

OPEN BALKAN VS. BERLIN PROCESS— SAME, SAME BUT DIFFERENT?

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Abstract

Giving equal attention to both Berlin Process and Open Balkan initiative, clearly the moment has arrived to take a side. From a pragmatic perspective, the Open Balkan initiative seems quite appealing but on the flip side the Berlin Process seen from a functionalist perspective is the only route that the Western Balkan countries should follow. Even if in the normative aspect there is no difference between these two processes and the principles are quite compatible with each other, the first one excludes the EU while the second one develops by taking directives from the EU. Since the European Union is the final destination for the Western Balkans, the Berlin process is the arterial line that needs to be followed. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that these two processes may appear same but in the very essence they are different. Taking into account the mere fact that in the EU each and every country recognizes each other while in the Open Balkan project Serbia does not recognize Kosovo, and to this regard the tension is becoming acute when we take into account the fact that also Montenegro and Bosnia have unresolved bilateral issues with Serbia. In geopolitical optics this looks more like an aspiration for influence throughout the entire region rather than regional cooperation. Clearly, in conclusion I've claimed that the future of the region in the middle term is quite uncertain, time will show whether they are able to overcome the contradictions in regard to EU accession road.

Keywords: *Berlin process, Open Balkan, EU, Western Balkans.*

Introduction

Given the divisive views on the issue, the paper aims to elaborate the role of the Berlin Process in regard to Western Balkans route toward the EU in order to tame and avoid the myriad nexus between Berlin Process and Open Balkan initiative that goes beyond its *raison d'état*.

Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, the EU has had a significant role both in strategic and economic aspects in Western Balkans. Looking at the trajectory of the events and assessing EU-Western Balkans relations what we can clearly grasp is that once in while the countries of Western Balkan were reminded by high officials of EU that they have a 'European perspective' and the EU will be the 'watchdog' in every process starting from Stabilization Association Process, to European Council Thessaloniki Summit of 2003 and more recently Berlin Process initiative of 2014 which became a constant *refrain* whenever the Western Balkans were discussed, it seems like every period has its *leitmotif* until the Open Balkan initiative of 2019 came up and opened the route of options and alternatives, the question was with or without EU in.

A dichotomy lies at the heart of this paper. Are we having two parallel processes since both of them include the same principles and why do we need two analogues' processes?

The geopolitical significance of this part of Europe keeps it on the table for discussion both options, many scholars may agree that the answer lies in the inability of EU to do more since the history of past two decades was not so encouraging in this respect, from EU enlargement fatigue, to 'widening vs. deepening' dilemma. The problem-solving capacity of the EU is continually tested by the Western Balkan countries and their bilateral disputes which impede the effectiveness of the EU to act outside its borders. Western Balkans want change- that is beyond question. But the direction of change remains an open issue.

Understanding the Berlin Process

The Berlin Process was initiated and launched by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014 to support Western Balkan countries to make progress in the reform process and resolve their bilateral disputes and internal issues, in order to achieve reconciliation within and between the societies in the region.³⁰

In *prima facie*, the purpose of the Berlin Process is to advance the EU's agenda in these dimensions:

- Economic growth and connectivity;
- Good neighborly relations and regional cooperation;
- Civil society development and people-to-people connectivity.³¹

According to Musliu³² the Berlin Process started as an intergovernmental diplomatic initiative and set out several broad and ambitious goals, such as stepping up regional cooperation, resolving bilateral questions for good neighborly relations and stability, strengthening good governance, carrying out reforms aimed at reinforcing the independence of the judiciary and increasing competitiveness, boosting investments and economic growth in the region as well as transport and connectivity in the energy, transport and digital sectors.

As we can grasp, the focus was put on economic and regional integration and political dispute, to this respect, Matteo Bonomi³³ claimed that the initiative turned out to be successful at the beginning taking into account fragile bilateral relations among countries of Western Balkans,

³⁰ See Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans, Berlin, 28 August 2014, <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/meta/startseite/final-declaration-by-the-chair-of-the-conference-on-the-western-balkans-754634> Accessed on 26.10.2021

³¹ Flessenkemper, T. (2017). THE BERLIN PROCESS: RESILIENCE IN THE EU WAITING ROOM. In S. Lange, Z. Nechev, & F. Trauner (Eds.), Resilience in the Western Balkans (pp. 23–30). European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07086.7>

³² Vjosa Musliu, «The Berlin Process for the Western Balkans. What is in a name? », The Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues/La Revue de dialogues inter-régionaux [Enligne], 2/2021 - Special Issue Western Balkans, European Union and Emerging Powers, URL: <https://popups.uliege.be/2593-9483/index.php?id=172>.

³³ Bonomi, M. (2019). Off Track.: The EU's Re-engagement with the Western Balkans. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19665>

there was an improvement in relations between Serbia and Albania, paving the way for the first visit in 68 years of an Albanian prime minister, Edi Rama, to Belgrade in November 2014.

Also, telecommunications have been one of the more positive areas in EU-facilitated dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, in 2016 an agreement was reached and gave Kosovo its own international dialing code, while allowing a subsidiary of Serbia's state-owned Telekom Srbija to continue operating in Kosovo.³⁴

To this regard, diplomacy triumphed once again in 2018 resulting with the Prespa Agreement in solving a long-term name dispute between Greece and Macedonia which was a precondition for Macedonia to join the EU.³⁵

This rapid advance of relations among Western Balkan countries made us believe that there is light at the end of the tunnel, yet, the problem-solving capacity of the EU and its foreign policy effectiveness is continually tested by the '*Serbia and Kosovo question*'.

From this functional starting point, Berlin Process is not trying to replace the EU's ill-functioning approach towards Western Balkans would-be Member States, as EU Commission³⁶ stated that:

"...it seeks to supplement it and revitalize its dynamic. It was developed outside the enlargement framework in an ad hoc, more flexible mini-lateral format, but was nonetheless closely linked to the EU's overall enlargement strategy, in terms of both substance and objectives, and was recognized very quickly as contributing to its advancement."

Thus, although the points above may seem as an institutionalized scheme of horizontal and non-coercive social coordination and cooperation among the states of the Western Balkans again, in practical terms they determine 'a normative framework' that the Western Balkans must follow under the umbrella of the EU.

If one had to make a tick in the box exercise, the Berlin Process points are not fulfilled yet, empirically this statement is surely over generalized but however the effect did indeed correspond with reality. As a result of EU inability to foster successful regional cooperation in the Western Balkans due to rigid bilateral relations between the countries of Western Balkans, once in a while the public opinion is presented with scenarios about border changes, non-papers, territorial exchange and land swap which in the very essence are dangerous and can only lead to instability because inability in practical terms means that there are other options and alternatives because the vacuum created by EU is exploited by Russia, China and Turkey for the geopolitical importance of this part of Europe a we'll see in the following sections.

If we were to evaluate all these components of the Berlin Process in a SWOT analysis table what we will hypothetically see is that the EU does not have a clear standpoint in regard to bilateral

³⁴ See BlakanInsight: D. Morina (2016) Kosovo and Serbia Reach Deal on Telecom Accessed on 09.11.2021 <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/11/13/kosovo-and-serbia-reached-an-agreement-on-telecom-11-13-2016/>

³⁵ See Statement attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on Prespa Agreement, 13 February 2019, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2019-02-13/statement-attributable-the-spokesman-for-the-secretary-general-prespa-agreement> Accessed on 26.10.2021

³⁶ The Commission stated in 2014 that "the Berlin Process can be instrumental for encouraging reforms and agreeing realistic priorities for core connectivity investments. It can also act as a spur to help resolve outstanding bilateral issues". European Commission, 8.10.2014. Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2014–2015. COM (2014) 700 final, p. 17

dispute resolution the weaknesses will outweigh more than strengths. (Kosovo and Serbia case and Serbia-Bosnia case), if there is no final resolution it is folly to believe that there will be economic or civil society cooperation between these countries.³⁷

Bilateral disputes and open cross-border hostility affected work of the Berlin Process, harming the spirit necessary for reaching agreements and delivering fast results.³⁸

The most obvious problem is that unanimity requirements in European level, will prevent the enlargement process for so long, for this reason the Berlin Process as German Chancellor Angela Merkel made it clear that Germany will continue to support the region's EU aspirations and that this commitment will continue through the *Berlin Process*, the flagship diplomatic initiative launched in 2014 with the purpose of keeping the dynamics of EU integration on track.³⁹ She made it clear that the EU is only committed to the Berlin Process and no other regional initiative which operates outside the EU scheme, to this regard she implied that Berlin Process is the "centerpiece".

Beside the fact that the Berlin Process changed at profound fashion the overall political and economic atmosphere of Western Balkans countries, still Qorraj⁴⁰ claims that: "*it seems that some countries of the Western Balkans need the EU's direct support since regional initiatives and regional instruments cannot enforce or monitor reforms in the region*".

In line with this pessimistic view, the Berlin Process suffered a debacle when EU Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker announced a five-year moratorium on the union's admission of new members, that's when Euroscepticism began to grow among Western Balkan countries.⁴¹

To this regard, according to Cvijic⁴² The enlargement fatigue became dominant when French and Dutch decided to veto the opening of EU adhesion negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019, taking into account the fact that the two countries have enjoyed candidate status since 2014 and 2005 respectively. This decision triggered incomprehension and indignation across the Western Balkans and the EU.

What we actually have on the ground is a twilight zone for the Berlin Process to further occur, and often in these cases when scholars try to assess the current situation; they raise two questions: how and why. These questions start the search for causes that lead to consequences.

³⁷Kamberi, D. (2021). "EU's impact in fostering peace in Kosovo in post-independence period" Università di Macerata, Italy, p.60.

³⁸ See more, The Berlin Process for the Western Balkans: Gains and Challenges for Kosovo, Policy Report, Balkans Policy Research Group, January 2018, p.24, at: goo.gl/XB5zJk

³⁹VisarXhambazi, September 22, 2021, 'Merkel's Balkan Farewell More than Just Symbolic' <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/22/merkels-balkan-farewell-more-than-just-symbolic/> Accessed on 23.11.2021

⁴⁰Qorraj Gazmend (2018), "Towards European Union or Regional Economic Area: Western Balkans at Crossroad", *NašeGospodarstvo/Our Economy*, March, 64(1), pp. 11-17.

⁴¹*Press corner*. (2014, July 15). European Commission - European Commission. Accessed October 27, 2021, from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_14_567

⁴²Srdan Cvijic, (2021) 'France, the Western Balkans, and the EU: on the wave of skepticism' <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/France-the-Western-Balkans-and-the-EU-on-the-wave-of-scepticism-210254> Accessed on 28.11.2021

Therein lies the chance for Western Balkan countries to opt for a different route outside the scope of EU integration. This new route leads us to the famous *'Open Balkan initiative'*.

The Open Balkan initiative, previously known as "Mini-Schengen," is an initiative championed by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, presently including Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia. Its supporters assert that it is compatible with the German-initiated Berlin Process' Common Regional Market, though others disagree, these disagreements will be the object of the analysis.

'Open Balkan initiative' – the roots

So, looming over all these issues a new option is just behind the corners; a new term recently entered the dictionary of International Relations: Open Balkan initiative often referred as Mini-Schengen. The concept generally refers to regional cooperation, to increasing trade and to improve bilateral relations between the member-states.⁴³

In 2019, the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia launched the Mini-Schengen (Open Balkan) initiative to boost regional cooperation in the region. This effort is largely seen as running in parallel with the Berlin Process but still lacks the explicit support of the EU and certainly the other Western Balkan countries.⁴⁴

Hence, the Open Balkan initiative somehow implied that the EU is no longer the exclusive source of power within the region. Before having a closer look at the logic of both processes a brief history seems appropriate in this regard.

If the Berlin Process was closely linked with the EU, the Open Balkan initiative is linked with Western Balkans themselves; they will remain 'the masters' of the agreements.

One may ask how the whole open Balkan idea came to life.

According to Simić⁴⁵ The original idea was to create a smaller version of the Schengen Area in the Balkans to promote regional and economic cooperation among Western Balkan countries while they await progress on EU enlargement. This idea was announced by the leaders of Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania - Aleksandar Vučić, Zoran Zaev and Edi Rama, respectively - who signed the mini-Schengen declaration on October 10, 2019, in Novi Sad, Serbia. The mini-Schengen is based on four fundamental freedoms: goods, capital, services and people.

The reasons behind this show as I previously mentioned in bold lines are mainly related with Albania and North Macedonia, they had been waiting to begin the process of accession negotiations with the EU for years but were left on hold despite strong efforts both in domestic level and regional cooperation. Also, the relations between Kosovo and Serbia fell almost in a 'frozen conflict', no progress in EU-facilitated dialogue, Serbia started the campaign of

⁴³See Joint statement of the leaders of "Open Balkan", Skopje, 29 July 2021 <https://vlada.mk/node/26063?ln=en-gb>
Accessed on 27.10.2021

⁴⁴VisarXhambazi, September 22, 2021, 'Merkel's Balkan Farewell More than Just Symbolic'
://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/22/merkels-balkan-farewell-more-than-just-symbolic/ Accessed on 23.11.2021

⁴⁵Julija Simić, "Three countries agree mini Schengen in the Balkans," Euractiv, October 11, 2019

withdrawing recognition of Kosovo, also blocking Kosovo in joining Interpol and as a counter response Kosovo imposed a 100% tariff on Serbian goods.⁴⁶

It is not accidental the fact that Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania were the initiators and first to agree about this project, even though I want to distance myself from biased arguments, a remaining puzzle is still here, in the conditions of current geopolitical reality you cannot literally read the on-going atmosphere without being influenced by global events, sometimes a change in leadership may change the whole route of the process, to this regard the case when Kosovo and Serbia made a *U-turn* under Trump administration (Washington agreement).

On the other hand, there is also a powerful argument that the roots are mainly founded on the EU's lack of appetite to play a more proactive role in the Balkans.

Turning to the issue in question in this paper, something other than the dichotomy of homogeneity of these processes is of equal importance: the issue of who benefits from this initiative and who is the bulwark?

In this logic there are some factors that need to be observed; first in economic aspect that is going to benefit more from the new regional architecture and the second point must be observed through political lenses of how Kosovo fits in the Open Balkan initiative, that's why at its heart the claim '*same, same but different*' seems to flow as it follows.

Discussion

In this part I am to specify the character of these processes and to offer an account of their dynamics. By situating the whole debate in the context, in this section I would like to anticipate the pedigree of the Open Balkan initiative albeit the discussion may not be sufficient to furnish the readers with a comprehensive understanding of the actual situation in the region, since no light has yet been shed upon this issue because of actual political matrix that interacts in the region.

To navigate in this direction, crucial to this picture is a discussion as we see a growing drift between proponents of Berlin Process and opponents of Open Balkan initiative and vice versa.

So, what can be the outcome of this duel, in principle the countries supporting Open Balkan argument is not fully stable and relevant, it is more a clash of ambitions and interest rather than regional cooperation, in purely technical terms the Berlin Process is the essential engine for regional and European integration, Berlin Process- has been a defender or bulwark of Western Balkans.

It is obvious to anyone that deals with such issues that the stability of Western Balkans depends on two factors: the people who live there, are they willing to co-exist peacefully and the Europe as Ismail Kadare would say (Atlantic Europe) in his famous writing '*The Balkans: Truths and untruths*'.⁴⁷

⁴⁶VisarXhambazi, "EU Initiatives Signal No Breakthrough in Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue, Democracy for Development Institute, December 2019.

⁴⁷I.Kadare (2001). '*The Balkans: truths and untruths. The Southern Balkans: Perspectives from the Region* (Chaillot Paper, p.5) Institute for Security Studies Western European Union DOI: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/cp046e.pdf> Accessed on 15.11.2021

Opponents-EU-Proponents Differing interpretations of Open Balkan

Sandwiched between opponents and proponents, the role of the EU in this regard is to take a side and either opt for the Berlin Process or Open Balkan.

Obviously, on line of reasoning, it is of a great importance to dilute the interpretations that have been developed recently about the Open Balkan and there are credible reasons to analyze passages of opponents and proponents of Open Balkan initiative.

The immediate question that comes to our mind is can the ‘Open Balkan project’ succeed without the half of the region, actually the game is 3 vs. 3, since Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia strongly oppose the project proposed by Rama-Vucic-Zaev.

So far, the loudest critic of the Open Balkan has been Kosovo’s prime minister, Albin Kurti. For Euro news Albania, Prime Minister of Kosovo, Kurti stated that:

*“When they say Open Balkan, open for whom? Because we would need to be part of the European Union, not the Russian Federation or China. We oppose this kind of tendency. In order to have an open and free Balkan, Serbia will need to change first.”*⁴⁸

Echoing his interview, he implies that he has doubts about Balkan’s self-sufficiency capacity and the final agreement with Serbia must be reached under the umbrella of the EU and Berlin Process. He believes that no regional initiative can be successful without the European Union’s involvement, that’s why the Berlin Process remains the main track towards EU integration.

Such rhetoric was being used even by Montenegro and Bosnia they saw no particular benefits from it, as easing travel and trade are already covered by the wider CEFTA⁴⁹ agreement, and by bilateral agreements between the region’s countries.⁵⁰

What is quite clear, is that Kosovo does not want in any circumstances, to replace its Euro-Atlantic perspective with any regional initiative proposed by Serbia, in current circumstances where Serbia does not recognize the independence of Kosovo, when EU-facilitated dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade is in a critical phase, Serbia is leading a successful derecognition campaign for Kosovo, Serbia blocks Kosovo in joining international organizations (the case of

⁴⁸ See Euronews Albania (07.11.2021), For it to be an Open Balkan, Serbia will need to change first, said Kurti <https://euronews.al/en/kosovo/2021/11/07/for-it-to-be-a-free-and-open-balkan-serbia-will-need-to-change-first-said-kurti/> Accessed on 11.11.2021

⁴⁹ See CEFTA’s legal documents and Agreement on amendment of and accession to the Central European Free Trade Agreement: <https://cefta.int/legal-documents/>

CEFTA ‘agreement provides removal of trade barriers in the South-eastern Europe harmonization of tariff and other administrative regulations with the standards of the World Trade Organization, introduces arbitration for dispute resolution and the rule of diagonal cumulation. As any other agreement, it is the result of compromise, which means that it has both advantages and drawbacks. Nevertheless, it is expected that it will strongly influence the mutual trade of the countries of South-eastern Europe and promote their process of integration into the European Union.’

⁵⁰ See Balkan Insights (July 29. 2021) Balkan ‘Mini-Schengen’ Leaders Eye Open Borders by 2023, Sinisa Jakov Marusic <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/29/balkan-mini-schengen-leaders-eye-open-borders-by-2023/> Accessed on 10.11.2021

Interpol) when we take into account all these indicators what we are left to say in this respect is that Serbia must be open to Kosovo first, in a sense that Serbia has to recognize travel documents, customs stamps, academic diplomas and certificates of Kosovo and move ahead, because Serbia's EU accession requires good neighborly relations as defined in *Chapter 35* of Brussels Agreement, until Serbia recognizes Kosovo and abandons its opposition to Kosovo's statehood, Serbia will not make progress towards EU accession. In my previous research on the matter, I have seen consistently the tendency of Serbia to avoid the Brussels Agreement, in particular Chapter 35⁵¹ that implies recognition, to this regard due to the lack of consensus among EU member states, and due to ambiguities in terms of the EU-facilitated dialogue that we've spent years and years talking about diplomas and license plates and the dialogue led us nowhere because the mediation architecture must change and include both EU and US representatives as co-chairs of the mediation, because diplomatic initiatives in the Balkans have succeeded only when the United States takes a proactive diplomatic and security role in the region, in close cooperation with the European Union; and when outside powers such as Russia pursue constructive, rather than destructive role. But actually, the reality on the ground in regard to Western Balkans is different, the above elaboration tells us that Serbia is exploiting the vacuum created by the EU, due to the lack of consensus on the European level. But my critique goes further, even Bosnia and Montenegro strongly oppose Open Balkan initiative, to this regard according to Vladimir Gligorov:⁵²

"Montenegro does not want to take what might appear to be a detour to EU accession, while Bosnia and Herzegovina meanwhile do not want to join anything that looks like it's being dominated by Serbia, and Kosovo wants to be treated equally, as a sovereign state, which is not the case".

It is precisely this juxtaposition – which I think makes this duel very seductive to be discussed. On the other hand, the proponents of the Open Balkan initiative collectively elide those interpretations and their assumptions on this score seem overly sanguine, they assert that Open Balkan is compatible with the German-initiated Berlin Process' Common Regional Market. Both Montenegro and Bosnia do not see any added value in the Open Balkan initiative, as all aspects of economic integration are already covered by the CRM, rendering the Open Balkan redundant. As a counter reaction about different interpretations on the matter, Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama was asked why there was a need for a second process to speed up a first, when Albania channeled all the energy and resources into the Berlin Process.

"I don't know how many times I have to reiterate it, but I will reiterate it for as long as it takes. There is no second process which is competing against the first or even less so, goes against

⁵¹ In the EU negotiating framework, the objective for Chapter 35 is defined as comprehensive normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo "in the form of a legally binding agreement (...) with the outlook of both sides being capable of fully exercising their rights and fulfilling their obligations".

⁵² Vladimir Gligorov is a senior research associate at Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies See Nikola Đorđević (2021). Can the Open Balkans project succeed without half of the region? *Emerging Europe* <https://emerging-europe.com/news/can-the-open-balkans-project-succeed-without-half-of-the-region/> Accessed on 13.11.2021

*the first... We do not have to deal with two processes here. The only difference is that the Berlin Process is led by our friends and partners who have thousands and one problems of their own and actually don't wake up with the question of how the Berlin Process is proceeding... But we are here, and when we are waking up in the morning, we are wondering how our economy is doing today, how our trade is doing today. These are the questions we pose ourselves".*⁵³

Simplifying grossly, he maintains that Open Balkan it's not in contrary with the Berlin Process but indeed an instrument to somehow accelerate the Berlin process since EU lacks consensus when it comes to EU enlargement, with pessimistic tones in a roundabout way he says that 'we have to take care of our own fate'.

Along similar lines seen from a the purely economic perspective, through the so called '*economy first approach*' the new form of regional cooperation could have a positive income on Serbia since Serbia is the largest producer in the region, to this end for the states opposing Open Balkan, they claim that Serbia has expansionist vision and through economic dominance wants to have political influence as well.

In this regard Toby Vogel⁵⁴, believes that for the likes of Rama and Vučić, the Open Balkan initiative is indeed a publicity stunt aimed to show off their personal power and contrast it with the EU's impotence in the region. He further claims that: "*Vučić's ambition is bigger. He sees himself as the regional leader and of course being leader of all Serbs is helpful in all that, but as soon as it clashes with his regional ambition, I think he's going to go for the regional role*"

We can grasp his new role even in the vaccine story, where it's been very clear that the message was, 'we can do stuff where the EU has failed,' taking into account the mere fact that Serbia is trying to send some messages through '*vaccine diplomacy*'.

It is worth mentioning that Balkan countries eager to demonstrate their Euro-Atlantic orientation initially declared they would not accept Chinese or Russian vaccines (neither of which have been approved by the European Union's medicines regulator), signaling they would wait for access to Western vaccines. Serbia, despite its stated desire to join the European Union, took the opposite approach, becoming the first European country to approve the use of China's Sinopharm vaccine. To this regard, China's and Russia's vaccine exports to Serbia and elsewhere came with soft-power messages, with politicians praising mutual friendship and criticizing the EU for not coming to the rescue when it was needed the most.

The hypocrisy of all these stories, saying something and doing something else, along this trajectory Serbia has played an ambidextrous game in the region, by working closer with China and Russia, and at the same time enjoying generous EU assistance, Serbia has proactively positioned itself to reap benefits from geopolitical competition.

⁵³ See European Western Balkans- Srbija (28. 09. 2021), Differing interpretations of Open Balkan brought up again during von der Leyen's visit to Albania <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/09/28/differing-interpretations-of-open-balkan-brought-up-again-during-von-der-levens-visit-to-albania/> Accessed on 11.11.2021

⁵⁴Toby Vogel is an analyst at the Democratization Policy Council, a Berlin-based think-tank. See: [Democratization Policy Council – An initiative for accountable democratization policy worldwide](#)

Conclusions

In light of the current situation, it should not go unnoticed of what the future may hold for the Western Balkans in relation to EU, hence the focus lies in the political architecture of this part of Europe, needless to say, nowadays circumstances makes us believe that this region will be ‘in limbo’ for a long time, unless they liberate themselves from fantasies of the past, it seems that in this region there are still some ‘*unfinished businesses*’ between Western Balkan states, they are not willing to reach compromises and build good neighborly relations with each other, the cases such as (Kosovo-Serbia dispute), (North Macedonia-Bulgaria*), (Serbia-Bosnia and Herzegovina), but it is beyond the scope of the paper to examine case-by-case disputes between states of the Western Balkans because there are other questions to bear in mind especially concerning this debate.

In recent years the issue of Western Balkans and more particularly the plurality of claims in regard to EU accession has been the dominant theme among the scholars of international relations. In this paper I have developed a critical perspective when it comes to European Union enlargement policy toward Western Balkans, at the beginning of my argument I’ve argued that Berlin Process it is the only route and the arterial line which Western Balkan countries aspiring EU should follow, even though the reality on the ground seems to be very pessimistic. Reading this paper, one cannot help but ask the *naïve* question: “*Why does the EU eschew its role in regard to the Western Balkans?*”

Skeptics are quick to point out that some EU member states are driven by their interests but taking this argument a step further, realists are aware of the fact that recently, the geopolitical approach to the enlargement is at a crossroad, seen in a broader context in which power politics prevails, taking into account the fact that Russia maintains strong relations with Serbia and Republika Srpska and uses its influence often to obstruct the EU’s objectives. China looks at the Western Balkans as an important element of its Belt and Road initiative and has massively increased its investments and presence. Turkey and a number of Arab countries are engaged in Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania. And the US, which used to coordinate its diplomatic activities closely with the EU, does so much less under the current administration. In all of this discussion, admittedly the similarities and continuities of both processes operate at a high level of abstraction, that’s why they require a careful translation of the general atmosphere in domestic level and global implications that they might have, for this reason one may find it hard to come with any easy general conclusion. Even the question raised by the title it’s a dilemma, but it is in nature of dilemmas that they have no easy solutions, in essence, then it is not an exaggeration to say that I have already indicated that both Berlin Process and Open Balkan are underspecified and sometimes ambiguous, so their use in different contexts might simply be a reflection of different understanding of what they mean. On the flip side of this criticism, I put the emphasis on economic dominance; these bilateral issues won’t be resolved through a purely economic approach. Amidst all these upheavals time, is the best teacher, it will show whether the Western Balkans are able to overcome contradictions and become align with Euro-Atlantic values and understand the mere fact

that you cannot avoid reality, often when ‘*political issues get too tough, they play with ‘economy first approach’.*

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