

Western Balkans. From the Berlin Process to the Open Balkan Initiative. Prospects for the Accession Process

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Regional cooperation is one of the cornerstones of the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans. If the countries of the region – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia – wish to become full-fledged Member States, they must strive for strengthened cooperation.

Apart from being a prerequisite for EU accession, the advantages of regional cooperation are numerous. Enhanced political ties can build trust that may be used to resolve open issues and contribute to reconciliation, while stronger economic cooperation could lead to growth and development by attracting foreign direct investments. Above all, the main beneficiaries of such cooperation mechanisms are the citizens: regional initiatives can increase people-to-people connectivity and possibly reduce the negative impacts of emigration (brain drain).

Although there have been numerous high-level and sectoral mechanisms aimed at fostering and/or creating closer ties among the Western Balkan states, EU membership does not seem to be getting any closer. Nevertheless, the added-value of such platforms – the Berlin Process or the Open Balkan initiative – must be acknowledged. In the light of these mechanisms, can regional cooperation have a positive impact on the region's EU bid? This analysis argues that even though the prospects of becoming EU Member States are not that promising, strengthened regional cooperation – with regional owner-

ship and external support – could still be highly beneficial for the Western Balkans prior to accession.

When There Is No Integration, Turn to Regional Cooperation

The Berlin Process and the Open Balkan initiative both came in times when the prospects of EU accession for the Western Balkans suffered major blows. To maintain a European perspective in the region and show readiness for further integration, regional cooperation seemed to be a convenient tool to incentivize aspiring Member States.

The infamous declaration by Jean-Claude Juncker that there would not be a new round of enlargement under his five-year term as President of the European Commission left the Western Balkans disillusioned.¹ At that time, in 2014, the EU was still in recovery phase from the financial crises, and the Brexit referendum was just around the corner, too. This was indeed the first time that *enlargement fatigue* had been so openly expressed by a high-ranking EU official. On the other hand, the Western Balkans around this time also experienced challenges, such as rising undemocratic patterns, decreasing political eagerness to diligently go through with reforms and unresolved bilateral issues.

Similarly to the period from which the Berlin Process arose in 2014, the region once again experienced constant rejections further down the line, culminating in yet another infamous act – the French *Non*. France, among others, blocked the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019 and, by doing so, it set a nega-

¹ “The Juncker Commission: A strong and experienced team standing for change.” Press Release. European Commission, 10 September 2014. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_984

tive example to the Western Balkans.² The case of North Macedonia clearly showed that even if a candidate country made significant concessions in the hope of EU accession (ie. resolving the name dispute), there are still no guarantees that a Member State will not take advantage of its veto power. As another example, what would motivate Belgrade and Pristina to normalize their relations if the prospects of EU accession are clearly overshadowed by the lack of unanimity among EU countries? The French veto thus significantly decreased the EU's leverage and credibility over local politicians and citizens to implement internal reforms, engage in dialogue and, if necessary, make painful concessions over EU accession.

The aftermath of Juncker's statement over EU enlargement and, five years later, the reluctance of France to greenlight further integration for two candidate countries resulted in the establishment of yet another regional mechanism. The Berlin Process and the Open Balkan can therefore be perceived as initiatives aimed at incentivizing the Western Balkans by strengthened political and economic cooperation among aspiring Member States.

Different yet Similar

The Berlin Process, under the auspices of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, started as a series of high-level, regular meetings between leaders of the Western Balkans and a few pro-enlargement EU countries. Over the years, it became not only the flagship initiative, but the most prominent driving force behind enlargement, with the aim of fostering regional cooperation and sectoral integration. The greatest achievement of the Berlin Process is undoubtedly the Connectivity Agenda; its strong focus on physical, digital and people-to-people connectivity. It also facilitated – with the involvement of civil society – the EU integration process of the

Western Balkans without creating new mechanisms, institutions or funding schemes, but keeping in mind the final objective of the enlargement process: EU membership.³

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The Berlin Process also provided a fertile ground for enhanced economic cooperation. The Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (REA), with the support of the EU and the Western Balkans, acknowledged in the Sofia Declaration (2018), aims to establish a barrier-free region in which the flow of people, goods, services and capital could be exercised. Building on the REA's goals and strong economic focus, the Sofia Summit (2020) introduced the Common Regional Market (CRM) initiative. With the primary objective of creating a regional market within the Western Balkans with all the aspiring Member States on board, and in accordance with EU laws and regulations, it can be considered as the natural evolution – and the legacy – of the Berlin Process.

A year prior to the idea of the CRM, leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia announced their vision to establish a regional cooperation mechanism, informally known back then as *Mini-Schengen*. Officially named the Open Balkan initiative, it builds on the ideas of the REA and CRM by keeping their strong economic focus and desire to have the four freedoms established in the Western Balkans.⁴ The Open Balkan's novelty derives from its regional ownership; although it borrows many aspects from planned or existing, EU-supervised mecha-

² MARUSIC, Sinisa Jakov. "France Sinks EU Hopes of North Macedonia, Albania." *Balkan Insight*, 18 October 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/18/france-sinks-eu-hopes-of-north-macedonia-albania/>

³ MARCIARCO, Florent. "The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process. Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty." Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2017. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf>

⁴ "Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans. Regional Economic Area, the 'Mini-Schengen' and the Common Regional Market." *Policy Report*. Balkans Policy Research Group, 2021. 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-4.pdf

nisms, it has been solely driven by local actors right from its inception.

Unlike regional cooperation mechanisms that came out of the Berlin Process, the Open Balkan initiative received mixed reactions, especially from countries that are reluctant to take part in it – BiH and Kosovo in particular. These criticisms include the fear of having a Belgrade-dominated political and economic sphere (just like in Yugoslavia) as well as the potential influx of malign third-actor influences (Russia and China). Thus, the biggest weakness of the initiative comes from its inability to incorporate all six countries of the Western Balkans, while not being able to leave political burdens and baggage behind.

The common Regional Market does seem to be a more reliable option for regional cooperation, albeit one that is missing the strong hand of the Open Balkan initiative – regional ownership

The above-mentioned mechanisms, however, all share the same objective: to have the four freedoms established as a guarantee for economic development and FDI inflow. In addition, they perceive EU membership as the final, non-negotiable goal. As for the differences, unlike the Open Balkan initiative, the CRM encompasses all six Western Balkan states and was conceived in a more transparent manner. In this regard, the CRM does seem to be a more reliable option for regional cooperation, albeit one that is missing the strong hand of the Open Balkan initiative – regional ownership. Which one should the Western Balkans opt for then?

One Mechanism above All

Despite some differences, the CRM and the Open Balkan initiative essentially represent the same ideas and objectives. Hence, it is not rational to have them simultaneously operating as somewhat competing mechanisms. The Western Balkans only needs one initiative that would be able to integrate all the ad-

vantages into one, long-lasting and result-oriented platform.

A regional cooperation platform must be in possession of various features:

- Test of time: to be resilient to changing governments and political elites and not to get hijacked by politicians (political volatilities) or unexpected crises;
- Inclusivity: must incorporate all six Western Balkan states as committed and equal partners and involve citizens (civil society) too;
- Vision: feasible objectives with a well-defined roadmap on how to achieve them; full EU membership must remain the ultimate objective;
- Regional ownership with EU approval: having external support while keeping full control and responsibility over the mechanism must also be a prerequisite.

The EU is unable to focus on multiple issues, and the armed conflict in its direct neighbourhood is a considerable distraction of its attention from the Western Balkans

Keeping in mind these four recommendations, the region (and the EU too) could avoid duplications and competing platforms – especially if we consider the lack of human resources available. A unified regional cooperation mechanism would likely be more efficient in bringing the awaited results – but could it accelerate the EU integration process?

Can Regional Cooperation Speed up Accession?

There is no feasible evidence to support the claim that regional cooperation contributes to speedier EU accession. Although there is an overarching consensus among EU Member States that it is still the backbone of EU enlargement, the lack of regional cooperation has never caused stalemates in the Western Balkans' accession processes. In oth-

er words, problems with regional cooperation were never a reason for halting the enlargement process. The enlargement process has been slow – and many times, stuck for good – for multiple reasons; the EU and the Western Balkans are both to be blamed for that. The EU has been burdened by its own internal and external problems (migration crisis, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic), while enlargement fatigue still serves as a good excuse to not put the focus on further enlargement. Meanwhile, democratic backsliding and state capture, and unresolved bilateral issues make it difficult to implement reforms and move the Western Balkans towards EU accession.

The prospect of EU accession of the Western Balkans remains in the hands of the capitals, no matter how good the region excels in regional cooperation

Although the war in Ukraine has sent shockwaves through the EU and beyond, and created new dynamics in the European continent, it seems unlikely that it would speed up the Western Balkans' accession process. The EU is unable to focus on multiple

issues, and the armed conflict in its direct neighbourhood is a considerable distraction of its attention from the Western Balkans.

The greatest challenge, however, remains unanimity in the enlargement policy. Member States have frequently exercised their right to veto, citing various reasons, spanning from rule-of-law deficiencies to disputes over history, language and identity.⁵ At this stage, it is unimaginable that all 27 Member States would agree on giving up their veto powers on foreign policy matters (including enlargement). Hence, the prospect of EU accession of the Western Balkans remains in the hands of the capitals, no matter how good the region excels in regional cooperation.

Even if strengthened regional cooperation does not bring the Western Balkans closer to EU membership, the countries of the region must realize the positive added-value and possible spillover effects of their enhanced partnership. It should be kept in mind, of course, that there must not be an alternative to being full-fledged EU Member States, even if they deepen their political, economic and societal cooperation. An intensified regional cooperation could be a move in the right direction, even in times when there is talk about selective integration and ideas about a European Political Community.⁶ Regional cooperation must be understood as a tool that is not only needed for EU accession, but for the development of the Western Balkans as a region.

⁵ FOUÉRE, Erwan. "History and identity should not blight the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans." *CEPS Policy Insights*, Centre for European Policy Studies, 2021. www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PI2021-08_EUs-enlargement-policy-towards-the-Western-Balkans.pdf

⁶ IVKOVIĆ, Aleksandar. "Macron's European Political Community: What would it mean for the Western Balkans?" *European Western Balkans*, 16 May 2022. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/05/16/macrons-european-political-community-what-would-it-mean-for-the-western-balkans/>