

NEW INSTITUTES AND ENTRENCHED COOPERATION PROBLEMS

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Open Balkan: A New International Organization or an Unsustainable Initiative?¹

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Abstract

With the Western Balkans' European integration completely stalled and its future uncertain, a new regional initiative was launched by Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia. Initially called Mini Schengen, it grew into the Open Balkan with an ambitious goal to form a single market with unhindered movement of people, goods, services, and capital. Despite active involvement of state leaders, the initiative lacks transparency, legal frameworks, and concrete plans to fulfill the strategic vision. It is also difficult to expect it to grow into a classic international organization given the failure to form an implementation body. In addition, the U.S. only conditionally supports the Open Balkan by demanding the inclusion of all six Western Balkan actors (which in practice proves to be impossible), while the European Union (EU) only cautiously welcomes activities leading to further regional integration, given that it initiated the competing Berlin process in 2014.

This article examines the internal and external sustainability of the Open Balkan initiative, its prerequisites, and its projects. It also argues that without support from the U.S. and the EU, an authentic regional integration in the Western Balkans is hardly feasible. Inter alia, the three countries have modest institutional capacities and incomparably small power potential.

Keywords: Western Balkans, Open Balkan, Berlin process, regional integration, EU

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Introduction

Launched in 2019, the Open Balkan initiative (OB) has already attracted attention of a few, primarily Balkan, researchers. Most of them point to the potential benefits of the OB for political stabilization, transit, tourism, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and agriculture [Rapaić, Matijević, 2022, p. 77; Rikalović, Molnar, Josipović, 2022; Zekić, Matkovski, Đokić, 2022, pp. 31–40]. Nonetheless, certain doubts are also voiced. The initiative does not enjoy undivided support from either external and societal actors [Kalemaj, 2023, p. 37; Karakoç, Botić, 2022, pp. 287–307; Semenov, 2022, pp. 24–34; Surlić, Lazarević, Kolarsko, 2022, pp. 57–78]. Albanian and Montenegrin analysts voice fears of “over-strengthening of Serbs.” The abolition of barriers on the border may also give impetus to intensification of cross-border crimes. Additionally, the correlation between the OB and the Berlin Process launched by the European Union (EU) in 2014 remains unclear, which informs the EU’s more reserved attitude toward the OB [Kamberi, 2021, pp. 60–71; Stanojević, 2022, pp. 117–46].

This article contributes to the debate by addressing the following research question: how sustainable is the Open Balkan initiative? Sustainability may be considered from two perspectives. The first examines its functionality, that is, its internal structure and the real and expected economic and political effects. The second concerns the environment in which this integration functions, including the attitude of internal and external actors toward this project. Employing a case study methodology, authors build conclusions on an analysis of primary policy documents (memoranda, agreements, decisions of international institutions, and other documents), as well as secondary sources and media materials (interviews, statements, and evaluations of relevant interlocutors).

Why Was the Open Balkan Created?

In October 2019, the first trilateral meeting of the prime ministers of Albania and North Macedonia (Edi Rama and Zoran Zaev) and the president of Serbia (Aleksandar Vučić) adopted a declaration of intent to establish the four freedoms between the three countries. The necessity of establishing the Mini Schengen Zone was dictated by France’s blocking of further EU integration for Albania and North Macedonia. At the same time, Aleksandar Vučić was facing fierce resistance from the domestic public, as well as criticism from the EU due to the vague and undeveloped idea of “demarcation” with the Albanians in Kosovo, which could have triggered a political crisis. Thus, for Rama and Zaev, the initiative was a way to put pressure on the anemic EU, while for Vučić, it was an option to get out of a predicament. Practically, the initiative was the result of the need to do something at a time when the EU was lacking ideas and had offered nothing but vague promises of membership in the long run and continuous conditioning of Belgrade by concessions regarding Kosovo [Proroković, 2022, p. 55–74]. The very name “Mini Schengen,” which would turn out to be temporary and of a working nature, indicated the essence of the signed declaration. It is possible that the process would have gone faster had it not been for the pandemic and its consequences during 2020 and the first part of 2021.

Since its launch, the initiative has been accompanied by fierce controversy about its possible limits and risks. Vangeli [2022, p. 62] showed that there are four general positions around which actors are clustered: enthusiastic early adopters, cautious followers, vocal opponents, and silent observers. The lack of sufficient data to link these positions to particular agendas or ideologies indicates that the initiative “is, in fact, potentially a disruptive development that may shuffle networks and allegiances in the region” [ibid.].

Advocates of the initiative regard it as a harmless and practical continuation of similar activities in previous decades, such as the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). The value-added benefit of the OB is the abolition of non-trade barriers in commercial relations between Serbia and Albania [Miteva-Kacarski et al., 2022, p. 46]. As for North Macedonia's economy, CEFTA membership is regarded as even more important than the agreements with the EU and other free trade agreement partners given the intensifying trade relations in the region [Toshevska-Trpchevska et al., 2022, pp. 23–36].

The opponents of the OB see it as another form of being in the EU's "waiting room for membership" and as "a new buffer zone" [Karakoç, Botić, 2022, p. 287]. Moreover, the initiators of the project did not explain why and how this decision was taken. Another anomaly here is that Serbia was represented not by the prime minister, but by the president of the republic who does not hold any executive powers.

At the end of July 2021, the formation of the Open Balkan was formally promoted at the Economic Forum for Regional Integration in Skopje. On that occasion, three trilateral memoranda were signed (see Table 1).

Table 1. Memoranda Signed Within the Open Balkan (2021)

Memoranda of Understanding on Trade Facilitation	Defines areas of cooperation that would lead to trade facilitation
Memoranda of Understanding on Working Permits	Is a framework for further work on enabling free access to the labour market for all citizens of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia under the same conditions as citizens in that country
Memoranda of Understanding on Cooperation in Catastrophic Situations	Is a framework for faster and smoother cooperation between Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia in cases of disasters

Source: [Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, n/d].

In the post-pandemic period, after the July forum in Skopje, an additional trilateral meeting in Belgrade followed in November 2021; it was of a preparatory nature, to agree on the details related to the big and solemn summit in Tirana a month later. Due to massive and partly violent demonstrations in Tirana against the OB led by the former Albanian president Sali Berisha, the opening and ceremonial part of the summit was organized in Elbasan. On the second day of the summit, a joint article by Rama, Vučić, and Zaev [2021] was published in the German daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* to explain the significance of the initiative. Two agreements were signed in Tirana providing access to the labour market of the three countries. Zaev had to resign the premiership on 22 December 2021, just one day after the summit, due to the defeat of his party in the previously held local elections. Nonetheless, in June and September 2022, the signing of new agreed documents continued (see Table 2).

The June summit in Ohrid (North Macedonia) is also significant in that the prime minister of Montenegro, Dritan Abazović, and the president of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Zoran Tegeltija, attended as guests. Both leaders pointed out that there is an interest among businesspeople in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina to participate in the project, given that the "abolition of borders" would be an accelerator of economic growth. While the new prime minister of North Macedonia, Dimitar Kovačevski, invited the prime minister of Kosovo, Aljbin Kurti, to the meeting, he refused to participate, explaining that he "remains engaged in the Berlin process."

Table 2. The Scope of Agreements Signed Within the Open Balkan (2022)

Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Academic Qualifications	Enables easier access to the labour market through a faster and more efficient procedure of mutual recognition of academic qualifications
Agreement of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Tourism in the Western Balkans	Defines cooperation in the field of tourism through possible forms of cooperation in the field of harmonization of the regulatory framework (recognition of travel agencies, operators, the promotion of a unique tourist product, new tourist routes, joint performances at fairs, and conferences). For the purposes of further coordination, a joint working group will be formed that will adopt two-year work plans
Agreement of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Culture	Regulates possible forms of cooperation in the field of culture through joint calls for funding projects and regulates the easier mobility of artists within the OB and the issue of residence
Agreement of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Tax Administrations in the Western Balkans	Provides a framework for the cooperation of tax administrations in the domain of sharing experiences and best practices, promoting tax collection, and joint work on combating tax evasion
Agreement on Mechanisms for Ensuring Uninterrupted Supply of Basic Foodstuffs in OB	Ensures food safety and uninterrupted supply of basic foodstuffs within the OB
Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Cinematography and Audio-visual Activities	Defines the exchange of best practices and experiences in the field of audio-visual policies with the aim of developing film culture in the Western Balkans. The establishment of a joint co-production fund of the Open Balkan for film professionals is also planned
Operational Plan in the Field of Civil Protection between MK, SRB, and ALB	Foresees the establishment of permanent channels of communication in civil protection through the operational centres, then the organization of joint seminars, conferences, exercises, round tables, training, and exchange of good practices and experiences

Source: [Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, n/d].

The September summit in Belgrade was even more salient due to attendance by the foreign ministers of Turkey and Hungary. Nonetheless, the Italian and Greek heads of diplomacy did not show political willingness to participate despite invitations. During the meeting, a bilateral memorandum on cooperation between Serbia and Albania in the field of energy was signed, which concerns the coordination of activities in the event of energy shortages.

Therefore, the EU's anemic policy in the Western Balkans inclined the leaders of three countries toward a more assertive sub regional integration. However, it turned out that their optimism was not shared by other stakeholders.

The EU, the U.S., and the Open Balkan

Generally, from the second half of 1990 until the present it has been widely considered that the EU and the U.S. have the same goals in the region—stabilization and modernization under the

Euro-Atlantic integration and its values. Although this general disposition is right, America's and Europe's critical interests in the region are different.

The EU's policy toward the Western Balkans can be explained in terms of the EU seeing this region as its own periphery. The presence of the EU has gradually expanded over the years, for instance through the CEFTA, the Regional Council for Cooperation (RCC), and the Berlin Process, though not without mistakes that fuelled the decline in support for integration, most noticeably in Serbia. But at the same time, through designed and organized functional binding, the EU increased the dependence of the Balkans on the EU and weakened their resilience. This was primarily facilitated by political elites, controlling economic flows and abusing the media space through which "politically correct" narratives were promoted. While the CEFTA served to break down barriers in the economy and promote free trade, the RCC contributed to the construction of the *acquis*. More than just a legal heritage, these assets are of a political and even ideological character. In this regard, it is worth comparing the OB with the Berlin Process (see Table 3).

Table 3. Open Balkan and Berlin Process: Similarities and Differences

	Berlin Process	Mini Schengen/Open Balkan
Startup Context	Initiated in Berlin in 2014, on the initiative of then Chancellor A. Merkel as a contribution to EU enlargement	Initiated in Novi Sad in 2019 by the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia in the context of a standstill in EU enlargement
Composition	Not a single country in the Western Balkans has reservations regarding the Berlin Process, nor is it considered unequal. All the summits were attended by the highest officials of the six countries of the region	There are reservations regarding this project in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and the entity of Kosovo. Kosovo rejects unequal status in OB, because Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina did not recognize it
Market Size	18 million people (WB6)	12 million people (only three countries)
Ratification Progress	All WB6 actors signed identical agreements and committed to their ratification	So far, bilateral and trilateral agreements have been signed. Serbia ratified five, and Albania and North Macedonia none
Scope of the Signed Agreements	Transport, energy, ecology, digitalization, roaming, mutual recognition of identity cards, university diplomas, and professional qualifications	Energy, agriculture, labour market, electronic services, veterinary and phytosanitary inspections, culture, education, and civil protections
Summitry	A summit is held once a year. Nine have been held so far	Several high-level meetings have been held since 2019. Two summits were held in 2022
Support From External Actors	Sponsored by the EU. The UK is also a participant	The OB enjoys the conditional support of the U.S. The conditions are as follows: a) it should not conflict with European obligations; b) all WB6 actors should become full members in future. The EU welcomes the OB cautiously as far as it is in line with the <i>acquis</i>
Attitude to Reconciliation Issues	One of the goals of the Berlin Process is reconciliation and the establishment of facts about the victims, as well as the processing of war crimes	The OB does not deal with the topics of reconciliation or establishing facts about victims and war crimes

Source: Compiled by authors.

The Berlin process was designed to bridge the problems and doubts around EU enlargement, as well as to amortize the negative effects of growing impatience and nervousness in Western Balkan societies and among elites. Realistically assessing that the accession of the WB6 to the EU would drag on indefinitely, and perhaps never end, Angela Merkel inaugurated this format to keep the “periphery” in the geopolitical orbit of the EU and continue the functional connection between the EU and the Western Balkans through the continuation of institutional cooperation. Through the Berlin Process, the “no-alternative path” to the EU is essentially determined and extended, although there is no guarantee that its ultimate outcome will be membership of the Western Balkan actors in the EU.

One of the most important achievements of the Berlin Process occurred in 2020, with the setting the goal to establish a common regional market. In parallel with that, the Economic and Investment Plan of the European Commission envisages the use of up to 9 billion euros from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), while up to 20 billion euros of investments will be mobilized from the private sector and international financial institutions, thanks to guarantees. Provision of guarantees for investments in the areas of sustainable transport, clean energy (implementation of the Green Agenda), digital future, human capital, and environmental protection is also foreseen.

At first glance, the plan may seem impressive, grandiose. However, experiences in cooperation with the EU and the operationalization of imagined strategies are somewhat different. A huge percentage of these funds goes to consulting services, audits, and various types of guarantees, which must be performed by institutions or private companies from the EU; moreover, when purchasing goods or services, end users from the Western Balkans practically have to opt for providers from the EU, which are usually more expensive than those from China, Turkey, or Russia providers. In short, only a part of the approved funds will eventually reach the Western Balkans, and even that part, larger or smaller, will have to be spent to some extent on structural adjustments, institutional reforms, and harmonization of national strategies with EU regulations.

This may also account for Rama’s, Vučić’s, and Zaev’s motivations to initiate the OB. Their desire to speed up integrations by first establishing Mini Schengen and then the OB is probably also due to the slowness of the EU and the fact that Brussels institutions start with the interests of the EU and then fit candidate projects from the Western Balkans into them—projects are approved in areas that are strategic priorities of the EU even though the Western Balkan actors have completely different strategic priorities [Stanojević, 2022, pp. 117–46]. Thus, from this perspective it can be argued that the implementation of the Berlin Process is accelerated through the OB, and the EU cautiously welcomes the OB as far as it is in line with that process. For instance, the recommendations of the European Parliament [2022] adopted in November 2022 express “strong reservations regarding any regional cooperation initiative that does not include all six countries of the Western Balkans and is not based on EU rules, such as the Open Balkan initiative.” In her speeches, the president of the European Commission also avoids overt support of the OB, emphasizing the importance of the Berlin Process.

The OB is clearly not the same as the Common Regional Market. Therefore, for the EU it can be tolerated if it is based on EU *acquis*, which implies all the achievements that were articulated in the Berlin Process anyway. It means that, for the EU, the OB has a future only as part of the Berlin Process.

Considering U.S. interests, the necessity for, and tasks of, the OB has other accents. Prior to the current phase of the Ukrainian crisis, there were many contradictions between the U.S. and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners from so-called “old Europe.” This led to greater attention being paid to “young” allies from Central and Southeastern Europe and the elevation of their position in common NATO strategy. In this sense, the OB plays a sup-

plementary role to the common place of Southeastern Europe in the southern wing of NATO. Military cooperation and the forming of common logistics and infrastructure are crucial points of NATO strategy in the Balkans. Thus, the main task of the U.S. is to increase connectivity in the region, especially in the political and military spheres. The OB is suited to this task: it establishes borderless space necessary for further movement in operational compatibility. This is one of the reasons Washington welcomes the participation of all WB6 countries in the OB project. In addition, it supports the Washington Treaty signed by Pristina and Belgrade in September 2020: one of the points was the promise for \$13 billion in investments in joint projects in transport and infrastructure construction.

For the U.S., in contrast to the EU, the priority of integration is not institutional modernization or regional economic cooperation with the further aim to integrate the European market more deeply, but rather the formation of single political and military space from the Baltics to the Balkans. The fact that they are ready to make economic investments in the region without predictable economic conversion (which is not typical of American investment programmes globally) is just another proof.

Criticism of the Open Balkan

There are criticisms of the OB in addition to those already noted. The Balkan Forum published a study funded by the Rockefeller Brothers that predicts that the OB will have negative implications, both on a symbolic level and on real regional cooperation, in that it is an idea of a single market not relying on “European heritage” [Taylor, 2022b]. This is true to a certain extent, regardless of the assurances of compatibility with the Berlin Process. Unlike the Berlin Process, which is based on the principle of “first the *acquis* and standards, then the single market,” the Open Balkan is based on the principle “first the single market, then we’ll see what happens with the *acquis* and standards.” The OB bears the imprint of real cooperation that may go beyond western control and be exploited by non-western actors.

The most promising non-western actor in this regard is China, whose investments are increasingly significant and extensive. For opponents of the OB, especially those sharing anti-Chinese narratives, this is one more matter of concern, which is especially heightened considering the degradation of European security since 2022. One of the expected consequences of the EU’s focus on Eastern Europe in the context of the Ukrainian crisis is a decrease in attention paid to the Balkans.

Edward P. Joseph, senior fellow at Johns Hopkins University, warned about the possibility of an unfavourable development of the situation in the light of the imbalance in the economic power of the actors. Given that the Serbian economy is twice as large as Albania’s and North Macedonia’s combined, he argued that Serbia will benefit more than its neighbours and translate economic power into political power [Elezi, 2022].

The EU’s political achievements in the Balkans rest on the narrative of Serbia as the source of problems, Serbian crimes, and the necessity of sanctioning and punishing the Serbs, which Joseph actually repeated by comparing the situation with the position of Germany in the decades after the Second World War (a parallel between “Milošević’s Serbia” and “Nazi Germany” was, in its turn, quite widespread during the 1990s in western political and intellectual circles). Proposals that were taken very seriously are that “the basic role of the OB in Serbia’s foreign policy is to create a positive image of Serbia as an initiator of cooperation and reconciliation in the Western Balkans, but also a guarantor of stability in a politically unstable area” [Rapaić, Matijević, 2022, p. 77]. Hence the warning that emerged based on Albanian public opinion: “From the Albanian side, the government in Tirana should do more to convince the

general public and the political opposition that this is an initiative that does not come at expense of the Republic of Kosovo and that it does not come with the incurring of additional economic costs due to trade asymmetries with Serbia that has the comparative advantage among the WB6 due to its quasi-hegemon status in the region. Also, it should be made clear that this project does not complement or contradict other agendas and trade relations that each country has with third countries” [Kalemaj, 2023, p. 37].

Therefore, according to this school of thought, anything beyond the “EU umbrella” should not be supported. This narrative was accepted, for example, by Kosovo prime minister Albin Kurti (and Salji Berisha in Tirana, who organized demonstrations in December 2021), who “resolutely rejected the initiative as harmful and said that the countries of the region should work to prevent Serbia from promoting Russian and Chinese interests.” [Sot, 2021b] The same narrative was accepted by the Bosniak politicians in Sarajevo and also by that part of the Montenegrin political elite that built its discourse on extreme anti-Serb attitudes [Starinac, 2022].

When the discourse is constructed in this way, it is not surprising that a short statement by Sergey Lavrov about the OB was given a negative connotation [Taylor, 2022a]. Because, although it cannot be ruled out that the project is “only political theater, it is also suggested that the fatigue of ‘running to Europe’, accompanied by internal problems, could put pressure on the three leaders to explore innovative approaches” [Semenov, 2022, p. 24].

Discussions within the Montenegrin public were stimulated by the Analysis of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Montenegro’s Participation in the OB Initiative, prepared by the Ministry of European Affairs with the help of the German Organization for International Cooperation (GIZ). Despite the position of Prime Minister Abazović, the document lists numerous objections to the project (lack of legal framework, absence of mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of agreements reached, and the non-transparency of the entire process) and does not recommend joining this initiative [Popović, 2022].

Sentiments against the OB were also detected in Serbia. It was not adequately explained by Aleksandar Vučić (in the National Assembly, for example) why integration with Albania and North Macedonia started so early, nor was an answer given as to how the issue of Kosovo’s status is viewed in the context of the OB. Thus, the initiative is seen as inconsistent with preserving the territorial integrity of Serbia.

The absence of a high level of support for the OB among the publics of the Western Balkan countries reflects political discourses in the region. “The political discourses toward regional integration are, on the one hand, a product of the internal unfinished process of state and nation-building, while on the other hand, they are a direct consequence of open bilateral issues and the absence of a clear perspective of membership in the European Union. The dominant negative discourse on the Open Balkan initiative equates regional integration with the fear of losing sovereignty both over internal political processes and on the path of European integration” [Surlić, Lazarević, Kolarski, 2022, p. 57].

Doubts and criticism are also expressed regarding the role of George and Alexander Soros in the initiative. It is symptomatic that even the name of the regional initiative coincides with Soros’ Open Society concept. “The Open Balkan project was promoted by George Soros, it is a completely American idea. The name also shows what Soros represents—an open society” [Tevel, 2022]. It is also significant that the principles of cooperation coincide with the numerous ideas of George Soros about the future of the Balkans published in the last quarter of a century. In the summer of 1999, immediately after the end of NATO aggression against Yugoslavia, he proposed: “The Balkans cannot be reconstructed on the basis of nation states. In the first instance, [it is necessary to] create a free trade area similar to Benelux. As soon as the EU is satisfied with its control over customs, it would admit the area to the European Common Market” [Soros, 1999]. Alexander Soros attended the founding summit in Tirana (Edi Rama said that

he attended it as a representative of the Atlantic Council and the Open Society Foundations NGOs), but it is noticeable that he met with representatives of three counties even in the years and months before this gathering [Sot, 2021a]. In 2018, Soros argued in favour of a common Western Balkans market which will let the region to modernize its financial markets without solutions being dictated from Brussels or Washington, while the consequences of inaction would lead to one more “Balkanization” [Soros, Soros, 2018].

Conclusion

In contrast to the initiatives of western actors, which are proceeding slowly, the implementation of the Mini Schengen and OB projects unfolded quickly. The set of agreements signed should contribute to the creation of a single market and promote sub regional integration, regardless of acute political issues among the participants—the status of Kosovo being the most sensitive among them, in that Albania not only recognized the unilaterally declared independence of its compatriots from the Serbian province, but actively facilitated the process. Undoubtedly, political leaders of Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia have shown that, with political will, it is possible to quickly and efficiently articulate common interests to overcome a crisis such as when the EU blocked further integration of two states and conditioned the third. The support of George Soros (through Alexander Soros) was also important for the realization of these initiatives because this enabled even “conditional support” from the U.S., which was also important in order to prevent greater protests or obstructions from the EU.

Guided by the principles of liberal institutionalism, Rama, Vučić, and Zaev (that is, his successor, Kovačovski) made a positive breakthrough in the field of regional relations and contributed to the improvement of cooperation. But for these principles to produce results, institutions must first emerge. The absence of institutions (legal frameworks, bodies for implementation, or even accompanying acts that operationalize the signed memoranda and agreements), their slow formation or non-transparency, and the absence of concrete plans on the fulfilment of the strategic vision, as well as major political disagreements, exacerbated controversy around the OB. As time passes, these deficiencies may become more noticeable. It is quite appropriate to raise the question here: how much administrative capacity do the three states have to independently implement the regional integration project? The answer to this question is more negative than positive given the international political circumstances. Balkan politics is about both “intellectual mutterings about the exotic and violent Balkans” and “nonsense that reflects the unbearable ease of labelling,” which stays true when it comes to the Open Balkan. The OB is also referred to as a “Greater Serbian project” that will destroy everything that was achieved in the establishment of a regional hierarchy by the U.S. and the EU in previous decades (although Serbia is struggling to prevent the legitimization of secession on part of its territory), but also as a possible platform for strengthening non-western influences in the Balkans—Chinese, Russian, and Turkish (despite the fact that Albania and North Macedonia are members of NATO).

Such theses also create a political environment that favours the EU’s position that the Open Balkan is not only an unnecessary, but somewhat dangerous integration. The EU perceives this initiative as competing with the Berlin Process and it can only support it in such a context. But, if this happens, then the Open Balkan will essentially be absorbed into the Berlin Process, and the success of the founders will be used to strengthen the influence of the EU in the region (completely returning regional integration to the supervision and control of the EU), which seems to have been reduced in previous years (otherwise, there could be no Open Balkan). In this escalation, from the point of view of structural realism, the three Balkan states simply do not have sufficient capacities of economic and political power to oppose the EU, and

it is to be expected that sooner or later they will succumb to pressure and be forced to submit to the Berlin Process, unless there is even more dramatic and unpredictable turbulence international relations that, hypothetically, could cause the disintegration of the EU or the blocking of EU institutions, leading to the neglect or disappearance of the Berlin Process. In accordance with this analysis, considering the reasons for, and way of starting, the initiative, the international environment, results, and shortcomings, it can be concluded that the Open Balkan will be as sustainable as the U.S. and the EU allow. Accordingly, regarding how the U.S. and the EU anticipate this project, as part of the solution or as part of the problem, such will be its fate.

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