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# Berlin Process and the Open Balkans: Effectiveness, Complementarity and Comparative Advantages in the Process of Regional Integration in the Western Balkans

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## Abstract

The Berlin Process was established in 2014 as an initiative of several member states of the European Union under German leadership to engage with six partners from the Western Balkans. The main goal is regional cooperation within the framework that should contribute to the acceleration of European integration in the Western Balkans, but also to the creation of a common regional market. The Open Balkans is an initiative launched by the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia in 2019. The main goal is to create a single market in the Western Balkans based on the principles of the EU market and the free movement of goods, people, capital and services. Paper's aim is to analyse the effectiveness of one and the other initiative, their complementarity and comparative advantages of one over the other and vice versa. Exclusively for the purpose of this, we have conducted a survey, in order to better understand the current position and the future of the two initiatives. The results show that Open Balkans initiative enjoys greater trust among respondents of the survey. We conclude that is because of faster implementation of the reached agreements and directly visible results for the economic sector and citizens in the region.

*Keywords:* Berlin Process, Open Balkans, Western Balkans, regional integration.

## **Berlin Process and the Open Balkans: Effectiveness, Complementarity and Comparative Advantages in the Process of Regional Integration in the Western Balkans**

### **The Berlin Process – the waiting room in the process of European integration of the Western Balkans**

The Berlin Process, as an initiative initiated by the member states of the European Union in which the six economies of the Western Balkans participate (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*<sup>1</sup>, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – WB6), has caused numerous doubts from the very beginning among the regional political elites, as well as citizens in the region. The moment of its creation was actually the subject of polemization of the agenda and goal of the Berlin Process, bearing in mind the fact that at that moment the European Union de facto placed the policy of enlargement, referring to the integration of the Western Balkans, on the margins of the European political agenda. The multiple problems faced by the European Union at that time, starting from the financial crisis, through the institutional one to the migrant crisis, influenced the European leaders, respectively, the leaders of the member states of the European Union, to focus on the so-called internal issues of the Union, thereby neglecting the enlargement policy in medium term. In fact, the Berlin Process experienced a debacle at the very beginning of its existence when the President of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, announced a five-year moratorium on the admission of new members of the Union (Juncker, 2014). Immediately before Juncker's statement, the Berlin Process initiative was established under German leadership.

The aim of the initiative was the promotion of regional cooperation and the European perspective of the Western Balkans. But, the self-evident immediate temporal connection between the Berlin process and the Juncker's statement has contributed to this initiative

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\* All references to Kosovo in this document should be understood in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

being accepted by the public with not-so-great enthusiasm, primarily in the context of European integration of the region. The first declaration adopted as part of the initiative on August 28, 2018 testifies to the fact that the initiative of the Berlin Process is not directly related to the process of European integration of the Western Balkans. It does not contradict the European heritage but in comparison to some other previous declarations, such as the one from Thessaloniki in 2003, which clearly states that the goal is the complete integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union, in this declaration the European Union is mentioned in the context of rapprochement of the region to the Union, but without single word about membership. Thus, Article 4 of the mentioned Declaration states that 'all of the countries in the Western Balkans firmly believe that their future lies in the European Union', while Article 11, which refers to democratic standards, states that 'the strengthening of democracy in societies in the countries of the Western Balkans also brings these states closer to the EU'. The similar is stated in Article 18, which refers to the pre-accession aid of the European Union (IPA Funds), in which it is once again stated precisely 'bringing the countries closer to the EU and European standards' (Transport Community, 2021).

The Berlin Process has made a number of achievements in fostering dialogue and cooperation between the WB6 and EU member states and the WB6. Some of the achievements of the Berlin Process include: promoting political dialogue, strengthening economic ties, enhancing connectivity and fostering regional cooperation. The Berlin Process has helped to promote political dialogue and cooperation between EU member states and the WB6, including efforts to promote democratic governance and respect for human rights. The Berlin Process has facilitated increased economic engagement between the EU and the Western Balkans, including greater trade and investment flows, as well as the launch of several major infrastructure projects. The Berlin Process has supported the development of transport, energy, and digital infrastructure in the Western Balkans region, helping to improve regional connectivity and promote economic growth. Also, it has supported a number of regional initiatives to address common challenges such as security, suppression of organized crime (see more: Bjelajac, 2015),

corruption and money laundering (see more: Bjelajac, 2011a; Bjelajac, 2011b), migration, and environmental issues, helping to promote greater stability and cooperation in the region. Although these results are significant, they are all just the beginning of the establishment of regional cooperation between the six countries of the Balkans, which have yet to strengthen and open many more projects. And regarding the cooperation between the EU and the WB6, these are also good initial steps that build the infrastructure of future cooperation, but not fast enough or to a significant extent.

With all its actions, dialogue and plans the Berlin Process has tried to help greater cooperation and integration between the WB6, and the EU member states and WB6, to contribute to greater stability in the region, to increase economic growth and prosperity in the region. The establishment of the RYCO is often quoted as evidence that the process has yielded tangible results. RYCO is a regionally-owned, regionally-financed organization, and the process of its establishment brought together governmental and non-governmental representatives. But it remains doubtful how RYCO will actually implement youth policies, and strong political interference in the future works should also not be ruled out (Nechev et al., 2017, p. 5). Considering the WB high unemployment rate and poor income, thousands of people, mostly highly educated youth, migrate to Western Europe each year, leading some to believe that they will only be able to join the EU if they trek there on their own two feet (Xeka and Mucaj, 2022, p. 3272).

The goal of connecting the region through infrastructure projects can be seen as a latent success primarily due to the nature of infrastructural projects and the time needed to implement them. The only visible result is the March 2017 start of construction works on a bridge connecting the Bosnian and Croatian section of a Pan-European corridor (Nechev et al., 2017, p. 6). The region connectivity started with the Trans-European Transport and Energy Networks (TEN-T and TEN-E) and then it spread through establishment of the network of new and old regional organizations such as the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), South-East Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO) and the Energy Community Secretariat (ECS). Improving connectivity and fostering sectoral regional cooperation process proved to be slow

process and potential positive results can be measured in the medium term at the earliest

The least of the results have been achieved in the area of regional cooperation and the area of resolution of bilateral issues.

The WB6 agreed on the Declaration on the Common Regional Market (CRM) to develop deeper regional economic integration as a stepping stone towards the EU Single Market. The Action Plan for the period 2021-2024, which is based on the four freedoms of the EU, was also adopted. It is planned that the common market of the WB6 will function on the same principles as the internal market of the EU. This would represent a significantly higher level of economic integration than the currently existing CEFTA 2006 free trade zone. The problem is that the action plan to establish the CRM did not take into account the high level of corruption and the lack of the rule of law in the WB6, and exactly the two of them could be a major obstacle for the proper functioning of the CRM (Hoxhaj, 2022). 'If the Western Balkan states are supported in their efforts to achieve an energy transition and to establish the CRM, and if civil society is supported more intensively in the region, the Berlin Process can even gain relevance in the future' (Vulović, 2022).

Prolonging of the Berlin Process beyond 2018 came from the EU's reluctance and inability to reset the enlargement agenda in WB6 rather than from the Berlin Process's success. The idea behind the Berlin Process, even if temporarily, seems to be a replacement of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans.

The Berlin Process has provided a platform for supporting reforms in the WB6, including efforts to promote good governance, combat corruption, and strengthen the rule of law. Unfortunately, the results in the practice of the countries of this region have not significantly changed but have largely remained the same.

## **The Open Balkans: the incomplete regional integration**

The Open Balkans initiative was launched at the end of 2019 by the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, as a platform for regional economic integration which leading goals are the free movement of goods, services, people and capital according to the model

of the European Union market. The ultimate goal of the Open Balkans is creation a common regional market in the Western Balkans modelled on the EU single market pillars. However, the essential barrier on that path and the realization of that goal is the fact that the participants of the initiative are only three out of six Western Balkans economies. The Open Balkans is support for existing regional initiatives, their concretization and response to the demands of the economy, companies and real life. The initiative launched under the name Mini-Schengen has been renamed the Open Balkans, and it can be accessed by all economies in the region (CCS/PKS, n.d.). Although it is an authentically regional initiative, it did not receive the support of all six regional actors. Similar as the Berlin Process, the Open Balkans initiative has been faced with numerous contestations since, however, unlike the Berlin Process, the Open Balkans is primarily faced with political condemnations.

While Belgrade, Tirana and Skopje see this initiative as an opportunity for the regional economic integration through practical measures, and thus the development of regional economies, authorities in Podgorica, Pristina and Sarajevo believe that the initiative does not serve the goals of regional and European integration, but rather to the hidden political goals with a nationalist connotation. There is no agreement on the Open Balkans between the political elite of Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The representatives of the Serbian people believe that this is an initiative that will contribute to the development of the economy of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the representatives of the Bosniak and Croat people do not have a clear position on this initiative, explaining that the Berlin Process is an already existing initiative with the same goals. The former Bosniak member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Šefik Džaferović has said that Sarajevo will insist on the implementation of what was signed by all six actors of the Western Balkans in Sofia under the auspices of the Berlin Process and that it will not accept any initiative that could be a substitute for Bosnia and Herzegovina's European path, alluding to on the initiative of the Open Balkans (Ćurčić, 2022). Foreign affairs minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina has said that the Open Balkans initiative has practically lost its conceptual importance since the moment when the Common Regional Market was signed as part of the Berlin Process,

which is also based on the four freedoms (Miladinović, 2021). When it comes to the position of Podgorica, newly formed political coalition/movement 'Europa Sad' believes that the Open Balkans initiative is a good opportunity for Montenegro and that it will contribute to the European integration path of Montenegro (Politika, 2023). On the other hand, the opposition Democratic Party of Socialists believes that the Open Balkans is an anti-European initiative that enjoys the support of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political subjects (Vukićević, 2022). Kosovo leadership also refuses to take part in the Open Balkans, claiming that the opposition to joining the initiative is based on Belgrade's refusal to accept the Kosovo documents. Current Prime Minister of the Pristina's Institutions believes that the Open Balkans will not succeed, that it is wrong and that he believes that the Berlin process under the leadership of German Chancellor is the right path to European integration (Kosovo Online/Syri, 2022).

The Open Balkans is primarily faced with political barriers that prevent the deepening and intensification of regional cooperation and integration, which automatically contributes to the common foreign policy goal of the Western Balkans, respectively, membership in the European Union. When it comes to the European integration process and the contribution of the Berlin Process, as well as the Open Balkans on that path, Cluster 1 of the European Commission's report for candidate countries and countries in the process of accession sufficiently testifies to the importance of regional cooperation and integration on the way to joining the European Union. In fact, within the Cluster 1 there is a section 'Good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation', which directly implicates the importance of regional cooperation and integrational initiatives to the European integration process of the whole region (European Commission, 2022).

In that context, there is clear correlation between the Open Balkan and European integration path of the participating actors within the initiative. But the Open Balkans currently does not have real capacities to contribute neither to the creation of a single regional market, nor to the acceleration of the European integration process. In order to promote the formation of the regional market, full regional integration is needed, that is, the inclusion of all six economies of the



Western Balkans. On the other hand, for the acceleration of European integration of the region, in addition to the involvement of all six actors in the initiative, the support of the EU member states is also required for the reaffirmation of the Union's enlargement policy.

Given that the CRM is rated by the EU as critical in increasing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the region, the advantage of the Open Balkans is that it de facto implements some elements of the CRM on which no formal agreement has been reached yet between the parties from the WB6 (European Commission, 2022, p. 86).

We should consider implications of the growing importance of the SME sector in the socioeconomic development of the Western Balkans countries, and these trends for the CRM of the Open Balkans initiative. Considering that the Open Balkans strives towards realization a deeper economic integration of the region the implications of these processes for smaller domestically owned firms and for the deepening of territorial inequalities that may occur due to greater economic integration are analysed in the Avlijaš 2022 paper. Although there is no automatic link between the economic strengthening of the SME sector and more balanced and inclusive economic development, research concludes that this link can be strengthened by developing cooperation and coordination between smaller businesses, both within countries and in the context of cross-border cooperation within the region (Avlijaš, 2022).

Given the already high rates of trade cooperation of these three countries, it is not surprising that they have moved on to negotiations on other higher degrees of cooperation, trying to remove obstacles to the improvement of cooperation. The public rhetoric of the heads of government of the three Open Balkans member countries seems to imply that this intra-regional endeavour contributes in the long term or indirectly to a better peaceful coexistence in the Western Balkans, although there is no direct reference in the joint declarations or memoranda signed by the founding members of the initiative (Lleshi, 2023, p. 26).

## **The survey**

In order to better understand the current position and the future of the two initiatives, we have conducted a survey with a precise focus

group. Survey is conducted exclusively for the purpose of this research, that is, scientific paper. The survey was conducted from March 1 to March 31 2023, on a sample of 107 respondents, electronically.

The survey was conducted anonymously, so the respondents did not have the obligation to provide their personal data, which, in the opinion of the authors of this paper, opened up additional space for providing a more objective answer to the survey questions.

The focus group was defined based on the following criteria.

- mixed population (male and female)
- aged between 28 and 38 years
- education: high school, master's degree, doctoral degree'
- expertise: social sciences
- geographic criteria: Western Balkans area

Regarding the analysis of the relations between the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans initiatives, the respondents were asked six mandatory questions with four options for answers.

The questions are as follows:

1. Which initiative has a better perspective?
2. Why is the Berlin Process a better initiative?
3. Why is the Open Balkans a better initiative?
4. Which initiative will take the leading role in the EU integration process of the Western Balkans?
5. Which initiative will take the leading role in promoting regional economic integration?
6. Which initiative will take the leading role in overcoming regional disputes?

According the results of the survey about the perspective of the two initiatives (Figure 1), 54.2 per cent of the respondents have answered that the Open Balkans Initiative has a better perspective in comparison to the Berlin Process Initiative, but the fact is that almost one quarter of the respondents has answered 'do not know' or 'none'.

According to the results of the second question (Figure 2), 31.8 per cent respondents believe that the Berlin Process Initiative is a better option because it is directly connected with European integration

process of the Western Balkans, while according to the results of the third question (Figure 3) 32.7 per cent of respondents believe that the Open Balkans Initiative is a better framework because it provides direct possibilities for regional economic sector. Also, one third of the respondents believe that Open Balkans Initiative has a better perspective because it is about regionally authentic project.

Related to the question which initiative will take the leading role in the European integration process of the region (Figure 4), the opinion of the respondents is almost shared, bearing in mind the fact the 39.3 per cent of the respondents believe that the leading role of mentioned process will take the Open Balkans Initiative, while, from the other side, 33.6 per cent of the respondents consider that the leading role will be in the hands of the Berlin Process Initiative.

When it comes to the fifth question 'Which initiative will take the leading role in promoting regional economic integration?' (Figure 5) the huge majority of respondents consider that the role will be taken by the Open Balkans Initiative – 71 per cent of the respondents, while only 15 per cent believe that it will be the role of the Berlin Process Initiative. We have to point out that this is very important question bearing in mind the fact that Western Balkans is a region composed of developing economies, so, in that context, providing trust by the population, especially by the young and educated fewer than 35, to the Open Balkans Initiative represents an important factor in understanding regional political and economic flows.

Also, the respondents believe that the Open Balkan Initiative will take a leading role in the process of resolving regional disputes (Figure 6), which is a question directly connected to regional stability as a pre-condition for economic development, but also a question directly connected to the European integration of the Western Balkans, bearing in mind the Copenhagen criteria and neighbourhood relations within the region as one of the key points on the European path.

But, in order to provide a more realistic explanation of the fact why the Open Balkans initiative enjoys greater trust among respondents, we need to take into account three factors:

First, meetings and summits within the framework of the Open Balkans are more widespread and frequent compared to the level of

the Berlin Process. The leaders of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia have achieved much more frequent communication and coordination within the framework of this initiative, in contrast to the communication of the leaders of economies in the Western Balkans within the framework of the Berlin Process.

Second, the Open Balkans initiative is much more represented in media reports in the Western Balkans, compared to the Berlin Process initiative, both on the economic and political levels.

And third, what makes the Open Balkans more attractive is the fact that numerous practical measures and facilitations have been achieved in a quick time frame for the economic sector that contributes to the regional development of economies and connectivity, while in the case of the Berlin Process, as an initiative that has existed since 2014, the implementation of the reached agreements is much slower and not directly visible for the economic sector and citizens in the region.

## **Conclusion**

The Open Balkans and the Berlin Process are initiatives that have similar goals on which both are based. It is about the creation of a regional economic space, respectively, a single market based on the example of the European Union market. The key difference between these two initiatives is that all six economies in the Western Balkans are integrated into the Berlin Process, while only Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia are included in the Open Balkans. On the other hand, the difference is also that the Open Balkans is an authentic regional initiative, created on the basis of a political agreement between the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, while the Berlin Process is an initiative initiated by Germany and led by the member states of the European Union. From the point of view of political rhetoric and the views of individual leaders in the region, it is actually about competing initiatives. However, from the point of view of efficiency and effectiveness, we are talking about initiatives that can act in a complementary way in the processes of economic integration of the region, political cooperation, as well as promoting the process

of European integration. If we look at the Open Balkans as an initiative with an economic sign, under the condition of the inclusion of all six economies in the Western Balkans, and the Berlin Process as an initiative with a political sign, we can establish that these initiatives can complement each other in achieving the strategic goals of the economies in the region, which are: economic development, overcoming regional and bilateral disputes and European integration as a key foreign policy goal of all actors in the Western Balkans.

In fact, certain politicians abuse the existence of one initiative and the other, observing from the point of view of exclusivity, respectively, that one excludes the other and vice versa. In this context, it is important to recall the first Declaration adopted within the framework of the Open Balkans, in which it is precisely stated that it builds on all existing regional formats of cooperation, and adapts its action objectives to existing regional initiatives and formats for cooperation. Viewed from the perspective of political power, the Berlin Process as an initiative can undoubtedly contribute to the acceleration of the European integration of the region. On the other hand, from the point of view of rationalism, the Open Balkans can undoubtedly contribute to the development of economic conditions in the Western Balkans, bearing in mind the logic of the potential of economic cooperation in regional frameworks, and the familiarity of economies in this region to each other.

Placing both initiatives on an equal footing on two lanes moving in the same direction, the Open Balkans and the Berlin Process may represent regional initiatives that enjoy strong political and economic support that can contribute to the achievement of regional goals if there are no any political abuse and interpretation of one in relation to the other from corner of the competition.

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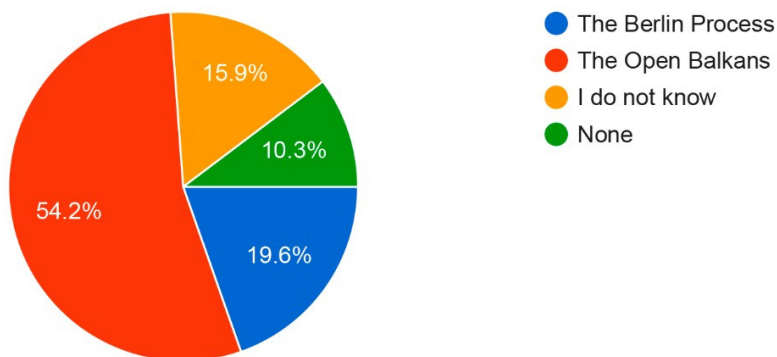
Xeka, S., & Mucaj, A. (2022). 'The Western Balkans and European Union: the last questions.' *Journal of Positive School Psychology* (2022): 3263-3273.



## Appendix

**Figure 1**

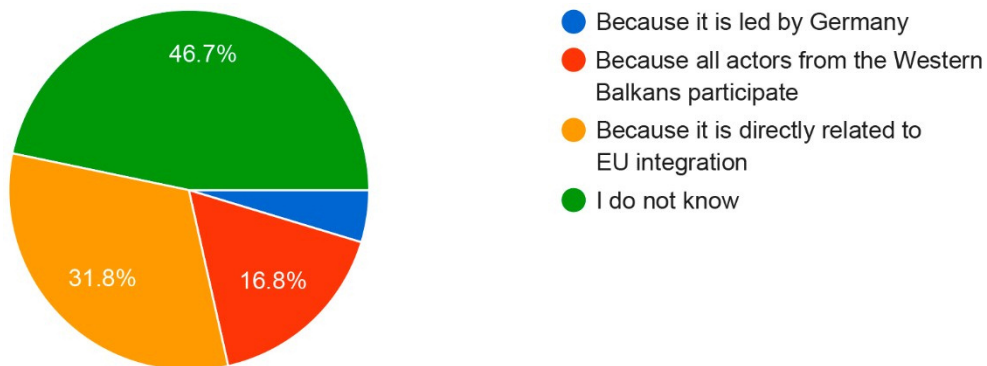
*Which initiative has a better perspective?*



Note. 107 responses

**Figure 2**

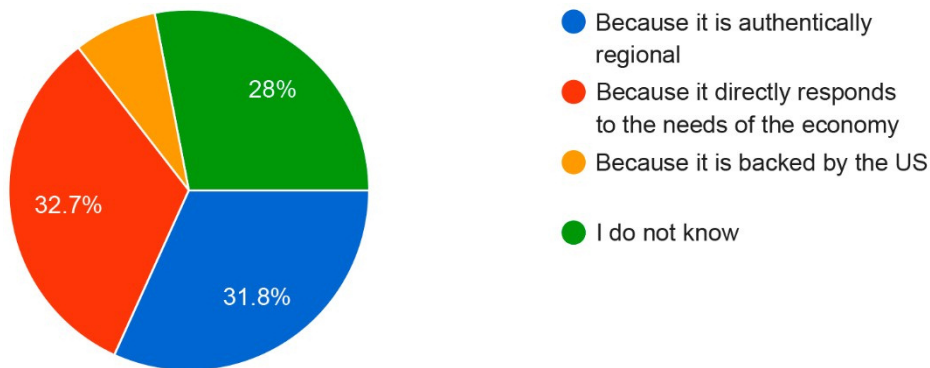
*Why is the Berlin Process a better initiative?*



Note. 107 responses

**Figure 3**

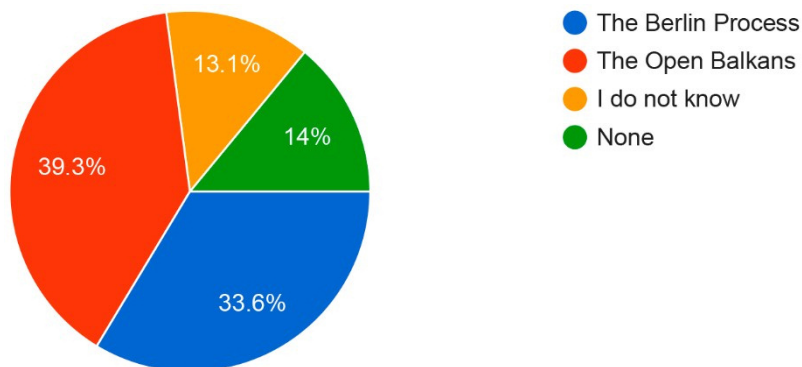
*Why is the Open Balkans a better initiative?*



Note. 107 responses

**Figure 4**

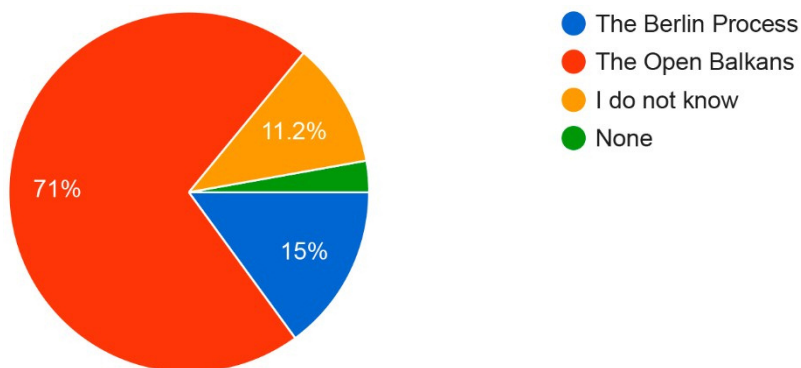
*Which initiative will take the leading role in the EU integration process?*



Note. 107 responses

**Figure 5**

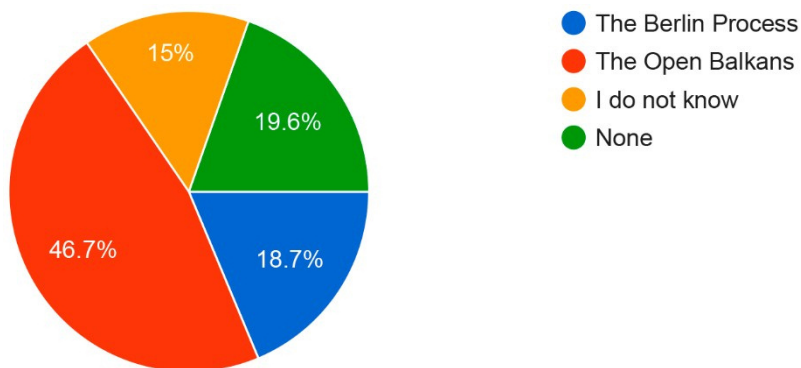
*Which initiative will take the leading role in promoting regional economic integration?*



Note. 107 responses

**Figure 6**

*Which initiative will take the lead in overcoming regional disputes?*



Note. 107 responses

## **Berlinski proces i Otvoreni Balkan: efektivnost, komplementarnost i komparativne prednosti u procesu regionalne integracije na Zapadnom Balkanu**

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### **Sažetak**

Berlinski proces je uspostavljen 2014. godine, kao inicijativa nekoliko država članica Evropske unije pod nemačkim vođstvom, da se angažuju u radu sa šest partnera sa Zapadnog Balkana. Osnovni cilj je regionalna saradnja koja treba da doprinese ubrzanju evropskih integracija na Zapadnom Balkanu, ali i stvaranju zajedničkog regionalnog tržišta. Otvoreni Balkan je inicijativa koju su pokrenuli lideri Albanije, Severne Makedonije i Srbije 2019. godine. Glavni cilj je stvaranje jedinstvenog tržišta na Zapadnom Balkanu, zasnovanog na principima tržišta EU i slobodnog kretanja robe, ljudi, kapitala i usluga. Cilj rada je da analizira efikasnost jedne i druge inicijative, njihovu komplementarnost i komparativne prednosti jedne u odnosu na drugu i obrnuto. Isključivo u ovu svrhu sprovedi smo anketu, kako bismo bolje razumeli trenutnu poziciju i budućnost ove dve inicijative. Rezultati pokazuju da inicijativa Otvoreni Balkan uživa veće poverenje među ispitanicima. Zaključujemo da je to zbog brže implementacije postignutih dogovora i direktno vidljivih rezultata za privredni sektor i građane u regionu.

*Ključne reči:* Berlinski proces, Otvoreni Balkan, Zapadni Balkan, regionalne integracije