

ARGUMENT

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The Balkans Don't Believe the EU Anymore

The European Union's next candidates for accession have realized the process is leading nowhere—and are acting accordingly.

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In the Western Balkans, a region that is best known for generating intractable-seeming crises, good news often goes underappreciated. On July 29 in Skopje, North Macedonia, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic, Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, and North Macedonia's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev convened a summit to announce the launch of Open Balkan, an initiative that aims to bolster regional economic integration. The three vowed to abolish border controls between their countries by January 2023.

The news has thus far been met with cautious encouragement. Regional economic integration is an end that all in the West support, Washington and Berlin both said in separate statements, and any efforts to achieve it are welcome. In private, however, there is more hesitation. European diplomats wonder if this effort could short-circuit the European Union's established efforts at fostering regional dialogue and cooperation (the so-called Berlin Process) or, worse, create an alternative to EU accession.

In a regional tour in July that took us to North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania, we sensed optimism for this initiative among local policymakers and business leaders, strongly leavened with disillusionment with the stalled accession process among the political class. Albania's Rama has been especially outspoken in public, likening it to the experience of being repeatedly left standing at the altar. "Enlargement has not stalled—it has stopped," another leader lamented to us during a series of off-the-record conversations with regional officials. Betting on Europe is increasingly becoming a liability with jaded voters tired of hearing about unfulfilled promises.

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the EU. Language about a “European perspective” for the region has made it into almost every relevant communique since, clung to by officials as a demonstration of seriousness and commitment by a bloc that has traditionally struggled to articulate a coherent foreign policy for its wider neighborhood. But political will has never kept up with the rhetoric. And support for enlargement among voters has largely collapsed across the continent since the admission of Croatia in 2013, with publics in Western European countries especially leery of admitting more countries at the moment.

But the stall is about more than Europeans failing to live up to their pledges. In the last decade, the EU has faced a flurry of crises, from the financial shock of 2008 to the migrant crisis, the effects of which were exacerbated by the bloc’s own internal structural shortcomings. French President Emmanuel Macron, who spearheaded the effort toward a new, more stringent, and most importantly reversible enlargement methodology, is insisting on far-reaching reforms to existing European institutions before any new countries are admitted to the bloc. Meanwhile, concerns about organized crime are dampening support for enlargement in such countries as the Netherlands.

And to be fair, Europeans are not wrong to point to corruption and problems with the rule of law for the disappointing progress in talks. The 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index ranks Serbia at 94th worldwide out of 180 countries, Albania 104th, and North Macedonia 111th. The fact that EU members such as Hungary and Poland are backsliding on democracy, and that Bulgaria and Romania continue to struggle with high-level corruption almost a decade and a half since accession, is not exactly an endorsement for hastily admitting more members to the club.

Faced with such grim prospects, it’s notable that none of Open Balkan’s founders see their initiative as an alternative to EU accession but rather as a complement to existing processes. Vucic, Rama, and Zaev all stressed to us during our trip that the project’s goals were patterned on the European common market, especially in seeking to guarantee the market’s “four freedoms” (the free movement of goods, capital, services, and people). The memorandum of understanding signed at the recent summit pledges to make good on the promise of free movement of goods within six months, and on the free movement of people by Jan. 1, 2023. The point, they say, is to show tangible benefits to their citizens as soon as possible. Serbia in particular is facing a labor shortage and is keen to make it easier for Macedonians and Albanians to cross the border for work. In the longer term, none of the countries is big enough on its own to attract large,

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more tempting.

While the Open Balkan name explicitly suggests an invitation to others, the absence of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro at the Skopje summit was conspicuous. The three holdouts remain skeptical, arguing that the new initiative duplicates the development of a Common Regional Market that was agreed to by all six in Sofia, Bulgaria, last year as part of the Berlin Process. They fret that taking part in an initiative that wasn't designed in Europe will impact their accession prospects, distant as they may be. This is, of course, not true. Europe's door is, for the moment at least, equally closed to all. And though, as we noted above, both American and European leaders have concerns about the Open Balkan initiative, the deliberate ambiguity of their statements—voicing support for regional economic integration without specifying which vehicle is best to achieve it—also betrays genuine ambivalence on the matter.

The truth is that an initiative like Open Balkan will ultimately stand or fall on implementation. The recent meeting saw only one binding agreement pledging mutual emergency assistance actually signed, with the rest of the ambitious proposals to be fleshed out at lower levels of government in the coming months. The smart play at this point would be for the West to help the initiative succeed while ensuring that its pledge of openness to the entire region remains in place. Any honest account of the birth of the EU admits that it was itself the product of many concurrently running initiatives and bilateral agreements that over time coalesced into the arrangement they have now. The birth of a lasting order in the Western Balkans will likely be no different. The role of the West should not be to engineer and micromanage. Rather, it should keep the participants honest in delivering on their pledges, while at the same time keeping an eye on the big picture, ensuring that the outcome be as inclusive, functional, and indeed open as possible.

The bigger picture matters most of all. Coming on the heels of the breakthrough Prespa agreement between North Macedonia and Greece, initiatives like Open Balkan signal that something important, and indeed healthy, is happening on the ground: Local leaders are taking ownership of their fate and showing creativity. This needs to be embraced and encouraged. The EU in particular should take the opportunity to be more flexible. As it itself adapts to a changing world, it should start reimagining what its relationship with its near-abroad can look like. Perhaps concentric circles of deepening integration over time can take the place of a one-size-fits-all bureaucratic approach that has obviously ground to a halt.

ually calling on his fellow Serbs to look to a hopeful future instead of maintaining his long-standing hatred for Albanians. This is but the most recent manifestation of a thaw that has been building for more than a year now. As of this summer, Serbs represent the second-largest nationality visiting Albania's beaches—a stunning figure given recent history. More positive surprises are possible, even likely, should a cycle of prosperity take hold.

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