

ALBANIA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: TOWARD AN ENHANCED REGIONAL ROLE

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Abstract: Seeking to answer how Albania, as a small state in the international system, politically benefits from its geographic position, this paper examines the development of its foreign policy in the Western Balkans over the past decade. The main argument of the paper posits that Albania, leveraging its geographic position, has demonstrated a commitment to strengthening political stability in the Western Balkans, thereby enhancing its role in managing regional dynamics. Albania's contributions to fostering stability in the Western Balkans have been realized through a proactive bilateral and multilateral foreign policy approach, made possible by its alignment with Euro-Atlantic regional priorities and emphasizing the absence of outstanding issues in bilateral relations with regional neighbours. Albania's enhanced role in the Western Balkans has primarily stemmed from constructive efforts in broader concerns affecting the Albanian population. Additionally, this role has arisen from initiating and promoting declarative local frameworks within regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, while maintaining commitment to initiatives that enjoyed comprehensive Euro-Atlantic support.

Keywords: small state, geographic position, Albania, Western Balkans, political stability.

Introduction

In addition to its Euro-Atlantic and Mediterranean affiliation, in the government programs over the past decade, the Republic of Albania

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(Albania) has been defined with a distinct Balkan identity. In that context, a salient aspect of Albania's foreign policy priorities was dedicated to the Western Balkans, relations with neighbouring countries, and its position in regional dynamics. Within these programs, notable is the intention to shape a more prominent and influential regional role. This ambition is largely predicated on NATO membership, which is viewed as a mechanism for reinforcing Albania's position as a „country that produces and radiates stability“ (Programi Qeverisës 2017-2021, 23). Furthermore, enhancing political and economic relations with regional neighbours is highlighted as a focus of Albania's regional foreign policy. Thus, stated is Albania's commitment to supporting its Western Balkan neighbours in their EU and NATO integration (Đukanović 2020, 115). Moreover, emphasis is placed on fostering regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, particularly through engagement in the Berlin Process and the Open Balkan. The government programs exhibit particular attention to relations with Kosovo, stressing the necessity of „strategic cooperation“ in economic matters and Euro-Atlantic integration, along with support for broader international recognition of Kosovo's unilaterally declared independence (Government Program 2021-2025, 38; Đukanović 2020, 115). Additionally, the programs highlight the commitment to „ensuring greater fundamental rights for Albanians in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia“ (Programi Qeverisës 2017-2021, 23). Ultimately, these programs reflect Albania's belief in the „normalization of relations in the Western Balkans,“ which is posited to „restore trust in itself and its neighbours“ (Ibid.).

In light of these priorities, this paper seeks to answer the following question: How does Albania, as a small state in international relations, derive political benefits from its geographical position? We argue that over the past decade, Albania has demonstrated a sustained commitment to strengthening political stability in the Western Balkans, thereby enhancing its role in managing regional processes. This commitment has been articulated through a proactive bilateral and multilateral approach, facilitated by consistent alignment with Euro-Atlantic regional priorities and the absence of outstanding issues in relations with its Western Balkan neighbours.

Albania's enhanced regional standing stemmed from its engagement with broader concerns affecting the Albanian population. An important development in this context was the opening of a new chapter in bilateral relations with Serbia, which allowed Albania to express its views on regional dynamics that extended beyond mere bilateral interactions and encompassed the incentivization of interethnic ties and regional cooperation. Moreover,

in the last decade, Tirana strived to become an influential third party in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. A further aspect of its regional approach was the contribution to revitalizing North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, followed by an enlarged scope of national rights for the Albanian community. Additionally, Albania's enhanced regional role arose from its positioning within the regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. Together with Serbia and North Macedonia, Albania co-founded the Open Balkan, which enjoyed temporary prominence in the regional agenda, enabling Albania, as a founding member, to amplify its influence in shaping multilateral regional dynamics. More significant in this sense was Albania's ongoing commitment to the Berlin Process, which enjoyed unanimous Euro-Atlantic support. This commitment has afforded Albania a prominent role in advancing the European regional agenda, exemplified by the 2023 Berlin Process summit in Tirana, and the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, which Albania presented to other regional actors. An exception to this fruitful regional approach was the relationship with Kosovo², characterized by recurrent political tensions. These tensions primarily arose from divergent visions regarding the development of mutual relations – Albania's desire to influence Kosovo's foreign policy versus Pristina's aim for an equal footing in their interactions.

The evolution of Albania's foreign policy in the Western Balkans over the past decade will be examined through the analysis of five interconnected domains: new chapter in relations with Serbia, Albania's role in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, failure to achieve the strategic level of relations with Kosovo, the shift in Albania's approach towards North Macedonia and contribution to its Euro-Atlantic integration, and Albania's role in the Western Balkans regional cooperation. Before addressing these topics, we will briefly outline the conceptual bases of Albania's foreign policy in the region.

Conceptual foundations of Albania's foreign policy in the Western Balkans

Albania is geographically positioned in the south-western segment of the Western Balkans, encompassing an area of approximately 29,000 km² and with a population over 2.4 million (Censi i Popullsisë 2023, 7). From Albania's perspective, its immediate regional neighbours include Montenegro, Kosovo,

² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

and North Macedonia; while for a more nuanced understanding of Albania's regional posture, it is pertinent to include Serbia in the discussion. With its neighbours Albania does not face outstanding issues, however, it is important to acknowledge that Albanians constitute the largest and second-largest national community in Kosovo and North Macedonia, and are recognized as a national minority in Montenegro and Serbia.

The conceptual underpinnings of Albania's foreign policy within the Western Balkans are anchored in two key factors. The first is Albania's sustained post-Cold War alignment with the regional interests of the Euro-Atlantic actors. Successive administrations in Tirana have sought to reinforce Albania's role as a stabilizing factor within the region. Albania supported Euro-Atlantic engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, while simultaneously committing to deeper integration within Euro-Atlantic structures (Hide 2018, 12). The second factor pertains to Albania's distinctive historical regional context. Unlike other regional actors, Tirana does not grapple with the legacy of post-Yugoslav identity, thereby allowing it to circumvent the complex bilateral disputes that emerged from the dissolution of ex-Yugoslavia. Another salient component of Albania's regional approach is related to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and the 2013 Brussels Agreement. For Albania and Euro-Atlantic stakeholders, this agreement was perceived as a first step in mitigating the vacuum between Serbia and Kosovo, aligning with Tirana's aspirations for a dynamic and constructive regional approach.

The implementation of this proactive approach was intrinsically linked to the consolidation of the Western Balkans as a coherent geopolitical entity. The term „Western Balkans” was utilized in Euro-Atlantic discourse since the mid-2000s to denote the post-Yugoslav actors (excluding Slovenia and including Albania). However, its geopolitical consolidation gained considerable traction following the events of 2013 and 2014. The first was Croatia's accession to the European Union, which symbolized its departure from the Western Balkans in both political and identity sense (Ђукановић и Крстић 2021, 13). The second event was the imperative to sustain the EU membership perspective for other regional actors, particularly following European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's assertion that, due to the necessity for internal consolidation, „there will be no EU enlargement in the next five years” (Juncker Commission 2014). In response, several European leaders, notably Chancellor Angela Merkel, initiated the Berlin Process, aimed at preserving the EU membership perspective and enhancing

economic and political relations among the regional actors (Hackaj, Madhi & Hackaj 2015, 10; Ђукановић и Крстић 2016, 169).

While this consolidation signified the continuation of ex-Yugoslavia ties for other regional actors, it represented a novel geopolitical reality for Albania. In the post-Cold War era, Albania's regional foreign policy was predominantly oriented toward Italy, Greece, and Turkey. Within the Western Balkans, aside from supporting Euro-Atlantic engagement and seeking to enhance relations with Kosovo, Albania did not engage intensively in regional dynamics. Consequently, Albania's initial stance within the evolving geopolitical framework of the Western Balkans diverged significantly from that of its regional counterparts. Nevertheless, within this newly established framework, due to the factors previously delineated, Albania could follow a more proactive foreign policy approach.

The new chapter in relations with Serbia

Following a prolonged period where conflict was the dominant mode of interaction, particularly after Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, Albania and Serbia signalled their readiness to open a new phase in bilateral relations in 2014. This paradigm shift held considerable significance for Albania for several reasons. Serbi, as the largest territorial actor and the most competitive economy, plays a pivotal role in regional dynamics. Furthermore, the dispersion of Albanians and Serbs across the region intricately connected Albania-Serbia relations with interethnic dynamics. As the Western Balkans emerged as a consolidated geopolitical entity, these interethnic ties became essential for regional political stability. In this context, Albania's evolving relationship with Serbia impacted its interactions with Kosovo and the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, where Tirana sought to position itself as an influential third party. A new chapter in relations with Serbia provided Albania with a salient platform in articulating its perspectives on regional dynamics, consistent with its pro-Western foreign policy orientation and commitment to fostering political stability within the Western Balkans.

A key contribution to this new dynamic was the high-level visits of the two prime ministers – Edi Rama's visit to Belgrade in 2014 and Aleksandar Vučić's visit to Tirana in 2015. This rapprochement was further encouraged by Euro-Atlantic actors, particularly Germany and the European Union. The core premise was that the improvement of Tirana-Belgrade relations would help alleviate regional tensions and cultivate a renewed spirit of cooperation

within the Western Balkans (Rakipi 2022, 234). The emerging bilateral dynamics were directed toward enhancing political dialogue, expanding economic cooperation, strengthening infrastructure connectivity, and encouraging interethnic ties. Messages were conveyed about improving political relations, citing historical grievances (Okruženje 2015). Economically, the benefits of enhanced cooperation, both bilaterally and regionally, within the Berlin process framework were accentuated. During this period, Albania and Serbia actively promoted the idea of deeper regional economic cooperation through a joint framework aimed at reducing trade barriers and facilitating the free movement of EU economic freedoms (Ibid.). Additionally, both actors expressed interest in constructing the Niš-Pristina-Durrës highway, as well as in obtaining greater access to international financial institutions to support their infrastructure endeavours (RSE 2015). Regarding interethnic ties, efforts centered on narratives of reconciliation between Albanians and Serbs. Tirana and Belgrade led the idea of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), initiated under the Berlin Process auspices and modelled after the Franco-German Youth Office established post-World War II (Nikolić 2015).

Nonetheless, divergent positions between Albania and Serbia regarding the status of Kosovo permeated this rapprochement. Initially, Albania underscored that „Kosovo is an irreversible geopolitical reality” and urged Serbia to recognize Kosovo’s self-proclaimed independence (VOA 2014). However, over time, in their bilateral relations, Belgrade and Tirana did not emphasize their differences regarding this contentious issue. For Albania, this approach was driven by the significance that these relations possessed in ensuring Western Balkans political stability and enhancing its role in the regional dynamics, evidenced by its engagement in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and the Open Balkan.

Albania’s role in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue

Assuming a leading Albanian role in encouraging interethnic relations between Albanians and Serbs enabled Tirana to incorporate the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue into its regional agenda. Over the past decade, while emphasizing international affirmation of Kosovo’s independence, Albania advocated for various modalities in finding a sustainable solution in the dialogue. The overarching objective was to signify a commitment to fostering Western Balkans political stability, to strengthen alignment with Euro-Atlantic actors, and to improve Albania’s regional positioning. While the

inconclusive nature of the process was not the desired outcome for Albania, the country's active participation has nonetheless contributed to its regional influence, particularly in light of the process's importance for political stability in the Western Balkans.

The initial phase of this engagement was framed by the calls for Kosovo's recognition by Serbia, articulated by PM Rama during 2014 and 2016 visits to Belgrade (VOA 2014; RFE 2016). Afterwards, according to Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, PM Rama supported the proposal of a „territorial exchange“ between Kosovo and Serbia (KOHA 2018). This proposal, which received tentative support from the then-U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton generally envisaged the exchange of four Serb-majority municipalities in North Kosovo for areas predominantly populated by Albanians in southern Central Serbia (Radio Kim 2018; VOA 2020).

As developments unfolded, Albania's role transitioned to concrete proposals related to the self-management of the Serbian community in Kosovo, identified as a key obligation for the government in Pristina. In June 2023, PM Rama unilaterally submitted a draft statute proposal to pertinent Euro-Atlantic stakeholders for the establishment of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities in Kosovo (ASMM) (Euronews Albania 2023). This proposal was framed within three prevailing contextual factors. First, the crisis in North Kosovo was exacerbated by the Pristina government's inflexibility toward the Serbian community, followed by the withdrawal of Serbian representatives from Kosovo institutions alongside efforts by Pristina to assert political and security control over the region. Second, an increasing disconnection became evident between the government led by Albin Kurti and the *Vetëvendosje* (Self-Determination) party, and Euro-Atlantic actors, particularly concerning relations with the Serbian community. Third, the proposal was submitted during a period when the U.S. and EU had imposed restrictive measures on Kosovo due to these developments. Within this context, the Albanian Prime Minister asserted that the establishment of the ASMM represents: „international affirmation of the Republic of Kosovo, its recognition by everyone, its seat in the United Nations and in all international forums“ (KOHA 2023).

In the most recent phase, Albania proposed a shift for Kosovo, advocating for the unilateral fulfilment of existing obligations in full compliance with the EU and the U.S. (Government of Albania 2024). This proposal arose from the assessment that the actions of the Pristina government had not yielded positive outcomes in the dialogue or contributed to enhancing Kosovo's international standing. It is noteworthy that the proposal was influenced by

the further deterioration of Kosovo's relations with Euro-Atlantic actors, primarily attributable to its approach to the Serbian community. Although the EU and U.S. generally supported Pristina's endeavours to solidify its legal-political framework in North Kosovo, especially in the aftermath of the events in Banjska, contentions emerged regarding the management of institutional ties between the Serbian community and Belgrade. Euro-Atlantic actors advocated for the exploration of sustainable alternatives within Pristina's legislative framework; in contrast, the Pristina government undertook uncoordinated actions to sever these ties while failing to propose viable alternatives. This sparked U.S. Ambassador to Pristina Jeff Hovenier's statement that „the quality of the partnership (with Kosovo) on these issues is not what we had hoped for,” and „the United States has lost enthusiasm to support Kosovo for membership in international organizations” (Insajderi 2024; RFE 2024). In light of these developments, the Albanian Prime Minister articulated the aforementioned proposal during a joint parliamentary session, emphasizing that “Kosovo should abandon nationalist reciprocity with Serbia” (Euronews Albania 2024). He further argued that: „in the normalization of relations with the northern neighbour, it (Kosovo) should aim through the bilateral dialogue with the European Union” (Ibid.).

Failure to achieve the strategic level of relations with Kosovo

Over the past decade, the essential strategic priority for Albania's regional approach was its relationship with Kosovo. This emphasis is primarily rooted in the Albanian Constitution, whose preamble highlights the „centuries-old aspiration of the Albanian people for national identity and unity” (Constitution of Albania 2020). Additionally, the Constitution states that „Albania protects the national rights of the Albanian people living outside its borders” (Ibid.). Beyond constitutional and national considerations, a supportive stance followed the understanding that strengthening Kosovo would positively influence the position of Albanians in the region as a whole. Conversely, Kosovo viewed Albania as the natural advocate for its interests. However, this mutual understanding was not followed with the unified approach in practical implementation (Krasniqi 2023, 57). For Albania, the role of protector and promoter implied dominance in bilateral relations and an influence over Kosovo's foreign policy, which contrasted Kosovo's perception that these phenomena should develop on an equal and independent footing (Ibid.). Consequently, the bilateral relationship over the past decade has been marked by tensions that signalled a lack of strategic

alignment between Albania and Kosovo, an exception in what is otherwise a fairly successful regional policy for Albania.

Following a change of government in 2013, Albania announced a new chapter in its relations with Kosovo, focused on strategic cooperation and coordination (Kalemaj 2020, 86). Year later, at Tirana's initiative, the practice of joint government sessions was introduced and to date they took place eight times, while Secretariat for bilateral relations was established in 2021. This initiative represented a positive change as it enhanced political communication at the highest level. However, the overall impact was mixed. Many assessments noted that while the sessions appeared decorated, they were not followed by the substantive content due to challenges in channelling political will toward the implementation of adopted agreements (Krasniqi 2023, 62). Albania and Kosovo have not demonstrated a willingness for a broader removal of the trade barriers, which impeded the implementation of their expressed commitments and occasionally led to economic tensions. The increase in cooperation was largely the result of private initiatives and a low starting economic base rather than strategic planning (Rakipi 2020, 37). The same can be said for societal relations, which in recent years mostly did not result from coordinated efforts by Tirana and Pristina (Ibid.).

Far greater disagreements emerged from Kosovo's foreign policy and the intended role of Albania. Given Kosovo's unconsolidated international status after the self-proclaimed independence, Albania unilaterally undertook the responsibility to represent Kosovo and her institutions, negotiate in Kosovo's name, and even mediate on behalf of Kosovo (Rakipi 2024). The objective of such actions was to demonstrate Albania's commitment to enhancing regional political stability, align more closely with Euro-Atlantic actors, and subsequently strengthen Albania's position in the Western Balkans. This strategy was reflected in the narrative surrounding Albanian-Serbian reconciliation, the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, and Kosovo's stance on the Open Balkan. Within the reconciliation framework, Pristina exhibited caution toward Tirana's attempts to lead this process on behalf of the Albanian side (Rakipi 2020, 42). This is best represented in a statement of Hashim Thaçi that: „the reconciliation of Albanians and Serbs goes through Pristina, not through Tirana” (Rakipi, 2019). Regarding the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, while Kosovo welcomed Albania's calls for recognition by Serbia, it emphasized that Albania could not assume a mediator role, which was exclusively designated for the EU and the USA (Rakipi, 2024). Furthermore, Pristina was cautious regarding PM Rama's proposal on the ASMM

establishment, which was best articulated by Kusari-Lila, who emphasized: „That document is for Kosovo, and before it goes there, it should be of Kosovo, for the citizens of Kosovo” (Euronews Albania 2024). Additionally, during a recent joint parliament session, there was a conspicuous lack of response from Kosovo officials concerning the PM Rama’s suggestion for revising Pristina’s approach to the dialogue with Belgrade (Brahimi 2024). Lastly, Albania and Kosovo maintained divergent perspectives on the Open Balkan. Albania actively advocated for the initiative’s expansion, expressing optimism that all regional actors would join (Seferi 2021). Contrarily, Kosovo explicitly rejected the initiative, asserting that it would only endorse regional initiatives which enjoyed unequivocal support from the EU and the USA. This position sparked substantial criticism from Albania, which termed Kosovo’s stance as a fundamental lack of vision and detrimental to its national interests (Krasniqi 2023, 64).

The shift in approach toward North Macedonia and contribution to its Euro-Atlantic integration

Albania’s approach to North Macedonia prior to 2016 exhibited consistent support for its Euro-Atlantic integration, as well as a commitment to supporting the Albanian population, all while refraining from interfering in internal affairs of this country (Krisafi 2020, 83). Support for integration processes followed the understanding that strengthening North Macedonia’s stability was one of the prerequisites for enhancing regional stability, given the multifaceted challenges that Skopje faced with its neighbours and its domestic interethnic dynamics. Additionally, Albania periodically advocated for the full implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, although the status of the Albanian community had considerably improved since the armed conflict in 2001.

A shift in Albania’s approach is related to its involvement in the government formation in Skopje following the 2016 parliamentary elections, and here the context of North Macedonia’s foreign policy should be noted. The protracted dispute with Greece over the country’s name and instituted blockades of the EU and NATO accession by Athens caused North Macedonia, previously a regional frontrunner in Euro-Atlantic integration, to become on the very margin of these processes (Đukanović 2019, 96). Simultaneously, the VMRO-DPMNE government was rooted in its uncompromising position and eschewed public discourse, attempting to obstruct any potential agreements with Greece (Ibid.). This development

effectively stymied the Euro-Atlantic integration of Skopje and led to more visible ties with non-Western actors, notably Russia and Turkey (Ibid.). Furthermore, there was a rising concern that North Macedonia would drift into more hard-line positions toward its neighbours, particularly Greece and Bulgaria, as EU and NATO members (Ibid.).

Parallel to this self-isolation threat, in North Macedonia, discussions were taking place between the ruling VMRO-DPMNE and the opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) regarding the prevailing political crisis, culminating in an agreement to conduct parliamentary elections in 2016 (Ibid., 97). The election outcome showed the standard division within the Macedonian political landscape between VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, with the former securing a marginally bigger number of seats. Despite winning fewer mandates, the Albanian parties were traditionally positioned between the two mentioned parties and, due to their increased coalition capacity, were in a favourable position for government formation. In contrast to earlier alignments with VMRO-DPMNE, the Albanian parties opted to form a coalition with the opposition SDSM.³ This shift was preceded by their joint post-electoral document, referred to as the „Tirana Platform,” adopted under the auspices of the Albanian Prime Minister. The platform underscored the imperative for the full Ohrid Agreement implementation and highlighted the necessity of „ethnic equality” for the Albanian population in North Macedonia, particularly through the recognition of the Albanian language as a second official language (RTS 2017). Additionally, the platform called for economic and social equality via proportional regional development (Ibid.). A particular accent was placed on resolving the dispute with Greece and ensuring Albanian representation in these negotiations, as well as on fostering amicable relations with neighbours, including „Albania and Kosovo” (Ibid.). Ultimately, the fulfilment of these provisions in the document was articulated as a „prerequisite for expediting North Macedonia’s EU and NATO integration” (Ibid.)

The new government, led by the SDSM with the participation of Albanian parties, aimed to resolve neighbouring disputes swiftly, thereby fulfilling the Tirana platform priorities. A noteworthy achievement was the Prespa Agreement of 2018, under which North Macedonia adopted its current name. This agreement represented a pivotal moment in relations with Greece as the EU and NATO integration was revived, which was

³ Parties in question: Democratic Union for Integration, Besa Movement, Alliance for Albanians, and Democratic Party of Albanians.

confirmed by North Macedonia's accession to NATO and the initiation of EU membership negotiations in 2020. Improvements in the Albanian community status were primarily attributed to the formal recognition of the Albanian language as the second official language, as well as the inclusion of the Ohrid Agreement in the preamble of the Constitution (Constitution of North Macedonia 2022; Marušić 2018). For Tirana, the actions undertaken by the new government were met with approval. However, by encouraging greater cohesion among the Albanian political parties, Albania disrupted its practice of non-interference in North Macedonia's internal affairs. On the other hand and taking into account the new government orientation toward the dispute resolution with Greece, with this development, Albania performed a valuable role in revitalizing Euro-Atlantic integration for North Macedonia, which was particularly important given the later dynamics in relations of the previous Macedonian government with certain non-Western actors. Thus, Albania confirmed its commitment to enhancing political stability in the Western Balkans and increased its regional standing, while using the opportunity to improve the position of the Albanian community in North Macedonia.

Albania's role in the Western Balkans regional cooperation: from the newcomer to one of the leaders

Albania's distinctive position in the Western Balkans was particularly visible in the process of regional cooperation. As it was not a part of former Yugoslavia and neither is of the „Yugosphere,” Albania initially exhibited a lower level of interaction compared to some other bilateral relations in the region (Judah 2009, 14). However, this specific historical context allowed for Albania's participation in regional cooperation to be free from bilateral disputes, thus enabling a more proactive approach. This proactive stance was primarily exemplified by engagement in the Berlin Process. However, as the Berlin Process began to wane, Albania, in collaboration with Serbia and North Macedonia, spearheaded the Open Balkan initiative, which was framed as a complement to the Berlin Process while also signifying a commitment to local agency within the regional cooperation framework (Kalemaj 2023, 29). Notwithstanding, Albania maintained its commitment to the Berlin Process, which was particularly important with its revitalization through the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. In doing so, Albania not only enhanced its role in regional cooperation but also improved its position within the larger context of the Western Balkans. Albania's elevated

status in regional cooperation was initially supported by the temporary prominence of the Open Balkan initiative, which granted Albania, as a founding member, significant influence in shaping multilateral regional dynamics. More significantly, through commitment to the Berlin process, Albania secured a rather prominent role in the implementation of the European regional agenda, exemplified by being the only Western Balkan actor that hosted a Berlin Process summit, and later presenting the EU Growth Plan to other regional actors.

Regarding the Berlin Process, it aimed to enhance regional cooperation and integration with the EU by fostering political relations, energy and infrastructure projects, youth exchanges, and dialogue with civil society (Barbullushi 2016, 60). The multilateral nature of the initiative, coupled with regional inclusiveness and European support, aligned closely with Albania's objectives for enhanced regional engagement. This context facilitated a new chapter in Albania's diplomatic relations with Serbia. Furthermore, Albania sought to encourage regional cooperation within a more structured framework. At the 2017 Trieste summit, Albania endorsed the Multi-Annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (REA) in the Western Balkans, promoting the EU's core economic freedoms (Đukanović 2020, 603). Additionally, Albania led the establishment of RYCO in cooperation with Serbia.

The Open Balkan initiative emerged as an idea to advance the REA, but from local actors. At its inception, participants emphasized the need for a single regional market to drive economic development and enhance integration with European and global markets (Ibid.). They highlighted the initiative's complementarity to existing frameworks, particularly the Berlin Process and the Regional Cooperation Council, while aiming for the Open Balkan to assume a leading role in ongoing regional economic cooperation and integration. Related to that, while asserting support for European integration, member states clarified that the initiative is not an alternative to EU membership (Ibid.). However, Open Balkan faced significant scepticism, firstly regarding local management of the regional cooperation without the leading Euro-Atlantic actors. Additionally, complex bilateral relations exacerbated apprehensions that the initiative could potentially facilitate the dominance of local actors, particularly Serbia and, to a lesser extent, Albania. Consequently, the Open Balkan struggled with regional inclusiveness and received partial Euro-Atlantic backing at best, notably from the Trump administration and Chancellor Merkel in the later stages of her term, while the EU's position remained ambivalent (Đukanović 2022, 6).

Albania's Open Balkan engagement represented an opportunity to enhance its role in managing regional processes, particularly when this initiative enjoyed regional prominence. However, Albania's Open Balkan participation did not signify distancing from the Berlin Process; on the contrary. Commitment to the Berlin process was exemplified by the Prime Minister's statement that the „Open Balkan is a tool for implementing the Berlin Process agenda” (Euronews 2022). A total turnaround towards the Berlin Process emerged with its revitalization in 2022, and particularly in 2023. The 2023 Berlin Process Summit marked the announcement of the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, which seeks to integrate the Western Balkan into the EU's single market, advance regional economic cooperation and EU-related reforms and increase pre-accession funding in accelerating Western Balkan's socio-economic convergence to the EU (European Commission 2023). It is pertinent to highlight that the 2023 Berlin Process Summit was held in Albania, which became the first and, to date, the only regional actor to undertake this role. Additionally, Albania took the initiative to present the EU growth plan to the other regional actors. In this context, over the past decade, Albania has transitioned from a relative newcomer to one of the leaders of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

Conclusion

Albania's evolving foreign policy over the past decade reflects a broader transformation in its strategic orientation within the Western Balkans, underpinned by a consistent alignment with Euro-Atlantic interests, and relying on the absence of outstanding issues in its relationship with the regional neighbours. As a small state, Albania has skilfully leveraged its geopolitical position not merely to safeguard national interests but to contribute to the strengthening of the political stability in the region as a whole. This has been achieved through a proactive and multidimensional foreign policy that prioritizes constructive bilateralism, Euro-Atlantic integration and regional cooperation, while committing itself to improving the position of the Albanian community in the Western Balkans.

By recalibrating its relations with Serbia, being present in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, supporting the Euro-Atlantic trajectory of North Macedonia, and positioning itself proactively in regional initiatives such as the Berlin Process and Open Balkan, Albania has demonstrated an increasing capacity to influence regional dynamics. These efforts have both reinforced its image as a contributor to regional stability and elevated its status as a

credible and indispensable actor in the Western Balkans, both in relation to the Euro-Atlantic actors and on a wider regional level. Certainly, Albania encountered limitations in projecting its proactive regional approach, especially in its relations with Kosovo. The inability to reach a consensus regarding the developmental framework of their mutual relations exposed political tensions and the absence of a strategic alignment between Albania and Kosovo, although both actors, at least rhetorically, remained committed to the said orientation.

Ultimately, Albania's foreign policy in the Western Balkans reveals the ability of small states to use the available space within the systemic limitations effectively and to shape a proactive course of foreign action. This example underscores how small states can align their interests with the regional priorities of dominant actors while leveraging historical contexts to their advantage. Consequently, small states can consistently pursue their foreign policy objectives while enhancing their regional and international standing.

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Стефан БОШКОВИЋ

**АЛБАНИЈА НА ЗАПАДНОМ БАЛКАНУ:
ПРЕМА ОСНАЖЕНОЈ РЕГИОНАЛНОЈ УЛОЗИ**

Апстракт: Потражујући одговор на питање како Албанија као мала држава у систему међународних односа политички профитира од сопственог географског положаја, овај рад испитује развој њене спољнополитичке дјелатности на Западном Балкану у протеклој деценији. Главни аргумент рада садржан је у томе да је Албанија користећи свој географски положај показивала посвећеност учвршћивању политичке стабилности на Западном Балкану, чиме је унаприједила своју улогу у управљању регионалном динамиком. Доприноси Албаније у поспјешивању стабилности на Западном Балкану остваривали су се путем проактивног билатералног и мултилатералног спољнополитичког приступа, чија је примјена била омогућена захваљујући усаглашености са евроатлантским регионалним приоритетима и потенцирањем одсуства отворених питања у билатералним односима са регионалним сусједима. Оснажена улога Албаније на Западном Балкану најприје је проистекла из ангажовања у превазилажењу изазова који су обухватили албанску популацију. Такође, ова улога је произашла из покретања и промоције декларативних локалних оквира у регионалној сарадњи на Западном Балкану, уз задржавање посвећености иницијативама који су уживали цјеловиту евроатлантску подршку.

Кључне ријечи: мала држава, географски положај, Албанија, Западни Балкан, политичка стабилност.