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# *Western Balkans and the Internal Integration Processes*

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# ***Western Balkans and the Internal Integration Processes***

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## **Abstract**

With the European flag, Germany is making great efforts to effect the Western Balkans' internal integration, but obviously the resistance from the countries of the region is very strong. Finally, the Americans are preparing to convince Western Balkan leaders, with the "stick and carrot", that their mutual integration in the region is not only beneficial for regional economic development but also for preserving world peace. Creating an economic or customs union would have multiple positive effects. The goal is to open a market of about twenty million people, which would vividly revive industry, commerce, agriculture, livestock, tourism, and so on. It would also greatly increase foreign investment. Above all, nations will have to come together in order to boost the region's economic development, as well as regional peace and stability. Given the real conditions in the region, which are specific by their nature, the key questions arise - to what extent is this possible, what are the means and ways of achieving this, and in what dynamics is it likely to occur? To be able to give an appropriate answer to this complexity, we have primarily used the comparative analysis method, but also the method of critical review by several authors.

**Keywords:** *Western Balkan, security, integration, mini-Schengen*

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## ***Introduction***

We live in a world which becomes more and more globalized slowly but surely. Everything which some time ago had a local or regional character has now become worldly - global: the economy has become global, wars have become global, the pollution of the environment has become global, the telecommunications and traffic also. Hence, all events, political, cultural, economic, religious, cannot stay trapped into small local or regional boundaries. As professor Bhagwati once argued "when implemented intelligently globalization could be the most powerful force for social good in the world today, providing especially great opportunities for economic and social uplift in the poorest pockets of the globe..." (Bhagwati, 2004, p. 72).

In this globalized world the connection and the mutual dependence between peoples is growing, therefore, the conscience for the need of dialogue and tolerance between people, cultures and religions has to grow also because that is what the future of all human kind will depend on. However regional and global integration processes are not always constant. Many regional societies have fallen in a deep crisis, which is not only a crisis of the institutions, the social state, the federalism, the nationalism, etc., but a crisis of ethics, coexistence orientations, of the system of values, etc.

The EU is the natural destination for the six Western Balkan countries that are still outside the Union - Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. And their path towards European integration - at varying speeds according to each case - will be defined and determined by a series of political, economic, social and institutional reforms set down by the European Commission (2018) in its Strategy for the Western Balkans (published at the beginning of February 2018). Very often, it is not so easy to

implement the *acquis communautaire*, without the influence of the European Union, that is, “unless the Union itself provides clear and tangible incentives to do so” (Trauner, 2009, p. 3). Very often, it is not so easy to implement the *acquis communautaire*, without the influence of the European Union, that is, unless the Union itself provides clear and tangible incentives to do so” (Trauner, 2009, p. 3). The EU encouraged rule adoption in justice and home affairs by including the respective rules and “by emphasizing their link to the country’s rapprochement with the Union” (Trauner, 2009, p. 20).

The Americans have appointed a special US envoy for the Western Balkans. He will have a difficult task to solve the huge internal problems in the region. Here, they should first insist on finding a solution to relations between Serbia and Kosovo, perhaps some correction of the Bosnian’s Dayton status. The Balkans is a European and global neuralgic point, which has been witnessed in the past. Therefore, pacifying this region means preserving regional and world peace. The Western Balkans has to create a common market, a common economic whole, a common energy policy, a common policy in telecommunications, transport, all of which would be complemented by the development of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Realistically, Western Balkans has been pushing for more significant trade integration through CEFTA for years, but obviously the progress is very slow. This free trade agreement works between all Western Balkan countries and Moldova, but the expected effects are not sufficient.

The six Western Balkan countries are at different stages of the EU integration process. Serbia and Montenegro are in the negotiation process, Northern Macedonia and Albania are likely to get negotiations date by the end of March this year, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a potential candidate, and Kosovo is

still at an early stage. But the fact is that the Western Balkans has significant integration delays compared to Bulgaria and Romania. All the indications, in particular the great internal divergences around this issue, show that the EU is tired of expanding with new member states. This directly affects the Western Balkan countries, which will need many years to negotiate with the new EU membership negotiation methodology. This could lead to collective outbursts in this region, but also to increased geopolitical appetites of other countries, such as Russia, Turkey and China.

This region is more than ever faced with two choices: cooperation and integration in the face of conflict and war. Hence the need for some "new Schumann plan", since then French Foreign Minister Robert Schumann's 1950 statement is relevant also in today's political situation in the Western Balkans. The Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkans (MAP) puts forward a structured agenda for regional economic integration, along the lines proposed by the Leader's Meeting, namely: promoting further trade integration, introducing a dynamic regional investment space, facilitating regional mobility and creating a digital integration agenda. The MAP stems from the commitments undertaken within the framework of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and South East Europe 2020 Strategy (SEE 2020) and is based on CEFTA and EU rules and principles as reflected in the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs). It foresees implementation of actions at all levels in the period between 2017 and 2020 (with some actions extending until 2023). Here the rule of law should be understood as the "foundation upon which every other dimension of democratic quality ultimately rests" (Magen and Morlino, 2008, p. 7).

### ***Security and Regional Co-operations***

Initiating the process of regional co-operation is not a simple task at all and it remains a challenge. The last Western Balkan wars have greatly affected the internal economies of the Balkan countries, the international trade, and in some cases social and political international cooperation. The lack of economic cohesion, the high rate of the “grey economy”, the slow democratic transition process and the ethnical nationalism have all been identified as obstacles for efficient regional cooperation. There are several official regional initiatives concerning the Balkans: CEFTA 2006, Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI), Energy Community, South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) and many other official and unofficial initiatives. All these are aimed towards post-conflict consolidation, reconciliation and integration of the eponymous region to the Euro-Atlantic structures.

The EU attempts of promoting stability and regional co-operation have only had partial success. EU had success only in the use of its economic and political capacities in its purpose to encourage the domestic reforms. In this way, the EU probably succeeded less than NATO in overcoming the bilateral character of its relations with the Western Balkan countries and in encouraging multilateral regional form of co-operation. In any case the role of the Alliance was not only to defend its members but to “contribute to peace and stability on a global scale through the development of partnerships and through peace and stabilization operations” (Wioeniewski & Bartosz, 2010, p. 16). One of the promotion modes of this kind of co-operation can be the use of the channels that are open to bilateral agreements and the assistance program, in order to promote the multilateral inter-border co-operation in the areas of economic development infrastructure, transportation,

ecology, and crime prevention. On a military-political level, what should be emphasized are the modes that the new “common European defence” can use in promoting the regional co-operation in the Western Balkans by involving aspirants in various educational programs of the European Union (Ringsmose, 2011, p.15).

The Western Balkan countries have different level of approach to NATO institutions, i.e. to the military expertise that the Alliance is able to provide due to the fact that part of them are NATO member countries and part of them are not. The Alliance, for instance, can provide a great amount of financial support for its members and PfP/EAPC activities in the region and to encourage the dialogue about the security non-military aspects (such as the economic and cross-border co-operation, and thus contributing to decreasing ethnical tensions). Also, the Alliance can contribute more to “a bigger practical support in establishing and implementing bilateral and regional measures of building trust and cooperation” (Nikodinovska, Stefanovska, 2012, p.47). Also, these differences are deepened if some of the countries become full-members of NATO. The New Strategic Concept of NATO is informing the world about why the Alliance “is still vital and vigorous” (Ringsmose, 2011, p. 7).

However, the regional co-operation will have a limited effect in a long-term period if the countries that in fact are the biggest source of instability and conflicts in the region are excluded from NATO. Alliance in spite of the burden and the obligations “is still of vital importance for regional peace” (Alcaro, 2010, p.1). Although NATO is able to do more in order to improve the regional co-operation, the progress of the regional co-operation cannot be separated from a broader political and safety regional development. All regional countries should be involved in this process. The regional co-operation will have a limited effect in a long-term period if the

countries that in fact are the biggest source of instability and conflicts in the region are excluded.

In this context, Pridham thinks that NATO did not succeed in developing an efficient strategy of facing the abovementioned reasons for regional problems, caused by the defects during the process of democratization and violent nationalism (see, Pridham, 2008, p.56-70). On the other hand, in the long term the solution about the crises in Western Balkans and the expansion of the stability throughout the region of South Eastern Europe will “depend on the development of the democracies, which, according to same standards, will respect human and minority rights in every single country” (Clark, 2001, p. 45).

From the practice so far, it can be concluded that the EU has neither got sufficient power to induce democratization, nor to build states. While it has developed a comprehensive approach for democracy promotion, the EU lacks a clear strategy for state-building in the first place. Given the limits of the EU’s transformative power and the lessons learned by the US and NATO in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is no use of trying to develop one. Rather, the Commission and the member states should acknowledge that the main goal of the EU’s external relations is promoting regional stability more than changes.

### *The Berlin Process*

The Berlin process is a diplomatic initiative linked to the future enlargement of the European Union by strengthening regional integration in the Western Balkans (The Western Balkans and the Berlin Process, 2018). It was initiated by Chancellor Angela Merkel in order to sustain the dynamics in EU integration process in light of increasing Euroscepticism and a serious slowdown of the accession process. It began with the 2014



Conference of Western Balkan States in Berlin, and was followed by the 2015 Vienna Summit, the 2016 Paris Summit, the 2017 Trieste Summit, the 2018 London Summit and the 2019 Poznanj Summit.

The goals of the Berlin process were outlined in the Final Declaration by the German Chair in 2014: “To make additional real progress in the reform process, in resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, and in achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region”, as well as to enhance “regional economic cooperation and lay the foundations for sustainable growth” (Anastasakis, Bennett, Sanfey, 2018, p. 1).

The Berlin Final Declaration states: “Germany is willing to carry out further measures within the framework of existing programmes on economic cooperation and development in order to support the region’s countries in making the most effective use of European measures for bringing them closer to the EU via the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). German development cooperation has provided reliable support to the countries of the Western Balkans for 25 years and is an integral part of German endeavours to bring the countries closer to the EU and European standards” (Point 18 of The Final Declaration of the Conference on the Western Balkans - 2014, Berlin).

In recent years, as mentioned above, regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has been boosted by the development of the “Berlin Process” - a series of annual meetings of the six Western Balkan prime ministers and seven EU member states with a strong interest in this region (Berlin 2014, Vienna 2015, Paris 2016, Trieste 2017, London 2018, Poznanj 2019). Presenting the format of the WB6 in July 2017, the Vice President of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, EBRD, Pierre Heilbronn, announced that the WB6 would “form a

regional economic area, getting rid of non-tariff trade barriers and harmonizing laws in order to attract more investment” (Balkan Insight, 2019; ).

It is well known that for years the EU has continued its collective treatment of the Western Balkans in the integration process, trying to create a level playing field to encourage those behind the reform process to keep up with leaders. Of the London Summit’s agenda, some participants questioned the emphasis on security. But some felt that the British Government was overly concerned about security issues, and that the agenda was unduly weighted towards the interests of the UK (which is concerned about importing terrorism, organized crime and the Russian threat) rather than those of the region. Some were of the opinion that strengthening the security apparatus in the region could be maligned to suppressing internal political opposition rather than combating organized crime or terrorism. Others recognized, however, the extensive corruption in the region-including at the highest levels of government-and its pernicious effects on governance.

Lack of progress in reducing corruption, and improving security and the rule of law in Western Balkans countries, were seriously affecting the scale and impact of foreign investment in the region. The creators of the Berlin Process were of the opinion to place greater emphasis on other issues as well, such as education, entrepreneurship, inequality, and youth development. Under the Multilateral Action Plan (MAP) for a Regional Economic Area (REA) agreed at the Trieste Summit in 2017, efforts are to be focused on: (i) promotion of further trade integration; (ii) introduction of a dynamic regional investment space; (iii) facilitation of regional mobility; and (iv) creation of a digital integration agenda (see: [https://www.rcc.int/priority\\_areas/39/multi-annual-action-plan-for-a-regional-economic-area-in-the-western-balkans--map](https://www.rcc.int/priority_areas/39/multi-annual-action-plan-for-a-regional-economic-area-in-the-western-balkans--map)). So the region needs

Europeanization. A process of change in national institutional and policy practices “that can be attributed to European integration”, can be called “Europeanisation” (Olsen, 2002; Džankić, Keil & Kmezić, 2019).

Labour mobility within the region was seen as important in order to ensure that the right skills were available to support the investments undertaken. However, the most damaging mobility has been the emigration out of the region of the most skilled workers. The large displacement from the region, in particular of the vital and professional youth, represents a historic handicap for this part of Europe. In fact, there can be no sustainable development without this generation. But still potential returnees would bring with them not just their skills, but their “social remittances” and new ideas in the application of political economy earned and acquired while abroad in Western Europe and elsewhere. Ways therefore need to be found to make it easier and more attractive for the region’s diaspora.

All six countries in the region need to implement determinations of Action Plan's Area in the common trade policy in order to achieve the objective of creating an efficient regional economic area based on EU compliance to support efforts to attract more investment, to reduce trade costs and eliminate barriers to market access in order to optimize production costs. Western Balkan’s Regional Economic Area will help unleash the vast potential of the region by creating better and more sustainable economic opportunities for all, and attract greater volumes of Foreign Direct Investment than the current individual efforts. This work will reinforce the capacity of Western Balkans economies to meet the EU accession economic criteria, and to implement EU *acquis* on a regional scale before joining the EU. The Regional Cooperation Council is invited to review and inform the Western Balkans Summits

and/or Sherpas on regular basis on the progress achieved as regards to the deliverables defined in the implementation of this action plan with the involvement of Central European Free Trade Agreement - CEFTA - structures (see OECD/CEFTA, 2013).

### *Mini-Schengen*

Leaders of Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia have signed a so-called “Mini-Schengen” deal, which, modelled on the passport-free zone of the EU, envisages free movement of people, goods, capital, and services among the three countries. Officials of the three countries said they expect all six countries of the Western Balkans to join the area soon (Balkan Insight, 2019). In a nutshell, the idea is to create a Balkan version of the European Union’s border-free Schengen area (See Çipa, 2019).

Diplomats are still wondering what’s behind the initiative of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, who, in October 2019, decided to advance regional cooperation by forming a so-called “Mini-Schengen” in the Western Balkans. The Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama have said that the goal of all three countries was to be part of the European family, “while this family has its own problems, we can’t be hostages of the past” (Balkan Insight, 2019).

Common market and customs union in the Western Balkans Six will enable unobstructed flow of goods, services, capital and highly skilled labour, making the region more attractive for investment and commerce, accelerating convergence with the EU and bringing prosperity to all its citizens. “The countries of the region need to adapt to European standards as there is still a large gap between the spirit of the EU directives and the facts on the ground” (Renner, 2009, p. 12). However, the regional countries in integration processes are

also “challenged by high domestic adoption costs in terms of opposition and resistance to compliance with EU conditions” (Zhelyazkova, Damjanovski, Nechev, and Schimmelfennig, 2018, p. 11).

The aim is to transform the Region in which goods, services, investments, and skilled people move freely without tariffs, quotas or other unnecessary barriers. There is a significant potential to foster regional economic integration in Western Balkans Six economies, through the development of Regional investment reform agenda. The removal of barriers to regional investment offers the opportunity for economies of scale, geographically diversified businesses, and an overall more efficient allocation of resources within a regional market, thereby fostering the integration of companies from the region in international value chains (Cvetanovski, 2019).

It is obvious that Western Balkan countries are all individually very small and economically underperforming and they have tight markets and tight markets are inefficient. The market in the former Yugoslavia was certainly one broader market given the complementarity of production factors. Today the Western Balkan countries among themselves approximate have similar level of development and no West Balkan country can have drastically different sustainable development from the others. So, increased economic openness in this area can be of benefit to all (See, Bjelić, Dragutinović Mitrović and Petrović, 2016).

Although the frequent meetings between regional prime ministers have given impetus to the idea of creating the Western Balkan Custom Union, not all of them are enthusiastic about it. However, the business people in the Balkans readily welcome the idea. Hence, is it politically and economically realistic for the countries of the Western Balkans to create a more open, single market, which would not be hampered by

many non-tariff and bureaucratic barriers, until they enter the European Union, countries in the region, already signatories to the CEFTA treaty, are gradually removing all barriers to the free and accelerated flow of people, goods and capital, instead of having trucks waiting on their borders for hours or days. (see Gligorov, 2017).

Washington is hoping to bring the Western Balkan countries back to the negotiating table and nudge them toward a genuine solution to their years-old disagreements. According to Daniel Serwer, US doesn't want to abandon the region and leave it open to Russian influence - which has already become very strong (DW, 2019). Negotiations on regional integration are indispensable because the Western Balkans still have “lack state capacities and is even still pronounced and exacerbated by the contentedness of borders and political authorities” (Ricca, 2011, p.8). Even in such a constellation with high adoption power costs for incumbent governments (such as threats on coalition breakup in case of compliance) often times were "blocked rule adoption in a few cases" (Schimmelfennig, 2007, p.131).

Finally, regional integration can serve as an important stepping stone for the “Western Balkans to better integrate into European and global value chains, and converge faster with the rest of the continent” (Consolidated MAP, 2017, p. 3). The first thing that needs to be done is to equalize all customs clearance rates and procedures, and to establish good cooperation between the customs administrations in the region. Reforms are also needed in investment policy. The regional investment reform agenda is intended to contribute and add value to investment reform efforts, and ensure transparent and fair competition among the economies. The ultimate goal is to improve the attractiveness of the region for foreign and intra-regional business, and hence facilitate higher inflow of

investments and generate higher entrepreneurial activity, trade, and ultimately jobs. Finally, the Western Balkan economies will need to develop a common platform for investment promotion and work jointly on presenting the region as a sound investment destination to the foreign business community.

This idea is strongly supported by those who are aware that the common market enables the strengthening of the competitive positions of the national economies of the member states. At the same time, the proponents of this idea are of the view that economic rapprochement will neutralize much opposition among regional states. This would be in favor of peace in the region and beyond. But there are also many contradictions that arise either out of a fear from the hegemony of the larger peoples, or from the many prejudices and stereotypes in the perpetually troubled Balkans. Serbian opponents oppose this as a trap to create a Greater Albania. Albanian oppositionists think that Serbian economy is stronger and will dominate. They also fear that Kosovo may remain an unresolved issue. Bosnia and Herzegovina, too, has its many reasons; while North Macedonia fears it will not feel strong in that association (see, Beqiri, 2018). Kosovo, although participating in the Regional Economic Area, which aims to create a joint economic zone for the six Western Balkan countries, refuses to participate in the Mini-Schengen funds, arguing that Serbia is continuously obstructing its independence. And despite the fact that Montenegro are participating as a guest, they say their negotiations with EU is a priority for them.

Often, the question is, who would benefit from the Customs Union? Discussions about the Customs Union very often indicate that it might be most appropriate for Serbia, as it is - among the countries in the game - the largest exporter. At first glance, judging by the fact that Serbia has a trade surplus

with other countries, it should be most appropriate for it. But it's a narrow view. How much a country benefits from free trade depends not on its size but on the economic environment. If it were different, it would mean that, for example, Germany benefits from much greater use of the Customs Union in Europe than Greece or Bulgaria. Counting how much a country is suited to such a union can easily end up in sovereignty and nationalist rhetoric.

According to this logic, it can also be concluded that Albania and Montenegro will have the most benefits as countries that have the sea, or Kosovo that would benefit from traffic transit. The fact is that all regional countries would benefit from a possible Western Balkans customs union. Even Serbia and Kosovo would easily find solutions to their problems. Therefore, the common market and the customs union of the Western Balkans would be a salvation for the entire region, which is risking to be emptied of its population, and the various disparities can be settled by agreement intended to balance the interests of the member states. At the same time, this would be a quick training for all countries in the region to join the EU together.

### *Conclusions*

1. Lack of progress in reducing corruption, and improving security and the rule of law in Western Balkan countries has seriously affected economic development and peace in the region for many years. Now, for the first time in the recent history, the countries of the region are able to recognize the common goal that unites them all. Their main goal is to achieve regional integration and membership in the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions and organizations. Key elements for



reaching these goals are integration, democratization, enforced good neighbour relations and political and economic reforms.

2. About half a million companies operating in the Western Balkans will have a better environment in which they can grow, invest, employ and utilize the benefits of the Regional Economic Area as an outlet for external markets. The purpose of the integration is to create conditions for all European countries to take part in building new architecture, and avoid the creation of new hostile separation lines.

3. The regional co-operation and integration into NATO and EU are complementary processes. All regional countries should be involved in this process. The regional co-operation will have a limited effect in the long term if the countries, that in fact are the biggest source of instability and conflicts in the region, are excluded. The regional cooperation and regional trade agreements are useful for international relations development. NATO officially supports this kind of co-operation. The reason for this is above all, due to the advantages of the geographical vicinity of the countries, and it will create and improve opportunities for improving trade and economic contacts and for communications, transport and energy networks. Furthermore, the regional co-operation will also improve good neighbour relations among these countries.

4. Reform efforts are underway in most of the economies in the region designed to address internal structural weaknesses, but considerable growth potential can be enabled through closer economic integration. Growth strategies have more chance of success if they are embedded in a consolidated system of regional cooperation in all relevant areas. Finally, this can serve as an important stepping stone for the Western Balkans to better integrate into European and global value chains, and converge faster with the rest of the continent.

5. The large displacement from the region, in particular of the vital and professional youth, represents a historic handicap for this part of Europe. In fact, there can be no sustainable development without this generation. Therefore, the common market and the customs union of the Western Balkans would be a salvation for the entire region, which is risking to be emptied of its populations, and the various disparities can be settled by agreement intended to balance the interests of the member states. At the same time, this would be a quick training for all countries in the region to join the EU together.

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