-summit-conclusions-western-balkans-leaders-remain-dedicated-to-regional-cooperation/>

²³ Balkans Policy Research Group, *Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans*, p.7 https://balkansgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Regional-Cooperation-in-the-Western-Balkans_Regional-Economic-Area-the-mini_schengen-and-the-Common-Regional-Market-WEB-1.pdf

²⁴ Bojan Baća, Florian Bieber, Matteo Bonomi, Richard Grieveson, Marko Kmezić and Zoran Nechev, *Through the Labyrinth of Regional Cooperation*, BIEPAG, 2023, p. 6.

²⁵ Ferenc Nemeth, *Western Balkans, from the Berlin Process to the Open Balkan Initiative, Prospects for the Accession Process*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2022 <https://www.iemed.org/publication/western-balkans-from-the-berlin-process-to-the-open-balkan-initiative-prospects-for-the-accession-process/>

ownership; while it incorporates several elements from pre-existing or planned EU initiatives, it has been exclusively propelled by regional actors since its beginnings. This is a novelty for the collaboration in the region, as we mentioned before the first initiatives were driven by outside the region.

However, despite the achievements and the political declarations, outcomes of the Western Balkans' regional economic integration have been modest and inconsistent. The initiative persisted purely on a political plane, devoid of any participation from civil society actors or institutions.

Collaboration hardly ever progressed beyond the mere declarative due to unresolved bilateral disputes and a lack of political will and commitment, which have prevented the REA/CRM from being fully implemented.²⁶

Greater regional economic integration and genuine free movement of capital, people, and goods will stimulate the economy of the region, more economic relations, more circulation of goods. However, the regional market is small and inconsequential compared to the European market, which limits the influence of economic integration on the region's overall economic development, according to some experts.²⁷ Thus, European integration is more appealing than regional integration a bigger market means more possibilities. If European integration continues to be the key to economic development, regional economic cooperation will continue to be more theoretical than result-oriented concrete initiatives.

Three significant agreements were signed in 2022 at the annual Summit held in Berlin, trying to give new impetus to regional cooperation inside the frame of the Berlin Process and to confirm the European future of the region.²⁸ The Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctor of Medicine, Dentists, and Architects by EU Regulations; 2) the Agreement on Freedom of Movement with ID Cards in the Western Balkans; and 3) the Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the Western Balkans. Western Balkan nations are devoting their efforts to ensure their implementation.²⁹ These agreements were intended as a positive step toward more liberties and connections in the region.

During this meeting, the Federal Chancellor, Scholz, declared that the Berlin Process conferences would subsequently be hosted by Prime Minister Edi Rama of Albania.

²⁶ Bojan Baća, Florian Bieber, Matteo Bonomi, Richard Grieveson, Marko Kmezić and Zoran Nechev, *Through the Labyrinth of Regional Cooperation*, BiEPAG, 2023, p.7

²⁷ *Pushing on a string, an evaluation of regional economic cooperation in the Western Balkans*, 2020, p. 12. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/user_upload/Pushing_on_a_string.pdf

²⁸ *The Western Balkan states: tackling reforms, resolving conflicts*, Western Balkans Summit at the Chancellery | Federal Government (bundesregierung.de)

²⁹ Bojan Baća, Florian Bieber, Matteo Bonomi, Richard Grieveson, Marko Kmezić and Zoran Nechev, *Through the Labyrinth of Regional Cooperation*, BiEPAG, p. 8

For this reason Edi Rama the Prime Minister of Albania, co-presented the Summit findings together with the EU Commission President and the German chancellor.³⁰

The challenge at that point was how the “Open Balkan” could be aligned with the Berlin Process and how regional efforts would be split between a primarily regional initiative like the “Open Balkan” and the EU-led program like the Berlin Process.

“Open Balkan” was a contentious initiative that exerted more pressure on the stalled integration process than as a constructive endeavor, given that the EU refused to begin membership negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019 and region’s EU future was at a crossroads.

Despite its declared purpose of fostering economic cooperation, the regional initiative between Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia has polarized the area, particularly regarding the relationship between Albania and Kosovo. There were two primary schools of thought regarding the regional initiative: those who viewed it as potentially hazardous for the region and those who believed it was at the right time for the area.

A significant argument against the “Open Balkan” is its participants’ economic and geographical imbalance. As the larger and more powerful country, Serbia will invariably gain more from the standard market than Albania and Northern Macedonia, even though all three will benefit.³¹ Furthermore, some perceive the Open Balkan as replicating the Berlin Process. This initiative initiated a regional common market involving all nations that share the priorities and values of the European Union.

Advocates of the initiative consider it crucial for the future prosperity and security of the region. They view the Open Balkan process as a direct consequence of EU politics in the area, contending that the enlargement process is predominately a political endeavor that may yield unintended consequences. Considering this situation, they argue that the Balkan countries should collaborate in a regional initiative.³²

The region’s leaders have always affirmed that the Open Balkan tries to emulate the unrestricted movement of capital, goods, services, and labor within the Schengen Zone. Still, it does not intend to replace the Berlin Process. On the contrary, its explicit objective is to supplement it by establishing collaboration and synergy that would most effectively equip the states to join the European Union. On the eve of the BE-WB summit in Tirana in 2022, Prime Minister Rama declared that the “Open Balkan”

³⁰ *The Western Balkan states: tackling reforms, resolving conflicts*, Western Balkans Summit at the Chancellery | Federal Government (bundesregierung.de)

³¹ Edward P. Joseph, *Open Balkan (s) is not just unwise, It is dangerous*, Birn, 2022 <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/15/open-balkans-is-not-just-unwise-its-dangerous/>

³² <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2022-open-balkan-the-future-belongs-to-the-peoples-of-the-balkans/5060>

is part of and aligned with the Berlin process, drawing inspiration from its values and those of Europe.³³

While this statement holds theoretical validity, the open Balkan initiative lacked critical elements that would transform political determination into an impactful positive process for the region. These elements include action plans and documents, a regulatory framework, and implementation mechanisms. Furthermore, there was no methodology for assessing success or administrative body to conduct these evaluations and recommend appropriate measures.³⁴ So it is clear that the initiative didn't went further than a mere political declarative will.

In 2022, the President of Kosovo Osmani declared that the initiative needed to follow the values of regional cooperation and that the countries were not regarded equally. Kosovo has declined to participate in the process after Albin Kurti won the elections.³⁵ Kurti asserted that the "Open Balkan" exposed the region to the potential eastern influence of China and Russia and emphasized the importance of respecting Kosovo's decision not to participate.³⁶

In an interview with Euro News Albania in April 2021, Rama expressed his view that eliminating borders between Albania and Kosovo would result from such a project. However, he cautioned, "It would be a long time before those in Kosovo would come to comprehend it." In doing so, he indirectly implicated Pristina's myopic perspective in neglecting the potential advantages that the Open Balkan could yield.³⁷

When the prime minister of Albania stated in July 2022 that Kosovo's firm refusal to join the open Balkan was manifestly an error of judgment and that the agreement between Kosovo and Serbia (concerning the free movement of people and mutual recognition of identity cards) could have been facilitated within the "Open Balkan" framework, relations between the two countries were at their lowest.³⁸ Rama and Kurti are far more than on the same page regarding the regional cooperation initiatives driven by the region. The "Open Balkan" was designed to position Rama as a regional and political leader. Still, Kosovo has always hesitated to participate in an initiative that is not EU-led. Also, one of the main problems was the non-recognition of Kosovo

³³ Euronews Albania, *Rama: Open Balkan, pjellë e Procesit të Berlinit, 100% në përputhje me BE-në*, 01-12-2021 <https://euronews.al/rama-open-balkan-pjelle-e-procesit-te-berlinit-100-ne-perputhje-me-be-ne/>

³⁴ Bojan Baća, Florian Bieber, Matteo Bonomi, Richard Grieveson, Marko Kmezić and Zoran Nechev, *Through the Labyrinth of Regional Cooperation*, BiEPAG, p.18

³⁵ Luljeta Krasniqi Veseli, *Plus apo Minus, Kosova jashte "Ballkanit te hapur"* <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/kosova-ballkani-i-hapur-humbje-apo-perfitim-/31887522.html>

³⁶ <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/kosova-ballkani-i-hapur-humbje-apo-perfitim-/31887522.html>

³⁷ Euronews Albania, *Did PM Edi Rama unilaterally decide to end the Open Balkan initiative?* <https://euronews.al/en/did-pm-edi-rama-unilaterally-decide-to-end-open-balkan-initiative/>

³⁸ Maela Marini, *Rama për marrëveshjen Kosovë-Serbi: Lëvizja me karta identiteti, zgjidhje e "Ballkanit të hapur"* <https://ata.gov.al/2022/09/02/rama-per-marreveshjen-kosove-serbi-levizja-me-karta-identiteti-zgjidhje-e-ballkanit-te-hapur/>

by Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, a central problem in the free circulation of people and goods.

The interruption of the “Open Balkan” initiative in July, following its suspension in June due to the events in northern Kosovo, can be perceived as a clear indication that it was intended as a signal to the European Union (EU) regarding the potential adoption of alternative strategies by the Western Balkans (WB) in response to the EU’s perceived neglect of regional integration efforts.

However, Rama asserts that this interruption results from the natural culmination of the initiative’s objective to advance the Berlin process.³⁹ The autumn summit in Tirana prompted him to declare that the Berlin Process was the most significant initiative for the Balkans, particularly Albania. However, the future of the Open Balkans agreements still needs to be discovered as the

The decision surprised the president of Serbia. In an interview with TV Prva in Belgrade, Vučić expressed skepticism regarding the statements made by the Albanian Prime Minister and foreshadowed an imminent meeting to seek clarification on the subject.⁴⁰

Furthermore, the initiative was suspended not due to the Albanian prime minister’s declaration but due to its limited accomplishments and outcomes. The agreements needed to have undergone complete implementation on the ground, and their substance needed more clarity to yield tangible results.

As stated by the foreign minister of Northern Macedonia, fostering reconciliation in the region and establishing mutual trust and shared values come first; with these, an integrated economy and a horizontal initiative of cooperation are more accessible to achieve.⁴¹

Conclusions

Promoting regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has received considerable attention from member states and the international community. Numerous mechanisms and initiatives have been established to foster regional stability and cooperation. All the countries in the Western Balkans aspire to join the EU, and the integration process is seen as a driving force for political stability, economic development, and the rule of law in the region.

³⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hD-_FrGI2jQ&ab_channel=EuronewsAlbania

⁴⁰ Euronews Albania, *Did PM Edi Rama unilaterally decide to end the Open Balkan initiative?* <https://euronews.al/en/did-pm-edi-rama-unilaterally-decide-to-end-open-balkan-initiative/>

⁴¹ *Fundi i ‘Open Balkan’, reagon Maqedonia e Veriut: Ndikoi situata në Veri të Kosovës* <https://politiko.al/rajoni/fundi-i-open-balkan-reagon-maqedonia-e-veriut-ndikoi-situata-ne-veri-te-k-i486500>

Until the first attempts at regional cooperation, in recent years, several regional organizations aimed to foster collaboration, like the Regional Cooperation Council, which was established to promote economic and social development and European integration.

Also, good bilateral relations between regional nations are vital for promoting cooperation. Stability requires that historical disputes be resolved and that good neighborly relations be maintained.

The evolution of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans over the 20 years since the first efforts have shifted from primarily a top-down government-to-government initiative to a more inclusive and dynamic process involving various actors. The increased scope of involvement has contributed to developing a collective consciousness and sense of ownership regarding the agenda for regional cooperation.

One key aspect of this development is the inclusive approach, which is crucial for addressing diverse perspectives and needs within the region.

Also, another critical point to the recent regional cooperation initiatives is the involvement of various actors like the civil society, private sector, municipalities, and citizens, which has made the regional cooperation more inclusive and more open to addressing different perspectives and needs of the region.

Although the European Union remains a major player in mediating and facilitating regional cooperation, the increased participation of numerous actors has shown that the process is not exclusively reliant on directives from the top down. Conversely, an increasing number of stakeholders understand that lasting collaboration necessitates their proactive involvement.

Notwithstanding advancements and obstacles endured, embracing historical disagreements, political differences, and economic and social disparities affects regional cooperation. Nevertheless, the broad spectrum of regional initiatives also offers possibilities for jointly confronting these obstacles.

The shift from a predominantly top-down government-centric approach to a more inclusive, bottom-up process has indeed contributed to the maturity and resilience of collaborative efforts.

The 20-year journey of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans reflects a maturing process where the involvement of various actors beyond governments has become integral to the success and sustainability of collaborative efforts. This bottom-up approach contributes to a more robust and resilient framework for regional cooperation, as it considers the interests and aspirations of a wide range of stakeholders.

The shift from a predominantly top-down government-centric approach to a more inclusive, bottom-up process has indeed contributed to the maturity and resilience of collaborative efforts. The change to a bottom-up approach signifies that regional cooperation is not solely dictated by directives from the top. Instead, it acknowledges the importance of grassroots initiatives, local collaboration, and the agency of non-governmental actors in shaping the direction of cooperative efforts.

Regional integration constitutes a foundational and continuous component of the European Union's (EU's) membership pursuits of the Western Balkan countries. As a fundamental requirement for membership, the EU has consistently emphasized the significance of excellent neighborly relations and regional cooperation. So, the continuity of regional collaboration is essential, which is now sustained and promoted by the government and the people who consider regional cooperation a positive step for the region and the economy.

Nevertheless, choosing that specific component and allocating a substantial quantity of political capital with the assurance of significant returns cannot serve as the sole course of action.

However, the following stages of regional economic integration should transpire with a significantly more extensive effort to enhance the Western Balkans' economic integration with the European Union.

Furthermore, it is not feasible to employ regional initiatives to exert "pressure" against the European Union whenever the integration process is in jeopardy. It is strategic for the regional cooperation initiative to involve all the region's countries.

Unresolved and bilateral disputes have prevailed in the region; sometimes, this was a source of instability, undermining cooperation and progress on regional initiatives like the "Open Balkans" because the initiative didn't go beyond mere political agreements. If this deep distrust between the Western Balkans Six exists, achieving proper regional economic integration and EU integration will be challenging.

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