



BERLIN PROCESS AND OPEN BALKANS INITIATIVE, IMPACT ON
THE ALBANIAN INTEGRATION IN EUROPEAN UNION

MASTER THESIS

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TIRANA, ALBANIA

September 2023

BERLIN PROCESS AND OPEN BALKANS INITIATIVE, IMPACT ON
THE ALBANIAN INTEGRATION IN EUROPEAN UNION

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Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of Requirement for the Degree of Master of Science in
Political Science and International Relations

EPOKA UNIVERSITY

2023

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ABSTRACT

In today's interdependent and increasingly interconnected world, collaboration across regions has become crucial, especially for developing nations. Numerous regional attempts have been made to close the vast gap between the expectations and realities for the Western Balkans' future in Europe in response to the EU enlargement weariness. The Berlin Process and Open Balkans are now two efforts that stand out and, in a sense, compete in the Western Balkans. The European viewpoint and the development of regional collaboration are highlighted by both efforts, the paper analyzes the real potential of these two initiatives. There is employed content and comparison analysis for that objective. This study examines the primary themes and characters included in the initiative's public declarations and evaluates how closely they adhere to and relate to the regional European integration processes. For the purpose of comparison, the paper utilized content and comparative analysis. It's critical to remember that the benefits of these initiatives can vary depending on the degree of participation, the rate of implementation, the overall geopolitical context, and domestic policies from the perspective of Albania and how both have aided the process of EU integration. We are currently examining whether or not the Open Balkan initiative, which was introduced as a complementary measure to assist the Berlin Process in becoming more focused on the Western Balkans, was successful for Albania and what the benefits were in the long run.

Keywords: Open Balkan, Western Balkans, Berlin Process, EU enlargement, Regional European integration processes.

PROCESI I BERLINIT DHE NISMA E BALLKANIT TË HAPUR, NDIKIMI NË INTEGRIMIN E SHQIPËRISË NË BASHKIMIN EVROPIAN

ABSTRAKT

Në botën e sotme të ndërvarur dhe gjithnjë e më të ndërlidhur, bashkëpunimi ndërmjet rajoneve është bërë vendimtar, veçanërisht për vendet në zhvillim. Përprojekte të shumta rajonale kanë filluar për të mbyllur hendekun e madh midis pritshmërive dhe realiteteve për të ardhmen e Ballkanit Perëndimor në Evropë, në përgjigje të lodhjes nga zgjerimi i BE-së. Procesi i Berlinit dhe Ballkani i Hapur janë tani dy përprojekte që dallohen dhe, në një farë kuptimi, konkurrojnë në Ballkanin Perëndimor. Pikëpamja evropiane dhe zhvillimi i bashkëpunimit rajonal theksohen nga të dyja përprojekjet. Për të ndihmuar vendet e Ballkanit Perëndimor të afrohen më shumë me parimet e Bashkimit Evropian dhe të ecin përpara në rrugën e tyre drejt anëtarësimit, si dhe për të forcuar dhe lehtësuar bashkëpunimin rajonal midis kombeve të ndryshme, punimi analizon potencialin real të këtyre dy nismave. Për qëllime krahasimi, në këtë kerkim shkencor u përdor analiza krahasuese e përmbajtjes. Është kritike të kujtojmë se përfitimet e këtyre nismave mund të ndryshojnë në varësi të shkallës së pjesëmarrjes, shkallës së zbatimit, kontekstit të përgjithshëm gjeopolitik dhe politikave të brendshme nga këndvështrimi i Shqipërisë dhe se si të dyja kanë ndihmuar procesin e integritimit në BE. Aktualisht po shqyrtojmë nëse nisma e Ballkanit të Hapur, e cila u prezantua si një masë plotësuese për të ndihmuar procesin e Berlinit për t'u fokusuar më shumë në Ballkanin Perëndimor, ishte apo jo e suksesshme për Shqipërinë dhe cilat ishin përfitimet në terma afatgjatë.

Fjalët kyçe: Ballkani i Hapur, Ballkani Perëndimor, Procesi i Berlinit, Zgjerimi i BE-së, Proceset Rajonale të Integritimit Evropian.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to all the professors who have supported and helped me during my five years at EPOKA University, especially my esteemed professor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lisen Bashkurti. It is both an honor and a privilege to have had the opportunity to work alongside you and to benefit from your guidance as my supervisor on this challenging assignment. With your mentorship and unwavering support, I am confident that my thesis will achieve success. I am deeply appreciative of your composure and patience, qualities that define your character. Working closely with you has been a pleasure.

I also want to express my gratitude to my friends who have stood by my side, supporting and sharing their ideas to assist me in shaping my thesis. Your support and companionship during the difficult moments I encountered throughout my years at EPOKA University have been invaluable. Last but certainly not least, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my family, who are my steadfast partners on this academic journey. Your unwavering presence, support, and the trust you have in me have been my pillars of strength.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this Master's Thesis, titled Berlin Process and Open Balkans Initiative, Impact on the Albanian Integration in the European Union, is based on my original work except for citations and quotations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that this thesis has not been previously or concurrently submitted for the award of any degree, at EPOKA University, or any other university or institution.

Luisa Tare

09 September 2023

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EU	European Union
WB	Western Balkans
SP	Socialist Party
WBIF	Western Balkans Investment Framework
SPAK	Special Anti-Corruption Structure
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
SEETO	South-East Europe Transport Observatory
SDSM	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia
MDSD	Most Different Systems Design
MSSD	Most Similar Systems Design

INTRODUCTION

For a very long time, the historical, geographical, and socioeconomic environment of the Balkans has been highly complex. Due to governments promoting regional cooperation and integration, regionalism has a significant impact on international events and world politics. The European Union is one of regionalism's most successful examples. The several levels or corporate fields that the nations decide to agree upon include security, trade, education, the environment, politics, social issues, the economy, and others. With the creation of the European Union and other regional projects over the past few decades, efforts have been made to promote stability, peace, and growth in the region. The Berlin Process and Open Balkans are now two efforts in the Western Balkans that stand out and, in a sense, compete with one another. Both projects highlight the European viewpoint and the intensification of regional collaboration. On the one hand, the possibility of entering the European Union seems too far off, unknown, and rife with difficulties for the majority of the region's governments.

On the contrary, regional collaboration is accelerating as a result of multiple recent agreements. However, certain Western Balkans nations have so far refrained from joining the Open Balkans. In a comparison with the Berlin Process, the paper examines the true capabilities of the Open Balkans and the Berlin Process, initiative in terms of enhancing and supporting regional cooperation between the various countries as well as opportunities for Western Balkans countries to move closer to the European Union's tenets and make progress toward joining it. As an adjunct to the EU's more complex approach to expansion, the Berlin Process originated as a mini-lateral project. It exemplifies "change as addition,". However, the Berlin Process was only supposed to last through 2018. Greater flexibility is possible thanks to its unique structure and shaky institutionalization, but continuity and consistency are still up for debate.

In addition, the Berlin Process runs largely on the basis of the willing participation of participating countries, whereas the EU's enlargement plan encourages technocratic methods and the adoption of conditionality. The methodology of the Berlin Process departs significantly from that of the EU in this regard. The EU and the area welcome the Berlin Process as an idea that gives the enlargement process a fresh outlook and drive. With the Berlin Process, the emphasis moved from regional cooperation and reconciliation to EU entry. Since then, gaining membership in the EU has become an unattainable dream, while regional cooperation, peacemaking, and the development of their economies have taken center stage for the WB6. In particular, the Berlin Process is an initiative with initial economic objectives that should in fact indirectly influence the outcome of other, more specifically political hurdles encountered by the Western Balkan partners by building mutual trust among the ruling classes in the area. The current state of affairs is such that political relationships influence economic flows and vice versa. In this context, the Berlin Process's function as a catalyst for the Western Balkans' presently unpredictable integration into the European Union represents a definition of this process that could be demonstrated or dismissed contingent upon whether the achievement of its objectives as an effort will be followed by the Western Balkans' partners becoming members of the EU. It has given regional cooperation a positive boost, especially through its projects, which are anticipated to have a social and economic effect that will enhance the individual countries' ambitions to join the EU.

The Open Balkans Initiative is a particular effort that has attracted a lot of attention recently. The Western Balkan nations have recommitted themselves through the Open Balkans Initiative to advancing economic integration, political relations, and regional collaboration. This ambitious project intends to build on the advancements made in the integration processes of the region and address the remaining issues impeding its full potential. The Open Balkans Initiative aims to expand chances for economic growth, improve regional stability, and foster tighter links between the participating countries by fostering an atmosphere of openness, cooperation, and mutual trust. The Open Balkans Initiative was founded as a result of a number of important elements and motivations. The Open Balkans Project came into being as a result of several important factors, including, the promotion of regional stability and security, Open Balkans Initiative can act as a stepping stone toward EU integration, reconciliation, and resolution of historical issues, encourage economic development, facilitate trade, and possibilities for investment,

regional integration, accelerate economic growth, and ease cross-border trade by improving transportation systems, energy connection settings, and technological infrastructure. It's essential to remember that the precise objectives and drivers underlying the Open Balkans Initiative may differ and that other variables might also be at play. This thesis will thoroughly study the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative, along with their historical background, underlying goals, prospective regional effects, and the indication it has on the integration of Albania into the European Union. This study aims to shed light on the major factors that led to the creation of the Open Balkans Initiative, evaluate its potential influence on efforts at regional integration, and assess the opportunities and challenges related to its implementation by conducting a thorough analysis of the initiative, political, social, economic, and environmental factors. The geopolitical importance of this region of Europe keeps both options up for discussion. Many might argue that the solution lies in the EU's inability to do more because the history of the last two decades has not been particularly encouraging in this regard, from expansion fatigue to the "widening vs. deepening" issue.

The Western Balkan nations and their ongoing bilateral issues put the EU's ability to solve problems to the test, making it more difficult for the EU to operate effectively outside of its borders. The most pressing query and worry is whether or not "Open Balkans" is promoted or marketed to national audiences as a substitute for European integration. This causes a significant rift in public opinion in Albania because, while the government vehemently rejects any alternative path and maintains that "Open Balkans" is only intended to hasten the nation's admission into the EU, the opposition and some media outlets believe otherwise by the Western Balkan nations and their interstate conflicts, which limit the EU's ability to operate effectively outside of its boundaries. There is no denying the desire for change in the Western Balkans, but the course of change is still up for debate. None of these initiatives, in our view, will succeed. These two regional initiatives' fundamental problem is their intended outcome. In other words, the primary question that arose with the establishment of the Berlin Process as well as the official launch of the Open Balkans was, "Will this attempt accelerate the European integration of the Balkans or is it an alternative plan for being a full member in the European Union?" We will try to give an answer to this question.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 How do Open Balkans and the Berlin Process contribute to Albania's EU integration and its adherence to EU standards?

Since 2014, Albania has been considered a prospective member of the EU. The Commission has pushed the notion that Albania and North Macedonia are prepared to begin accession negotiations with the Union during the last few years. The Western Balkans' integration has experienced ups and downs since the EU Summit in Thessaloniki prioritized it in 2003, and the nations in the region are still having difficulty assimilating into the bloc (Tota, 2023). Croatia became the second Balkan state to become a member of the association after Slovenia in 2004; it appears to be the final one for quite some time. When Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, imposed a five-year suspension on expansion, the EU vision reached its lowest points in 2014 and "echoed skepticism within the WB countries" (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2018).

The problem reached a climax in October 2019 when France, the Netherlands, and Denmark vehemently opposed beginning negotiations regarding membership with the two countries, particularly Albania (Laska, 2022). Member States had not previously agreed to this. France presented two main justifications for their veto at the October 2019 Council meeting: first, the EU must strengthen its current policies and structures before including any new members, secondly, the proposed expansion policy and negotiations for the membership process are flawed because there is no assurance that the candidate state will adhere to the Copenhagen criteria, uphold the rule of law, and the EU. France's decision was primarily motivated by the belief that, once a country joins the EU, there are insufficient mechanisms to address afterward regresses in democratic norms and the enforcement of the law (Smith 2019), such concerns are relevant given the current developments in Poland and Hungary.

A controversial trend resulted from this distance from membership prospects and the realization that long-term stability and transformation in the region could be best obtained via economic expansion and increased collaboration among nations. This trend led to the establishment of the referred to as Berlin process (European Parliament 2016), a German action led by Chancellor Angela Merkel with the goal of reviving regional hopes for EU integration. However, it has been hotly contested whether this project served as a replacement for or addition to the EU's enlargement goal. Although it was suggested that a stepped-up EU enlargement effort could aid the Berlin process in facilitating the Western Balkans' impending membership while enhancing regional cooperation between them, it was acknowledged that the previous function was certainly the motivating factor behind decreasing enthusiasm for further enlargement (Ruci, 2022). But things didn't always seem to go according to plan. Although the former function was undoubtedly the catalyst for further enlargement in the wake of waning enthusiasm, it was suggested that an intensified EU enlargement effort may aid the Berlin process in allowing the admission of the Western Balkans while improving regional cooperation between them. But things didn't always seem to go according to plan.

According to (Musliu, 2021), the EU needs to be reformed in order to support the eurozone and its processes for making decisions in responding more quickly to crises, as brought out more clearly by the COVID-19 pandemic crises. These are legitimate arguments when one considers the regress of liberal democratic values in some Member States. From the WB nations' point of view, the process of integration has long appeared to be a unilateral one, relying primarily on each country seeking membership in the EU (Brezor, 2022). This trend has gradually changed to a regional one since the Berlin Process was established in 2014, emphasizing a regional mentality that influences the international approaches of the WB states and is based on the values of promoting peace, friendly interactions with neighbors, and regional collaboration in politics and the economy. In this regard, Albania deserves to be mentioned as a member of the region whose government saw regional cooperation as one of the pillars of foreign policy within the Governance Program 2013-2017 (Beshku 2016), while aligning its strategy to the changes of its main objectives with "regional collaboration" and European Integration in its most current Governance Program 2017-2021 (Qeveria e Republikës së Shqipërisë 2017). However, it is crucial to examine the changes on both sides in a comparative analysis, looking at the country's reforms and the development of the nation's foreign policy from one perspective and the EU

Enlargement initiatives from the other. Albania has served as a useful example in this regard before. According to (Ailish 2001), "Albania-EU relations constitute a great example for analyzing, on the one hand, the efforts of transition states to foster their external relations and on the other hand the development of the EU's external relationships between nations in its regional influence." Despite praising Albania's dedication and steady development, the EU made it clear that the completion of the ongoing judicial reform and the maintenance of a positive cross-party political dialogue are the two main requirements for the next stage, which is the commencement of discussions (Hoxha, 2022). "The most challenging problem to solve is judicial reform". The foundation of the entire procedure is the rule of law (Steinmeier, 2014). Thus, through the International Monitoring Operation (EEAS 2016), the European Commission is helping Albania perform a rigorous and reliable screening procedure. (Ailish, 2019) "External relations of nations under its geographical influence".

A package of changes that altered a quarter of the nation's Constitution served as the foundation for comprehensive and intricate justice reform. The main tenets of the ongoing reform are summarized by the following pillars: measures to fight corruption, including by establishing a new Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK); measures to reduce the influence of the legislature; measures to increase the effectiveness and independence of the High Court, as well as measures to increase the autonomy, neutrality, and transparency of the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Justice and Prosecution system (Hoxhaj, 2021). The heads of state of the Western Balkan countries, along with high-level officials from the European Union and other stakeholders, attended a series of summits on the Western Balkans that were arranged by the Berlin Process. These summits served as a forum for conversations about international integration, economic growth, and the rule of law. The Western Balkans Summit, which took place in Trieste, Italy, in 2017, saw the adoption of the Trieste Declaration by the participating nations, which underlined the importance of improved regional connectivity and collaboration. The proclamation emphasized the value of regional people-to-people relationships, infrastructural development, and energy cooperation (Hoxhaj 2021). The Berlin Process and the Trieste Declaration provided a strong foundation for the Open Balkans Initiative, which was introduced on October 30, 2020. During a conference held in the Serbian city of Novi Sad, the heads of state of Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia all signed the initiative. It aspires to expand infrastructural connections, lower trade

barriers, deepen regional collaboration, and strengthen economic links among the participating nations (Semenov 2022). An important step toward enhancing regional collaboration, integration in the economy, and EU conformity in the Balkans is represented by the Open Balkans Initiative. The Berlin Process provided the groundwork for it, and the participating nations have all agreed to cooperate in achieving their common objectives and aspirations. The Open Balkans Initiative has the opportunity to boost Albania's integration into the EU by lowering the bar for entry into the EU and encouraging compliance with its rules (Laska, 2022). Here are some essential factors to remember: compliance with EU standards, the Open Balkans Initiative, while encouraging member countries to align existing regulations, procedures, and laws with those of the EU, includes Albania as one of the participating countries. This alignment is necessary to meet EU admission requirements and to guarantee conformity with the EU's legal and regulatory framework (Ruci, 2022).

Moreover, it busts reforms' implementation, the initiative promotes the adoption of significant reforms in the areas of governance, human rights, the rule of law, and market competitiveness. Participating in the Open Balkans Initiative will allow Albania to show its commitment to reform. According to (Kouchner 2019), Albania is a good example of a reformer under EU supervision and under the influence of regional initiatives, in three areas: regional relations (good relations with its neighbors following the Berlin Process series), domestic policy (justice system reform), and foreign policy (full alignment with CFSP). This is because the rule of law is a crucial precondition for a stable society, the consolidation of democracy, and the economic growth of a country on its way to the EU of the law (Smith 2019), such concerns are relevant given the current developments in Poland and Hungary. A controversial trend resulted from this distance from membership prospects and the realization that long-term stability and transformation in the region could be best secured through economic growth and raised regional cooperation. This trend led to the establishment of the known Berlin process (European Parliament 2016), a German effort led by Chancellor Angela Merkel with the goal of reviving regional hopes for EU integration (Brezor, 2022). However, it has been hotly contested whether this project served as a replacement for or addition to the EU's enlargement goal. While the former function was undoubtedly the driving force behind waning enthusiasm for further enlargement, it was suggested that a redoubled EU enlargement effort could help the Berlin process facilitate the membership of the Western Balkans while strengthening

regional cooperation between them (Tulun, 2022). However, things did not always appear to go as planned. It was suggested that a stepped-up EU enlargement effort may assist the Berlin process in facilitating the integration of the Western Balkans while enhancing regional cooperation between them, even though the former function was clearly the catalyst for additional enlargement in the wake of declining enthusiasm. But it didn't seem like everything always went according to plan (Tota, 2023). The EU needs to be reformed in order to support the eurozone and its processes for making decisions in responding more quickly to crises, as brought out more clearly by the COVID-19 pandemic crises. These are legitimate arguments when one considers the regress of liberal democratic values in some Member States.

From the WB nations' point of view, the process of integration has long appeared to be a unilateral one, relying primarily on each country seeking membership in the EU (Hoxha, 2022). Since the Berlin Process was launched in 2014, this trend has gradually shifted to a regional one, placing more emphasis on a regional mindset that shapes the international strategies of the WB states centered around the principles of peacemaking, good neighborly interactions, and regional cooperation in politics and economy. In this regard, Albania deserves to be addressed as an integral part of the region whose leadership considered regional partnership as one of the pillars of foreign policy within the Governance Program 2013-2017 (Beshku 2016). In contrast, the government's strategy with regard to the adaptation of its main objectives with "regional collaboration" and European Integration was aligned in the government's most recent Governance Program 2017-2021 (Qeveria e Republikës së Shqipërisë 2017). The nation's reforms and the evolution of its foreign policy should be viewed from one perspective, while the EU Enlargement measures should be viewed from the other, in order to properly assess the developments on both sides. Before, Albania was a helpful case study in this area. According to (Ailish 2001), "Albania-EU relations constitute a great example for analyzing, on the one hand, the efforts of transition states to foster their external relations and on the other hand the development of the EU's external relationships between nations in its regional influence. In order to address the numerous political, economic, and social concerns in the region, the process started in 2014 and has since encompassed a number of summits and meetings. Albania has not received financial aid from the Berlin Process directly, but it has benefited in a number of other ways. The Western Balkan countries'

political collaboration and conversation have been facilitated by the Berlin Process. These discussions have aided in fostering the trust that is necessary for peace and conflict resolution among the regional nations. Albania has taken part in these discussions and profited from the more favorable political environment in the area. (Musliu, 2022). Supporting the Western Balkan countries' integration into the European Union (EU) is one of the main objectives of the Berlin Process. Like other Western Balkan countries, Albania hopes to join the EU. The Berlin Process has given Albania a venue to show its dedication to EU membership and to gain support and direction in this process. The Western Balkans' improved connectivity and infrastructure have been a major emphasis of the Berlin Process. This covers initiatives in the fields of transportation, energy, and online connectivity. The development of Albania's economy and regional trade may be positively impacted by improved connectivity and infrastructure. (Tulun, 2022). The Berlin Process emphasizes the importance of economic development. Through the introduction of new markets and trade prospects for its enterprises, Albania can gain from efforts to enhance economic cooperation and trade within the Western Balkans.

People-to-people interactions and exchanges have benefited from the Berlin Process in the area. This can help with cultural exchanges, educational possibilities, and collaboration across a range of industries, all of which can advance the cultural and social development of Albania (Keil, 2023). High-ranking representatives from the European Union and other parties having an interest in the Western Balkans attended a series of summits on the region that included the heads of state of the Western Balkan countries. These summits served as a forum for conversations about international integration, economic growth, and rule of law (Tota, 2023). The Western Balkans Summit, which took place in Trieste, Italy, in 2017, saw the adoption of the Trieste Declaration by the participating nations, which underlined the importance of improved regional connectivity and collaboration. The proclamation emphasized the value of regional people-to-people relationships, infrastructural development, and energy cooperation (Hoxhaj 2021). The Berlin Process and the Trieste Declaration provided a strong foundation for the Open Balkans Initiative, which was introduced on October 30, 2020. During a conference held in the Serbian city of Novi Sad, the heads of state of Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia all signed the initiative. It aspires to expand infrastructural connections, lower trade barriers, deepen regional collaboration, and strengthen economic links among the participating nations (Semenov 2022). An important step toward enhancing regional collaboration, integration

in the economy, and EU conformity in the Balkans is represented by the Open Balkans Initiative. The Berlin Process provided the groundwork for it, and the participating nations have all agreed to cooperate in achieving their common objectives and aspirations (Ruci, 2022). The Open Balkans Initiative has the opportunity to boost Albania's integration into the EU by lowering the bar for entry into the EU and encouraging compliance with its rules. Here are some essential factors to remember: compliance with EU standards, the Open Balkans Initiative, while encouraging member countries to align existing regulations, procedures, and laws with those of the EU, includes Albania as one of the participating countries (Musliu, 2022). This alignment is necessary to meet EU admission requirements and to guarantee conformity with the EU's legal and regulatory framework. Reforms' implementation: The initiative promotes the adoption of significant reforms in the areas of governance, human rights, the rule of law, and market competitiveness (Tota, 2023).

2.1.1 Does the Berlin Process and Open Balkans truly pave the way for Albania's European integration?

The time has come to pick a side, giving equal weight to the Open Balkan Initiative and the Berlin Process. From a practical standpoint, the Open Balkan project appears to be highly enticing, but from a functionalist standpoint, the Berlin Process is the only path that the countries of the Western Balkans should take (Brezor, 2022). Even though there is no difference between these two processes from a normative standpoint, and their underlying ideas are quite congruent, the first one ignores the EU while the second one develops using EU directives (Pano, 2022). The goal is to show that although both of these procedures may seem similar, they are actually quite different (Vjosa, 2021). The tension is growing in this regard when we consider that Bosnia and Montenegro also have unresolved bilateral issues with Serbia, in addition to the simple fact that every country in the EU acknowledges each other while Serbia does not in the Open Balkan project. This appears less like regional collaboration and more like a desire for dominance all through the entire region from a geopolitical vantage point (Tota, 2023). The geopolitical importance of this region of Europe keeps it up for debate regarding both options. Many scholars may concur that the correct answer lies in the EU's inaction because its history over the past two decades has not been particularly encouraging in this regard, from expanding the EU fatigue to the "widening vs. deepening" dilemma (Tulun, 2022). The Western Balkan

nations and their ongoing bilateral issues put the EU's ability to solve problems to the test, making it more difficult for the EU to operate effectively outside of its borders. There is no denying the desire for change in the Western Balkans. But the course of change is still up for debate (Laska, 2022). The Berlin Process began as an intergovernmental diplomatic initiative and set out a number of broad and ambitious goals, including enhancing regional integration, addressing bilateral disputes for peaceful coexistence and stability, enhancing good governance, implementing reforms to increase the autonomy of the judiciary and competitiveness, and accelerating investments, economic growth, and connectivity in the region (Ginali, 2023). As we can see, the initiative's main focus was on both economic and integration into the region as well as political conflict. In this regard, the initiative proved to be initially successful given the fragile bilateral relations among Western Balkan countries.

There was an enhancement of its ties between Serbia and Albania, which opened the door for the first visit of an Albanian prime minister to Belgrade in 68 years by Edi Rama in November 2014. Regarding this, diplomacy won out in 2018 with the Prespa Agreement, which resolved a protracted name disagreement between Greece and Macedonia and was a need for Macedonia to join the EU (Brezor, 2022). We were led to believe that the Western Balkans' ties were quickly improving, but the EU's ability to solve problems and carry out effective foreign policy are still being put to the test by the "Serbia and Kosovo question (Kamberi, 2021)." The Berlin Process criteria are not yet satisfied if one were to check the appropriate box. This statement is oversimplified scientifically, but the result does match reality. Due to the EU's inability to promote efficient regional cooperation in the Western Balkans as a result of the rigid bilateral relations between the Western Balkan countries, the public is sometimes confronted with conditions about border adjustments, non-papers, territorial exchange, and land swaps, all of which are dangerous in their very nature and can only cause instability because the vacuum created (Hoxha, 2022). The Berlin Process's work was hampered by bilateral conflicts and overt cross-border animosity, which damaged the positive attitude required for quickly establishing agreements. The most obvious issue is that the enlargement process will be prolonged by the need for unanimity at the European level, which is why the Berlin Process was established (Zappi, 2022). Angela Merkel, the chancellor of Germany, made it clear that her country is going to keep backing the region's EU goals, and that this commitment will be carried out by means of the Berlin Process, the main diplomatic initiative that was started in 2014 with the aim of

maintaining the momentum of EU integration. In this sense, she emphasized that the EU is solely dedicated to the Berlin Process and to no other regional effort that runs outside of the EU framework (Ngresi, 2022). Despite the fact that the Berlin Process significantly altered the political and economic climate in the Western Balkans, it appears that some of these nations still require direct assistance from the EU because regional initiatives and local mechanisms are unable to impose or monitor reforms in the region. According to this pessimistic perspective, the Berlin Process failed when Jean-Claude Juncker, the head of the EU Commission, put a five-year ban on the union's accession of new members; at that point, Euroscepticism grew within Western Balkan countries argues (Tota, 2023).

The decision by the French and Dutch to oppose the beginning of EU accession discussions with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019—despite the fact that the two nations had enjoyed candidate status since 2014 and 2005, respectively—marked the beginning of the expansion weariness. This choice sparked confusion and outrage throughout the Western Balkans and the EU (Ozturk, 2021). The Berlin Process is genuinely in a twilight zone right now, and whenever scholars attempt to appraise the situation, they frequently raise the questions of "how" and "why." (Kamberi, 2021). These inquiries mark the beginning of the look for factors that influence outcomes. It is at this point that the Western Balkan nations have the option of choosing an alternative path that is independent of EU integration. We reached the renowned "Open Balkan initiative" via this new path (Laska, 2022). Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic is a strong supporter of the Open Balkan plan, formerly known as "Mini-Schengen," which now consists of Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia. Although some disagree, its proponents claim that it is compliant with the Common Regional Market of the German-initiated Berlin Process (Bushati, 2022). In light of this, the Open Balkans concept seemed to imply that the EU is no longer the exclusive source of influence in the area. In order to better understand the reasoning behind both procedures, it would be helpful to first go over some background information. The Open Balkan effort is directly related to the Western Balkans themselves, who will continue to be "the masters" of the accords, unlike the Berlin Process, which was closely linked to the EU (Ginali, 2023).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. The analytical lens through regional cooperation endeavors

The Open Balkans Initiative and the Berlin Process must be explained within a theoretical framework since it offers a systematic and analytical lens through which to comprehend and evaluate these regional cooperation endeavors (Ejdus, 2020). The Open Balkans Initiative and the Berlin Process can be analyzed under the following theoretical frameworks like, Security Complex Theory which is a concept that examines how various states' concerns about security are interconnected within a given geographic region. It evaluates how the Open Balkans Initiative promotes regional stability and collaboration while addressing common security issues like organized crime, border conflicts, and ethnic tensions (Demirtos, 2022). Another theory is the Soft Power and Norm Diffusion theories, examine how ideas, norms, and values influence international relations. They evaluate the Open Balkans Initiative in terms of how it fosters common values, democratic ideals, and goals for European integration among participant nations.

According to (Pano, 2022) this approach assesses how well the effort has fostered a shared regional identity and encouraged at fostering a shared regional identity and encouraging cooperative norms. Moreover, theories of regional integration are the ones aids in understanding the motivations and processes underlying regional cooperation projects by relying on theories like neo-functionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and constructivism. It explores regional social, political, and economic facets and sheds light on the successes and difficulties of integration attempts (Ejdus, 2019). According to (Demirtos, 2022) Comparative Regionalism is another theory that can help us compare the Open Balkans Initiative and the Berlin Process with other regional cooperation frameworks to identify commonalities, differences, and factors that contribute to their success or failure.

3.2 Using regionalism theory to dissect Open Balkans, Berlin Process, and their role in Albanian EU integration.

The regionalism theory is a conceptual framework for understanding international relations that emphasizes the function and influence of regional organizations, projects, and collaboration on state behavior and global consequences (Koirova, 2022). We have to take into account the following elements and ideas when utilizing regionalism theory to describe how the Open Balkans Initiative and the Berlin Process have affected Albania, elements such as: Integration and cooperation across the region: because this theory of regionalism places a strong emphasis on encouraging regional cooperation and integration. The Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative both seek to promote political and economic cooperation among Balkan nations (Zappi, 2022). Albania's involvement in this situation is a reflection of its dedication to regionalism and its desire to collaborate with its neighbors to achieve shared objectives.

In order to advance bilateral and regional economic collaboration among Western Balkan nations while they wait for developments on EU enlargement, the original plan was to establish a scaled-down version of the Schengen Area in the Balkans. The Serbian authorities announced this concept on October 10, 2019, in Novi Sad, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania - Aleksandar Vučić, Zoran Zaev, and Edi Rama, respectively, signed the mini-Schengen declaration (Halili, 2021). The four essential freedoms of products, capital, services, and people are the cornerstones of the mini-Schengen. The countries of Albania and North Macedonia, who had been waiting to start the process of accession talks with the EU for years but had been put on hold despite significant efforts on both a domestic and regional level, are primarily responsible for this show's motivations, as I previously stated in bold type (Zappi, 2022). According to (Pano, 2022) is very important to consider also the Economic integration, such as the lowering of trade barriers and the development of a unified economic zone, is a typical component of regionalism. By gaining better access to regional markets, lowering tariffs, and harmonizing trade laws, these actions may have benefited Albania's economic growth and growth potential.

(Ejdus, 2019) stresses that Regionalism can also support regional stability and security. The efforts' promotion of a decrease in regional tensions and conflicts may have helped Albania as a member. Greater regional stability can foster a climate that is more hospitable to investment and economic growth. On the other hand, the notion of regionalism takes into account how norms and practices spread across a region, named as the Norm Diffusion (Ozturk, 2022). The acceptance of standards for democratic governance, economic liberalization, and collaboration in Albania's internal policies and practices may have resulted from participation in these projects. The strongest feature in these cases is cooperation on politics. Political collaboration on local issues is a common component of regionalism. Albania's participation in these projects may have facilitated diplomatic communication and cooperation with neighboring nations on common problems, enhancing its regional stature. This theory gives a huge importance to the external actors' impact. The Berlin Process was influenced by outside parties, including the European Union (EU), according to regionalism theory.

Albania's participation in these programs demonstrates its agreement with the desires and stances of these outside parties, which may influence its international relations and trajectory for development. In the geopolitical reality of today, you literally cannot study the ongoing surroundings without being affected by global events as (Ginali, 2023) states. Contrarily, there is also strong evidence that the EU's reluctance to play a more active role in the Balkans is the root of the issue. Since Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia vehemently oppose the initiative offered by Rama-Vucic-Zaev, the first issue that comes to our minds is whether the "Open Balkan project" can work without the participation of half of the region. In reality, the situation is a 3 vs. 3 matchups. Albin Kurti, the prime minister of Kosovo, has been the Open Balkan's most vocal critic so far. Kurti, the prime minister of Kosovo, said the following for Euro News Albania: "When they say Open Balkan, open for whom? We would have to join the European Union, not the Russian Federation or China, (Kamberi, 2021). We cannot neglect the importance of the Institutional Development. The establishment of regional organizations or mechanisms to promote cooperation is a common component of regional efforts. Albania may have participated in the creation or development of such institutions, which may have benefited its governance and capacity-building frameworks. This part would have been better explained by Institutional neoliberalism, which places special emphasis on how institutions help governments work together and integrate (Koirova, 2022). It investigates how institutional

mechanisms, such as shared decision-making procedures and common structures for economic integration, encourage regional cooperation within the context of the Open Balkans Initiative.(Keil, 2023), When considering the impact of the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative on Albania from an institutional neoliberal perspective, several key points can be highlighted:Economic Integration and Liberalization, highlighting the importance of international institutions in fostering economic liberalization and integration is highlighted by institutional neoliberalism. The Open Balkans Initiative and the Berlin Process both seek to lower trade restrictions and harmonize legal frameworks in the Balkans in order to promote economic integration(Koirova, 2022). Moreover, Albania is an EU candidate nation, and the European Union (EU) is a significant participant in the Berlin Process. The EU encourages the adoption of EU *acquis* (laws and regulations), market-oriented economic policies, and democratic governance standards. These requirements encourage Albania to implement market-friendly reforms and adhere to EU standards, which are in line with institutional neoliberal ideas (Ejdus, 2019).

Furthermore, Institutional neoliberalism emphasizes the part that institutions play in fostering an environment that is conducive to business. Participation in these projects can boost Albania's economy, draw in foreign investment, and encourage the formation of institutions that uphold property rights and encourage contract enforcement (Ruci, 2022).(Pano, 2022), emphasizes that in order to promote economic cooperation and integration within the Balkans, two regional cooperation regimes have been established: the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative. By taking part in these projects, Albania may strengthen its commercial and economic relations with the area, promoting regional stability and economic progress. Also is important to mention the,EU-Supported Reforms, because the relevance of international institutions in fostering domestic reforms is emphasized by the institutional neoliberal perspective. Albania's involvement in these projects could result in EU-driven reforms, such as enhancements to the rule of law, governance, and market-oriented policies(Koirova, 2022).

As mentioned above, international institutions play a crucial role in spreading norms, according to institutional neoliberalism. (Pano, 2022) argues thatAlbania's participation in these projects has the potential to spread cooperative and market-oriented values, affecting domestic policies and practices. (Keil, 2023) stresses that, by harmonizing trade laws and regulations, Albania's involvement in the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative

can increase its access to EU markets. This is consistent with institutional neoliberalism's emphasis on the part that institutions play in promoting cross-border economic connections.

In conclusion, participation by Albania in the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative can be considered as instruments that support economic liberalization, regional collaboration, and the adoption of market-oriented policies from an institutional neoliberal perspective (Zappi, 2022). These programs give Albania the chance to harmonize with EU standards and regulations, draw in investment, and promote economic expansion. The degree to which these measures affect Albania, nevertheless, also depends on the domestic policies of the nation, its capacity to enact changes, and the overall geopolitical environment in the region (Demirtos, 2022).

4.METHODOLOGY

A wide-ranging and thorough evaluation of the literature is used to perform this study. The approach employed in information gathering for this study includes a review of official documents, information gleaned from various history books, and the explanation and analysis of the material gathered. The purpose is to aid the reader in better comprehending the responses to the queries that form the basis of this research. Data collection is realized by document analysis, the application of various regulations, and the interpretation of the law. A case study is what it is because of the qualitative technique and the fact that we are concentrating on the case of the Albanian state. Through this research we aim to explain and answer to the research question that guides this research, how does the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative enhance Albania's integration into the EU, particularly in terms of fulfilling EU admission requirements and adhering to EU standards?

To have a clear comparative analysis between the Open Balkans Initiative and the Berlin Process, I will use two popular research techniques in comparative politics, the "Most Similar Systems Design" (MSSD) and the "Most Different Systems Design" (MDSD), which are used to examine the influence of variables on political outcomes. These methods enable researchers to select cases that are either highly similar or very dissimilar in terms of some crucial criteria, thereby assisting in their comprehension of the relationship between variables (Caramani, 2018). Selecting examples that are highly similar in most ways but differ on one or a few important variables is made easier with the aid of MSSD. By keeping other variables constant, the intention is to isolate the influence of particular variables. When you want to understand how a certain variable affects political results while controlling for other aspects, this method is helpful. On the other hand, MDSD entails choosing examples that, while being highly diverse in most respects, share one important variable. Here, understanding how a certain variable behaves in numerous situations is the main objective.

When determining the robustness of a variable's impact or testing the generalizability of a theory, MDSD might be advantageous (Faur, 2008). Both MSSD and MDSD have advantages as well as disadvantages. MSSD enables a more in-depth investigation of the effects of a single variable while controlling for other variables, which can aid in establishing causal links. It might not, however, offer information on how generalizable the results are. On the other hand, MDSD permits broader generalizations but may have trouble identifying the precise impact of a variable due to the numerous contextual variations (Lanckar, 2008). In order to examine the relationship between the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative in the context of Balkan politics, the "Most Similar Systems Design" (MSSD) might help more.

I will choose cases that are highly similar in most respects but differ in terms of their engagement or participation in these initiatives. By keeping other variables constant, this strategy can help us comprehend. I have first determined the main factors of interest: The results or features of Balkan politics, such as interregional collaboration, economic growth, and political stability, are dependent variables. Second, independent variables such as involvement in the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative, and how the Open Balkans Initiative might affect or interact with the Berlin Process. The "Most Different Systems Design" (MDSD) method is used to examine how the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans Initiative relate to one another in the context of Balkan politics by choosing cases that are very different from one another in most ways but have something in common, in this case, participation in both initiatives. This method can assist us in comprehending how these efforts' interactions change depending on the context (Lanckar, 2008).

5. RESULTS

5.1. Reflecting on the real achievements of the Berlin process and the Open Balkans initiative.

5.1.1 Albania's "Berlin Projects"

Throughout the past 25 years, Albania's economy has seen a significant transition. It enlarged the significance of the entrepreneurial community, eliminated laws that hindered corporate development, opened up to international trade, grew more export-oriented, and started to create the institutions necessary for sustaining a market economy (Musliu, 2021). Taking the economy as one of the fixed variables of study these initiatives have led to strong economic growth, significant increases in earnings and living standards, and improved macroeconomic stability, but this is relative, for as long as the other variables remain unchanged. Albania is currently concentrating on a significant number of economic reforms, including the fight against informality and changes to the schooling and professional learning sectors (Ngresi, 2023). The government's attention will continue to be on manufacturing, energy, tourism, agro-industry, education, and services in the years to come. It might be claimed that the "Berlin Process" primarily emphasizes the regional aspect of the interconnectivity projects when it comes to the financing method (Keil, 2023).

This joint venture is a component of the establishment of an East-West electrical transmission corridor linking Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, and Italy is a project of the European Commission (Hoxha, 2022). Since 2006, Albania has been an essential component of the Stabilization and Association Process, which offers the Western Balkans a thorough road map to membership. The signature of the Stabilization and Association Agreement also assumes that the Albanian economy has improved capacity to deal with the competitive advantage of the single market and to fully utilize the resources that are available therein from the point of view of EU economic relations. EU is Albania's main trading partner, and it has close ties to Italy in particular (Koirova, 2022).

The amount of goods Imported and exported by Albania climbed from 86% of Its GDP in 2008 to 92.3% in 2014. With a total of 77.4% of its goods exports and 61.1 percent of its services exports, the EU is still by far Albania's greatest trading partner. The "Berlin Process" provides the WB6 with a singular opportunity to become better organized and coordinated, increasing their leverage in various discussions, not just with the EU but also with other IFIs or international organizations (Tota, 2020). The creation of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the signing of the Regional Roaming Agreement, the Agreement on the Development of a Common Regional Market, and the establishment of the so-called "green lanes" to expedite border procedures with vital supplies throughout the COVID-19 pandemic are the main accomplishments of the Berlin Process. (Halili, 2021) stresses that in terms of politics, the Berlin Process has promoted regional collaboration to address issues of shared importance. The lack of infrastructure, youth unemployment, the economy's low competitiveness and distant prospects of economic convergence with the EU, the slow progress toward peacemaking, bilateral issues, research and education, Roma integration, and environmental challenges are some of the topics covered.

It is also important to move forward with certain aspects of the Common Regional Market action plan (Bushati, 2022). With its neighbors, Albania has a comparable profile and long-term objective: a candidate nation that aspires to be a vital member of the European Union. But the ongoing financial and economic crisis, the influx of immigrants, and the very questions the EU is posing about where it intends to go in the next 10 to 30 years make cooperation with our neighbors even more essential (Musliu, 2021). As it was mentioned above, using (MDS), this method assists us in comprehending how these

efforts' interactions change depending on the context and in relationship with other changeable variables, such as politics and social economic issues (Tota, 2020). As an example of this regional component of national programs, consider Prime Minister Rama's speech in Hong Kong, where he promoted Albania. Finally, and certainly not least, Albania should continue to play its cards well in order to accomplish the previously set goals for successful engagement in the process. The Albanian civil society's expertise, drive, networks, and resources are invaluable assets that should be utilized closely with the governmental (and eventually parliamentary) structures (Kamberi, 2021).

5.1.2 Open Balkans: Opportunities and Challenges originating since the beginning.

With the same goal of the WB6's full membership in the EU, "Open Balkans" would constitute a continuation of the Berlin approach, a complementary approach that would accelerate it up and be considered as a bottom-up effort as opposed to the Berlin-led process, which was regarded as top-down (Zappi, 2022). Olivér Várhelyi, the European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, as well as Gabriel Escobar later praised it as a "great initiative" and suggested that Open Balkans could "be an instrument for speeding up the way towards the European Union." The project encountered conflicting responses from the beginning. It was met with opposition by the other three nations in the region, notably Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo, as this paper will explain (Keil, 2023). Large swaths of the media, the public, and the political opposition in Serbia, Albania, and Northern Macedonia all viewed it with mistrust. Third, it was received with conflicted reactions from the international partners, particularly from Brussels, Washington, DC, and EU member states (Ngresi, 2023). Regardless of what its initial founders said, one of the main reasons was its connection to the Berlin Process. Second, notwithstanding some informal rhetorical support from Montenegro's Prime Minister Abazovic and the attendance of the Serbian delegation, the three other WB6 nations were outright rejected (Hoxha, 2020).

Many individuals have always been doubtful about the long-term effectiveness of "Open Balkans" since it is was never fully institutionalized; it lacks very crucial institutions, such as, a permanent secretariat and an administrative framework to support it. Open Balkan is not yet formally established (Bashkurti, 2022). Every participant member state must fill

positions for a permanent secretariat, permanent organizational structure, and a founding charter. It must have a clear strategy and objectives as well as formalize the gatherings of heads of state, and maybe this is one of the reasons why the Open Balkan initiative wasn't welcomed among the Albanians, but not only, because it wasn't trustworthy, and the leaders who initiated this initiative never shared with the public the goals and the real objectives of this initiative, and more important as (Bushati, 2022) argues, they never shared the strategy or a function plan on how they would make the initiative be productive, never gave information on what were the costs, and the benefits of this initiative (Ruci, 2022). If we have to compare it with other similar regional initiatives, In order to stabilize it as a permanent regional body comparable to CEFTA, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the body of Black Sea Regional Cooperation, etc., it has so far been lacking in these crucial areas such as institutionalization. Furthermore, and this is crucial, it is seen as a direct rival of the Berlin Process, especially by Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro (Kamberi, 2021). The only goal for these nations is complete integration in the European Union. Albania does not appear to have benefited significantly from its Open Balkans participation. For instance, Albania has an annual trade deficit of 130 million euros with Serbia, although it now maintains a trade surplus with the Republic of Kosovo (Hoxha, 2022). Taking into the study a very important variable in the region such as the case of Kosovo and the role it played in this initiative.

Due to the lack of agreement among EU member states and the ambiguities in the dialogue that the EU facilitated, as well as the fact that we spent a lot of time talking about diplomas and license plates but got nowhere because the mediation architecture needed to change and include both, I have consistently observed Serbia's tendency to dodge the Brussels Agreement, particularly Chapter 35 that implies recognition states (Zappi, 2022). Since the EU lacks agreement on enlargement, some scholars contend that Open Balkan is not in opposition to the Berlin Process but rather a tool to speed up the Berlin Process. Similar to this, from a purely economic standpoint, the so-called "economy first approach" of the new regional cooperation could benefit Serbia since it is the region's largest producer (Tota, 2020). To this end, the states opposed to Open Balkan contend that Serbia has an expansionist vision and seeks political influence through economic dominance (Bushati, 2022). As we mentioned above in the study one of the biggest opponents of this initiative has been Albin Kurti, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, has been the Open Balkan's most vocal critic so far. Kurti, stated clearly the ambiguity that follows this initiative: "When

they say Open Balkan, open for whom? We would have to join the European Union, not the Russian Federation or China, (Kamberi, 2021).

In this sense, I think the Open Balkan idea is a publicity gimmick for people like Rama and Vučić to demonstrate their own strength while contrasting it with the EU's weakness in the region. There are assertions that his ambition is greater. (Kamberi, 2021) argues that he views himself as the regional leader, and although being the leader of all Serbs is beneficial in all of that, I believe he will pursue the regional position as soon as it conflicts with it. The Open Balkans gives people a platform to urge the EU, but its probable failure will highlight the incapacity of regional authorities and the necessity of EU oversight (Semenov 2022). As long as the initiative lacks inclusivity and is restricted to only three of the six WB, it is obvious that it is still insufficient and is destined to fail

5.2 Albanian stance on the 'Open Balkans', supporters and critics

To begin with, the 'Open Balkans' concept and all it represents are known to and understood by the Albanian population. This is due to the abundance of information flowing through televisions, newspapers, and websites as well as Prime Minister Rama's personal avenues of communication (Bushati, 2022). Although the opposition has largely been vehemently opposed, the government has invested significantly in promoting this program. The opposition claims that Rama is attempting to inflate and self-promote his contribution to Balkan peace. This presents Serbia with the chance to position itself as a pacifist force in the turbulent Western Balkans. But what makes it unique is that this is the first instance of such intense dissent and opposition on foreign policy issues in Albania (Bushati, 2022). Consensus and accords are alien concepts in Albanian politics, yet disagreements among political parties are uncommon when it comes to foreign affairs. The opposition also maintains that Serbia, having the most dynamic market and marketplaces in the area, benefits from the Open Balkans.

Furthermore, and this is crucial, the opposition accuses Rama and the Socialist administration of putting Kosovo on the altar of promoting tighter ties with Serbia (Kamberi, 2021). This is best illustrated by the Republic of Kosovo's steadfast refusal to attend any "Open Balkans" meetings, which it views primarily as a competing effort to the Western Balkan states' aspirations for EU membership. Former Democratic Party minister

Genc Pollo believes that the entire project is an effort to split apart the three Balkan governments that want to participate in it from the other three (Halili, 2021). The entire process would halt if Kosovo joined the Open Balkans, which is a hypothetical scenario. The split separating Albania and Kosovo appears to be the main concern of Albanian opinion makers who have written on the matter; yet, they do not see any immediate advantages for Albania or the area (Hoxha, 2022). This is either due to a lack of mechanisms or a lack of faith in Serbia, who is seen as the initiative's primary driver from an Albanian perspective. Additionally, Open Balkans does nothing to hasten the process of European integration. Instead, it is a project that, in the lack of a desire for future enlargement on the part of any EU member states, may take the place of the complete integration of the region into the Union. Others are harsher when comparing the advantages of the Berlin Process to the drawbacks of Open Balkans (Laska, 2022). A journalist claims that Open Balkans is both an unneeded duplicate of the Berlin Process and a blatant diversion from the EU membership process. Beyond the pronouncements and the political will that has been demonstrated, he continues, "there are no specific instruments for carrying out the agreements."

"On the contrary, the public appears to be generally informed, as 79% of people were aware of this project because it is promoted by the government and criticized by the opposition, each of whom spends a lot of time in the media. It is significant to take note of how Albanian citizens see the European Union's support for the "Open Balkans" policy (Bushati, 2022). Half of those who responded in the interview feel that, in reality, the EU is either firmly behind the project or openly supports it, compared to the 21% who disagree that "Open Balkans" is backed by the EU. The others, meanwhile, are either unaware or do not know. This is significant given the polarized nature of Albanian politics on this matter, where the government initiated and enthusiastically supported the effort while the opposition attacked it (Pano, 2022). Taking into account the fact that an overwhelming number of political analysts and significant portions of the media have criticized the idea as a whole or in part. According to (Halili, 2021) It could indicate that the general public is more persuaded by the Albanian government's claim that both the European Union and the United States genuinely embrace the "Open Balkans."

In actuality, public support for the Open Balkans idea has fluctuated in Albania. This is due to the fact that political allegiance, which are sharply split in Albania, frequently divides the public's opinion, and that political leaders and influencers frequently alter public opinion (Bushati, 2022). The opinion writers for the Albanian media have generally criticized the government for its strong support of the "Open Balkans." For instance, political analyst Andi Bushati recently asserted that Albania should withdraw from the Open Balkans since it is a Russian concept. On the other hand, Premier Rama has addressed the criticism by stating that: anyone who is opposing the Open Balkans has the capacity to either see or listen nor understand that this initiative fosters peace, collaboration, and integration, and quickens the Berlin Process! Since future occurrences cannot be avoided, The Open Balkans will not end. Rama, the prime minister of Albania, is likewise unconcerned by Kosovo's steadfast refusal to participate in the "Open Balkans" summit. Albin Kurti, the prime minister of Kosova, has refused to acknowledge it and to take part in such meetings, in contrast to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro, which have recently sent representatives to the periodic conference despite not formally joining the project (Keil, 2023). It will be fascinating to see if the Albanian population views this initiative as a threat to the independence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Kosovo.

Here, a relative majority of 41% think that this doesn't truly endanger Kosovo's independence, compared to 30% who think it does and a third who are undecided. The perception that poses a threat to Kosovo's acceptance of its sovereignty seems to go hand in hand with the perception that 'Open Balkans' facilitates Kosovo's acknowledgment of its independence. Here, 43% of respondents concur, whereas 27% think it is ineffective. Nearly a third of those surveyed have neither an opinion (Ginali, 2023). Contrarily, this program is built on the incorrect premise that war is something that is exported from elsewhere rather than something that is caused by a number of nations in the region, despite the fact that it is praised for lessening the likelihood of future conflict by promoting trade and collaboration (Demirtos, 2022). Finally, the conflicting narratives coming from each of the three capitals that launched this initiative—Belgrade, Tirana, and Skopje—should at least agree that the major objective is to hasten the WB6 nations' entry into the EU. As Brussels and Washington D.C. had frequently urged, genuine attempts should be made to approach and persuade Podgorica, Sarajevo, and Pristina to join the project (Kamberi, 2021).

In order to achieve the sole objective of the WB6's integration into Europe, these efforts should be directed toward allaying the concerns and fears of the remaining three Western Balkan countries, conceptualizing "Open Balkans" as complementary to the "Berlin Process," and setting up a permanent secretariat as well as other structures that would elevate this initiative above simple summits of heads of state and government (Pano, 2022). The Albanian government should do more to persuade the public and political opponents that this initiative doesn't harm the Republic of Kosovo and that it won't result in higher economic costs because of trade asymmetries with Serbia, which has an advantage in comparison to the WB6 due. Even while the 'Open Balkans' project frequently uses language that aims to redress the atrocities of the past and promote peace among the former Yugoslav states, several problems still exist (Keil, 2023).

Firstly, why should Albania make the cut since neither it nor Yugoslavia was involved in the mayhem that followed the breakup of the former Yugoslav republic? Second, Milosevic's Serbia was the main culprit in the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo (Zappi, 2022). As a result, it is primarily Serbia's responsibility to try to resolve the neighboring issues, including those in Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, and Croatia in addition to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Regardless of the rapport and personal relations between Serbia and Albania, ties between the two need to improve. For (Tulun, 2022) It is crucial to notice how "Open Balkans" is viewed in Albanian society as aiding in rapprochement between the peoples of the various states that have participated or may join the project undertaken from this initiative. Half of the population agrees that this program will aid in the reconciliation process, compared to the other half who disagree and say it won't. It will be fascinating to see if the Albanian population views this initiative as a threat to the territorial integrity and independence of the Republic of Kosovo (Ozturk, 2021). Here, a relatively large number of the population think that this doesn't truly endanger Kosovo's independence, compared to the minority, who think it does impact Kosovo's goals and objectives (Kamberi, 2021). The perception that poses a threat to Kosovo's acceptance of its sovereignty seems to go hand in hand with the perception that 'Open Balkans' facilitates Kosovo's acknowledgment of its independence. Contrarily, this program is built on the incorrect premise that war is something that is exported from elsewhere rather than something that is caused by a number of nations in the region, despite the fact that it is praised for lessening the likelihood of future conflict by promoting trade and collaboration (Demirtos, 2022).

Finally, the conflicting perspectives emanating from the three capitals that launched this initiative Belgrade, Tirana, and Skopje should at least agree that the major objective is to hasten the WB6 nations' entry into the EU. As Brussels and Washington D.C. have frequently urged, genuine attempts should be made to approach and persuade Podgorica, Sarajevo, and Pristina to join the project. In order to achieve the sole objective of the WB6's integration into Europe, these efforts should be directed toward allaying the concerns and fears of the remaining three Western Balkan countries, conceptualizing "Open Balkans" as complementary to the "Berlin Process," and setting up a permanent secretariat as well as other structures that would elevate this initiative above simple summits of heads of state and government (Ginali, 2023). On the Albanian side, the Tirana government should exert more effort to persuade the populace and the political opposition that this initiative does not harm the Republic of Kosovo and does not entail incurring further economic costs because of trade imbalances with Serbia, which has the comparative advantage of being part of WB6 due to its quasi-hegemon position in the region (Tota, 2023).

It ought to be made explicit that this project does not conflict with or add to the goals of other initiatives and trade agreements that each nation has with other nations. It's possible that some of these relationships could be seen as risks to the Western Balkans' overall stability as well as to their claimed shared objective of EU integration. Last but not least, the EU's stance toward the WB6 nations suffers from a harmful disjuncture as a result of reluctance to view expansion as politicized (Ginali, 2023). In practice, enlargement has become (more) unpredictable, less accepted by EU (and even WB6) citizens, less eagerly encouraged by elites, and more influenced by national interests or intergovernmental institutions, even though its policy structure still illustrates the conventional structure of a process controlled by elites relying on the flexible consensus of their constituencies and in accordance sanctioned by somewhat predictable political decisions (Hoxhaj, 2022).

5.3. Which one of the initiatives has contributed more to Albanian Integration in the EU?

Although it may be true that The Open Balkans has come to an end, very unexpectedly, it may still be said that the program was over-promised. When the chances of the Western Balkans joining the EU experienced a significant setback, the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans were established (Ngresi, 2023). The Berlin Process was started as a result of Juncker's announcement that there wouldn't be another round of enlargement while he was president of the European Commission. Similar to this, the Open Balkans Initiative was promoted following the French embargo of EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia (Laska, 2022). Both programs have comparable objectives, but the two most significant ones stand out: increasing regional cooperation and moving toward EU membership (Hoxhaj, 2022). When we get into the details, the Berlin Process places a priority on the creation of cross-border infrastructure, whereas the Open Balkans emphasizes the elimination of administrative barriers. As a way to get the region back on course for EU membership, the Berlin Process was started, and it has produced some outcomes (Kamberi, 2021).

The Berlin Process might be considered as opening up new routes and its accomplishments as meriting building on, rather than serving as a temporary bracing for the EU's enlargement program. First, focusing on regional collaboration, may open the door for the creation of a regionalized strategy that is more suited to fostering group identity development, cooperation, solidarity, and trust than the EU's "regatta" strategy (Halili, 2021). Second, technical advancements in the EU's conditionality approach have divided the accession process rather than bringing it closer to WB6 citizens. While keeping the possibility of accession as far away as possible, they create the appearance of movement. At the same time, WB6 applicants are subject to transformational costs that increase proportionally as the EU *acquis* develops. If the EU doesn't make accession possibilities more real soon, both its credibility and power will keep declining (Zappi, 2022). Building on the Berlin Process, the EU's strategy should permit WB6 nations to participate in EU processes earlier than just after the approval of admission requirements. It's necessary to keep WB6 leaders busy, but it's even more crucial to obfuscate the line between joining and not joining by taking part in pre-accession (Ginali, 2023). Constructive competition

cannot serve as the guiding principle for the EU in the growth of its distinct relations with WB6 nations in unstable, economically sensitive, post-conflict circumstances.

Instead, the foundation of relations between the EU and the WB6, including in terms of expansion, should be regional cooperation. This entails, more particularly, pooling accession prospects, regionalizing some aspects of the EU's conditionality approach, and providing less country-specific expansion frameworks (Bojanic, 2021). However, the Berlin Process has run its course and people are disappointed with how quickly things are moving forward and once again their opinion wasn't heard (Tota, 2023). The Western Balkans countries have developed similarly in terms of their socioeconomic situation and political climate. The essentials of the EU admittance procedure are outlined in (The Review of International Affairs, Vol. LXXIV, No. 1187, January-April 2023 79). The community in the area, however, is not happy with the rate of development (Halili, 2021). This will boost the initiative's legitimacy and attractiveness to other countries in the region. This effort has attainable goals and regional ownership, and three leaders are in charge and responsible for it.

However, it is a sword with two sharp edges because it is unclear whether the Open Balkans would endure and become a state program following the departure of the founding leaders (Zappi, 2022). In this region of Europe specifically, leaders and institutions can be the key drivers of progress as well as the main barriers. Recent events inside and outside the EU "have created a 'power vacuum' in the Western Balkans," which third parties are attempting to exploit for their purposes. As a result, Western Balkan leaders may try to view the current geopolitical issues "as a possibility, not a problem" from time to time (Bashkurti, 2023). The EU must, however, take into account moving toward a deeper mode of cooperation and create systems to foresee and mitigate any negative effects of geopolitical developments in a world that is changing (Ngresi, 2023). To prevent the Western Balkan nations from abandoning Europe and interfering with authoritarian regimes that do not defend European principles, it is necessary to keep them bound to genuine EU activity and perspective. Since the early 1990s, the EU has been widely regarded as Albania's only path ahead (Kamberi, 2021). Even while the reforms demanded by the EU are occasionally painful but necessary, as the instance of the still ongoing reform of the judiciary in Albania has proven, it serves as the ideal "normative" or "soft power" able to garner support from all the major internal actors in the nation. In any event, the Albanian instance may be seen as "instructive" (Kouchner 2017) and the EU in its view

as a good "reforming power" because the nation has undergone such a thorough justice reform under the tutelage of the EU.

Albania is an excellent instance of a reformer under EU supervision in three areas: foreign policy (complete conformity with CFSP), relations with the region (good neighborly ties following the Berlin Process series), and domestic policy (justice system reform), as the establishment of the rule of law is a key precondition for the growth of a democratic society, the establishment and maintenance of democracy, and the economic advancement of a nation aspiring to join the European Union (Kouchner 2017). Last but not least, the EU's stance toward the WB6 nations suffers from a harmful disjuncture as a result of reluctance to view expansion as a politicized issue area (Halili, 2021). In practice, enlargement has become (more) unpredictable, less accepted by EU (and even WB6) citizens, less enthusiastically encouraged by the privileged few, and more driven by national goals or intergovernmental institutions, even though its policy structure still demonstrates the conventional structure of a process guided by elites relying on the permissive consensus of their constituencies and in accordance sanctioned by relatively foreseeable political decisions (Musliu, 2021).

The problem is to accept the politicized nature of expansion as a new reality and fight for expansion as a political battle rather than checking the boxes of a technical process. This is where the Berlin Process, in its creation and accomplishments, may help (Ruci, 2022). Beyond the basic Europhile vs. Eurosceptic argument, European integration could and could be a source of productive divisions in WB6 politics. Serbia, Northern Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina now approve the Mini-Schengen Action Plan for Freedom of Movement and a Common Regional Market between the Western Balkan nations, with Montenegro remaining the lone hostage (Tulun, 2022). The strategy for action aims to realize the four freedoms—goods, services, capital, and freedom of movement—on which the European Union is founded and which the member states already enjoy between 2021 and 2024. The EU's strategy toward the WB6 countries best exemplifies "change as addition" rather than the Berlin Process (Brezor, 2022). Its goals, as stated in 2014, are to keep the region's reforms moving forward and provide "additional real progress" in terms of enlargement. Three years after its launch, the program has seen its focus broaden from supporting infrastructure projects to promoting mobility and the mobilization of civic society. Although the Berlin Process's focus clearly (and consciously)

overlaps with the EU's enlargement strategy, it relies on significant distinctions in its structure, logic, and operation that serve as a defining feature (Bushati, 2022). The Berlin Process has a more established and direct relationship with the European Union in terms of what it means to be "European." It was started by the EU and is an important tool for getting Western Balkan nations ready for EU membership. Its goals closely reflect the norms and principles of the EU (Kamberi, 2022).

On the other hand, three Balkan nations are in charge of the regional project known as the Open Balkans Initiative. However, it does not have the same level of official EU involvement or a direct focus on EU admission, even if it likewise aims to improve regional cooperation and economic integration. What is more surprising is that the Albanian Prime Minister, Rama, announced the closure of the Open Balkans a month ago unexpectedly, an initiative that opened strong debates in Albania, but also clashes in relations with Kosovo. The Open Balkans initiative, which sparked heated debates in Albania as well as conflicts in relations with Kosovo, was shut down by the Albanian prime minister Rama (Xhafaj, 2023). He stated on July 1, 2023, that the goal of this project was to progress the Berlin Process, and he believes that this goal has been achieved. The Open Balkans initiative was confronted with criticism from the beginning, and that is how it came to an end. The government and opposition in Albania, as well as former diplomats, have different perspectives on the accomplishments and the reasons for the closure of the regional initiative, which includes, in addition to Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia. The announcement about the end of the Open Balkans was made by the prime minister of Albania, Edi Rama. Regarding this statement by Rama, the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, said that "he cannot believe that Rama said such a thing".

While in North Macedonia there were no reactions to this statement. Rama had already warned of the end of the Open Balkans on June 23, when in a press conference, he declared the "freezing" of relations with Serbia, due to the arrest of three Kosovo policemen. Rama said that he would not meet and would not talk to the president of Serbia, Vucic, about anything other than this issue, which further strained relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The policemen were released three days later. The head of the parliamentary group of the Socialist Party, Taulant Balla, spoke about the end of the "Open Balkans" initiative (Daci, 2023).

Balla said that the mission of the "Open Balkans" for free movement has been successfully concluded, adding that now is the time for the EU to continue the process. He said that the initiative has closed the mission because it has helped Albanian producers not to have bureaucratic obstacles at the border.

"The Open Balkans is the best instrument for implementing the Berlin Process on the ground. The EU is based on the free movement of goods, people and capital. He closed his own mission because he helped Albanian producers to avoid bureaucratic obstacles at the border. When we achieved free movement, we achieved 3 basic dimensions of what we aim to become. Now that it has achieved success, it is up to the EU to continue the process," said Balla.

Many critics have stated that the Open Balkans never turned into a broad process supported by the factors of these countries, but was symbolized and developed only between the three leaders, especially between Vucic and Rama, making this even less transparent process and also increasing the conviction that this process was only at the service of the leaders of the initiating countries and not actually a well-studied process with diplomatic professionalism. Often, because this initiative was personalized only between Vucic and Rama, it was conceived by the Albanian factor or by the Albanians as an act of betrayal by Rama towards the interests of the Albanians in the Region. Abazovic also joined this process, while Kurti was never a part of it (Daci, 2023).

6. CONCLUSIONS

With a focus on European integration and regional stability, the Open Balkans Initiative and the Berlin Process are initiatives aimed at strengthening collaboration and integration in the Balkans region. The two projects, however, have different histories, organizational frameworks, and objectives, so it's critical to comprehend each one's traits in order to decide whether one may be regarded as more "European." When the chances of the Western Balkans joining the EU experienced a significant setback, the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans were established (Keil, 2023). The Berlin Process was started as a result of Juncker's announcement that there wouldn't be another round of enlargement while he was president of the European Commission. Similar to this, the Open Balkans Initiative was pushed forward following the French embargo of EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. Both programs have comparable objectives, but the two most significant ones stand out: increasing regional cooperation and moving toward EU membership.

When we get into the details, the Berlin Process places more of an emphasis on the creation of cross-border infrastructure while the Open Balkans places more of an emphasis on the removal of administrative hurdles, which weren't able to witness because the initiative came to an end without leaving behind any significant achievement. To put the entire area back on track for EU membership, the Berlin Process was started, and it has produced some outcomes. However, with the pace of development and implementation of what was agreed upon, the Berlin Process has reached a point of fatigue and dissatisfaction (Bushati, 2022). The Western Balkans countries have developed similarly in terms of their socioeconomic situation and political climate. The population in the area, however, is not happy with the rate of development. The initial flywheel effect will be beneficial to everyone involved if the Open Balkans Initiative produces tangible benefits in practice that all regional citizens could witness in the future. This somehow boosted the initiative's legitimacy and attractiveness to other countries in the region.

This effort had attainable goals and regional ownership, and three leaders were in charge and responsible for it. However, it was a double-edged sword since it was questionable whether the Open Balkans would withstand the test of time and continue to be a state project after the withdrawal (Ngresi, 2023). Regardless of the effort by which they were realized, the advancement of political and socioeconomic development in the WB6 was deserving of notice. Political difficulties and unresolved issues have long been a challenge, in WB projects in the past. Developed and ongoing regional partnerships, both economic and political, would benefit all parties involved, regardless of the outlook for EU integration, which hasn't gotten any more certain over the years (quite the contrary). Through more frequent and stronger direct communication, regional efforts and regional collaboration can produce a synergy of results by energizing one another, inspiring the development of novel solutions, and removing barriers (Kairova, 2022). Regional cooperation of any kind is encouraged within the WB, especially because it is a prerequisite for EU membership.

The conclusion is that it is highly unlikely to expect essential integration, both in terms of depth and breadth, within the context of the Open Balkans without further assistance from "outside," given the high level of skepticism of politicians in the region, the abuse of interstate disputes in political marketing, and the lack of political readiness to accept responsibility. On the other hand, the Berlin Process has already seen certain setbacks, even when it was being sponsored primarily by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Its future is also quite uncertain given all of its flaws and the lack of a clear definition of whether it is a project that will accelerate the Western Balkans' integration into the EU or whether it will act as a kind of alternative for full membership in the EU. None of these measures, in our opinion, will succeed. These two regional initiatives' fundamental problem is their intended outcome (Ozturk, 2021). To put it another way, the primary question that came up when the Berlin Process was founded and the Open Balkans was made public — will this initiative speed up the European integration of the Balkans or is it an alternative proposal for full membership in the European Union? Finding a response to this essential question at this time is incredibly difficult. The political discussion in Brussels places the European Union's enlargement policy on the periphery, and the current security threats also influence how the Union feels about the enlargement plan (Zappi, 2022). How to make the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans supplementary, accessible, and successful without being used as a tool of political struggle inside the Western Balkans, as

well as along the lines of the Western Balkans and the European Union, is an open question that can be answered with regional and European political readiness and will (Kairova, 2021). The EU has begun to lose interest in the Balkans and is not particularly interested in EU enlargement in general, thus the WB6 and Albania should finally give up on their delusions and acknowledge that these measures will not materially contribute to speedier European integration or better regional integration. With that realization comes another, Albania should look inside and build up its capacities, including working cooperatively with its neighbors based on shared interests.

In conclusion, the Berlin Process is more closely linked to European integration initiatives in the Western Balkans if we define being "European" in terms of alignment with EU integration and principles. The effort succeeded for the administration, which is why it was started as a catalyst for the Berlin Process; but, for the opposition, it was a failure that only harmed relations with Kosovo and benefited Serbia. In my analysis, I emphasized that the Open Balkans would always remain an initiative at the level of political rhetoric and would never turn into a project similar to the EU, because they had neither the will nor the human resources to design and implement them and the whole process turned the initiative into a genuine Treaty. Europe has needed almost 50 years of efforts, agreements, treaties, and will to become what we know today as the European Union. The Open Balkans could not actually solve anything in the Balkans. He could not even resolve the last crisis between Kosovo and Serbia.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Luisa Tare was born on 10 November 1999, in Mantova (Italy). She enrolled at Epoka University in 2018. She finished her bachelor's studies in July 2021, to enroll again in September of the same year in the study program Master of Science in the Political Science and International Relations department. During the first year of her Master's studies, Luisa was also employed as a part-time employee at EPOKA University, as a teaching assistant, in the Department of Political Science and International Relations. During this time Luisa also completed an internship at the Center for European Studies. During the second year of her Master's studies, Luisa was offered a full-time job as a Human Resources Specialist at EPOKA University, a position she held for a year, and then moved on to become an Archive Specialist at EPOKA University.

Luisa during her five years at EPOKA University has been associated with many activities especially those created by EPOKA Clubs, but not only, she has been engaged in many activities, organized mostly by the Department of Political Science and International Relations, and activities organized by the Center for European Studies. She has been the vice president of BackToTheFuture Club, she was also elected president of the Club in June 2021. She has been involved continuously with different organizations promoting human rights and gender equality. Luisa has also been an intern in the Durrës Municipality, as part of the "EU Corner" project. Her research interests include conflict resolution, human rights protection, European studies, International Relations cooperation, and development.