

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL ORDER

# THE BERLIN PROCESS IN THE NEW EUROPEAN SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

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## 1

## INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the enlargement process's overall perspective was not promising for the Western Balkans. The EU's declining commitment to the region has been clear for years. The EU itself has been more oriented towards addressing its internal crises. Since the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003, only Croatia has managed to become part of the EU, which since January 2023 has also joined the Eurozone and Schengen. The overthrow of the European Constitution project by the French and Dutch in 2004, the financial crisis of 2008, and the refugee crisis of 2015 dominated the political narrative in many EU Member States.

In 2014, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, declared that there would be no further enlargement of the EU during his five-year mandate.<sup>1</sup> This statement was the clearest indication of the fact of lost enthusiasm and political support for the enlargement process. As if internal challenges were not enough, the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia that same year shook the security architecture of Europe.

Meanwhile, the path of the Western Balkans was accompanied by the challenges of the consolidation of democracy, the development gap, the functioning of institutions, and the extreme polarization of political life. Furthermore, various bilateral disputes related to unfinished statehood projects, identity, borders, minority issues, and reconciliation processes pose a significant risk to regional instability, often exploited by foreign actors. Therefore, the EU embracing an active approach in the region would cement its role as an effective actor in overcoming disputes and addressing them as part of a wider European plan. But at the same time, it would guarantee an EU membership process for the countries of the region based on merit rather than a process overshadowed by the disputes mentioned above.

This paper analyses the achievements and challenges of the Berlin Process, which was presented as a comprehensive platform of regional cooperation aimed at progress for the countries of the region towards the EU. The text also engages with the role that this process has played in the

growth of regional cooperation and the main challenges facing the relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans. In light of new security conditions on the continent as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the paper is accompanied by recommendations aimed at consolidating the European project through a better connection between the Berlin Process and the Western Balkans' European integration process.

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<sup>1</sup>For more information, see Jean-Claude Juncker's speech at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_14\\_567](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_14_567)

## 2

## PROGRESS OF THE BERLIN PROCESS

Due to the above-mentioned geopolitical situation, Germany, as the main political and economic power in the EU, has committed itself to including the Western Balkans in a dynamic, future-oriented process through a platform that has become known as the "Berlin Process".<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, the process was conceived as a complement and not a substitute for the EU membership process, relying on three main dimensions: (i) political, with the aim of resolving bilateral disputes amongst the countries of the Western Balkans in order to strengthen good neighbourly relations and regional stability; (ii) economic, with the aim of developing joint infrastructure projects and sustainable economic growth in the region; (iii) social, with emphasis on civil society relations and human interaction.<sup>3</sup>

Over the years, the Berlin Process has undergone changes that reflect German and EU strategic engagement goals in the region but also the need to deepen regional cooperation by expanding the participants, actors, and cooperation.<sup>4</sup> Almost nine years since its conception, the Berlin Process has been accompanied by optimism and disappointment, achievements and challenges.<sup>5</sup> For a clearer overview of its progress, it is important to analyse each dimension as well as the impact of this process on daily life.

### 2.1 POLITICAL DIMENSION

As a result of the different engagement formats, the Berlin Process has created a sense of equality in representation, rights, and obligations among the six countries of the Western Balkans. This is evidenced by the regular meetings of the countries' leaders with their relevant state symbols, which constitutes an important political message in itself. The Berlin process aimed at a better and more organic connection between the region's EU integration and regional cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans. The EU's commitment, through financial instruments, aims to implement the development agenda of the region. At the same time, it conveys the clear message that the Berlin Process is not a consolation prize for not advancing in the EU membership process.

The signing of the Joint Declaration for the peaceful resolution of outstanding bilateral issues by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs during the Vienna Summit in 2015 was a first step in this direction, although the results in practice are limited. The same can be said about the practical implications of the Joint Declaration on Missing Persons and War Crimes, signed at the 2018 London Summit, which constitutes the first commitment document among the region's countries on this issue. Despite the commitment of the countries involved in the Berlin Process, the progress in finding missing persons is not impressive.<sup>6</sup>

The Berlin Process has tried to promote the reform process within the framework of good governance. At the Brdo-Brijuni Summit<sup>7</sup> on April 27, 2017, Western Balkan countries committed to take a more proactive approach in 2018 in terms of the rule of law, protection of human rights, and good governance, emphasizing the significance of refraining

<sup>2</sup>More specifically, during the Brdo-Brijuni Process meeting in Dubrovnik in July 2014, Chancellor Merkel announced the Berlin Summit, which was held on August 28 that year in Berlin. According to Hellmut Hoffmann, who served as German Ambassador to Albania during 2013–2016: "In memory of the beginning of the First World War, Germany took the initiative of organizing a series of annual meetings, initially spanning four years, with some of the key countries of the EU and the six countries of the Western Balkans. Shortly after, the new [Albanian] Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dëlmir Bushati, committing to a rapid rapprochement with the EU, introduced the term "Berlin Process". Since many forums were organized in the Balkans at the time, which remained within the framework of routine meetings and diplomatic statements, I was convinced that the Western Balkans Conference would represent an additional value if it would undertake concrete projects". For more, see Hellmut Hoffmann, Enrico Seewald, "Continuity and Discontinuity: Albania and the German States 1912–2021", Onufri Publishing House, 2022.

<sup>3</sup>For more information, see "The Achievements and the Future of the Berlin Process", <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-achievements-and-the-future-of-the-berlin-process-40>.

<sup>4</sup>Today the process includes the six countries of the Western Balkans, nine EU Member States, representatives of civil society, businesses, EU institutions (EC, External Service, the member country holding the presidency of the EU Council), international financial institutions, and regional initiatives (RCC, SEETO, EnC, CEFTA, RYCO, RAI).

<sup>5</sup>For more information, see "The Berlin Process in a Nutshell", Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, 2018: [https://www.giz.de/en/downloads\\_els/The\\_Berlin\\_Process.pdf](https://www.giz.de/en/downloads_els/The_Berlin_Process.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>Over 1,600 people are still considered as missing as a result of the last war in Kosovo. The Declaration, among other things, states that it is given full access to all materials, notes, orders, documents, videos, audio recordings, and all other documents, including those with "confidential" status and are in the possession of institutions in Kosovo and Serbia. Therefore, in order to obtain results with this very sensitive issue, in the wake of Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, the Declaration on Missing Persons was signed on May 2, 2023 as part of the High Level Political Dialogue, bringing new hope because the parties have undertaken to allow access to all documents in their possession, including those marked as "confidential".

<sup>7</sup>The Brdo-Brijuni process, initiated by Slovenia and Croatia as two EU Member States with the participation of candidate and potential candidate countries of the Western Balkans, focuses on EU integration, strengthening political dialogue, increasing trust, and resolving bilateral issues.

from populist and nationalist rhetoric. Within the political dimension, the Joint Declaration Against Corruption (2017) and the Declaration on Roma Integration (2018) were also signed. The above commitments have been translated into strategic documents and action plans by the region's countries.

In order to create a new spirit of cooperation among administrations and to increase leadership capacities, it was agreed to implement a pilot project for young civil servants, offering mobility opportunities, although so far there have been no significant developments in this direction.

In the field of good governance, it must be acknowledged that the Berlin Process has not been able to provide instruments that improve the governance system in accordance with European standards. Throughout these years, according to international institutions, the countries of the region, with the exception of Kosovo, have suffered a "democratic backsliding".<sup>8</sup>

During the pandemic, increased cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans in providing mutual aid outside the framework of the Berlin Process was evident. In the first phase, the EU countries, members of the Berlin Process, were not helpful in providing medicine or medical equipment. The lack of EU action was used by other actors, such as China, Russia, and Turkey, as an opportunity to exercise their influence in the region. Thus, the countries of the Western Balkans turned into a competitive area over the use of medicine and medical equipment needed to cope with the pandemic.

During the second phase of the pandemic, regional cooperation marked a positive boost in terms of facilitating the movement of goods and medicines. The countries of the Western Balkans decided to join the EU initiative for the implementation of "Green Lanes", where health or goods check processes should not take more than 15 minutes.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2 ECONOMIC DIMENSION

There is no specific budget line set aside for the Berlin Process. The projects approved for each country are partly financed by EU instruments and partly by the countries themselves. To give life to the design and implementation of regional priority projects within the Berlin Process, the countries of the Western Balkans created the National Investment Committees, which are also responsible for programming funding sources from foreign partners.

<sup>8</sup>For more information, see the reports of international organizations such as Freedom House Nations in Transit Report, Transparency International, and the World Justice Project, which show a decrease in indicators measuring the level of democracy or the functioning of the rule of law and an increase in the perception of corruption by citizens in the region.

<sup>9</sup>In order to continue the free and efficient movement of goods throughout the EU, on March 23, 2020, the European Commission issued practical advice on the implementation of "green lanes", according to which border crossing points for all vehicles and goods must undergo checks, including health checks, for no more than 15 minutes. On April 29, 2020, the Commission proposed a regulation that set out specific and temporary measures in order to inhibit the spread of COVID-19. This regulation concerned the validity of certain certificates, licenses, and authorizations and the postponement of certain periodic checks and training in certain areas of transport legislation.

The European Commission, through the Western Balkans Investment Framework,<sup>10</sup> co-finances energy and transport projects from the list of projects of interest of the Energy Community and the Trans-European Transport Network.<sup>11</sup> International financial credit institutions, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Investment Bank, and the World Bank, also play an important role in financing these projects.

Participating countries in the Berlin Process have prioritized the Connectivity Agenda, which aims to improve infrastructural connectivity between the Western Balkan countries and the EU, as an opportunity for mutual economic benefits. In the context of interconnection, the Berlin Process has operated with hard measures, which include regional and national infrastructure projects, and soft measures, which include cross-border circulation procedures, reforms in the field of safety in transport systems, maintenance schemes for infrastructure networks, and other strategic measures to facilitate regional integration.

The focus on connectivity arises from the needs of the region, which has a lower average of the extent and access to infrastructure, energy, and interconnection networks compared to EU member countries.<sup>12</sup> In this context, the Berlin Process somewhat changed the routine of enlargement by placing emphasis on regional economic cooperation, where, in addition to the classic vertical structure of the enlargement process, it added horizontal elements with issues such as the common regional market, transport, energy, and the regional economic zone, thus promoting the conditions for sustainable development and relations between different social agents.<sup>13</sup>

Thanks to the Berlin Process, the region was placed on the European map of transport and energy by orienting the financial instruments of the EU and the national budgets of the Western Balkan countries in accordance with these priorities. Likewise, six initiatives were outlined in the European Commission's 2018 Enlargement Strategy: transport, energy interconnection, the digital agenda, economic and social development, rule of law and security, and migration, with the aim of strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Since 2009, WBIF has supported 44 projects worth 3.2 billion Euros invested in the public sector in Albania. The country has benefited from the provision of 62 grants worth 355.6 million Euros in technical assistance and investment co-financing. Support from the EU's IPA instrument, channelled through WBIF, amounts to 337.6 million Euros, covering both technical assistance and investment. Other donors have contributed to this package in the amount of 18 million Euros. For more, see: <https://www.wbif.eu/beneficiaries/albania>.

<sup>11</sup>The Western Balkans Investment Framework co-financed investment grants and technical assistance projects in the energy, environment, private sector development, social issues, transport, and digital infrastructure sectors. In total, this framework instrument has allocated 2.6 billion Euros in grants to its beneficiaries in the Western Balkans. In addition, 7.3 billion Euros have been granted in signed loans for projects with a total value of 25.6 billion Euros; see: <https://www.wbif.eu/technical-assistance-grants#investments>.

<sup>12</sup>Për më shumë shih: "The Berlin Process in a Nutshell", Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH: [https://www.giz.de/en/downloads\\_els/The\\_Berlin\\_Process.pdf](https://www.giz.de/en/downloads_els/The_Berlin_Process.pdf)

<sup>13</sup>For more, see "The Berlin Process in a Nutshell", Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/19730.pdf>

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

Another important dimension of regional cooperation is the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which is a regional strategy that focuses on sustainable economies in line with the European Green Deal. It aligns the region with the EU's ambition to make Europe carbon neutral by 2050,<sup>15</sup> and it also serves as an opportunity for the orientation of the region towards energy transition and investment in infrastructure. In this context, the Declaration on Energy Security and Green Transition in the Western Balkans was adopted at the 2022 Berlin Summit. Germany committed to investing up to 500 million Euros to overcome energy difficulties in the Western Balkans and up to 1 billion Euros to support long-term energy transition in the region. These commitments parallel the "energy package" of 500 million Euros that the EU Commission intends to offer the region as emergency aid.

Within the economic dimension, the most ambitious project so far is the establishment of the Common Regional Market (CRM) at the Sofia Summit in 2020. The purpose of the CRM is to ensure the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people ("the four freedoms"), including aspects related to digital investment, innovation, and industrial policies. CRM is considered a preparatory step towards the future integration of the region into the EU's internal market. Compliance with the "four freedoms" is a prerequisite for admission to the EU's internal market and part of the *acquis communautaire*.

The Regional Economic Area (REA), which was initiated at the 2017 Trieste Summit, laid the groundwork for the CRM. The REA envisioned the implementation of the "four freedoms" focused on the following areas: digital integration, mobility, trade, and investment. The agreements signed at the Berlin Summit in 2022 on the freedom of movement and mutual recognition of higher education degrees and professional qualifications in the fields of medicine and architecture are also based on this initiative and are now part of the CRM.<sup>16</sup>

If we were to list some of the achievements of the Berlin Process in the field of cooperation and economic development during these years, we would note the design and implementation of 37 projects in the transportation sector, 8 projects in the energy sector, 2 programs in the renewable energy sector, investment in infrastructure of the green (digital) zone, and soft measures in the energy and transport sectors. Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum was also established. The process has provided support to SMEs from the Western Balkans Fund for Enterprise Development and Innovation, and work on the operation of the Common Regional Market has started.

In addition, at the Tirana Summit held between the EU and Western Balkan countries on December 6, 2022, telephone operators signed an agreement on the reduction of roaming charges, which will start implementation on October 1, 2023. The reduction of roaming costs between the six countries of the Western Balkans and the EU Member States will enable better conditions and incentives for businesses but it is also considered a stimulus for tourism.

## 2.3 SOCIAL DIMENSION

In the framework of the social dimension of cooperation and strengthening human ties, civil society is considered an important actor for pushing political accountability and promoting reforms related to EU membership.<sup>17</sup> In this context, one of the achievements of the Berlin Process is the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), with headquarters in Tirana. The RYCO was established according to the post-WWII Franco-German model at the 2016 Paris Summit.<sup>18</sup> RYCO represents great potential for shaping the young generation in the region by making them protagonists of change.<sup>19</sup>

Another complementary instrument in the field of youth cooperation is the Western Balkans Fund, headquartered in Tirana and based on the model of the V4 countries (Visegrad Group). It was established after the signing of an agreement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Western Balkan countries in November of 2015.<sup>20</sup> The fund aims to increase cooperation, strengthen social cohesion, and accelerate the progress of the countries of the region towards the EU by engaging representatives of civil society, higher education and research institutions, the business community, and local authorities.

Within the Berlin Process, the Civil Society Forum was also established as a platform that brings together think tanks and civil society organizations, along with the Youth Forum and the Business Forum. These forums play a crucial role in regional political processes by offering decision-makers the latest expertise and on-the-ground insights.

It is worth highlighting the annual organization of the Joint Science Conference, which brings together academics and scientists from the region and EU countries to discuss current challenges for and possible improvements in the scientific systems of the Western Balkans.

<sup>15</sup>This strategy was adopted at the Sofia Summit in 2020, and its Action Plan was adopted at the Brdo Summit in October 2021. The objectives of the Green Agenda focus on clean energy sources, climate protection, transition to a circular economy, cleaning up air, water, and soil pollution, building sustainable agriculture and food systems, and protecting biodiversity and ecosystems.

<sup>16</sup>1. Agreement on free movement in the Western Balkans with identity cards; 2. Agreement on the recognition of higher education diplomas in the Western Balkans; 3. Agreement on the recognition of professional qualifications of doctors, dentists, and architects.

<sup>17</sup>See Velina Lilyanova, "The Western Balkans' Berlin Process: A new impulse for regional cooperation", European Parliamentary Research Service, 2016: [https://www.euro-parl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586602/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)586602\\_EN.pdf](https://www.euro-parl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586602/EPRS_BRI(2016)586602_EN.pdf)

<sup>18</sup>RYCO focuses on youth projects in five priority areas: (i) promoting regional cooperation, (ii) increasing mobility, (iii) promoting reconciliation, (iv) building peace and stability, and (v) ensuring a prosperous future for youth in their respective countries. Since the establishment of RYCO, about 25 thousand young people have become part of the youth exchange and mobility programs supported by a budget of 3 million Euros just for the purpose of these programs.

<sup>19</sup>See "Monitoring the Berlin Process: From Paris to Trieste", Working Paper, Cooperation and Development Institute / ShtetiWeb, 2017: <https://www.connectwith.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Monitoring-the-Berlin-Process-From-Paris-to-Trieste.pdf>

<sup>20</sup>Since its establishment, the Western Balkans Fund has supported over 150 projects in the region, from which around 7,000 interested parties have benefited: <https://westernbalkansfund.org/>

## 3

## THE BERLIN PROCESS AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

The EU has promoted regional cooperation over the years as an important element of its enlargement policy. Since the beginning of the Stabilization-Association Process in 1999, regional cooperation has become a central part of the conditionality regulation, alongside the Copenhagen criteria. The Berlin Process re-dimensioned this approach, placing regional cooperation at the centre of the European integration process and including most sectoral policy areas, with a special emphasis on economic issues.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the political aspect, concrete measures for cooperation in the fields of infrastructure, trade, investment, mobility, and digitalization were included. Based on the experience of Germany and France after World War II, the focus was mainly on economic integration, with the hope that this common goal would consolidate and increase regional cooperation. In this way, intensifying regional cooperation and increasing countries' prosperity became the main objectives of this process.

Looking back over nine years, the results in practice remain limited. The new format of regional cooperation had some positive effects, leading to the multiplication of meetings at all levels, which helps to build trust and interpersonal relations. Although the Berlin Process provided a political platform for EU and Western Balkan leaders to discuss bilateral issues and promote new initiatives, especially in the area of regional economic cooperation, unresolved conflicts and bilateral disputes still remain problematic, often becoming a source of instability, thus hindering the fulfilment of the objectives of this initiative and the journey of the countries of the region towards the EU.

The Berlin Process has not managed to overcome the bilateral disputes that hinder authentic regional cooperation. Although a quarter of a century has passed since the Dayton Agreement and 20 years since the end of the war in Kosovo, the unresolved conflict between Serbia and Kosovo and the good functioning of Bosnia-Herzegovina remain unresolved regional security concerns.

In relation to economic cooperation, the Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (2017–2019) and the Common Regional Market (2020–2024) were approved within the Berlin Process. Likewise, CEFTA's Additional Protocol 5 was approved for the recognition of phytosanitary and agricultural controls and the mutual recognition of Authorized Economic Operators and CEFTA's Protocol 6, which aims to facilitate the border transition procedures for goods and services, is in the process of ratification. However, the results of regional economic integration among the countries of the Western Balkans remain modest but still considerable. Because of CEFTA, exports of final goods in general and to a lesser extent exports of intermediate goods have increased<sup>22</sup>. The different effects of export growth suggest that CEFTA participating states are positioned differently within CEFTA and in global value chains. The figures show a greater integration of Serbia into global value chains<sup>23</sup>.

It must be admitted that the overall economy of the Western Balkans, despite close ties with the EU, is fragmented. The level of intra-regional trade is still low, especially due to the lack of tradable goods and services. However, intra-regional trade comes in second after the level of trade exchange with the EU, representing a fifth of all exports and a tenth of imports.<sup>24</sup> The main exporter in intra-regional trade is Serbia, whereas the main importers are Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>25</sup>

During the years of CEFTA's operation, Serbian exports have shifted from CEFTA towards the EU: in 2006, Serbia exported 25.6% of its goods to CEFTA, but by 2020, this figure was only 14.1%. Meanwhile, the corresponding figures for Serbian exports to the EU were 62% and 68%, respectively. This indicates a greater integration of Serbia into global value chains. Furthermore, it is worth noting that CEFTA has increased exports of final goods but less so for intermediate

<sup>21</sup>For more information, see: Florent Marciacq "The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty", 2017: <http://oefz.at/2017/12/07/the-eu-and-the-western-balkans-after-the-berlin-process-reflecting-on-the-eu-enlargement-in-times-of-uncertainty-policy-study-marciacq-florent-20-17/> dhe Matteo Bonomi "Off Track. The EU's Re-engagement With the Western Balkans", 2019: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/track-eus-re-engagement-western-balkans>

<sup>22</sup>For a more detailed analysis, see Nina Vujanović, "CEFTA: Trade and Growth Patterns Fifteen Years since Establishment", 2023: <https://cefta.int/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/cefta-trade-and-growth-patterns-fifteen-years-since-establishment-dlp-6508.pdf>

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Plamen Kaloyanchev, Ivan Kusen, & Alexandros Mouzakis, "Untapped Potential: Intra-Regional Trade in the Western Balkans" European Economy Discussion Papers, 2018: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/dp080\\_western\\_balkans.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/dp080_western_balkans.pdf)

<sup>25</sup>For additional data, see Eurostat Western Balkans-EU International Trade in Goods Statistics.



goods.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, the Berlin Process has paid attention to infrastructure investment. In particular, through the EU-supported Connectivity Agenda, the process succeeded in placing the Western Balkans on Europe's transport and energy map.<sup>27</sup> Supporting the Connectivity Agenda as a driver of economic growth aims to transform the Western Balkans into a more unified region and, consequently, more attractive for investment and trade.

In addition, the Berlin Process has created positive synergies between young people, civil society, and chambers of commerce, based on the experiences of different EU countries.

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<sup>26</sup>Oliver Reiter & Robert Stehrer, "Value chain integration of the Western Balkan countries and policy options for the post-Covid-19 period", 2021, wiiw Policy Note/Policy Report 48, Vienna

<sup>27</sup>For more information, see: <http://oefz.at/2017/12/07/the-eu-and-the-western-balkans-after-the-berlin-process-reflecting-on-the-eu-enlargement-in-times-of-uncertainty-policy-study-marciacq-florent-2017/>

## 4

## OPEN BALKAN – FACILITATOR OR ALTERNATIVE TO THE BERLIN PROCESS?

During a meeting in October 2019 in Novi Sad between the President of Serbia and the Prime Ministers of Albania and North Macedonia, the idea to establish the Open Balkan initiative was first presented in the format of a mini-Schengen. The main goal of the initiative was to deepen regional cooperation by promoting the free movement of goods, people, services, and capital (the four "freedoms" of the EU). The initiative came to life at a time when Albania and North Macedonia were blocked from starting EU membership talks by France, which insisted on reviewing the EU's enlargement and reform methodology.

It is worth emphasizing that the ownership of this regional initiative comes from three countries in the region, even though there has been no shortage of such initiatives in the past: some in tripartite or quadrilateral formats, and others, like the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECF), in a broader and more inclusive format.

Although all countries of the region were invited to this initiative, unlike other regional cooperation platforms, there were hesitant reactions from Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro.<sup>28</sup> The main concerns lay in the utility of the initiative and its difficulty in ensuring inclusiveness by guaranteeing the equality of participating actors as one of the main principles for fruitful regional cooperation.

Kosovo appears to be the most sceptical about this initiative. All political leaders in Kosovo, regardless of ideology, oppose participation in this initiative. These contradictions are mainly related to Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's statehood, the risk that this initiative will duplicate the Berlin Process and the dialogue process mediated by the EU, as well as the economic benefits of Serbia vis-à-vis Kosovo.<sup>29</sup> Although in the document for the normalization of economic relations with Serbia mediated by the USA, otherwise known as the "Washington Agreement", Kosovo pledged to become part of this initiative, this never became a reality.<sup>30</sup>

The pandemic, as well as the election processes that took place in North Macedonia and Serbia, prevented the normal development of the initiative during 2020. In July 2021, at a meeting held in Skopje within the framework of the Regional Economic Forum, it was decided that the mini-Schengen was to be called Open Balkan. A joint statement by the President of Serbia, the Prime Minister of Albania, and the Prime Minister of North Macedonia emphasized the commitment of the participating countries to the implementation of the "four freedoms". In view of this commitment, three Memorandums of Understanding and Cooperation were signed.<sup>31</sup>

Despite participation in several meetings of officials from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro, the position of these two countries basically did not change, underlining the lack of political and economic benefits from participating in this initiative.<sup>32</sup> According to the position of the Ministry for Europe of Montenegro, Open Balkan lacks a roadmap, strategy, or institutional framework that would guarantee an equal relationship and position among the participating countries.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Montenegro has opposed participation in this initiative by arguing that the main goal is EU membership and not an alternative to it.

The main issues that arise regarding this initiative are related to the benefits and innovations it brings compared to existing regional cooperation initiatives. According to the initiators, Open Balkan does not aim to replace the Berlin Process or the EU integration process. Rather, it aims to complement it by creating cooperation and synergies to better prepare participating countries for EU membership.<sup>34</sup> However, it is difficult to justify the need for a parallel initiative that aims to achieve the same objectives as those of the Berlin Process without having the same mechanisms or instruments of this process.

<sup>28</sup>For more pro arguments, see: <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2022-open-balkan-the-future-belongs-to-the-peoples-of-the-balkans/5060/> For cons, see: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/16/open-balkans-shows-no-sign-of-delivering-promised-freedoms/>

<sup>29</sup>For more information, see <https://www.riinvestinstitute.org/Al/riinvest-blog/308/mini-quot-mini-schengen-quot-bleron-menzelxhiu/>

<sup>30</sup>See the document signed on September 4, 2020, by Prime Minister of Kosovo Avdullah Hoti.

<sup>31</sup>1. Agreement on the mobilization of the three countries in terms of dealing with natural disasters; 2. Memorandum of understanding to facilitate the import and export of goods; 3. Agreement for free circulation in the labour market.

<sup>32</sup>For more, see: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/29/balkan-mini-schengen-leaders-eye-open-borders-by-2023/>

<sup>33</sup>An analysis of the Montenegro Minister for European Issues; see, for more information: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/montenegro-questions-transparency-strategy-of-open-balkan-initiative/>

<sup>34</sup>For more information, see: <https://ata.gov.al/2022/10/12/rama-procesi-i-berli-nit-dhe-ballkani-i-hapur-nuk-perjashtojne-njeri-tjetrin/>

Unlike the agreements reached within the Berlin Process, such as the Action Plan for the Regional Economic Area and the Action Plan for the Regional Common Market, there is no Open Balkan document defining its objectives and scope. It is based on joint declarations adopted in meetings or summits within the framework of this initiative. After the Declaration of Novi Sad in October 2019, which proposed the implementation of this initiative,<sup>35</sup> two more declarations were signed in Ohrid in November 2019 and in Tirana in December 2019. The first declaration aimed at accelerating the implementation of the Regional Economic Area by identifying a list of priority measures related to the four freedoms,<sup>36</sup> whereas the conclusions of the Tirana meeting underline the significance of this initiative in view of preparing the region for EU membership.<sup>37</sup>

Joint declarations, summits, memoranda, and agreement conclusions have failed to outline how this vision will be implemented in the near future. Also, removing border controls to fulfil a promise undertaken by the initiators of this initiative without installing strong law enforcement and security systems could encourage illegal trade, adding to the existing problems of organized crime and harming the image of these countries.<sup>38</sup>

If we were to compare the objectives of the Open Balkan initiative with the Common Regional Market Action Plan,<sup>39</sup> an overlap is observed. Some of the Open Balkan agreements signed by participating countries have previously been included in the Regional Economic Area Action Plan or have been integrated into the Common Regional Market Action Plan.<sup>40</sup> The implementation of these actions would be more fruitful if it were done by all countries under the umbrella of the Common Regional Market. Even if Open Balkan was initiated to overcome the slow pace of the implementation of existing regional integration initiatives, moving forward should not jeopardize the quality of implementation, nor should it deviate from EU standards.

Moreover, by not including all the countries of the Western Balkans, the potential of intra-regional trade will not be properly exploited. Data on trade in goods suggests that the exports of North Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia are higher with non-participating countries. For example, Kosovo absorbs most of the export value from both North Macedonia (40.78%) and Albania (58.07%), while Bosnia-Herzegovina is Serbia's main export market in the region.<sup>41</sup> Having said that, the main beneficiary of the removal of barriers will be Serbia, the strongest economy

within Open Balkan and which generates half of the region's gross domestic product.

According to the initiators of Open Balkan, during 2022, commercial exchange between the participating countries increased, proving that this increase is a result of Open Balkan.<sup>42</sup> Although exports and imports between Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia have increased, it is noted that this increase is only in terms of the value of the products exchanged and not in quantity. In fact, there is a decrease in the amount imported and exported in the year 2022 compared to 2021.<sup>43</sup>

More specifically, as seen in the figures below, although North Macedonian exports and imports increased in value during 2022, respectively by 35% and 11.7%, there was a decrease of 3.3% and 17% in the quantity of goods exchanged. The same trend is observed with Serbia. Exports increased in value by 26% and decreased in quantity by 26%, while imports increased in value by 13% but decreased in quantity by 18.6%.<sup>44</sup>

This can be seen through the increase in prices that occurred, especially during 2022 as a result of the war in Ukraine. In fact, this trend, where the changes in value and quantity in trade is not proportional, is also observed if we analyse the trade data of Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

<sup>35</sup><https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/10/albania-north-macedonia-serbia-sign-mini-schen-gen-declaration/>

<sup>36</sup>For more, see: <https://cep.org.rs/en/blog/open-balkan-initiative/>

<sup>37</sup>See Tirana Statement: <https://api.pks.rs/storage/assets/final-tirana-declaration.pdf>

<sup>38</sup>For more information, see: <https://cep.org.rs/en/blog/open-balkan-initiative/> and Stefan Ristovski, Simonida Kacarska, "Open Balkan, Berlin Process and EU's Acquis Rapid Analysis within the Assessing and Streamlining Potentials of the Open Balkan Initiative", 2022.

<sup>39</sup>Common Regional Market Action Plan: <https://www.rcc.int/docs/543/common-regio-nal-market-action-plan>

<sup>40</sup>Examples include agreements on phytosanitary measures and mutual recognition of the status of authorized economic operators (AEOS).

<sup>41</sup>For more information, see the following publication of the European Policy Institute Skopje: <https://epi.org.mk/post/21533?lang=en>

<sup>42</sup>Statement at the press conference held after the meeting in Verona, Italy, at Vinitly Fair, by the President of Serbia and the Prime Ministers of Albania and North Macedonia.

<sup>43</sup>Based on data of the Institute of Statistics of the Republic of Albania (INSTAT): [http://databaza.instat.gov.al/pxweb/sq/DST/START\\_\\_FT\\_\\_FTY/NewFTY004/](http://databaza.instat.gov.al/pxweb/sq/DST/START__FT__FTY/NewFTY004/)

<sup>44</sup>INSTAT Albania: [http://databaza.instat.gov.al/pxweb/sq/DST/START\\_\\_FT\\_\\_FTY/Ne-wFTY004/](http://databaza.instat.gov.al/pxweb/sq/DST/START__FT__FTY/Ne-wFTY004/)

Figure 1: **Import/export weight in kg**

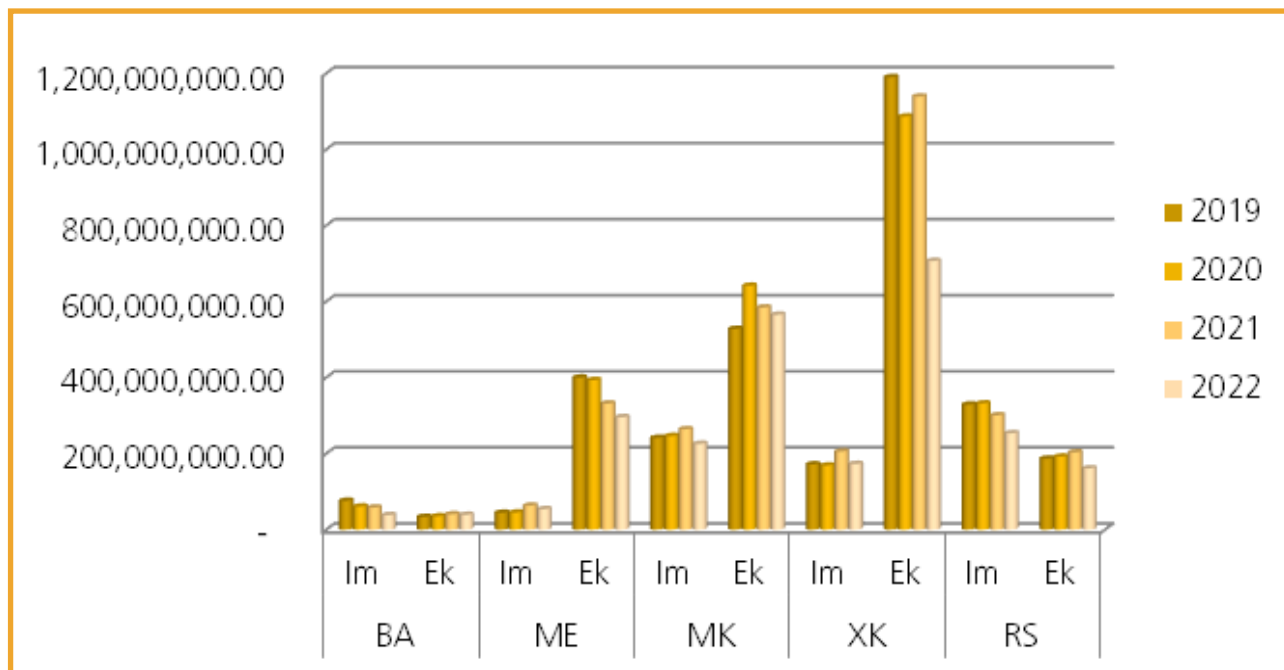
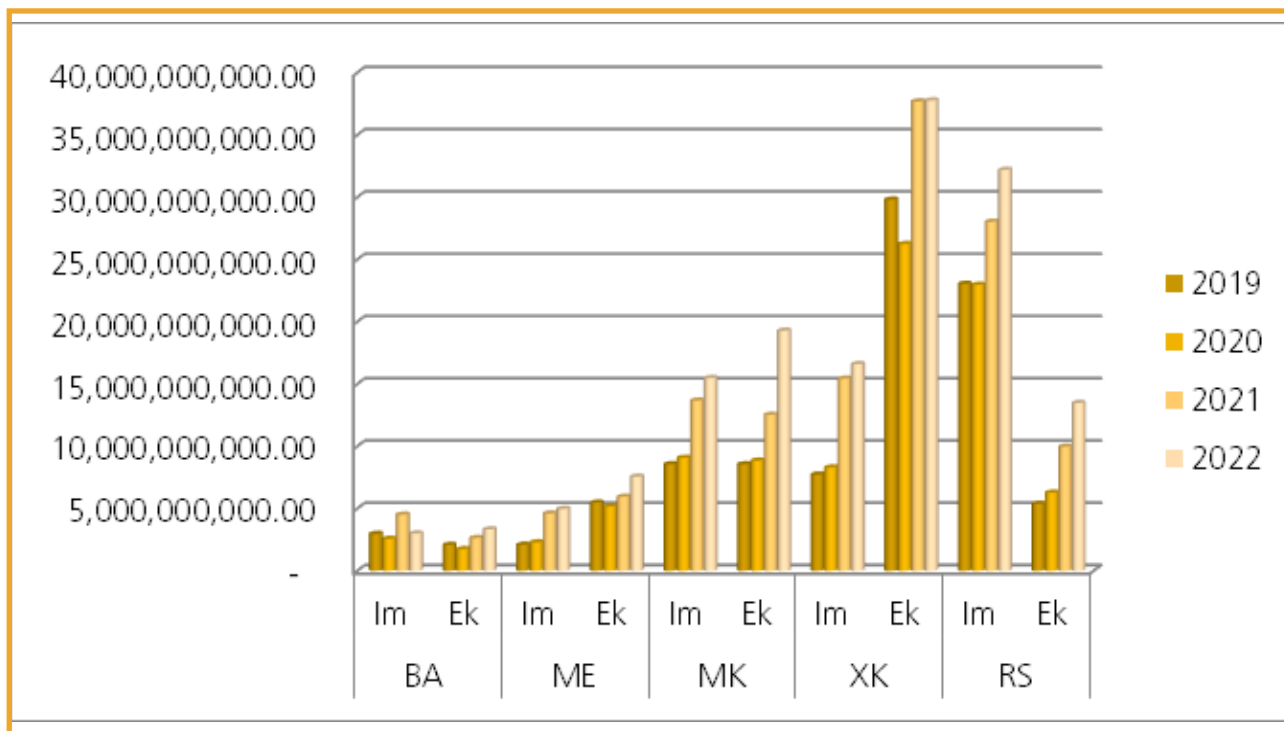


Figure 2: **Import/export value in ALL**



Aiming to provide wider support on the international level, the initiators of the Open Balkan initiative also invited countries such as Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Hungary to join. At the last meeting held in Belgrade in September 2022, only Turkey and Hungary had responded to the call of the initiators.

The EU seeks to focus efforts on increasing regional cooperation in initiatives that include the six countries of the region and which it supports financially. Meanwhile, the US supports the Open Balkan initiative as long as cooperation remains only on the economic level and not on the political level and is based on EU rules with the aim of making progress towards the EU.<sup>45</sup>

Since the last meeting in Belgrade and participation in several fairs promoting wines from the region, as well as the renewal of the Berlin Process by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, it seems as if Open Balkan has been relativized. It has the potential to create a positive economic agenda based on the outcomes of the Berlin Process, aiming to turn the countries of the region into attractive tourist and cultural destinations as well as to promote their image and products.

The organization of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in December 2022 in Tirana, as well as the decision to hold the next Berlin Process Summit in Albania in the fall of 2023, conveys a clear message by the EU of increased attention and support for the Berlin Process. Therefore, it is important that progress in this process is managed not through technical means but through the joint political commitment of the countries of the region and the EU.

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<sup>45</sup>Statement by the US Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, Gabriel Escobar. For more information, see : <https://www.zeriamerikes.com/a/6607996.html>

## 5

## CHALLENGES THAT REQUIRE SOLUTIONS

Although 20 years have passed since the Thessaloniki Summit, which opened the prospect of Western Balkan countries joining the EU, membership remains an unfulfilled promise. Initiatives, formats, and institutional innovations in support of this process have been numerous, starting from the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe to the continuous updating of the enlargement process methodology and from the Stabilization and Association Agreements to the Berlin Process and annual summits of the EU and Western Balkan leaders. And yet, the path of these countries towards the EU continues to be bumpy and without a clear timeline. Five interrelated challenges need to be addressed in terms of democratic stability, well-being, and EU membership:

*First, the level of democracy and the rule of law.* Although the implementation of reforms within the framework of EU integration should improve the level of democracy and help strengthen the rule of law, the situation in the Western Balkans does not fully reflect this. Conversely, based on the evaluation of international organizations monitoring democratic developments, a "democratic backslide" has been observed in recent years, with the exception of Kosovo.<sup>46</sup> The success of reforms in the field of the rule of law is related to economic success and individual income. While waiting outside the EU's doors, Western Balkan countries' economic growth has slowed. In this way, the belief that democratic systems will automatically bring about transformation has been undermined. Thus, progress towards the EU is not directly proportional to the strengthening of the rule of law. However, at this point in time, the EU faces internal challenges. Although values are cornerstones of the EU good functioning, the mechanisms and way in which these values are acquired within the EU have often been questioned.

*Second, the development gap between the region and the EU average.* The Western Balkans are underdeveloped not only compared to the average of the EU countries but also compared to the poorest countries of the bloc. The GDP of all Western Balkan countries is roughly equal to that of Slovakia, or less than 1% of that of the EU.<sup>47</sup> Despite the economic benefits that various regional initiatives have

brought and the potential that the Common Regional Market holds, economic development in the region remains limited, as it depends more on trade and foreign direct investment originating from the EU than on intra-regional trade.

The situation would be different if the EU treated the Western Balkans with the same solidarity as it treats the economic laggards within it, most of them neighbouring the Western Balkans. The best way to improve cooperation in the region is to implement policies aimed at increasing individual income. For example, transfers from the EU budget to members in Central and Eastern Europe are considered to have been the main driver of individual income growth.<sup>48</sup> However, in order to benefit from EU cohesion and solidarity policy, the countries of the Western Balkans must guarantee the implementation of European norms in the field of public procurement and competition, as well as improve the parameters and measuring indicators of the fight against corruption and organized crime.

*Third, the demographic threat.* While the essence of the European integration process is to build a better life for those in the countries aiming to join the EU, the region is facing a mass exodus of citizens to the EU for a better and more dignified life. In order to encourage citizens not to leave the region, agreements on the mutual recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications concluded within the Berlin Process are not enough, despite their undeniable value in a long-term plan for possible EU membership. For professionals from the region, it is more beneficial to choose northern Europe over a Western Balkan country that offers more or less the same living standard. Western Balkan countries should embrace welfare policies related to investment and opportunities in education, health, and housing, creating a more suitable terrain for a more dignified life. On the other hand, treating the Western Balkans as part of the EU is an effective way to mitigate the development gap and somewhat curb the phenomenon of depopulation.

*Fourth, the limitations of regional cooperation.* Although regional cooperation is an important part of the European

<sup>46</sup>For more information, see footnote 8 in page 4.

<sup>47</sup>See Bertelsmann Foundation and WIIW, "Pushing on a String? An evaluation of regional economic cooperation in the Western Balkans", 2020: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/pushing-on-a-string-en>

<sup>48</sup>Bertelsmann Foundation and WIIW, "The long way round: Lessons from EU-CEE for improving integration and development in the Western Balkans", 2022: <https://wiiw.ac.at/the-long-way-round-lessons-from-eu-cee-for-improving-integration-and-development-in-the-western-balkans-p-6194.html>

integration process, its potential is limited. Bilateral disputes, not only within the Western Balkans but also between individual countries and EU countries, have driven the slowdown of cooperation, the return of cyclical tensions, and the stagnation of the European integration process, especially given that neither the EU nor the Berlin Process have a concrete mechanism for overcoming them. Moreover, as the experience of Central and Eastern European countries has shown, regional cooperation increased after these countries became members of the EU.<sup>49</sup>

*Fifth, the lack of EU vision towards the Western Balkans.* Since the great expansion of the EU to include countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the enlargement process has ceased to be a magnet for transformation and development for the Western Balkans, and it has not succeeded in alleviating bilateral disputes or unfinished statehood projects, which hinder the release of energies for deeper regional cooperation, prosperity, and economic growth. And yet, the Berlin Process remains the only regional cooperation platform with the participation of all the countries of the region and key EU countries. In order to obtain the desired goals, this process must be connected with the development agenda and with a concrete vision for EU membership for the countries of the region within a defined time frame.

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<sup>49</sup>More specifically, trade in goods and services among these countries increased by approximately 50% after their accession to the EU; for more information, see Bertelsmann Foundation and WIIW, “The long way round: Lessons from EU-CEE for improving integration and development in the Western Balkans”: <https://wiiw.ac.at/the-long-way-round-lessons-from-eu-cee-for-improving-integration-and-development-in-the-western-balkans-p-6194>.

## 6

## ZEITENWENDE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

In 2005, shortly before being elected Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel declared in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper that "with the current enlargement policy, the EU has reached the limit of its ability to integrate new members", asking for a consolidation phase before the EU could think about new members.

Under the leadership of Angela Merkel, Germany was more identified with the status quo in the Western Balkans than with a clear vision for these countries' membership in the EU. Germany's role has been decisive in repelling dangerous ideas about changing borders. The weight and presence of Germany in the region are incomparable to those of other European countries. However, the impact of the results of its initiatives on the ground remains limited.

The clear German position in relation to the epilogue of the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue has failed significantly impact the citizens of the two countries. The Franco-German plan for the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, which turned into a European plan after receiving support from EU Member States on February 9, 2023<sup>50</sup>, has still not changed the Kosovo-Serbia relationship from one of unfinished conflict.

The joint German-British initiative of 2015 for Bosnia-Herzegovina did not lead to EU membership possibilities nor did it eliminate dangerous ideas on the country's dissolution. Due to regressive developments, a few years later, Germany was forced to bring up sanctions against Milorad Dodik, the separatist leader of the Bosnian Serbs.

When considering the Berlin Plus initiative put forth by previous German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, which sought to integrate additional aspects of the region's economic development, Chancellor Scholz's revival of the Berlin Process is seen with cautious optimism. An initiative that failed to secure adequate financial support.

However, in a speech by Chancellor Scholz on February 27, 2022, at the special session of the German Bundestag after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, noted a *Zeitenwende* (turning point) due to the commitments undertaken and the

vision revealed, has awakened hopes for the consolidation of the European project. The Chancellor announced that Germany will meet and exceed NATO's spending target of 2% of GDP and will establish a special fund of 100 billion Euros to ensure significant defense spending in the coming years. He also stressed that Germany will defend every corner of the Alliance's territory.<sup>51</sup>

Due to historical responsibility and a bitter past, German governments have traditionally been careful to avoid increasing military spending. Now, using the same argument, the increase in military spending is justified. This change also happened thanks to the support of international partners, who expect Germany to take a more central role. Apparently, it took a war in Europe for to happen.

Germany has repeatedly underlined that the war in Ukraine should serve as a warning for the Western Balkans. The objectives of the German government's program related to the beginning of the EU accession talks for Albania and North Macedonia, the visa liberalization process for Kosovo, and the granting of EU candidate country status for Bosnia-Herzegovina, were also fulfilled as a result of the European security situation created by the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Germany's new National Security Strategy emphasizes the necessity of accelerating the EU membership process for the Western Balkans after reforming the way the former's institutions operate.<sup>52</sup> The EU is a union of countries where the difficulty of joint decision-making cannot be ignored at present. An increased number of members makes it harder to take decisions. The EU operates on the principle of solidarity. Some members pay more than others, and the more members there are, especially if they are poor, the less money there will be for other poor members within the EU. Thus, the methods of decision-making, the budget, and representation will be essential elements for the enlargement process.

Historically, the EU has been cautious about enlargement. The largest enlargement of the EU came after the end of the Cold War, with the end of the war in Kosovo. What we see

<sup>50</sup>For more information, see the conclusions of the European Council: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-1-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>51</sup>These commitments were embodied in Germany's National Security Strategy. For more information, see: <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/en.html>

<sup>52</sup>See: <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/en.html>



today with the Russian invasion of Ukraine is an opportunity for European leaders to think about how to make war in Europe impossible and how to create a stronger Europe. This is a moment where it can be argued that an EU with more members is more difficult both in the manner of taking action and in the financial sense, but the advantages are greater. It would create a large area with a single market, without barriers between countries and citizens, and a stronger Europe that addresses the consequences of the end of the wars in former Yugoslavia and aggression in the east of the continent. With the war in Ukraine and the awareness that Europe is not complete, this should also be seen as an opportunity to implement the vision of EU membership for the countries of the Western Balkans.

The moment Europe finds itself in is a window of opportunity to bring a new push towards EU enlargement, for geostrategic reasons as well as a signal of strength to show that the EU is able and willing to renew itself, to grow, and to promote its values against competing powers. While the EU is not a military power, it can deepen its influence as an economic and normative power. In this context, the Western Balkans should take priority, and the EU should demonstrate true commitment.

For some of the countries in the Western Balkans, it is also the moment of truth regarding Russia. The space for neutrality, ambiguity, or non-alignment of positions and decisions in foreign policy and security issues has shrunk, turning this into a strategic choice. On the other hand, breaking away from Russian influence will have to go hand in hand with essential EU support for the accession process of the Western Balkan countries. Alternatives to full membership and the endless prolongation of this process are risks to be avoided. Half-steps forward as preliminary stages towards full membership should not turn into a permanent state for the Western Balkans.

Germany must be at the forefront of this challenge, not only in preventing crises or in financial contributions, but by creating influence and real political change in the Western Balkans once and for all. This requires unity among Member States and a clear list of priorities; anyone who thought that they could pay less attention to democratic consolidation and the reform process than to stability and security should reconsider this thesis against the background of the war in Europe.

In order to fully fulfil its role as a leader in Europe, by consolidating the project of European integration and strengthening the transatlantic alliance, Germany will have to end the status quo in the Western Balkans, focusing on the real challenges the countries of the region face, such as unfinished statehood projects, the consolidation of democracy, and the model of economic and social development based on the rules through which Europe has flourished. Otherwise, no commitment to increased defense spending can prevent future escalations on the continent.

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THE BERLIN PROCESS IN THE NEW  
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