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## **INTEGRATION VS. SOVEREIGNATION. THE “OPEN BALKAN” IN THE FRAMEWORK OF STATUS AND IDENTITY DISPUTES\*\*\*\***

### **Resume**

The paper analyses the “Open Balkan” initiative with the intention of establishing, through a critical discourse analysis, the dominant positions of the countries of the Western Balkans regarding this form of regional cooperation. The authors will show that political discourses towards regional integration are, on the one hand, a product of the internal unfinished process of state and nation-building, while on the other hand, they are a direct consequence of open bilateral issues and the absence of a clear perspective of membership in the European Union. The paper proves that the dominant negative discourse on the “Open Balkan” initiative equates regional

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integration with the fear of losing sovereignty both over internal political processes and on the path of European integration.

**Keywords:** “Open Balkan”, regional integration, state building, nation building, European integration, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo\*

## INTRODUCTION

The starting point of this paper is the question: Why do representatives of certain political systems in the Western Balkans create a negative discourse about the “Open Balkan” initiative despite the fact that regional integration is complementary to the proclaimed goal of membership in the European Union? The analysis relies on a critical analysis of the discourse and theory of state and nation building. We start from the thesis that in the past period of time, two frames of negative discourse were formed according to the “Open Balkan” initiative. The first frame is represented by *status and identity disputes*, while the second is the *porous perspective of membership in the European Union*. Both frameworks are united by the fear of the creators of the negative discourse on the “Open Balkan” that this initiative may further challenge their sovereignty over the unfinished processes of state and nation building, as well as over the separate processes of European integration.

Although negative discourses about the “Open Balkan” exist in all countries of the Western Balkans, the focus of the analysis is on the political systems that have not yet joined this form of regional integration. Since Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo\* have not yet become part of the initiative, we draw the conclusion that in these societies the negative discourse about the “Open Balkan” creates reality and has direct political consequences in the form of rejection of formal membership. Our intention is to deconstruct the negative discourse that has two dominant forms and place it in the broader framework of the Balkan regional dichotomy - integration vs. sovereignization. Discourse analysis was conducted on the public messages that political representatives communicated about the “Open Balkan”, i.e. the initiative previously known as “Mini-Schengen”, in the period from November 2019 to June 2022.

The first thesis from which we start is that the “Open Balkan” is relevant from the point of view of the paralyzing effects that the unfinished processes of state and nation building can have

on regional integration and greater connectivity of the countries of the Western Balkans. The second thesis is that the “Open Balkan” demystifies European integration by reducing them to the level of internal status and ideological disputes in the absence of a realistic perspective of membership. Therefore, the discourse on this initiative fulfills the condition that it enters the sphere of politics, due to the power relations and consequences it produces (Bešić 2019, 359). Power in this case was undeniably demonstrated because the expressed discourse showed social dominance in terms of control of a certain group and institutions in relation to the actions and opinions of others (van Dijk 2001, 355). Also, we intend to deconstruct the negative discourse about the “Open Balkan”, and by that we mean that “by exposing and denouncing a particular discourse, its mechanisms and social consequences, we subversively insist on the 'damage' that this discourse produces in social reality” (Bešić 359). Therefore, we simultaneously include text, discourse practice and social practice in critical analysis (Fairclough 1992, 73).

In the paper, we will first present the previous theoretical approaches in the analysis of the “Open Balkan” initiative, the frameworks of the previous regional initiatives, and then the analysis of the dominant negative discourses of the leaders in Sarajevo, Podgorica and Pristina. Special emphasis is placed on the interpretation of legitimized “truths” proclaimed by regional leaders. In them, we read the ontological uncertainty of regional integration because any form of integration necessarily requires the sharing of sovereignty over political processes.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The previous theoretical approaches to the “Open Balkan” (formerly “Mini-Schengen”), the Berlin Process and other regional initiatives were mainly focused on regional and European integration models. Đukanović and Đorđević note that, unlike the Berlin process and its achievements, which were achieved under the full control mechanism of the European Union, “Mini-Schengen” represented a higher degree of regional ownership due to less coordination with Brussels (2020, 611). Although local ownership of the process should have a positive connotation, we will show in a critical discourse analysis that this is one of the biggest objections to this regional initiative.

In the interpretation of local ownership, there are readings that it is a project to divide the Serbian and Albanian spheres of influence, thereby weakening the importance of the European Union for the region to the detriment of Russia and the United States (Karakoç and Botić 2021, 16). However, the dominant discourses confirm that the demand for regional cooperation by the EU stems from the desire to present European integration, despite its stagnation or even complete absence, as a means of confirming state independence and complete separation from other Western Balkan actors.

There are two reasons for this approach. Firstly, in the context of European integration, nationalist and “technocratic” pro-European structures in the Balkan countries that refuse regional cooperation do so based on the questionable premise of their more advanced and superior position (Đukanović and Krstić 2021, 18). Secondly, since the outcome is far away, the path of European integration has its own value because it declaratively confirms that a certain political system has sovereignty over the process and deserves full membership in the EU. In this way, European integration is in itself one of the usable instruments for completing the process of state and a nation building.

A comparative analysis of various regional initiatives shows that, according to the model of regional cooperation, the Visegrad Group and the countries of the Western Balkans are almost identical in their activities, but that unlike the Central European identity, the Western Balkan identity was absent (Đukanović and Dašić 2021, 627–630). This regional identity cannot survive with fundamental status and identity disputes, and at the same time it is necessary for higher forms of political integration. The current East-West foreign policy orientations, radicalized by the crisis in Ukraine, further complicate the creation of a unique identity and reject any form of “neutral” status (Đukanović 2022, 8).

In the end, the biggest burden is the interpretation that regional initiatives, especially “Mini-Schengen”/ “Open Balkan” are a kind of waiting room before the EU, which permanently marks the region as a new buffer zone (Karakoça and Botić 2021, 17). In this way, any type of regional integration that is the product of local ownership of the process is denounced as an alternative to European integration and at the same time it is denied the possibility of being one of the platforms for overcoming bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans.

In the interpretation of the “Open Balkan”, it is impossible to avoid the economic approach, although it was not sufficiently represented in the discourses that are the subject of this analysis.

This further confirms the thesis that the discourse on the “Open Balkan” is not formed by an economic *cost&benefit* analysis for each country individually, as the determination is based above all on political positions on status and identity issues, as well as on unrealistic expectations from European integration. If the “Open Balkan” together with the Berlin process aims to create a single regional market, very difficult harmonization of the system lies ahead. The mere establishment of a customs union would mean equalizing customs duties, i.e. average customs rates, which obviously differ from country to country, and it is further complicated by the fact that three out of five countries are members of the World Trade Organization and are not allowed to raise customs duties above the consolidated level (Rapać 2020, 584–85). Also, the creation of a common market would require new arrangements for already reached foreign trade agreements, and perhaps a redefinition of the process of accession to the European Union (585).

Taking these arguments into account, one could realistically see what the economic consequences of deepening regional cooperation through the “Open Balkan” initiative are. However, the focus of this paper is on negative discourses that do not derive from economic analyses, but exclusively political ones. An illustrative example is the distinction made between the “Open Balkan” and the Berlin Process. Both were actually designed in the absence of a clear perspective of EU membership. Both processes lead to the same goal - the creation of a single regional market. However, this does not prevent political actors from having completely opposite views on these initiatives. The reasons for such an approach lie in the fear that regional integration with local ownership would deepen status and identity disputes.

Defining “the state concept”, Buzan claims that the state exists primarily on a socio-political and not on a physical level, and that it is composed of three different elements: the physical basis of the state (effective sovereignty, international consensus on territorial borders); the institutional expression of the state (consensus on the political “rules of the game”, but also on the scope of state institutions); and ideas of state (implicit social contract and ideological consensus (Buzan according to Nicolas Lemay-Hébert 2009, 24). Emphasizing the state more as an idea shared by different groups of people than as a physical organism, Buzan warns that “without a widespread and rather deeply rooted idea of the state among the population, the state institutions themselves have difficulty functioning and surviving” (25). It is precisely the idea of the state that is conspicuously absent among the members of all three constituent nations in Bosnia and

Herzegovina. Competing agendas for the redesign of Bosnia and Herzegovina prevent institutional functionality, which results in limited engagement in regional integration. The absence of a social pact speaks of internal disintegration, which is questionable as to whether it can be replaced by external integration. On the other hand, Kosovo\* with a disputed status exists with temporary administrative bodies in Pristina that are still fighting for the physical foundations of statehood, since there is no consensus among UN members, but also EU and NATO members on their international legal subjectivity. Therefore, the authorities in Pristina cannot in any way exist as an equal actor in regional initiatives even though they are invited to join.

Unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo\*, which have a conflicting past and clear ethnicized divisions, Montenegro, despite the long-term peace since the referendum on independence in 2006, faces a deep identity division into “Montenegrin” and “Serbian” blocs, which prevents the formation of a unified political nation. As Nicolas Lemay-Hebert points out, “state-building must take into account not only the renewal of state institutions, but also the complex nature of socio-political cohesion, or what some call nation-building” (2009, 22). Therefore, it is impossible to achieve the process of state building separately or in the absence of nation building. The absence of this cohesive factor represents a permanent factor of destabilization both for post-conflict societies and for states that have managed to preserve peace, but face deep identity divisions.

The search for unity should in no way mean the pursuit of ethnic identity, because its preservation is at the foundation of the state structure. Nevertheless, nation-building imposed itself as a legitimate demand before the various ethnic communities that make up a single society. In the current political constellations, it seems impossible to reach a compromise between the Serbian and Albanian sides in Kosovo, a basic consensus of Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and with the passage of time, the proclaimed civic concept in Montenegro is rendered meaningless by the stratification of political parties by ethnic key Montenegrin, Serbian, Bosniak, Albanian and minor civil forces.

When it comes to international engagement, the entire process of restoring Montenegro's statehood was led by EU representatives, who determined the conditions for the referendum on independence. Special international engagement is still present in Kosovo\* and Bosnia and

Herzegovina. Therefore, the international presence through the policy of conditioning is a constant that ensures a minimum of coexistence in the divided societies of the Balkans.

Hippler offers three central elements of successful nation-building: a unifying ideology, social integration, and a functional state apparatus. The last prerequisite enables the birth of a “political society” and the development of self-awareness about a political order that has a monopoly over the use of force and effective control over the entire national territory (2005, 7–9). The state with all its functions from finance, a unified fiscal system to a police and legal system and a unified administration creates loyal officials who identify with the “nation” through its functioning. It follows that state building is an essential element of successful nation building (9).

However, in the absence of a “political society”, a functional state apparatus that should create internal cohesive elements, European integration in the Western Balkan countries takes on a completely new meaning. They are not the subject of wider external political and economic integration, but a substitute for the absence of internal legitimacy for a unified order. Therefore, joining the European Union requires constant supervision, not only at the internal level, but also at the level of regional initiatives, and not only in the context of raising institutional capacities but also in the resolution of identity disputes. In this way, the existence of a regional Balkan connection beyond the initiative and coordination of the European Union is actually a blasphemous activity for many local and European actors.

Authors devoted to the topic of nation building tend to ignore ethnic diversity, not recognizing them as possible permanent obstacles, but as minor difficulties that will undoubtedly give way to a common identity in order to achieve the higher goal of building a unified state (Connor 1972, 319). In this context, the EU policy tried to connect progress in integration with the resolution of status disputes through mutual agreements (Keil 2013, 350). However, the process so far has shown that the problems of limited statehood have seriously restrained the transformative power of the EU in the Western Balkans - so that the EU could not encourage democratization or the process of state building despite the proclaimed perspective of membership for the entire region (Börzel 2011, 14).

## WHAT IS THE “OPEN BALKAN” INITIATIVE?

Striving to keep the countries of the Western Balkans on the European path, to speed up the approach of the Western Balkans to the European Union, to reduce the increase in the influence of third parties in the region, but also to prevent the further growth of Euroscepticism in the Western Balkans, the Berlin Process was launched at the initiative of Germany. The focus of the Berlin Process itself, since its launch in 2014, was related to intensified sectoral cooperation, development of regional infrastructure and increased cooperation in the field of security, but it gradually moved to other economic issues in the Western Balkans (Minić 2019, 27–28). Although the duration of this diplomatic initiative was limited to four years, until 2018, after the adoption of the Western Balkans Enlargement Strategy, its duration was extended “until conditions are created to absorb its results and put them on the main track of the region's integration into the EU” (Minić 2018, 374).

The process, therefore, should have sent a message that even without enlargement, the reform processes and democratization of the region will continue, along with the promotion of regional cooperation, dispute resolution and the connection of the countries of the region. During the summit held within the Berlin Process in Trieste in July 2017, the *Regional Cooperation Council* presented, for the first time, a *Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkans*. The implementation of the activities<sup>1</sup> outlined in this document aims to enable the smooth flow of goods, services, capital and highly skilled labor, making the region more attractive for investment and trade, accelerating EU convergence (RCC 2017). Then, at the summit held as part of the Berlin Process in Sofia in November 2020, the leaders of the Western Balkans presented the Common Regional Market (CRM) as an initiative based on the achievements and lessons of its predecessor, the Regional Economic Area. The action plan for the Common Regional Market envisages that all planned activities will be implemented in the period from 2021-2024. (Common Regional Market (CRM) 2021-2024 Action Plan) after which it is expected to start its full implementation (RCC 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Implementation of far-reaching interventions and actions within four components: trade, investment, mobility and digital integration (RCC 2017).



At the same time, through the implementation of what was agreed within the Regional Economic Area, and with the aim of “reinforcing” it, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, the then Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, and the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama (*Edvin Kristaq Rama*), present a new regional initiative called “*Mini- Schengen*”.

As part of the first joint meeting held in Novi Sad on October 10, 2019, a Joint Declaration was signed in which it is emphasized that this initiative “should help the entire region of the Western Balkans to start functioning on the principle of the four key freedoms of the European Union - freedom of movement capital, goods, services and people” while the signatory states continue their European journey (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019a).

As part of the initiative in 2019, the following was achieved: a memorandum on the free movement of people with the use of identity cards and the equalization of procedures for issuing work permits for all citizens in the countries of the Western Balkans; 24-hour functioning of border controls for phytosanitary and veterinary controls; agreed construction of a new border crossing between Serbia and North Macedonia; Agreement between the customs administrations of North Macedonia and Albania on a single counter at the Kjaľasan border crossing and with Serbia at the Tabanovce border crossing with the aim of becoming a non-stop border crossing (Влада на Република Северна Македонија 2019).

The leaders of the three countries, together with representatives of the business community from the region, met on July 29, 2021, as part of the Forum for Regional Economic Cooperation in Skopje. On that occasion, they announced that the initiative known until then as “Mini-Schengen” was given the new name “Open Balkan”. On that occasion, the leaders of the three countries signed three documents: Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation to facilitate import, export and movement of goods in the Western Balkans; Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation regarding free access to the labor market in the Western Balkans, and Agreement on cooperation in disaster protection in the Western Balkans, which will facilitate trade in the region and enable a single labor market, but also mutual assistance in emergency situations (Vlada Republike Srbije 2021).

In the Joint Statement, it is emphasized that the three countries “remain committed to the Berlin process and the European perspective, while the government commits to the implementation of the four freedoms and to the construction of the “Open Balkan” in the same vision as the common regional market” (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia 2021). In the same

document, the leaders finally conclude that “while the prospect of EU accession remains a catalyst for regional cooperation, one should not wait for every issue to be resolved, or for Europe to reach a consensus, in order to improve the lives of citizens. In this spirit, all interested parties in the Western Balkans are invited to join the initiative” (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia 2021).

With the announcement of deepening cooperation, the specificity of an independent regional initiative without European support, but also of the asymmetry of regional integration, which takes place only between Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia, comes to the fore. More concrete steps are noticeable at the Summit held in Tirana on December 21, 2021, when new agreements were reached with the aim of facilitating the circulation of goods, people, services, capital, and business (Komarčević 2021).

## **ANALYSIS OF THE DOMINANT POLITICAL DISCOURSES ABOUT THE “OPEN BALKAN”**

In the following lines, a critical analysis of the discourse of the political representatives of the countries of the Western Balkans that have not yet supported the “Open Balkan” is applied. We start from the thesis that two frames of negative discourse were formed according to this initiative. The first frame is made up of *status and identity disputes*, while the second one is made up of the *porous perspective of membership in the European Union*. Both frames are in the sphere of politics, and the analyzed discourses demonstrated power in the consequences for social reality. The intention of the demystification is to show the discrepancy between the text and the real fear of the possible threat of sovereignty above all over internal political processes.

In the case of Montenegro, the framework of status and identity is recognized in the discourse of President Milo Đukanović, who underlines the importance of regional cooperation for foreign investments, but that “this determination in principle does not mean that we keep blindfolds, and that we cannot read and perceive some things on the right way” (IBALKAN 2022). With these words, he actually confirms that he is against the initiative because he recognizes in it a danger for his country, a kind of trap that remains undefined. The current Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Raško Konjević is more explicit because he claims that the potential entry

into the “Open Balkan” would destabilize the Government, that he does not believe that Prime Minister Abazović cares more about the “Open Balkan” than the Government, as well as that “involvement in any regional initiatives must be the result of dialogue, and then the proposal of the competent Ministry of Foreign Affairs; And above all, it must aim at the state interests of Montenegro” (Radio Free Europe 2022a). In this way, he confirms the thesis that, from his political point of view, the initiative is actually harmful to state interests. President Đukanović himself demystifies the threat to the state's interest by asserting that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić is trying to present himself as a factor in regional cooperation with the “Open Balkan” project, and that “in fact, he is a man who destroys the sovereignty of neighboring countries and the stability of the region.” Using the same formula as Milošević, he (Vučić) argues that Serbs in the region are threatened, that he was called to protect the rights of Serbs in neighboring countries, starting with Montenegro, endangering its *sovereignty* and endangering the stability of the Balkans (Srbija Danas 2022). In an earlier interview, Đukanović spoke about the “Serbian world” and the rhetoric coincides with the previously mentioned regional initiative - for the authors of that plan, he thinks that at this moment “they would be satisfied with some federal organization of key Serbian centers within that Serbian area, but there is no doubt that their ultimate goal is the unification of that Serbian space, thereby *endangering other countries and jeopardizing the identity of other peoples, starting with the Montenegrins*” (Danas 2020). In this way, it expresses the ontological uncertainty of Serbia's dominant role in the regional initiative, which could threaten the current status of Montenegro as a state and the identity of the Montenegrin people. Furthermore, his recent open confrontation with pro-Serbian parties and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro indicates the fear that regional integration would necessarily lead to a change in political relations within the country. In the end, promoting the Open Balkan as an external threat represents an ideal platform for the homogenization of the Montenegrin and “sovereignist” electorate. “Open Balkan” is therefore a threat to status and identity.

The president of the temporary institutions in Pristina, Vjosa Osmani, is explicit that Kosovo\* cannot enter the initiative “where Serbia is trying to play a leading role, and that would give it the opportunity to continue denying the existence of Kosovo as a sovereign state” (DW 2021). On the basis of this discourse, the conclusion is drawn that the “Open Balkan” is controversial primarily because it was initiated by Serbia at a time when the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is ongoing on an agreement that would determine the final status of Kosovo. Since the political position of Pristina is that this status has already been defined, the opposition to

the “Open Balkan” is an attempt to put additional pressure on Belgrade in order to recognize the unilaterally declared independence. This is also evident in the call to EU representatives to exert crucial pressure on Serbia “and make it known - equal treatment, equal representation of all countries, including Kosovo, is a basic prerequisite for the survival of these regional initiatives” (DW 2021). In the meeting with the president of North Macedonia, Osmani repeated “as long as Serbia does not treat Kosovo equally in regional initiatives, we see that Serbia wants to expand its hegemonic interests”, adding that she has reservations about this initiative because it can “delay European integration” (Radio Free Europe 2021). Additionally, on an ethnic basis, she accused the representatives of Albania of betraying the interests of their own nation in Kosovo by participating in an initiative with Vučić who “destabilizes Kosovo on a daily basis and *threatens its sovereignty*” (Euractiv 2022). As long as there is a status dispute, the Albanian representatives in Kosovo will insist on the perception of the “Open Balkan” as the hegemony of Serbia, a process harmful to the entire Albanian people, wherever they live, and as an initiative that is in conflict with European integration. At the same time, Kosovo\* cannot even formally start negotiations with the EU because five member states do not recognize the secession declared in 2008. In creating a negative discourse towards regional integration, the Prime Minister of the interim authorities in Pristina, Albin Kurti goes a step further - this initiative represents Serbia's involvement in creating a new platform for the so-called “Greater Serbia”, and added that a “fourth Yugoslavia” must not be allowed (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019b). In this way, the economic dimension is denied and the initiative is presented as the creation of a unique political system where countries would lose their sovereignty. The aim of such a discourse is an attempt to provoke regional aversion to any form of tighter association. Based on the statements of Montenegrin representatives, we conclude that the matrix of negative discourse is the same - the threat of sovereignty and the fear of the creation of some new state framework. Paradoxically, Kurti declares for a similar initiative that “Kosovo is committed to the Berlin Process” and that Kosovo and North Macedonia should cooperate to “prevent Serbia from promoting Russian and Chinese interests in the region” (DW 2022). One of the goals of this initiative is the creation of a single regional market in which Serbia's participation is indispensable.

Although there is no explicitly negative discourse about the Open Balkan in the public space, it is evident that there is political resistance to the joining of Bosnia and Herzegovina to this initiative. The Serbian member of the BH Presidency, Milorad Dodik, expressed his regret that BH

is not part of the “Open Balkan” initiative and pointed out that “the participation of Republika Srpska has been impeded, because some morbid thoughts in Sarajevo prevent joining that initiative only because they suspect some pranks and frauds” (Republika Srpska.net 2021). From this statement, it can be concluded that the representatives of the constituent nations did not agree on regional integration, but also that there is no basic consensus regarding internal political issues either. With this statement, Dodik actually strengthens the discourse about hostile Sarajevo, which works directly against the interests of the Republika Srpska entity. In addition, the “Open Balkan” served to accentuate insurmountable differences, so Dodik stated that “BH, unfortunately, is also divided on the issue of the 'Open Balkan' and that the acceptance of that initiative has become an exclusively political, not an economic issue” (Info Balkan 2022). On the other hand, in the light of the war in Ukraine, Bakir Izetbegović, the leader of the SDA party, stated that the “Serbian world” is the Balkan version of the “Russian world” and that “Greater Serbian nationalism adapts and survives in a democratic and civilized environment, oscillates, withdraws and revives itself with every change, and uses every crisis to expel and dominate everything that is not Serbian” (Politika 2022). He adds, “we are dealing with a party that is convinced that it is its right to drive out others and otherwise, to dominate those who remain, to force them to live in apartheid, to deny genocide and crimes, to celebrate war criminals” (Politika 2022). Although he refers to nationalism, in this discourse Izetbegović actually labels Serbia as a state, attributing to it the intention of territorial expansion to the detriment of the territories where Bosniaks live. Therefore, the argument for the “Open Balkan” is probably on the trail of the one already applied to “Greater Serbian nationalism”, which is that it has a clear intention to threaten the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and prevent the further process of post-conflict state building.

The EU integration framework in which the negative discourse about the “Open Balkan” is created has a particularly intriguing context. The interpretation of the initiative as something that blocks the path of the Western Balkan countries to the EU does not start from a real analysis of the accession process, but from independently created perceptions of what European integration is or should be. The Balkan narratives about the EU have long since parted ways with the real status of the countries of the region in relation to the proclaimed goal - full membership. Albania and North Macedonia have just started negotiations with the EU, Bosnia and Herzegovina, unlike Ukraine, which is at war, does not even have the status of a candidate for membership, Serbia and

Montenegro are at a standstill with the negotiation process, and Kosovo\* with a disputed status cannot at all be viewed as potential candidate for membership.

Therefore, European integration is not mentioned as fulfilling certain criteria, but as an inherent process, which regardless of stagnation, confirms the independence and sovereignty of the negotiating state with its existence. Any kind of meta-integration, which would also include regional integration, is not in contradiction with European integration, but with the subjective experience of that process as something special that distinguishes a particular state of the region from others.

Comparing the Berlin Process and the “Open Balkan”, the President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, declares: “Everything we do through the Berlin Process, is aimed at reaching the standards that will eventually qualify us for membership; ‘Open Balkan’ does not insist on European standards and in a way, it seems to me, ‘Open Balkan’ is a prepared initiative that would be a kind of alternative for the membership of the Western Balkan countries in the EU” (CDM 2022). This discourse aims to present the Berlin Process as a path to the EU, and the “Open Balkan” as an obstacle on that path, although both initiatives put the region first in order to create a single economic space. At the same time, the Berlin process itself was created as a response to an evident deadlock in the accession process. This discourse actually denies both initiatives if they imply regional integration. The Berlin process was taken out of its real context and equated with accession negotiations, and “Open Balkan” means giving up EU membership.

Đukanović further claims: “I think that the ‘Open Balkan’ was created when some leaders, disappointed with the effectiveness of the enlargement process, created a parallel initiative that is a reserve position for the countries of the region that, in their opinion, will not have a European perspective. That's our difference, we think we belong in the EU” (Mondo 2022). In this way, he rejects regional integration because it would eventually show the real status of Montenegro in European integration. Although he is aware that in the absence of agreement on the enlargement policy, Brussels has a unique approach towards all countries of the Western Balkans, the “European perspective” presented in this way serves as a narrative that strengthens not only sovereignty over the process but also the idea of the special success of Montenegro in relation to other countries of the Western Balkans.

The discourse on the “Open Balkan” as an obstacle to the successful European integration of Montenegro is widespread. Ervin Ibrahimović, Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Bosniak Party, claims that the “Open Balkan” initiative does not have his support, nor the support of the Bosniak Party because “the priority task of the current administration is to accelerate EU integration and all institutional capacities should be directed towards that goal.” Although he is aware that Brussels, in the absence of agreement on the enlargement policy, has a unique approach towards all the countries of the Western Balkans, the “European perspective” presented in this way serves as a narrative that strengthens not only the sovereignty over the process, but also the idea of the special success of Montenegro in relation to other countries of the Western Balkans.

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In a similar way, the discourse was built by the Albanian representatives in Kosovo\*. Hashim Thaçi also said about “Mini-Schengen”: “For Kosovo, the only vision is membership in the European Union and NATO. Therefore, we do not want to replace our Euro-Atlantic perspective with any regional initiative under any circumstances” (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019). The authorities in Pristina create an imaginary choice between the EU and the Western Balkans for the domestic public, while in fact the disputed status of Kosovo\* permanently blocks Euro-Atlantic integration, and while in regional initiatives due to the absence of an agreement with Belgrade, they do not have the opportunity to participate in an equal capacity with other Western Balkan actors. With this discourse, the idea was created that Kosovo\* has a perspective of membership that it does not want to replace with “any” regional integration. Also, the discourse on the “Open Balkan” as a substitute for European integration is fostered. Thus, Vjosa Osmani claims that “with the ‘Open Balkan’ it is completely the opposite (compared to the Berlin process).

His goal is to somehow put us in a waiting room and instead of continuing with European integration, he creates a situation in which certain countries are in a better position than others, either economically, politically or in other circumstances” (DW 2021). A discourse is emerging in which regional integration is the main obstacle to the EU, and not a status dispute due to which five EU member states do not recognize the unilateral declaration of independence.

In the end, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to the division over the position on the “Open Balkan”, one cannot speak of a dominantly negative discourse, but it is evident that the opponents of membership also link the perspective of EU membership with regional integration. Thus, Šefik Džaferović, a member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, points out that “it is very important not to forget that everything that is the content of the 'Open Balkan' initiative was previously accepted in Sofia by all six countries of the Western Balkans in November 2020 at the summit held as part of the Berlin Process. At that summit in Sofia, agreements were signed which provided for a common regional market, complete freedom in the movement of people, goods, capital and services in all six countries of the Western Balkans” (Oslobođenje 2021) Although this can be subsumed under the argument of overlapping initiatives, the key message has been sent with the attitude: “those documents were signed under the supervision and leadership of the European Union as part of the Berlin process” (Oslobođenje 2021). The patrimonial relationship required from the structures of the European Union speaks of the absence of desire for local ownership of the regional integration process. The connection and cooperation of the countries of the Western Balkans in the formed discourse does not necessarily bring benefits, but only if there is “leadership” of the European Union. In such a framework, there is no real progress in European integration, but the leaders are deprived of responsibility for the failure of the process. At the same time, “Open Balkan” is the only one denounced as a redundant regional initiative among dozens of initiatives that are formed and persist in the Western Balkans despite the questionability of their purpose and goal.

## CONCLUSION

A critical analysis of the discourse showed that the representatives of Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo\* create a negative discourse about the “Open Balkan” initiative, despite the fact that regional integration is complementary to the proclaimed goal of membership in the European Union. By looking at the messages that were created in the past three years, we



defined two dominant frames of negative discourse: the first, status and identity disputes, while the second is the perspective of membership in the European Union in locally created perceptions. We have shown that the main fear of the leaders who do not support the “Open Balkan” is that this initiative would further challenge their sovereignty over the unfinished processes of state and nation building, status and identity disputes, as well as the created idea about the current position of their country in the process of joining the European Union.

The paper did not analyze the positive discourses about the “Open Balkan” that move within the political concepts of “erasing borders”, “permanent peace”, “regional progress”... Our intention was to demystify opposition to regional integration and the concept of integration in general. We draw the conclusion that regional initiatives and EU accession are only declaratively supported in relation to the open aspiration for sovereign management over status and identity issues in the mentioned case studies.

Regional initiatives such as the “Open Balkan” and the Berlin Process share the fate of failure until long-term solutions to bilateral disputes are found. The same applies to the process of European integration. In the absence of local ownership of the processes and responsibility for the political decisions of the leaders of the Western Balkans, the prospect of membership remains an irrational political goal. The leaders of the region also ignore the fact that the formal policy of enlargement, which has as its goal the full membership of the candidate state in the EU, has turned into a process of accession without membership (Samardžić 2018, 680).

The Western Balkan identity within some of the regional initiatives becomes impossible because “regional cooperation is seen as a necessity (in the context of European integration) rather than as a confirmation of the existing ‘inherited’ and strong economic, cultural and other ties that objectively exist in this part of Europe” (Đukanović and Dašić 2021, 629). In the end, the discourse analysis showed that there are two completely different views of European integration. While the protagonists of the “Open Balkan” point out that “a better connected region of the Western Balkans will integrate faster and more successfully into the EU” (Radio Slobodna Evropa (Edi Rama) 2020), opponents perceive this initiative as a direct obstacle to further European integration.

Through a critical discourse analysis, we defined the main messages that create social and political reality in the countries of the Western Balkans that do not want to join the “Open Balkan”

initiative. For further research, the question remains open: what could be the consequences of asymmetric Western Balkan regional integration between countries that do not have disputes with each other, such as Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia? Also, can regional initiatives, despite negative perceptions, be a platform for overcoming status and identity disputes? Especially if one looks at the consequences for the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina if the authorities in Kosovo\* join the “Open Balkan” initiative.

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## **ИНТЕГРАЦИЈА VS. СУВЕРЕНИЗАЦИЈА. „ОТВОРЕНИ БАЛКАН” У ОКВИРИМА СТАТУСНИХ И ИДЕНТИТЕТСКИХ СПОРОВА**

### **Сажетак**

Рад се бави иницијативом „Отворени Балкан” са намером да кроз критичку анализу дискурса установи доминирајуће позиције земаља Западног Балкана о овом облику регионалне сарадње. Аутори ће показати да су политички дискурси према регионалној интеграцији, са једне стране, производ унутрашњег недовршеног процеса изградње државе и нације, док су са друге, директна последица отворених билатералних питања и одсуства јасне перспективе чланства у Европској унији. У раду се доказује да доминирајући негативни дискурс о иницијативи „Отворени Балкан” поставља знак једнакости између регионалне интеграције и страха од губитка суверености како над унутрашњим политичким процесима, тако и над путем европских интеграција.

**Кључне речи:** „Отворени Балкан”, регионална интеграција, изградња државе, изградња нације, европске интеграције, Босна и Херцеговина, Црна Гора, Косово\*

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