

## **OPEN BALKANS - BETWEEN ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND POLITICAL REALITY**

**Sanja Jelisavac Trošić**

Senior Research Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, Serbia,  
[sanja@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs](mailto:sanja@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs)

**Mitko Arnaudov**

Research Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, Serbia,  
[mitko@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs](mailto:mitko@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs)

### **Abstract**

The Open Balkans initiative has received huge media attention for three reasons: first, because it is an authentic regional initiative launched by the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia without foreign "mentorship"; second, because it has enabled practical mechanisms and measures that directly provide the economic sector of the participating countries to facilitate their business operations; and thirdly, because, unlike other initiatives with a regional character, it does not include all six economies of the Western Balkans, precisely because of existing political disagreements. The goal of this work is to determine and predict the real capacities of the Open Balkans, as well as the possibility of complete integration of the entire region within the framework of this initiative, aside to existing political disagreements. The research question is do the economic interests prevailed over the political interests of local politicians, so the future of this initiative is certain? In a theoretical sense, this paper will provide a new contribution to the science of international relations, more specifically in studies of regionalism by providing a new analysis of the importance of regional integration and association in the processes of economic development and political visibility of small and micro states, on the example of the Western Balkans.

**Keywords:** Economy, Politics, Open Balkans, Integration, Regionalism.

### **1. Introduction**

Regional initiatives in the Balkans after the end of the civil wars have had a different goal and justification for their establishment. First of all, it was initiatives that would enable overcoming the war past through various mechanisms of political, diplomatic, academic, historical and cultural communication and discussion between Balkan actors. Over time, the actors in the Balkans have managed, with the strong support of the international factor, to establish communication channels and keep mentioned channels open in order to establish the foundation not only for regional communication, but also for cooperation in various fields. But this should not mean that disagreements and open issues in the Balkans have been resolved, but rather that a new approach has been opened. In fact, it is about an approach that enables the development of mutual relations within the region in various domains, while simultaneously resolving all open disputed regional and bilateral issues. In this context, numerous regional commissions were established that dealt with the issue of borders, i.e. establishing the border line between former socialist republics, commissions that have dealt with the legacy of the former socialist joint state, commissions that have dealt with establishing facts during civil wars, but also

political and economic commissions that have looked for mechanisms to promote cooperation between actors in different domains, with the aim of facing contemporary challenges in the regional, European and global context.

In this process, the European integration of actors in the region was the basic and essential common denominator. The states in the region have set membership in the European Union as a key and leading foreign policy goal, and thus established the basic foundation that justifies various attempts and ideas for joint and integrated cooperation within the regional frameworks. However, in all of this, it is important to emphasize that regional initiatives were mostly initiated by external actors. For example, the Berlin Process is an initiative led by Germany. The Berlin Process was established in 2014 as an initiative of several member states of the European Union (EU) under German leadership to engage with six partners from the Western Balkans (WB6), consisting of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and to promote regional cooperation and the European perspective of the region (Jelisavac Trošić & Arnaudov, 2023). In fact, Berlin Process is a very important regional initiative, but not an initiative that has an authentic regional character. A similar example is the Brdo-Brioni process. The Brdo-Brioni process is an annual multilateral event in the Western Balkans. It was launched in 2013 by Slovenian President Borut Pahor and Croatian President Ivo Josipović. The first official meeting was held on Brdo pri Kranj in Slovenia. The main focus of the Process is the enlargement of the European Union towards the countries of the Western Balkans. The Berlin process has achieved concrete results when it comes to regional integration. On the other hand, the Brdo-Brioni process is a more official format of a regional gathering, without concrete and tangible results, but the point is that both initiatives do not have an authentic regional dimension.

In comparison these two examples, which were not taken in purpose to compare their success and effectiveness, the Open Balkans initiative is one of the few authentically regional initiatives, with concrete goals, guidelines and results, established as a result of the interest of regional political elites. The leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia have organized a meeting in Novi Sad on October 10, 2019, where they announced the formation of the so-called Mini Schengen Initiative,<sup>48</sup> with the aim of establishing the freedom of movement of goods, services, capital, and people within the Western Balkans by the end of 2021. (Jelisavac Trošić & Arnaudov, 2023) The original concept of the initiative aimed at implementing the four freedoms of the European Union in the Western Balkans after the meeting of the Mini Schengen Initiative in October 2019 had the idea to ensure the creation of a regional market based on full freedom of movement with a valid identity card throughout the region, but also full freedom of labor movement. (Jelisavac Trošić & Arnaudov, 2023) In fact, it is an initiative launched on the basis of authentic regional interests and goals. Open Balkans represents an initiative whose goal is not an attempt to reconcile the region with external mechanisms, but an initiative of regional actors that are recognizing regional challenges, that are ready for regional cooperation and that provide concrete measures and mechanisms both to initiate cooperation and to achieving concrete results within the region.

## **2. Economic achievements of the Open Balkans**

In the modern globalized and interdependent world regional cooperation has become paramount especially for smaller states (Kulo, Novikau, 2023, p. 1). In order to expand and accelerate regional cooperation in several areas, Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, the three countries of the Western Balkans, launched a domestic regional cooperation initiative the Open Balkans in 2019. Considering that the idea of cooperation from which this Initiative arose, it is considered to be originally regional initiative, but precisely because of that the potential failure of the Open Balkans Initiative will only prove the incompetence of local leaders and the need for EU supervision (Semenov, 2022, p. 31). Today, the moment has arrived to take a side between the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans initiative. Kamberi claims that the future of the region in the middle term is uncertain, and that time will show whether they are able to overcome the contradictions in regard to EU accession (Kamberi, 2021, p. 60).

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<sup>48</sup> The Prime Ministers of Albania and North Macedonia, as well as the President of Serbia, announced on July 29, 2021 in Skopje that the initiative, colloquially known as Mini Schengen, would be renamed the Open Balkans in the future.

As a rare case in the Western Balkans, the Open Balkans initiative did not find widespread support, and at the very beginning it was opposed by the other three countries of the Western Balkans, which are reluctant to join it (Tota, & Culaj, 2023, p. 321). 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. 58). But, based on the results of a research it can be concluded that Serbia is the “locomotive” of the Western Balkans and that all countries in this area should join the regional initiative for cooperation, the Open Balkans (Rikalović, Molnar, & Josipović, 2022, p. 31).

Very interesting are the results of the research Miteva-Kacarski et. al. regarding the case of the North Macedonia, registered a high index of trade openness in comparison to the other countries being part of the Open Balkan initiative. The Trade Balance Index shows that in the course of the period of 2011-2020, the country had been continuously present in the capacity of a net exporter of products of the category of tobacco and beverages, whereas the RCA index indicates positive values in the category of the food sector, beverages and tobacco, crude materials, except fuels as well as animal and vegetable oils, fats and waxes (Miteva-Kacarski, Cabuleva & Gorgieva-Trajkovska, 2022, p. 40).

One of the new agreements that were signed within the framework of the cooperation of the countries of the Open Balkans, was in June 2022, when Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, signed a Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of tourism in the Western Balkans (Jelisavac Trošić & Arnaudov, 2023, p. 76). The Petrevska investigated the level of seasonality in terms of overnights of tourists from Serbia and Albania to North Macedonia, between 2011-2019, and the research revealed low seasonality and favorable precondition for creating sustainable regional tourism product based on cultural heritage, tradition, gastronomy, and other cultural similarities, and outlined the importance of establishing a single tourism market that will contribute to creating a new concept of integrated regional tourism (Petrevska, 2022, p. 214).

Labor market developments as well as trade and FDI links and developments in the remittances between the WB countries and EU countries, in the last 10 years, shows that economic ties on the grounds of FDI, Trade, Labor Market and remittances are more severe between WB and EU countries, rather than in between WB countries by itself, making the initiative of the Open Balkan fragile on economic sense and imperfect substitute for EU integration agenda (Dauti, & Matoshi, 2022).

The removal of non-tariff trade barriers and increased freedom of movement between Open Balkans countries would primarily benefit the agricultural and tourism sectors. Since the three countries have pledged to grant mutual recognition of each other's agricultural-sector documentation, such as certification issued by food safety agencies, that would mean shorter border inspection times, particularly for phytosanitary and veterinary inspections, and streamlined paperwork for the transport of goods. (Dhimolea, 2022, p. 4). For instance, in the framework of the Open Balkans, Serbia is exporting wheat and corn to Albania. Movement of agricultural products and food between the three countries has become much faster since they introduced the green lanes on the border crossings for the trucks of the Open Balkan members. The mechanisms for control are conducted much faster because they operate 24/7 and are mutually recognized, thus making the triple controls outdated (Dhimolea, 2022, p. 5).

The Open Balkans is an initiative launched on the basis of authentic regional interests and goals and the discussions and agreements reached within this cooperation therefore, they should have visible and quick results in the daily life and work of the citizens of these three countries. One of the positive examples is the fact that the citizens of Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia are able to travel within the Open Balkans just with their ID cards, while foreigners could move between the three states without visas. The countries have harmonized protocols on the connection of identification number schemes, which enable citizens to access the labor markets of the three countries. ID cards enable citizens to work in the private sector in any of these three countries, without the need for separate recognition of the diplomas, without having to wait for various permits, and without facing administrative barriers. This is expected to be the most used by seasonal workers. The use of electronic IDs and a single work permit will contribute to facilitating the movement of people and the use of electronic services within the initiative itself.

The business community also expects to benefit from boosting regional economic integrations within the framework of this initiative. “American companies planning to come to Serbia think not only about infrastructure and local conditions, but also about the potential for growing their regional presence thanks to harmonized standards that apply across the region. This is why Open Balkan Initiative matters above all for the economy and business and as an opportunity to attract foreign investors”, said H.E. Christopher Hill, US Ambassador to Serbia (American Chamber of Commerce in Serbia, 2023).

It must be also noted, apart from these positive trends and perspectives, that all the countries of the Western Balkans have a problem with the rule of law, the fight against corruption, and the protection of human and civil rights. Solving these problems will bring them one step closer to full EU membership and the realization of the four freedoms on which the EU is based (freedom of movement of people, goods, services and capital) (Kekenovski, 2022).

### **3. Political reality in the context of Open Balkans**

The main goal of the Open Balkans is the economic integration of the participating countries, and as such this initiative does not serve as a substitute for accession to the European Union, but as an element in that process. (Арнаулов & Турчић, 2023) That it is an economic initiative, an initiative focused on the economic integration and cooperation of the region, is best evidenced by the documents adopted so far between the participating states. (Privredna komora Srbije, n.d.) It is actually an initiative that represents support for existing initiatives of regional cooperation and is a response to the needs and demands of the economy and citizens to make it easier to do business, trade, travel and employ in the Western Balkans, and it is already producing concrete results. (Privredna komora Srbije, 2022) Progress is visible on the ground, but further investments in the construction and improvement of infrastructure are needed, especially at border crossings, as well as the implementation of signed agreements, so that the effects of the initiative can be fully felt. After the establishment of green corridors, specially marked Open Balkan boards at border crossings, as well as the changed regime of control of goods originating from one of the three countries of the Open Balkans, border procedures are significantly simplified and more efficient. (Privredna komora Srbije, 2022)

However, the initiative is facing politically determined challenges since its constitution, because in certain parts of the public discourse it is presented not only as a counterweight to European integration, but also as a parallel process to the Berlin process initiative, in which Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the so-called Kosovo\* are participating. (Арнаулов & Турчић, 2023) At the very beginning, an extensive media narrative was created that said that the Open Balkans is an initiative that will replace the European integration process, (Šofranac, 2021) then that with the Open Balkans, the leaders of Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia are *de facto* starting a process that will distance the participating countries from joining the EU, and the statements that they interpret the initiative as a project for creation a Greater Serbia, (politicki.ba, 2021) designed to exclusively serve the interests of Serbia (Арнаулов & Турчић, 2023).

In fact, an attempt was made to make the Open Balkans initiative another in a series of political mechanisms in the Balkans, respectively, to be misused in the political rhetoric that is most often used for the sake of collecting political points. From the other side, according Djukanovic, the prevailing reasons for opposing the integration into the Open Balkans are related to the essential mutual distrust of the elites and the dominant spheres of society, but also to the noticeable non-complementarity of the foreign policy efforts among the countries of the Western Balkans. (Jelisavac Trošić & Arnaudov, 2023) In fact, we are talking about three key problems at the political level that the Open Balkans is facing, and which indirectly affect the process of realizing the set goals of this initiative. First, it is an initiative that does not have strong international support, as is the case with the Berlin process, but enjoys more declarative and less substantive support. Second, it is an initiative in which the entire region is not integrated, respectively, not all actors are involved, which largely determines its effectiveness. And thirdly, we are talking about an initiative that has been rhetorically misused since its inception, without an explanation as to why it is being misused in political rhetoric. Probably, the essence of the problem in this initiative actually lies in the possibilities of its inclusiveness, which directly puts it in a subordinate position in relation to the Berlin Process, which, as we stated earlier, includes all six actors of the Western Balkans. (Jelisavac Trošić & Arnaudov, 2023)

In fact, numerous regional issues and bilateral disputes are still not resolved in the Western Balkans, including those issues is the status of Kosovo, which unilaterally has declared independence in 2008. But none of the existing issues should affect the inclusiveness of the Open Balkans, bearing in mind that the leaders of the participating countries continuously invite other actors in the region to join the initiative. The doors of the Open Balkans regional initiative are open for Pristina, Sarajevo and Podgorica and it was announced since 2021 at the summit of the initiative in Belgrade after the meeting of the leaders of Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia, the countries that are the initiators of the initiative. (Hina, 2021) This is precisely why we have mentioned the dispute between Belgrade and Pristina, as one of the key regional disputes. In fact, it is an issue that calls into question the principles of international law, but at the same time an issue that does not represent an obstacle for Pristina to become part of the Open Balkans, because it is Belgrade that invites, in addition to Sarajevo and Podgorica, also Kosovo to join the Open Balkans, regardless of the open status issues of Pristina. In the political framework, but also in the framework of the research and academic community, excluding factually unfounded political rhetoric, it is difficult to establish the reasons why Sarajevo, Podgorica and Pristina refuse to become part of the Open Balkans Initiative.

Bearing in mind the domains in which cooperation within the framework of the Open Balkans permeates, bearing in mind the interest realizing by the economic sector in the participating states of the Open Balkans, as well as the interest of the economic sector in further deeper integration within the framework of this initiative, there is only one explanation for the refusal of Pristina, Podgorica and Sarajevo to become part of this initiative - misunderstanding of the current economic conditions and flows in regional and European circumstances, and thus misunderstanding of the interests and needs of the domestic national economy.

#### 4. Economic relations between Belgrade and Skopje within the Open Balkans

The economic relations between the two countries, as a consequence of the Open Balkans Initiative, are getting better and better, prime Minister Ana Brnabic assessed and voiced the expectation that this year the trade exchange will exceed €1.5 billion and perhaps reach €2 billion. the improvement of trade and agricultural exchange, that is, exchange of food products was also discussed at the meeting in Belgrade on 31 March 2023. On the other hand, Prime Minister of North Macedonia Dimitar Kovacevski pointed that the governments of the two countries are focused on raising the economic and social standard of citizens, enabling a fast and efficient business environment, on being able to react and analyze their business plans in a reasonable, faster time than what we had in the past, said the Prime Minister of North Macedonia. He added that excellent cooperation brings with it quality solutions in times of crisis, which is a great incentive for us to invest even more strongly in the stable and prosperous Western Balkans (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2023).

At meetings within the framework of the Open Balkans, Serbia and North Macedonia discusses all topics of interest to the two countries, with the aim of further rapprochement, deepening of economic relations and cooperation, which is in the interest of both parties, and above all of the citizens. The "Wine Vision by Open Balkan" and Open Balkan wine fair, showed that Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania also have something to offer together. In the table 1 we can see the main economic indicators of Serbia and North Macedonia.

Table 1: Key Economic Indicators for North Macedonia (NM) and Serbia

	2020	2021	2022e	2023f	2024f	2025f
<b>Real GDP growth (percent)</b>						
NM	-4.7	3.9	2.1	2.4	2.7	2.9
Serbia	-0.9	7.5	2.3	2.3	3.0	3.8
<b>Consumer price inflation (percent, period average)</b>						
NM	1.2	3.2	14.2	9.1	3.0	2.0
Serbia	1.6	4.0	11.9	8.2	4.0	3.5
<b>Public debt (percent of GDP)</b>						
NM	50.8	52.0	50.9	51.5	53.1	54.1

Serbia	53.9	54.5	52.6	52.3	50.5	49.6
<b>Goods exports (percent of GDP)</b>						
NM	44.4	51.3	57.0	56.5	57.2	58.3
Serbia	34.3	39.4	44.6	44.5	43.8	43.1
<b>Trade balance (percent of GDP)</b>						
NM	-12.7	-16.1	-21.0	-18.9	-18.1	-17.4
Serbia	-8.8	-8.7	-11.7	-10.3	-8.8	-8.1
<b>External debt (percent of GDP)</b>						
NM	78.7	81.9	87.5	89.4	89.5	88.9
Serbia	65.8	68.4	67.9	64.3	61.1	59.7
<b>Unemployment rate (period average, percent)</b>						
NM	16.4	15.7	14.4	13.7	13.6	13.5
Serbia	9.7	11.0	9.4	-	-	-

Source: The World Bank, (2023) Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No.23, Spring 2023, Testing Resilience, p. 108-110, World Bank calculations and projections on data from national authorities.

The regional connection through the Open Balkans initiative represents in some way an upgrade to the CEFTA agreement, with the fact that the political importance of this initiative seems to exceed the economic interest, which is also not negligible. The envisaged trade liberalization for agricultural and food products will almost certainly lead to a greater volume of exchange of these products, which would be of interest to all countries that accept it. The reason is the relative complementarity of the agriculture of certain countries, as well as regional import dependence when it comes to agricultural products. In this context, facilitating the conditions of trade in agricultural-food products can contribute to the improvement of food security, and to the reduction of economic and social tensions in crisis conditions (Zekić, Matkovski, & Đokić, 2022, p. 40).

## 5. Political cooperation between Belgrade and Skopje since the promotion of Open Balkans

"Although we had a brief cooling of relations a few years ago, as neighbors we have found a common language and resolve all open issues through dialogue and mutual respect," said North Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski. (Миладиновић, 2019) From the other side, Serbian president has said: "In political relations, apart from different positions regarding the independence of Kosovo, we do not have any other open issues. We want to build the closest friendly relations". (Politika, 2019) Bilateral relations between Macedonia and Serbia are assessed as friendly and cordial, regardless of the fact that politicians, mostly driven by internal political motives, from time to time rhetorically cool them down in the manner of a "marital quarrel". (Filkov, 2019) Today, Serbia and North Macedonia are really unique actors in the framework of the Western Balkans without a single open bilateral issue. If we take as an example the reconciliation of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archdiocese after 55 years of schism, it is difficult to establish that the latest developments in the relations between Serbia and North Macedonia are questionable. The only problematic period in bilateral relations between these two neighbors in the past ten years was the attack in the Macedonian Assembly in 2017. When VMRO-DPMNE protesters stormed the Macedonian parliament building in April 2017 in an attempt to prevent the election of a representative of the minority Albanian party to the head of the parliament, the first major diplomatic uproar was caused by the news that a member of the Security and Information Agency (BIA) was and the employee of the Serbian embassy in Skopje was among them. Although his explanation was that he happened to be there because he wanted to make sure if there were Serbian citizens among the demonstrators, former North Macedonia Prime Minister Zoran Zaev's authorities did not like the fact that the Serbian intelligence officer was among the demonstrators. (Миладиновић, 2019) There were disagreements later as well. When Skopje has supported Kosovo's membership to UNESCO. Also, political relations between Belgrade and Skopje cooled down when former Macedonian Prime Minister

Nikola Gruevski managed to leave the territory of North Macedonia illegally. But these are actually only stages in a series of good and quality relations between these two actors in the Western Balkans. The best indicator of this is actually the launch of the Open Balkans initiative. This is not a turning point in the relations between these two countries in the Western Balkans, but a confirmation of solid, stable and sustainable relations based on mutual political trust. Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić assessed that the improvement of bilateral and economic relations with North Macedonia is a "direct consequence" of the regional economic initiative "Open Balkans". (Za bolje odnose Srbije i Severne Makedonije zaslužen 'Otvoreni Balkan', kaže Brnabić, 2023) The increasingly high-quality and better relations between Serbia and North Macedonia are witnessed not only by political leaders, but also by the regional media, which, as they state, "Serbia and North Macedonia ended 2022 and entered 2023 with the historically best relations", adding that on this was greatly influenced by the dynamics of the Open Balkans, with the signing of numerous agreements. (Severna Makedonija i Srbija sa "istorijski" najboljim odnosima ušli u 2023., 2023) In fact, The Open Balkans actually represents the best example of quality related the relations between Belgrade and Skopje, which are permeated through the common/integrated management of border crossings, so-called "green" corridors for goods, but also the creation of a unique identification number in order to establish a unique labor market. However, the relations between these two actors are also determined by other current challenges, such as the energy, political, security, and economic crisis. But it is important to point out that both sides are jointly trying to manage the mentioned challenges. When it comes to European integration, Serbia and North Macedonia are jointly facing with the stagnation of this process. Although membership in the European Union is a key foreign policy goal for both Belgrade and Skopje, the bottom line is that enlargement policy has been a marginalized item on Brussels' agenda for a long time. This is precisely why both sides are facing with the fact that they are working intensively in the field of European integration, fulfilling the necessary criteria, while on the other hand they are forced to wait, due to uncertainty about a potential new „horizontal“ expansion of the Union.

When it comes to security challenges, both Serbia and North Macedonia are facing the consequences of the war on the territory of Ukraine. The consequences of high energy prices, an increasing number of cyber-attacks, high inflation rates and uncertainty in the domain of economic and energy sustainability create for both sides a security vacuum that requires daily management, without the possibility of any long-term strategy or plan. This is precisely why the potential for joint cooperation is a good basis for overcoming the imposed challenges. The consequences of the conflict on the territory of Ukraine do not recognize borders. And in this context, the fact is that small countries like Serbia and North Macedonia are even more vulnerable, bearing in mind the limitation of their resources and capacities. That is precisely why stable political cooperation between Serbia and North Macedonia, imbued in various domains, through economy, health, security, tourism and economy, is a quality basis that can create space for joint action in order to more efficiently and effectively overcome existing and upcoming challenges. The fact that these are neighboring countries further justifies the commitment to integrated cooperation. In addition, one of the conditions for joining the European Union is definitely good neighborly relations. In this context, we have to establish that the quality relations between Belgrade and Skopje are actually multiple determinants that can provide numerous affirmative sides in the medium and long term. Firstly, in the economic domain through a common and/or single regional market, secondly, in the political domain by providing a concrete contribution to the creation of sustainable political trust in regional frameworks and thirdly, in the security domain, through integrated cooperation in the process of more effectively and efficiently dealing with modern security challenges that do not recognize national borders or territorial integrity.

## **Conclusion**

The countries in the Balkans, with the strong support of the international factor, over time managed to lay the foundations not only for regional communication, but also for cooperation in various fields - economic, diplomatic, political, legal and others. Integration into the European Union of the countries of the region was the basic and essential common denominator, which initially and in some way forced them to cooperate, because the countries of the region set membership in the European Union as a key and leading foreign policy goal. Regional initiatives were primarily initiated by external

actors, but the Open Balkans initiative is one of the few authentically regional initiatives. The original concept of the initiative aimed to implement the four freedoms of the European Union in the Western Balkans. Therefore, the Open Balkans is an initiative launched on the basis of authentic regional interests and goals and the discussions and agreements reached within this cooperation, therefore there is a high expectation that they will have visible and quick results in the daily life and work of the citizens of these three countries. There is really visible progress on the ground, but of course further investments are needed in building and improving communication, cooperation and generally setting up the infrastructure for future good and quality relations. Unfortunately, at the very beginning, an extensive media narrative was created that says that the Open Balkans is an initiative that will replace the process of European integration. Time will of course deny or confirm that.

The Open Balkans actually represents the best example of the qualities related to the relations between Belgrade and Skopje, which are imbued through, for example, the joint and integrated management of border crossings, the so-called "green" corridors for goods, but also the creation of a unique identity number in order to establish a single labor market, harmonization of veterinary and phytosanitary certificates, recognition of accredited laboratories, introduction of an electronic shipment tracking system. Better and more intensive cooperation of competent authorities contribute to cheaper and better business, faster border crossing with minimal controls and checks. However, the relations between these two countries are also determined by other current challenges, such as the energy, political, security and economic crisis. But it is important to point out that both sides are jointly trying to deal with the mentioned challenges.

The bottom line is that EU enlargement policy has been a marginalized agenda item in Brussels for a long time, so it is not surprising that both countries have turned to regional talks and are trying to make everyday work and life better for the citizens of both countries. In this context, we must determine that the quality relations between Belgrade and Skopje are actually multiple determinants that can provide numerous affirmative parties in the medium and long term. Until now, no initiative has resulted in so many agreements in a short time between the three governments of Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia on more efficient and free movement of goods, services, people and capital. The biggest drawback of this regional initiative is that not all six economies of the Western Balkans are still part of it. So, above all, the further work of all three countries that founded the Open Balkans must be focused on fostering the inclusiveness of this initiative. Only with a good example and quality results will this initiative become strong, stable, prosperous and attractive for all countries of the Western Balkans.

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