



# **Albania amidst the External Actors' Influence. The Open Balkan initiative: A Russian Trojan Horse or a faster approach to Regional Cooperation?**

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## Abstract

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This study analyzes Albania's position in the middle of the political "chessboard" created by the most influential external actors after the EU and the USA in the Western Balkans, namely, Russia, China, Türkiye, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Firstly, this paper examines Albania's position among these various actors by categorizing them as either benign or malign toward the country. It explores Albania's multifaceted attitudes within the context of regional dynamics in the Western Balkans. Second, the

study sheds light on how the Open Balkan (OB) initiative has shaped these regional relations. Third, it focuses on Albania's attempt to become a crucial actor at the regional level concerning its European integration path through the Berlin Process and, lately, through the Open Balkan initiative. Finally, the last part links the external actors - mainly Russia - to infiltrations through the Open Balkan initiative, interference, and the pursuit of specific interests within the country.

# Introduction

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Like other Western Balkan countries, Albania represents, geopolitically, an essential bridge between the East and West of the Western Balkans. This position makes it attractive to external actors prone to developing their spheres of influence in this region. On the one hand, due to ethnic tensions, unresolved border disputes, pervasive organized crime, and corruption, the Western Balkans have often reemerged as one of the EU's most pressing security challenges. On the other hand, this tendency changed after the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine, not because these issues disappeared but because the area suddenly shifted from *"a region to be secured"* into *"a region to securitize."* If we define securitization as *"an extreme form of politicization"* (Buzan, Waever & de Wilde 1998, 23), or framing and heightening particular issues as security threats, shaping how countries perceive and respond to

threats and how they interact with other countries, explains how the Western Balkans region boldly returned to all the external actors' political agenda. Due to the growth of non-European influences in the region, the presence of various actors raises concerns about the potential for significant malign influences.

In this regard, Albania has been characterized *"as both an external security provider and an internal security receiver"* (Jano 2023, 63) due to its NATO membership and its coveted geopolitical position in the region by third powers. Thus, this study centers on analyzing the involvement of external factors by describing each actor's role and then analyzing Albania's positioning as a pole of regional cooperation in the region by closely examining the Open Balkan initiative from the perspective of Albanian experts.

# Methodology

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In terms of methodology, this study is based on primary and secondary sources, including semi-structured interviews with different experts whose opinions helped to build background knowledge for this contribution. Firstly, the study deals with the positioning of Albania towards the external actors, i.e., Russia, China, Türkiye, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Then, it focuses on these relations' practical implications and future perspectives. This perspective is of crucial importance as the process of European integration might be undermined by the malign strategies of various regional actors.

In the first part, the study utilizes the existing primary literature, reports, and data elaboration produced by various NGOs or public institutions, while the second part is based on 15 interviews that were conducted online or in person to collect data on the Open Balkan initiative and possible Russian influence. The targeted group to

conduct the interviews were Albanian experts, politicians, journalists, and activists following developments related to this matter. Interviewees identify their perceptions of the OB initiative. Responses may often be affected by different variables, such as if and how the interviewer has influenced the interviewee, their level of trust, the interviewee's position in public administration, or their political affiliation. This case study used one-to-one and semi-structured interviews to minimize this limitation.

Some limitations exist when it comes to primary sources of literature on the Open Balkan initiative and regarding a more expanded analysis of the role of key actors, such as the EU and the USA, but given the length of the study, such limitations may receive detailed consideration in a second phase of a possible study expansion in the future.



# The moves on the Western Balkan playboard: Albania and the external actors

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Albania has always had precise geopolitical positioning and foreign policy alignment in the regional and international arenas. It has been a committed agent in its path toward EU membership. This Western inclination is a well-known fact within the EU diplomatic channels. Albania's continuous commitment to *"full alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy"* (European Commission 2022, 3) is consistently emphasized with a touch of pride by Albanian state representatives on numerous occasions. Albania is a longtime US ally that joined NATO in April 2009. Visa liberalization with the EU was formally completed in December 2010, and EU candidate status was granted in June 2014. It unanimously adopted a comprehensive justice reform in 2016, obtained non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council in 2021, and started accession negotiations with the EU in June 2022. Despite this straightforward configuration in the European and global arenas, external influences from third parties have not escaped Albania but have proven to be present in different ways.

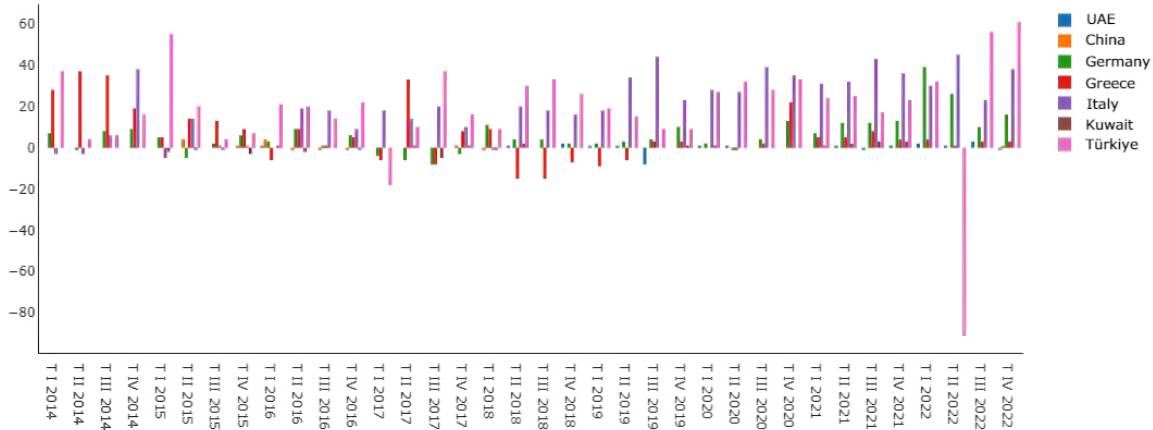
Russia has not shown great interest in Albania since Western dominance has undoubtedly prevailed. On the other hand, Türkiye has always considered Albania geopolitically significant. Meanwhile, China and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf (also referred to as the Gulf States) have only regarded it as geo-economically attractive, probably due to *"those countries' prospect for EU membership, promising the Gulf countries long-run economic and diplomatic returns in their relations with the EU"* (Mandaci, Rusi Karacalarli 2018). While third parties kept advancing in the region, the EU, due to its poly-crisis period (2008-2016), kept laying the groundwork for the gradual establishment of these actors in the region. All in parallel with a certain tolerance by the EU to the rise of illiberal regimes in the Western Balkan countries as long as the situation served the region's stability (Bieber, Kmezić 2017). The European fatigue, intensified by a form of US disengagement from the region during the Trump era (2017–2021), led to the rise of Türkiye, China, Russia, and the Gulf States' presence in the region, Albania, and the creation of some new regional initiatives such as the Open Balkan.

## Türkiye, Albania's eldest brother

Türkiye is Albania's third-biggest ally, after the EU and the US, and was proclaimed a strategic ally in 2013, shortly after the current administration led by Edi Rama took power (Beshku, 2015). Türkiye is also one of Albania's most important economic partners. The Bank of Albania's investment data for third countries in Albania from 2019 to the second trimester of 2022 (Bank of Albania 2022) supports this claim. As can be easily seen, Türkiye dominates foreign investments in Albania, followed by the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, while significant Chinese and Russian investments are nearly nonexistent.

## Direct investment liabilities in Albania by country<sup>1</sup>

**Graphic 1.**  
**National Bank of Albania (2022) Data on Foreign Investments for the period 2019–2022**



According to the Europeanization theories, unlike the European Union, which governs externally by relying on conditionality and incentives (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020), non-European countries come to the WB without conditionality but offer beneficial allegiances, at least seemingly. This approach seems to be the case for Türkiye concerning Albania. There have been massive Turkish investments, especially after the earthquakes that destroyed part of Albania in September and November 2019. The Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has repeatedly asked, in return for support with the eradication of all the schools and institutions linked to the Gülen movement, an organization backing exiled Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, who is accused of being part of a terrorist group for his alleged role in the failed 2016 *coup d'état* (Al Jazeera, 2016).

In January 2022, Erdoğan addressed the Albanian parliament, stating that: “a precondition to our support and brotherhood is your commitment to the fight against FETÖ” (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization), known as the Gülenist organization, while reminding of the massive investments in Albania (Taylor, Halla 2022). During this

visit, he inaugurated the Ethem Bey Mosque, restored by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Turkish government’s apartment complexes built in Laç cost around 42 million euros (Daily Sabah, 2022). However, Türkiye’s investments in Albania remained relatively low throughout 2022 (see Graphic 1). Presumably, to address this decrease in assets, the closure of a school and a kindergarten linked to the FETÖ organization followed. Moreover, a week before, a Turkish citizen, Emre Olsur, an opponent of the Turkish government, had been immediately deported to Türkiye from Tirana in September 2022 without following the international rules for deportation (Taylor, 2022).

A major investment that speaks volumes about the latest Turkish-Albanian relations has been the Hospital of Fier. The construction of this hospital, baptized as the “Türkiye-Albania Fier Friendship Hospital,” began in January 2021 (Guler, 2021), after Albanian Prime Minister Rama’s visit to Türkiye the same month, which came after a promise made by President Erdoğan, the construction of the Hospital of Fier commenced. Remarkably, the hospital was completed in less than three months. As a result, the Turkish government

1 Data is provided from the official website of the National Bank of Albania at [https://www.bankofalbania.org/Statistikat/Statistikat\\_e\\_Sektorit\\_te\\_Jashtem/Investimet\\_e\\_huaja\\_direkte/Te\\_dhenat\\_kryesore\\_per\\_Investimet\\_e\\_huaja\\_direkte.html?evb=agregate&evn=agregate\\_detaje&cregtab\\_id=719&periudha\\_id=3n](https://www.bankofalbania.org/Statistikat/Statistikat_e_Sektorit_te_Jashtem/Investimet_e_huaja_direkte/Te_dhenat_kryesore_per_Investimet_e_huaja_direkte.html?evb=agregate&evn=agregate_detaje&cregtab_id=719&periudha_id=3n), last accessed in March 2022.

2 TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) is a government organization under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Türkiye. It represents the Turkish official vision and public diplomacy in all the countries in which it is present.



has built a fully equipped 150 beds hospital for over 70 million euros (Guler, 2021). The hospital was inaugurated on April 21, just four days before the Albanian parliamentary elections, clearly supporting Rama's re-election (Tzifakis, 2021) and, thus, reconfirming the personal relations that go beyond the official political ties between the two leaders of Türkiye and Albania (Madhi, 2021).

Besides these massive investments, there are many permanent Turkish companies in Albania, such as Banka Kombëtare Tregtare (Bank Company), Albtelcom (Communication Sector), Air Albania (Flight Company), Acibadem Hospital, American Hospital, FMT Group (Energy), and Kurum Holding Albania (Mineral Field), to name a few. They are all coordinated by the Turkish Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ATTSO), active in Albania. Moreover, Türkiye *"has the advantages of geographical proximity, which allows for a reduction in transportation costs, as well as an existing similarity in consumption habits"* (Hake and Radzyner 2019: 6), together with the advantage of having signed a free bilateral trade agreement with Albania since 2008.

The Turkish influence is not only economic but also cultural. The TİKA Foundation influences many aspects of everyday life in Albania by supporting art, education, and cultural events. TİKA projects, Yunuş Emre Cultural Centers, Turkish education institutions, and soap operas extensively contribute to a somewhat romanticization of the Ottoman period and expose and popularize Turkish culture and contemporary ways of life (Abazi 2020: 174). Although passing *"from rulers to supporters"* (Xhaferi, 2017), Türkiye's interest in Albania is greatly amplified by Türkiye's rivalry with Greece" (Lami, 2017), and Albania's interest in Türkiye is linked to the rivalry with Russia's influence in Serbia. Thus, Türkiye represents a crucial ally to Albania since it preserves its security concerns through the balance of forces after forming two dominant axes of power in the region: the Russian- Greek-Serbian axes on one side and the American-Turkish-Albanian one on the other (Beshku, 2015). Türkiye is *"a NATO teammate and the Albanian guarantor"* (Xhaferi, 2017) of security. Thus, it is often considered a sort of eldest brother to Albania.

## The Arab States of the Persian Gulf: A crescent influence in Albania

The Arab states of the Persian Gulf (further referred to as the Gulf States) have increased their influence on Albania in the last two decades. Their economic and religious influences are bolstered by the Muslim-majority population in Albania. The most important influences are represented by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (religious and economic influence), Kuwait (mainly economic influence), Qatar (economic, infrastructural, and cultural influence), and the United Arab Emirates - UAE (economic influence and new investment interests).

While the influence of the other Gulf States is moderate, that of the UAE seems very promising for long-term investments in Albania. The most notable projects funded by the UAE up until now have been: the construction of the Sheikh Zayed Airport in Kukës and the Tirana-Elbasan road, both funded by the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD). However, since these investments have been mainly in loans, they might lead to high economic

dependency on the UAE (Rrustemi, De Wijk, Dunlop, Perovska, and Palushi 2021), and this dependency is going to intensify very soon. In addition, the EMMAR group from Dubai will invest 2.5 billion dollars in the port of Durres, the second major city of Albania, to build the "Durres Yacht and Marina" port (Bhoyrul, 2022). This mega-project is expected to profoundly impact Albania's tourism industry, potentially transforming the country into a premier Mediterranean destination for global tourists.

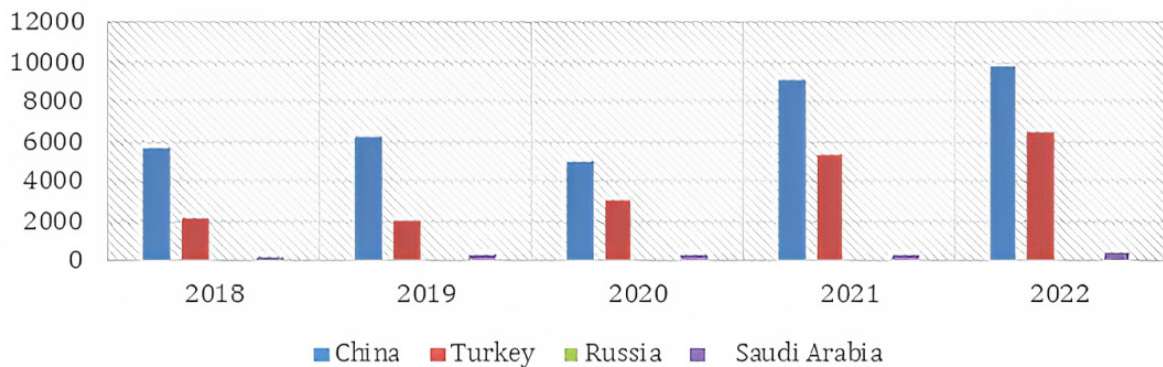
Albania is also linked to the UAE in terms of commerce and tourism. It is believed that many Albanians used to go to the UAE for vacations, especially during the Covid-19 period (2020-2022), when the UAE was one of the few vaccine-free countries and offered them for free to visitors. Moreover, with the four Gulf countries exempt from obtaining a visa to enter Albania (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait), tourism seems vital for all parties involved.

## China's soft power in Albania

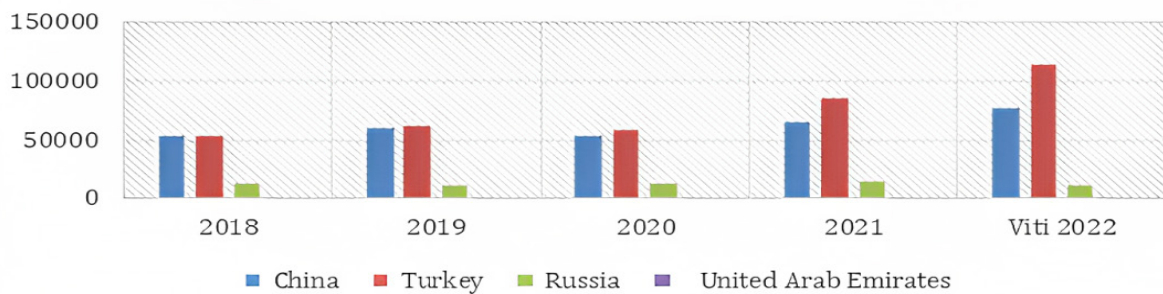
Albania is among the Western Balkans countries “with the longest and deepest track record of cooperation with communist China before the two countries fell out at the beginning of the 1970s” (Shopov, 2022). Albania's alignment with China as a security ally is not comparable to its strong alliance with the USA or its NATO membership. Instead, Albania represents a partnership-oriented commerce collaborator for China, in line with China's plans not to

replace the US alliance system with its rival system of alliances (Ekman, 2022). Albania is part of a “network of partnerships built step-by-step at both bilateral and multilateral levels” (Ekman, 2022). This approach becomes more evident in the lack of Chinese government investments in recent years in Albania (graphic 1) and the rise of imports and exports, shown in graphics 2 and 3 below, of commercial partners with Albania.

**Graphic 2**  
Data on Albania's exports to Türkiye, Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia (2019–2022) by INSTAT



**Graphic 3**  
Data on Albania's imports from Türkiye, Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia (2019–2022) by INSTAT



As can be seen, China is an active partner in imports and exports in Albania (INSTAT data).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this suggests that the Chinese-Albanian relationship is not economically based on investments but on markets' exploitation (petroleum and chromium) by China's side and wholesale and retail trade commerce by Albania's side. There is a high number of Chinese citizens who live and work in Albania (Merepeza, 2019). Despite being the seventh community

to apply for residence permits in Albania in 2019, following the Iranian, Italian, Kosovar, Greek, American, and Turkish communities (INSTAT 2019), the Chinese community has established a significant presence in wholesale and retail businesses within an area known as The Chinese Market (Merepeza, 2019). The second generation of their children born in Albania already speak fluent Albanian and perceive Albania as their homeland.

3 Data provided by INSTAT (National Statistical Institute of Albania) for 2018-2022, at <http://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/tregtia-e-jashtme/tregtia-e-jashtme-e-mallrave/#tab2>, accessed in December 2022.





There is also a relationship based on the historical links between the two countries, which translates mostly into a Chinese cultural hegemony over a smaller country.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese government has supported Albanian students with Chinese scholarships every year since 2013.<sup>5</sup> There has been a rising cultural cooperation promoted by an active Chinese Embassy in Albania and the Confucius Institute, which was founded in Tirana in 2013 (Arežina, 2020) on the premises of the University of Tirana. The wider public can learn Chinese through this institute and follow many Chinese cultural events. The Institute manages its own journal and radio channel and is very active on social media. As for

the past historical linkages, there is a very telling symbolic building in Tirana that evokes the solid Chinese-Albanian relationship during the communist regime. The current Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs building - a massive, aged, and imposing structure - was intended to serve as the Chinese Embassy in Albania, but it never did. The building was finished in 1978, exactly when relations between the two countries formally split up. The current Albanian relationship with China can be metaphorically compared to this building: very symbolically important but non-functional in terms of foreign investments at the same time.

## Russia's "Frozen" Relationship with Albania

The Albanian-Russian relationship seems to have remained "cold" since the Cold War. Albania is indisputably an ally of the US on the one hand, while Russia supports Serbia against Kosovo's independence on the other. The Albanian attitude is also affected by the alignment of Albanian foreign policy with the Common and Foreign Security Policy of the EU. *"Politically, Tirana is strongly geared to the West, which does not encourage the development of other linkages to Russia"* (Abazi 2020, 170). Thus, since 2015, Albania has followed the EU and US sanctions policies against Russia after the annexation of Crimea and has continued to do so after the aggression against Ukraine in 2022.

The relationship with Russia reached one of its lowest points in 2018, when the Albanian government expelled

two Russian diplomats in response to NATO's collective action principle and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In April 2022, a street near the Russian Embassy in Tirana was named "Free Ukraine" (Reuters, 2022). Although the Albanian government has taken a clear stance on Russia, there is a belief that Russia provided financial support to the former leader of the Democratic Party (PD), Lulzim Basha, during the recent elections (Taylor, 2022a). However, this incident is considered an isolated case that has caused conflicts within the leadership of the Democratic Party. The Russian influence in Albanian internal affairs continues to be a political driver in the political debate between the two main parties in Albania.

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4 The diplomatic relations between Albania and China were established in 1949. In the collective memory of the Albanian public, China is recognized as the sole country that provided economic support to Albania during the challenging years of "grand isolation" immediately after the dictator Hoxha announced the split with the Soviet Union in 1970. From 1970 to 1978, the survival of the Albanian economy and its people was exclusively dependent on China's investments and trade until in 1978 these relations were dramatically frozen.

5 See the scholarship session on Albania's Ministry of Education and Sports website for the academic year 2023-2024. In this section which dates back to 2015, we can see that there are scholarships offered each academic year from Chinese and Turkish Universities through their governments; meanwhile, there are scholarships provided randomly from Russia, Qatar, and UAE: <https://arsimi.gov.al/bursa-dhe-programe-studimi/>, accessed in January 2023.

# From CEFTA to the Berlin Process: Navigating the Halted EU Advancement and Paving the Way to Open Balkan

CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement), created in 1992, was the first regional economic initiative concerning southern Europe after the Visegrad Group. Once these countries entered the EU, CEFTA was reformulated to accommodate the WB countries in 2006. Differently from what the WB countries needed, CEFTA has always focused on commercial and regional cooperation and implementing the free market zone. The collaboration within the WB countries needed a social component. Thus, the EU established the mechanism of the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEEC) in 1996 at the Ministers of Foreign Affairs meeting held in Bulgaria the same year. This regional cooperation forum was also aimed at strengthening good neighbor relations among all participants from Southeast Europe. After two decades, there are several other initiatives that share a common denominator: regional cooperation, a paradigm that has been required by the EU since 1996 and incorporated as a central part of the EU conditionality to the Stabilization Association Process (SAA) since 1999 (Bonomi & Nechev, 2022). The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) was founded by the SEEC in 2008, and as of 2020, it also incorporates the Regional Economic Area (REA) and the Common Regional Market (CRM), both of which were established by the Berlin Process in 2017 and 2020, respectively. Given that the WB has often considered the Berlin Process as a substitute for the EU Enlargement and it has been criticized for not having reached any substantial progress within the WB countries (Jovanović & Holzner, 2023), the leaders of Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia gave life to the “Mini Schengen” initiative in 2019 and turned it into the Open Balkan (OB) in 2021, under a “Western Balkan for the Western Balkans approach”.

The last two initiatives were born while the European integration of Albania and North Macedonia was stalled due to the French veto in the European Council of October 2019, which blocked the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia until 2022. Even after

the formal start of the access negotiations in March 2020, the European Council postponed the previously planned Intergovernmental Conference with Albania and North Macedonia. The delay from March 2020 to July 2022, due to the Bulgarian veto over North Macedonia, was overcome only by the interference of France holding the Presidency of the European Council in the second half of 2022. Albania and Serbia tried to develop a “Western Balkans for the Western Balkans” approach during this period. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić have continuously tried to create European integration through regional cooperation to fill the void of a reluctant EU, which, in 2019, showed the peak of its enlargement fatigue towards the region.

The Open Balkan initiative has been intensively discussed in Albania due to concerns about parallel structures with the existing CEFTA, REA (Regional Economic Area), and CRM (Common Regional Market) developed under the framework of the Berlin Process. During the Berlin Process Summit held on November 10, 2020, in Sofia, the Common Regional Market was encapsulated within the RCC and CEFTA Secretariats that would facilitate its implementation, which is hoped to be finished by 2024 (WB6 2020). Despite the worries expressed regarding the overlapping of the Open Balkan with the REA and RCC, the Albanian Prime Minister continues to put a lot of energy into the Open Balkan. With a firm grip on his third mandate and facing weak opposition, Prime Minister Rama has neglected to engage the public and seek their consensus on this project, which serves as an alarming sign of democratic backsliding within the country. He attempted to retract his previous actions afterward by conducting a survey distributed throughout the country to gather public opinion on the matter, which experts thought was intentional and not scientifically based (Gjoka, 2022). A question on the OB derived from this survey was also shared on his social media in January 2022.<sup>6</sup> The survey results were published in April 2022, and according to the organizers, 59% of the

6 Question No. 12 regarding the Open Balkan initiative was published on the Facebook profile of the Prime Minister, but envelopes with the survey were sent in parallel by mail to each home in the country. The question was formulated like this: “Some people believe that the set-up of the Open Balkan initiative is in Albania’s interest. Others think that this initiative does not bring any advantage to Albania. What is your opinion about that?”

respondents favored the Open Balkan. Meanwhile, 26% were against it, and 15% did not know how to answer. Moreover, experts were split in two: some thought consulting their citizens was a democratic and open way of leading, and others thought it was a clear populist move.

There have been two main perspectives on the Open Balkan initiative in Albania. On one side, some experts believe that the Open Balkan is a “natural” prolongation of the Berlin Process within the European Integration initiative. *“After all, the negotiations for these agreements began as early as 2021 within the framework of the Berlin Process,”* says a diplomat from the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania (Anonymous (a) 2023). On the other hand, some perceive it as in line with the Berlin Process or as *“complementary to the Berlin Process”* (Anonymous (d) 2023). Blerjana Bino, an expert on the region and Head of SciDEV (Science and Innovation for Development), a think tank based in Tirana, believes that *“the Berlin Process and Open Balkans are two different initiatives with a shared goal of supporting peace and stability in the Western Balkans region.”* She believes the Open Balkan *“calls for increased dialogue between the region’s countries, focusing on issues such as strengthening*

*trade, infrastructure, access to education, and investment in renewable resources”* (Bino, 2023). On the other hand, Enika Abazi, an expert on geopolitics who lives and works in France, thinks that *“both initiatives aim in principle at the same result, the pacification of the Western Balkans and its integration into the EU”* (Abazi, 2023).

On the other hand, a group of experts believes this initiative has nothing to do with European integration but is a parallel process. *“After a dissatisfied attitude with the EU, when the Berlin Process was not generating new energies and the region’s difficult confrontation with several challenges, where the most strenuous one was COVID-19, it seemed as if a new regional (Balkan-led) initiative was brewing to fill the vacuum created by the Berlin Process. In such circumstances, Open Balkans was not a duplication but merely an attempt to find a ‘shortcut’ based on the same freedoms and services promised by the Berlin Process,”* says Elira Luli, an Albanian expert on the European Union (Luli, 2023). *“Differently from the Berlin Process, the Open Balkan is not backed up and guaranteed by the European Union,”* says Enis Sulstarova, an expert on the Balkan region and political activist who expressed his worries about the initiative’s future (Sulstarova, 2023).

# The "Open Balkan": Effective Regional Cooperation or Russia's Trojan Horse? The Experts' Opinion

With Kosovo opposing the OB initiative, the Albanian government has faced divided public opinion regarding this effort. Part of its public opinion fears its closeness with Serbia and, as a result, with Russia. *"Whatever fruits it will bear, strictly speaking of Albania, they will not be worth it as long as Serbia maintains its actual position on Kosovo and Bosnia,"* says Klejdi Këlliçi, an expert on regional and comparative studies (Këlliçi, 2023). Under these circumstances, due to the historical links between Albania and Kosovo, the participation and leadership of the Open Balkan are sometimes perceived as a betrayal of Kosovo's interest by the Albanians of Albania. Albin Kurti, Kosovo's Prime Minister and leader of Vetëvendosje has repeatedly claimed that Kosovo would not join any initiative with Serbia if the EU were not present.

On the other hand, the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, firmly believes that the two countries should collaborate despite any bilateral disputes they might have. He considers this platform an excellent opportunity to discuss Kosovo's independence. The initiative constitutes an interesting interplay: Kosovo rejects the idea outright, while Albania is among the leading architects by comparing this initiative to the achievements of similar initiatives in the past.

Experts fear Serbian supremacy in economic terms and the absence of the EU in this project. *"Serbian industrial products will easily compete with the Albanian ones, and that will not be compensated by the Albanian exports or by the arrival of Serbian tourists on the Albanian shores,"* says Sulstarova (Sulstarova, 2023). *"Serbia is the most powerful country in the region, with the largest economy - which, in such an initiative, can benefit more than others. More economic gains translate into more political power, which may cause serious complications in the WB,"* says Elira Luli (2023).

Regarding the influence Russia might exert in the WB through the OB platform, an expert says: *"The problem is Serbia rather than Russia. Serbia is using Russia's problems to exert some kind of hegemony in the Western Balkans"* (Këlliçi, 2023). It is a known fact that Serbia has close historical links with Russia, and the fear of a more significant Russian infiltration in the region, especially after the aggression against Ukraine, seems more probable. *"Furthermore, the OB*

*is led by Serbia, which has not aligned its foreign and security policies with the EU (considering the Russian aggression in Ukraine). Serbia plays a threatening and destabilizing role in Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro; therefore, no credible EU integration process could be led by such a country,"* says Arber Zaimi, an Albanian expert on the Western Balkans and a political activist who lives in Kosovo (Zaimi, 2023). According to him, the Open Balkan initiative might strengthen Russia's influence in the Western Balkans *"Being opened to Serbia's capital means that Russian and Chinese capital could also find a way to influence Albania's economy, and in the future, this can upset western investors too."*

When Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed that Russia had funded and developed the Open Balkan project, worries over Russian interference significantly resurfaced. This affirmation disturbed the geopolitical situation in the region during the Ohrid Summit at the beginning of June 2022. Moreover, it managed to split the Albanian public opinion into two camps, easily deducted on social platforms: those who thought their Prime Minister, Edi Rama was a traitor for supporting a Russian project and those who thought he was a hero for following an original idea of regional cooperation.

Undoubtedly, recent developments have escalated tensions in the northern part of Kosovo and raised concerns about the future of the Open Balkan initiative. *"If we consider the last conflict in the north of Kosovo, then I think Open Balkan is less realistic than before,"* points out an Albanian economist and expert on regional markets (Anonymous (b) 2023). *"The Russia-Ukraine war and the tensions on Kosovo's northern border exposed Serbia's approach and aspirations more openly. Serbia is the only country aspiring to EU membership that is not imposing sanctions on Russia due to the Ukraine war. On the other hand, allegations are high about Russia using Bosnia and Herzegovina (through Republika Srpska) and Serbia to destabilize the Western Balkans,"* commented Luli (Luli, 2023).

Based on Lavrov's declaration and the latest declarations of Olaf Scholtz, the German chancellor, who had expressed many reservations about the OB initiative, the EU's position on this initiative and its member states has become of high

importance. *"In the first stage, the OB had EU support",* says an expert for the EU and a functionary of the Albanian Parliament (Anonymous (c) 2023). However, the initiative will no longer be advantageous for Albania *"if Serbia becomes the principal/leading actor in the initiative and the rest of the WB countries still need to join the initiative,"* stresses Abazi (Abazi, 2023).

The biggest fear in Albanian public opinion remains the advantages the Serbian economy could get over the Albanian one due to its size and strength within the regional market. *"Albania's economy has not, in any sector, built a comparative advantage to be ready to face competition from Serbia. In the OB, Albania's economy will become increasingly subservient to Serbia's, providing only raw resources, a workforce, and consumers."* (Zaimi). An expert in economics and finance perceives it another way. *"In any*

*case, the OB is a long-term, strategically significant process with a sharp focus on EU standards while attempting to develop universally applicable solutions for the entire region. Smaller regional initiatives could be able to temporarily fill any gaps. At the same time, the Berlin Process, hopefully, continues for a long time"* (Rrumbullaku, 2023). Although the initiative is not without problems (in particular because it does not include all the economies of the Western Balkans but only three of them), the OB initiative *"has a clear advantage over the Berlin Process: it is supported and driven by local actors, and the politicians and political decision-makers of the Balkans are much more committed to this project than to any other initiative."* (Jovanović and Holzner, 2023). The politicians' dedication makes the initiative more efficient regarding short-term and practical goals to be reached within the countries participating in it.

## Conclusion

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Albania has stronger historical links with the US, the EU, Türkiye, and China and has been improving its relations with the Gulf States. Regarding Russia, Albania has moved from dealing with it, mainly from a NATO member state's perspective, to a fervorous opponent, especially after Albania became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and in the aftermath of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The presence of these actors has become more vivid after the US decided to focus on internal matters, and the region experienced an American "power vacuum" during the first two years of President Trump's administration (2017-2018), combined with the European fatigue that characterized the first phase of the Berlin Process (2014-2018).

Under these circumstances, like other countries in the Western Balkans, Albania primarily witnessed the influence of third actors, with Türkiye playing a prominent role, rather than China and Russia. Meanwhile, due to important investments like the one that EMMAAR Group will soon start in the Port of Durres, a rising influence can be spotted coming from the Gulf States. Therefore, we can list first Türkiye, then the Gulf Countries, China, and Russia in decreasing order regarding these countries' influence in Albania. In any case, Türkiye has been cautious not to cede

space in Albania to other external actors - such as Russia and China - to exercise their influence in the region (Tzifakis, 2021). Moreover, Albania is considered the strategic center for Türkiye's involvement with the Western Balkans. Thus, especially in the last decade, Türkiye has developed a great geopolitical influence over the country (Lami, 2017).

The establishment of the Open Balkan initiative emerged as a result of the stalemate in the European integration process of certain Western Balkan countries into the EU. CEFTA could serve as an umbrella for reaching long-term goals in the region and deepening regional integration. *"In the 2021 Berlin Process Summit, it was suggested by the EU that CEFTA should act as an arbitrator in case of any bilateral disputes occurring once the Western Balkans CRM becomes operational by the start of 2025"* (Hoxhaj 2022). While the Berlin Process is the smaller umbrella under which the WB countries can foster dialogue and economic cooperation among themselves, the Open Balkan initiative remains a mechanism that ensures the reaching of short-term goals and speeds up regional cooperation in the region. All these mechanisms - CEFTA, the Berlin Process, and Open Balkan - stand as matryoshkas to one another, having one common aim: preparing the Western Balkan region for the EU Single Market.

Although Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are not participating in this regional initiative, there is little hope for them to join it in the future due to their hesitation about close collaboration with Serbia, with whom they share bilateral disputes. Albania should also consider possible Serbian domination in the region, especially in terms of economic predominance that could bring a political one.

Regarding the widespread fear that Albanian exports could be harmed by the imports from Serbia of more convenience and better-quality goods, an economic approach should be developed based on strengthening the “competitive advantages” of Albania. This is one of the paradoxes in this very shallow debate that is happening in Albania about the

OB. There is no real debate among experts in economics or finance over this initiative. Instead, the initiative has been heavily politicized by party supporters in Albania due to concerns over its potential impact on certain vulnerable economic sectors once exposed to an open market. On the other hand, this initiative could exactly represent a gradual approach to the European free trade zone for the Western Balkan countries. Opening the markets through the OB may represent a simpler process compared to the complicated opening of the market to the EU single market in the future. The countries of the region should prepare themselves for this broader opening in the future, and the OB could serve as a pool diving board in this regard.

## Policy Recommendations

- ✘ Albania has closer links with Türkiye in economic relations, which translate into important investments by this country in Albania, but at the same time, political conditionality is imposed by this country. This suggests that Albania should develop its proper autonomy regardless of the need it has for foreign investments by diversifying this need with other powers like the EU, China, and the UAE.
- ✘ More transparency should be considered regarding the Open Balkan initiative. One possible approach could be to create an official website for the initiative, showcasing its achievements and making it accessible for experts to consult as well as for the public to gain important information.
- ✘ Due to their delicate status involving some Western Balkan countries, the political leaders should have secured more extensive bottom-up support from their people on this regional initiative. People could have been involved or prepared before these initiatives started, to lower the high polarization, it caused within the Balkan societies. Thus, greater transparency and public dialogue would be welcomed.
- ✘ There is a noticeable sense of anxiety among experts regarding the potential economic and security disadvantages that the Open Balkan initiative may bring to Albania. Encouraging expert-level discussions on this topic is important, especially considering that the Western Balkan countries are expected to gradually open their markets to the region and subsequently to the EU member states. Such discussions would not only benefit society by addressing concerns but also enable the government to address citizen worries and better prepare the public for the future within the EU.
- ✘ The EU continues to be perceived as a guarantor of peace and stability in the region; thus, it should be more involved in the Open Balkan initiative to calm the worries about Russian interference in the region through this initiative.

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