

## THE “OPEN BALKAN” INITIATIVE: AN OUTWARD-DIRECTED POPULISM

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*Abstract.* This paper analyses the “Open Balkan” initiative, using some of the theoretical assumptions of economic and, consequently, political populism in order to show that the economic benefits of this initiative do not differ too much from the existing economic benefits of the CEFTA (2006) agreement, of which all three countries (signatories of the “Open Balkan” initiative) are members. However, unlike the economic ones, the political benefits of this initiative can be seen much more clearly. Specifically, the “Open Balkan” initiative can be seen as a mechanism for “bridging” the waiting period for these countries to join the EU, overcoming some of the obstacles of the existing bilateral trade agreements that the countries from this region have with the EU. We will show, using quantitative content analysis, that the “Open Balkan” initiative is a political populist concept directed outward, i.e., toward EU leaders, and not an initiative that can bring something completely new and different compared to all previous bilateral and multilateral initiatives of this type.

*Keywords.* “Open Balkan” initiative; Serbia; North Macedonia; Albania; CEFTA; populism; international trade.

### An Introduction – Evolution of the “Open Balkan” Initiative

This part of the paper will offer a brief comparative analysis of the CEFTA 2006 agreement and the “Open Balkan” initiative. Why is it important? The public can often hear assessments that the main intention of the “Open Balkan” initiative

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This work is supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia (grant number 451-03-68/2022-14, from 17 January 2022).

is the development of free trade – more precisely, the unhindered movement of people, goods, capital, and services among the countries signatories to this agreement. This rightly raises the question, what is the significance of the “Open Balkan” initiative? What is its comparative advantage over the CEFTA 2006 agreement? To answer this, we must, briefly, look at the basics of both agreements.

The Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) is an agreement on a free trade zone between Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, UNMIK Kosovo, Moldova, and Montenegro. It was founded in 1992 in Krakow. Former CEFTA members were Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, and Croatia, which have since become EU members. All countries that joined the EU have left the CEFTA. Later, the CEFTA agreement was expanded by allowing other Balkan countries to become members of the CEFTA, which had already developed bilateral free trade agreements under the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe. A new declaration on CEFTA enlargement was adopted with new members: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Serbia, Montenegro, and, on behalf of Kosovo and Metohija, UNMIK. The new agreement was signed on December 19, 2006, at the Southeast European Summit in Bucharest. The agreement was ratified on March 31, 2007. Its implementation started on May 1, 2007. So, we notice that most of the mentioned CEFTA member countries were part of the former single market, i.e., until 1991, most of these countries, except Albania and Moldova, were members of the former Yugoslavia. The problems that led to the rapid disintegration of this country, which can be divided into several categories: political, economic, cultural, ethnic, religious, etc., are more or less present today and largely represent a burden from the past that burdens the CEFTA agreement and affects its effectiveness (Begović 2011).

The current purpose of the CEFTA, as a free trade agreement, is to prepare the countries of the Western Balkans for EU accession but also to develop and improve regional cooperation. The CEFTA strengthens and renews economic cooperation between partners in the Western Balkans and, as such, is an effective basis for these countries to join the EU (Rajin et al. 2018). As a framework of economic cooperation, the CEFTA enables the creation of a positive business environment in the following manner: 1) offers the possibility to apply diagonal cumulation of the origin of goods; 2) introduces steady liberalisation of trade in services - fulfilled; 3) requires balancing of investment conditions through the application of the WTO rules and offers identical status to domestic and foreign investors from the region; 4) guarantees protection of intellectual property rights in line with international standards; 5) advances mechanisms for resolving disputes arising from the implementation of the CEFTA; 6) commits to obliging its member countries to implement the WTO rules regardless of their membership in the organisation (Rajin et al. 2018, 357).

However, despite the basic intention and its essential provisions, the free trade agreement does not in itself guarantee that the expected results will be achieved. Economic benefits for one member state do not have to translate into economic benefits for another member state of the agreement. Moreover, certain conflicts can be observed. Bartlett (2009) claimed that the Balkan states are engaged in a complex and contradictory process of simultaneous regional integration and disintegration. A network of 32 bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) were introduced under the guidance of the Stability Pact for South East Europe and later the CEFTA free trade area, to improve political and economic cooperation, liberalization, and integration. However, the way it was implemented came in for some criticism (“spaghetti bowl” of differentiated trade relations). Bartlett (2009, 28) argued that the interaction of the EU’s preferential trade on a bilateral basis, through Autonomous Trade Preferences and the Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs), with the system of bilateral FTAs between the countries of the region could create a perverse “hub-and-spoke” syndrome. He explains it in a way that those firms located in the EU hub would achieve lower costs than those located in the Balkans spokes due to greater economies of scale achievable in the hub, so that spoke firms would become less competitive. On the other hand, firms located in the spokes would also be discouraged from importing intermediate goods from neighbouring countries in the region for processing into exports for the EU market. This could lead to a well-explained risk by Christie (2002, 26–27) that the Western Balkan countries redirect massively to the EU and end up being a set of small peripheral economies that are next to each other rather than integrated.

Here it must be added that the SAA Trade Agreements introduce trade reciprocity after the stipulated transitory period, which means that the markets of the Balkan states would also be open for EU products, but slowly since the transitory period of usually 6 years is envisaged. The EU adopted unilateral trade measures, the Autonomous Trade Measures (ATMs), granting Serbia and other Western Balkan economies tariff-free trade and quota-free access to the EU single market for almost all export products from this region (except sugar, some meat products, fish, and wine). The ATMs are nonreciprocal and asymmetrical in favour of the Western Balkans not being obligated to reciprocate by granting trade preferences to the EU. These agreements are different from the European Agreement in that the EU insists more on the fulfilment of certain political conditions. However, those networks of bilateral trade agreements were too complicated to administer, and the Balkan states decided to conclude a single trade agreement under the auspices of the CEFTA (Bjelić and Dragutinović Mitrović 2012, 268–269).

The aforementioned political, economic, and legal (for example, the current ATMs) reasons can be singled out as the cause of the insufficiently good effects of the CEFTA agreement so far. In that regard, certain analyses (Kikerkova et al. 2018)

point out that within the 10 years of its creation, the CEFTA gave an unsatisfactory performance in the region regarding trade liberalisation.

The shortcomings of this agreement are reflected primarily in the ineffective system for resolving disputes and the existence of numerous non-tariff barriers that the countries of the Western Balkans have introduced to prevent the import of certain products. These non-customs barriers, which are of an administrative and technical nature, include complex procedures at border crossings, inconsistency in the work of customs and inspection services (sanitary, veterinary, radiological), inconsistency of domestic standards and technical regulations with international ones, lack of accredited bodies and laboratories, mutual non-recognition certificates on the quality and origin of goods, various types of corruption and crime, etc. (Rapać 2020, 567).

In July 2017, under the Berlin Process, the CEFTA member states decided to enhance cooperation by taking the free trade area to a higher level – the regional economic area, which should provide full trade liberalization. One of the steps taken in that direction was the Amended CEFTA Agreement, more precisely Protocol 5, which deals with issues of trade in goods, and Protocol 6, which deals with issues of services. This newly established framework of the CEFTA should become fully operational by 2023. During that period, all CEFTA Parties are due to implement concrete measures that will eliminate non-trade barriers to trade by cutting down the number of physical controls at the borders and introducing joint customs controls. However, this has not happened so far. Moreover, the consequences of Kosovo's<sup>3</sup> decision to ban the import of Serbian products in 2017/2018 are still being felt – 37% fewer goods are imported from Serbia to Kosovo\* today than five years ago when the disputed customs duties on the import of products from Serbia were introduced. Furthermore, all CEFTA Parties are expected to reduce the number of documents required for customs clearance, as well as to implement paperless trade in goods and provide the option for electronic payment of customs duties, fees, and so on. Having in mind that all Parties of this regional economic area face severe budget constraints, the speed and success of the full implementation of this Amended Agreement can be slowed down, or even disabled, and might depend on the accessibility of additional funds or multilateral donations (Kikerkova et al. 2018, 300–301). These are just some of the reasons for the establishment of the “Open Balkan” initiative, within which these activities will

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<sup>3</sup> In UN Security Council Resolution 1244, the term “Kosovo” is used. In the following text, we will use the name Kosovo\*, as provided for in the Agreement on Regional Representation. This name is accompanied by a footnote to this content. The designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

be successfully implemented because it is a matter of a significantly smaller group of countries, among which there is a political will to implement these decisions.

Some of the European officials went a step further by proposing a common market for the Western Balkans, which would function on the same principles as the internal market of the European Union, emphasizing that such a market would be more attractive for investors from other countries and that it would remove obstacles in intra-regional trade. Then, for the first time, the idea of something that would practically be a customs union, and perhaps even a common market for the countries of the Western Balkans, was presented to the public, which represents a significantly higher level of economic integration than the free trade zone such as the CEFTA 2006, i.e., what we call “mini-Schengen”. However, it is unknown so far how it is possible to implement the liberalisation of factors of production in the region without a previously established customs union, i.e., a common market. In other words, it is not possible to realise a certain aspect of a higher level of integration without previously established lower levels, because the previous levels represent the basis for each subsequent level (Rapać 2020, 568–571).

Understanding this idea becomes even more complex if we look at its goals, among which we pay special attention to the first point of this agreement, which represents a significant novelty in the political relations of the three countries (Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania) – the establishment of a common visa policy. The second and most significant innovation is the creation of common work permits, i.e., the recognition of qualifications and diplomas, which will lead to the creation of a somewhat unique labour market. The other listed points do not realistically represent a significant improvement in the political and economic relations of the three countries, but primarily come down to the abolition of administrative and technical barriers in trade, which is why the “mini-Schengen” concept, as agreed in Novi Sad and Ohrid in 2019, cannot be classified as a higher form of regional economic integration, and that it does not include the freedom of movement of goods, people, services, and capital, as its advocates claim. It can represent only a regional economic space (zone), which is a level lower than the customs union but slightly higher than the CEFTA 2006. The basic idea of the creators of “mini-Schengen” as a regional economic zone is to be only the first step in establishing a higher level of integration (Rapać 2020, 574–575).

Considering that it cannot be said that any significant progress has been noticed after the improved version of the CEFTA agreement and that Serbia and other countries in the region (mostly as a result of insufficiently implemented reforms in many segments) have not received positive signals about the recent accession to the EU, the conditions are created for political leaders in these countries to take over the situation, so to speak, in their own hands. One such attempt is the “Open Balkan” initiative.

What is the “Open Balkan” initiative? The leaders of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia decided to improve regional cooperation by forming the so-called “mini-Schengen”, aiming to improve the economic performance of the region and quality of life in general, until the EU opens the door to them. Their idea of bringing Western Balkan countries closer together was a few years old; at a regional summit in Trieste in 2017, they agreed on a regional economic action plan. They met on October 11, 2019, in Novi Sad (northern Serbia) and signed a declaration of intent to establish the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital between the three countries. This “mini-Schengen” agreement became operational in 2021, starting with the citizens who were able to cross the borders only with an ID card. Also, they have invited Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo to join them (Simić 2019). Several steps were undertaken in that direction: first, the *Joint Declaration adopted at the Western Balkan Summit held in Ohrid* on November 10, 2019; second, the *Joint Declaration adopted at the Western Balkan Summit in Tirana* on December 21, 2019; and third, the *Memorandum of understanding on cooperation related to free access to the labour market in the Western Balkans*, signed in Skopje on July 29, 2021, with the new name – the “Open Balkan” initiative (previously known as the “mini-Schengen” area), as an idea of forming a common market for countries waiting for EU membership.<sup>4</sup> According to the World Bank estimations (Brezar 2021), because this initiative is trade-heavy, promising free movement of goods and citizens as well as equal access to the labour market, those countries which will take part in this initiative will save up to \$3.2 billion (€2.71 bn) each year.

In that regard, the most important step happened on December 21, 2021, in Tirana, where an *Agreement on conditions for free access to the labour market in the Western Balkans* was signed. This agreement was confirmed in the form of the Law, passed by urgent procedure, in the Assembly of Serbia on December 29, 2021 (Open Parliament of the Republic of Serbia 2022). The main intention of this agreement is to further strengthen regional cooperation and mutual understanding, aiming to contribute to economic development and increase economic growth, investment, and employment in the Western Balkans. According to this agreement, citizens from all three countries will be able to be employed under the same conditions as the domestic population, i.e., they will be subject to domestic legal regulations. The provisions of this agreement are, in fact, a precursor to removing the borders, as

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<sup>4</sup> So far, within the “Open Balkan” initiative, there are signed agreements on free access to the labour market (Tirana December 2021), on interconnection of electronic schemes (Tirana December 2021), on cooperation between the Ministries of Agriculture in relation to phytosanitary and veterinary inspections (Tirana December 2021), and bilateral agreements on recognition of the AEO between Serbia and Albania and between North Macedonia and Albania (Tirana December 2021). Prior to Tirana, an MoU on trade facilitation, an MoU on the creation of a single labour market (both signed in Skopje 2021), and a Travel Agreement with ID card were signed.

was stated<sup>5</sup> during the Economic Forum for Regional Cooperation (July 29, 2021) in Skopje.

To enable the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital, the “Open Balkan” initiative also aims to reduce or eliminate the stopping of trucks at border crossings, which as a model already exists in the EU, through an ICT system that pre-defines all necessary documentation, etc. Also, to introduce concrete benefits not only for citizens of the “Open Balkan”, but as well as for companies, in the form of certain discounts on goods and services (Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia 2022).

Therefore, according to its basic content, the “Open Balkan” initiative represents a kind of concretization of previous regional initiatives. It is fully compatible with the Common Regional Market set goals (as part of the Berlin Process or with the CEFTA), as well as with the EU principles and EU regulations, meaning that this initiative does not contradict the obligations of each state under the accession process. However, there is one key difference (Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia 2022), one feature of this initiative compared to the previous ones. This initiative is not an alternative to the previous agreements *but is an additional instrument to bypass the current obstacles to enable the benefits of regional integration to be felt on the ground in the day-to-day operations of companies and the daily lives of citizens* (in the first phase for three and the second for all six countries in the Western Balkans).

The analysis of the stated goals of the “Open Balkan” initiative, in addition to the obvious economic goals, highlights one, we would say, political, or more precisely, foreign policy goal, and that is the creation of a union that will be regulated by all existing and valid EU rules and regulations before the accession of the signatory countries of this initiative to the EU. The economic logic of this initiative is clear, and that is the unification of otherwise small and poorly developed economies, which individually cannot match the developed economies in the international market. Their chances increase significantly in the form of the single free market, as one of the forms of economic integration that eliminates the shortcomings of the previously analysed CEFTA agreement. However, we must not overlook the fact that, in the political sense, this initiative will be confronted with numerous political, cultural, historical, etc., challenges, so it is crucial how the political leaders, not only of the signatory countries to this initiative but also of the other countries, will treat each other.

Based on the above, it could be stated that the basic idea of the “Open Balkan” initiative is the creation of a single labour market because its essence is exclusively in the free movement of workers. But the fundamental question here is why the

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<sup>5</sup> President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic stated: “...we will no longer have borders by January 1, 2023. Border crossings will remain, but not for our citizens” (*Euronews Albania* 2021).

free movement of people and the single labour market suddenly became so important to the initiative's initiators. An interesting analysis is offered, claiming that despite relatively high unemployment and subsidies per newly hired worker, foreign investors will still have a lot of difficulties finding qualified workers for wages that are only slightly above the minimum wage, especially if we keep in mind that 40,000 to 50,000 people leave Serbia every year. Precisely because of this, the need arose in the Serbian market to maintain a low minimum wage and ensure stability in the inflow of organisation as well as retain existing foreign investors and attract new ones. This can only be achieved by ensuring a single labour market, that is, freedom of movement and employment within the "Open Balkan" Initiative. Given that it is hard to imagine that this single labour market will cause significant migration of Serbian workers to North Macedonia and Albania, it is assumed that workers from Albania and North Macedonia will fill the jobs that are created by the departure of Serbian workers to the highly developed countries of the world. Foreign investors will also get easier access to the markets of other members of "Open Balkan", which will further reduce costs and improve business. The European Union and the international community will support the idea of "Open Balkan", because it contributes to the stabilisation of the Western Balkans, especially if Kosovo\* is included in this integration, and the countries of the region will be offered a "common European perspective" (Rapačić 2020, 590–591).

### **Economies of the "Open Balkan" Initiative**

As we stated in the previous part of the text, the members of the "Open Balkan" initiative are Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. In order to gain insight into the economic potential of this initiative, it is necessary to present the basic macroeconomic indicators of each of the member states. Also, here we will present their foreign trade relations, which will shed light on the basic economic flows within the initiative.

#### *Albania*

Albania is the country that is still economically the least developed of the members of the Open Balkan initiative. With a population of 2.8 million inhabitants and a gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021 of 18.2 billion dollars, or 6,494 dollars *per capita*, it can be considered to lag behind the other Balkan countries (World Bank 2022b).



Table 1: Basic macroeconomic indicators of Albania (2016–2021)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Real GDP growth (percent)	3.3	3.8	4.1	2.2	-3.5	8.5
Consumer price inflation (percent, period average)	1.3	2.0	2.1	1.4	1.6	2.6
Public revenues (percent of GDP)	27.4	27.7	27.6	27.2	25.9	27.0
Public expenditures (percent of GDP)	29.6	29.8	29.3	29.2	32.6	31.5
Public debt (percent of GDP)	68.7	67.8	64.6	63.7	74.0	72.1
Goods exports (percent of GDP)	6.7	6.9	7.7	6.6	6.0	8.2
Goods imports (percent of GDP)	30.9	31.3	30.2	29.7	28.4	33.0
Net services exports (percent of GDP)	7.4	9.4	8.6	9.3	8.1	11.5
Net foreign direct investment inflows (percent of GDP)	8.7	8.6	8.0	7.6	6.7	6.4
External debt (percent of GDP)	73.5	68.7	62.9	60.0	65.6	58.1
Unemployment rate (percent, period average)	15.2	13.7	12.3	11.5	11.7	11.5
Youth unemployment rate (percent, period average)	28.9	25.9	23.1	21.5	20.9	20.9

Source: World Bank 2019, 38; World Bank 2022a, 71.

Although we cannot speak about significant economic development, Albania has had a couple of years of moderate growth in real GDP, which reached 4.1% in 2018. However, this process begins to slow down the following year, when it recorded a growth rate of only 2.2%, just before the crisis year 2020. In the year in which the world faced the COVID-19 pandemic, Albania recorded negative economic growth of -3.5%. This negative value of economic growth in the year of the crisis is not surprising, but its rapid recovery in 2021 certainly is. Real GDP growth in 2021 was 8.5%. This is the highest recorded value in the post-crisis year in the countries of the “Open Balkan” initiative. Until the end of 2021, inflation was relatively moderate and stable. In the observed period, public revenues as a percentage of GDP stayed around 27%, and public expenditures also did not vary significantly.

Albania had a high share of goods imports in GDP, which has even increased in the last five years and amounts to 33%. On the other hand, the share of exports in the total GDP was decreasing, and it even decreased by approximately 50% in

2019 compared to 2014, when it was 9.3% (Rapaić 2020, 576). However, goods exports as a percentage of GDP recovered and reached 8.2% in 2021. This indicates the importance of goods trade that advanced in the observed period, which coincides with the development of the Open Balkan initiative.

Aside from the previously mentioned negative trends, there is a high share of public debt in GDP, which has ranged between 63 and 74 percent over the last five years. External debt as a percentage of GDP, on the other hand, fell significantly from 73.5 percent in 2016 to 58.1 percent in 2021. Another positive indicator for the Albanian economy is the share of service exports in GDP. The export of tourism services, in particular, jumped, which contributed to this share of 11.5% in 2021. Tourists from Serbia, whose number has increased significantly in previous years, have certainly contributed to this, since they do not need a passport to visit Albania. Nevertheless, unemployment is still a big problem in Albania, especially youth unemployment, which amounted to 20.9% in 2021. Although this is a historical minimum for this country, general unemployment of 11.5%, as well as high youth unemployment in 2021, indicates numerous shortcomings in the Albanian economy.

Table 2: The most important trade partners of Albania  
(share in total merchandise exports and imports, 2020)

	Export	%	Import	%
1	EU	74.7	EU	58.0
2	Serbia	12.0	Turkey	9.6
3	North Macedonia	3.3	China	8.9
4	Montenegro	1.9	Serbia	5.2
5	China	1.8	Russia	2.2

Source: World Trade Organization 2022a.

The European Union is the most important foreign trade partner of Albania. More than 74% of the total Albanian exports end up in the European market, while 58% of the total imports into Albania originate from the EU. Perhaps the most interesting piece of information is the fact that Serbia is the second most important export market for Albanian products. Of the total exports in 2020, the share of goods exported to Serbia was 12%. Serbia is also an important country of origin when it comes to imports into Albania. Of the total imports in 2020, 5.2% accounted for goods from Serbia. So, it is clear that Serbia represents an important foreign trade partner for Albania, especially when it comes to exports.

We notice that, apart from the EU, Albania imports the most goods from Turkey (9.6%) and China (8.9%), while Russia is in fifth place with a share of only 2%. Russia's

share refers to the import of energy products, while Albania imports various types of finished goods, machines, and semi-finished products from Turkey and China. Turkey recognises Albania as a country of special political, economic, and cultural interests. However, we note that Serbia is also on the list of the countries from which Albania imports goods, and it is in fourth place with a total share of 5.2%.

### *North Macedonia*

North Macedonia was considered the least developed republic in the former Yugoslavia. In 2021, North Macedonia’s GDP was \$13.8 billion, or \$6,720 *per capita*. At the beginning of the transition period in 2001, the GDP of North Macedonia was 3.7 billion dollars, which is four times lower than in 2021 (World Bank 2022c). In the last six observed years, we can note that the average growth rate of the Macedonian economy was only 1.2%.

Table 3: Basic macroeconomic indicators of North Macedonia (2016–2021)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Real GDP growth (percent)	2.8	0.2	2.7	3.9	-6.1	4.0
Consumer price inflation (percent, period average)	-0.32	1.4	1.5	0.8	1.2	3.2
Public revenues (percent of GDP)	30.6	31.0	30.4	31.4	30.5	32.3
Public expenditures (percent of GDP)	33.2	33.09	31.5	33.5	38.9	37.7
Public debt (percent of GDP)	39.9	39.5	40.5	40.4	51.9	51.8
Goods exports (percent of GDP)	35.1	38.1	43.2	47.5	45.3	51.1
Goods imports (percent of GDP)	53.1	54.9	58.6	64.8	62.3	71.3
Net services exports (percent of GDP)	3.5	3.8	3.3	3.0	4.0	4.3
Net foreign direct investment inflows (percent of GDP)	3.3	1.8	5.8	3.2	1.5	3.7
External debt (percent of GDP)	74.7	73.6	73.7	72.4	88.3	81.4
Unemployment rate (percent, period average)	23.8	22.4	20.7	17.3	16.4	15.7
Youth unemployment rate (percent, period average)	48.2	46.7	45.4	35.6	35.7	36.3

Source: World Bank 2019, 58; World Bank 2022a, 96.

The public debt of North Macedonia is constantly growing, and in 2021 it was more than half of GDP. External debt also increased, especially in 2020, when it amounted to 88.3% of GDP. Although unemployment in 2021 reached a record low level of 15.7%, North Macedonia is still a country with a high unemployment rate and a particularly high youth unemployment rate, which in 2020 amounted to 36.3%. A relatively low rate of economic growth, a high unemployment rate, and high foreign debt point to structural problems in the Macedonian economy.

Table 4: The most important trade partners of North Macedonia (share in total merchandise exports and imports, 2020)

	Export	%	Import	%
1	EU	77.6	EU	46.2
2	Serbia	7.9	UK	15.6
3	China	2.5	Serbia	7.8
4	UK	2.4	China	6.9
5	Turkey	1.5	Turkey	5.1

Source: World Trade Organization 2022b.

Looking at the main foreign trade partners of North Macedonia, we notice that in this case, as well as with the previously presented countries, the European Union dominates. North Macedonia sells 77.6% of its total exports to the market of EU members. Also, most of the goods imported into the Macedonian market come from the EU. In the total Macedonian imports in 2020, the share of the EU as the country of origin was 46.2%. Apart from the EU, Serbia is the main export market for Macedonian products. Approximately 8% of the total value of exports ends up in the Serbian market, while the share of Serbian goods in total imports to North Macedonia is also around 8%. When it comes to the main import partners, it is interesting that the United Kingdom appears as one of the key players with a 15.6% share of total imports.

### *Serbia*

Serbia has the largest economy in terms of territory and economic capacity in the Open Balkan initiative and the region we are looking at. With a GDP of 63.07 billion dollars in 2021, it could be concluded that it is the most developed country in the region. However, its macroeconomic indicators indicate not-so-enviable results. The achieved GDP *per capita* of Serbia in 2021 was 9,215 dollars (World Bank 2022d).

Table 5: Basic macroeconomic indicators of Serbia (2016–2021)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Real GDP growth (percent)	3.3	2.0	4.2	4.3	-0.9	7.4
Consumer price inflation (percent, period average)	1.1	3.2	2.0	1.9	1.6	4.0
Public revenues (percent of GDP)	40.8	41.5	41.1	42.0	41.0	43.3
Public expenditures (percent of GDP)	41.9	40.4	40.6	42.2	49.0	47.4
Public debt (percent of GDP)	62.8	55.6	50.1	48.8	53.9	53.9
Goods exports (percent of GDP)	34.9	35.9	35.5	35.7	34.4	38.9
Goods imports (percent of GDP)	43.4	46.1	47.7	47.9	45.5	50.1
Net services exports (percent of GDP)	2.5	2.4	2.5	2.3	2.4	2.7
Net foreign direct investment inflows (percent of GDP)	5.2	6.2	7.4	7.7	6.3	6.8
External debt (percent of GDP)	72.1	68.9	61.3	61.8	65.8	68.6
Unemployment rate (percent, period average)	15.3	13.5	12.7	11.2	9.7	11.0
Youth unemployment rate (percent, period average)	34.9	31.9	29.8	28.6	27.3	26.5

Source: World Bank 2019, 63; World Bank 2022a, 102.

The Serbian economy had its biggest growth in 2004, when real GDP growth was 9%. After 2008, the growth of Serbia’s economy stopped, so in the period 2009-2019, the average growth rate was only 1.5% (Rapaić 2020, 581). Among the countries of the “Open Balkan” initiative, in the crisis year of 2020, Serbia had the smallest drop in economic growth, which was below one percent. In the coming year of 2021, Serbia has even recorded a significant economic recovery and real GDP growth of as much as 7.4%.

Serbia reduced public debt in the observed period. In 2016, it amounted to 62.8% of GDP, and in 2021 it would be reduced to 53.9%. The share of merchandise exports in GDP increased in the observed period, but it was

accompanied by an even greater increase in the share of merchandise imports, which implies that Serbia, just like Albania and North Macedonia, is highly dependent on merchandise imports.

Table 6: The most important trade partners of Serbia  
(share in total merchandise exports and imports, 2020)

	Export	%	Import	%
1	EU	64.9	EU	58.8
2	Bosnia and Herzegovina	7.1	China	12.2
3	Russia	4.7	Russia	6.0
4	Montenegro	4.0	Turkey	4.4
5	North Macedonia	3.8	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2.3

Source: World Trade Organization 2022c.

In 2020, Serbia exported goods worth 19.4 billion dollars and imported goods worth 26.2 billion dollars. In terms of the value of exported and imported goods, Serbia is the leader in the region, which is understandable given the size of its market and population. The share of the EU in total exports of Serbia is 65%, while the share of imports is 59%. The second most important market for Serbian products is Bosnia and Herzegovina, which accounts for 7% of total exports. Serbia's third export market is Russia, and to this country, Serbia mostly exports agricultural products, socks, medicines, and vehicle tires. Russia is also the third most important foreign trade partner of Serbia when it comes to imports. Approximately 6% of total imports into Serbia originate from Russia. Just like other countries in the region, Serbia is dependent on the import of gas and oil from Russia. In the fourth and fifth place as the main Serbian export markets are Montenegro and North Macedonia, with a share of 4% and 3.8%, respectively. Apart from the EU and Russia, when it comes to imports, the most important partners are China, with a share of more than 12%; Turkey, with a share of 4.4%; and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with 2.3% of total imports to Serbia.

Common to all three countries of the “Open Balkan” initiative are high public and foreign debt, import dependence, a foreign trade deficit, the EU as the main foreign trade partner, high unemployment, and especially high youth unemployment. All this is accompanied by a low growth rate in average wages. The average salary in Albania in 2021 was 363 EUR, while in North Macedonia it was 458 EUR. Real wages in Serbia from 2012 to 2021 increased by 26%, which means that the average annual growth is only 2.6% (*Nova ekonomija* 2022). The average

salary in Serbia in 2021 was 544 EUR, which is significantly more compared to Albania and North Macedonia. Nevertheless, Serbia ranks high among the countries of the “Open Balkans” in terms of industrial production and market size, so within this group it represents an economic leader. This thesis is supported by the data that Serbia is one of the main foreign trade partners of Albania and North Macedonia. Serbia is Albania’s second most important market for the export of its goods, and it is not negligible either as a country of origin, accounting for about 5% of the total value of imports into Albania. The situation is similar in North Macedonia. It can rightly be said that, after the EU, Serbia is the most important foreign trade partner of North Macedonia. Serbia is second on the Macedonian list of import countries and third on the list of export countries.

Trade that develops between these countries requires further liberalisation but not in terms of customs barriers but primarily non-tariff barriers. Tariff barriers were removed under the CEFTA 2006 agreement, but numerous non-tariff barriers still remain in place and are implemented by all countries. The “Open Balkan” initiative is precisely aimed at removing these barriers and represents a union of the political wills of three states to improve economic relations and increase the flow of goods, people, and services. Bearing in mind the high unemployment rate in all three countries, and especially the high unemployment rate of young people, who do not have legal opportunities to get a job in the EU countries, the “Open Balkan” initiative affirmed the idea of the movement of labour between these three countries and the mutual recognition of diplomas.

### **The Open Balkan Initiative as an Outward-Directed Political Populism**

Uncertainty and dissatisfaction, accompanied by various economic problems caused by globalisation – economic and financial crisis, trade wars, deindustrialization, and migrant crisis, have enabled the growth of populism, both on the side of globalisation advocates and those of its intentional and unintentional victims (right-wing and left-wing populism). Populism is often associated with left-wing parties, which criticise the current economic situation – dissatisfaction with the country’s growth performance, initial conditions, etc (Dornbusch and Edvards, 1990). But economic globalisation cannot be completely blamed for the flourishing of economic and political populism in Europe and the rest of the world. Rodrik (2018, 13) points out that changes in technology, the rise of the market where the winner takes everything, the erosion of labour market protection, etc., in addition to globalisation, played a role, especially as processes that fostered and strengthened globalisation.

A somewhat more detailed analysis of the economic incentives of populism is offered by Dorn et al. (2020, 3139–3183), particularly emphasising the impact of

negative economic shocks that are linked to sharp ideological divisions that deepen along racial and ethnic lines and cause discrete changes in political preferences and economic policy.

In addition to the above explanations of the economic roots of populism, we must not omit another very useful interpretation (Guiso et al. 2017, 3), which, in addition to the anti-elitist dimension, emphasises that populists share the fear of people's enthusiasm and promote policies regardless of their long-term consequences for the country. The three important components of populism, according to this interpretation, are 1.) the populists' claim to be on the side of the people against the elite (so-called supply rhetoric), 2.) the fears of people's enthusiasm (so-called demand conditions that populists give in), and 3.) the neglecting of future consequences (short-term oriented policy). This attempt to decompose populism in economic terms, on the side of supply and demand, is important for understanding the short-term nature of populist politics. The demand side, which refers to the so-called fears of people's enthusiasm, meets with the offer side. That is, the populists claim that they are against the elite and, as such, on the side of the people. In this context, short-term protection represents the moment in which supply and demand meet. This is especially pronounced in situations of economic insecurity when people try to overcome new problems as soon as possible. More precisely, they require short-term protection. On the other hand, short-term supply-side politics, i.e., populist politics, is based on the dichotomy of people against the elite, because the long-term is considered the interest of the elite (Guiso et al. 2017, 8–9).

The aforementioned views on the economic causes of populism indicate to a certain extent that the "Open Balkan" initiative does not fit into the offered matrix of so-called economic populism. However, the fact that it is a populist concept can be concluded first by comparing this initiative with the CEFTA, where we showed that there are no significant differences, but rather, we believe that the concept of "Open Balkan" is directed toward the EU leaders, to provide their support for reducing existing tensions due to the delay in the admission of these countries to the EU.

In this context, interesting research is offered by Colantone and Stanig (2018, 1–18), who examined how globalisation affected electoral outcomes in 15 Western European countries between 1988 and 2007. Specifically, how the measure of exposure to Chinese imports, specific to each region based on its industrial specialization, affected the election cycle and the movement of the electorate. They concluded that a stronger import shock leads to increased support for nationalist and isolationist parties, then to increased support for the parties of the radical right and a general shift of the electorate to the right. They proved that the Chinese import shock, by imposing uneven adjustment costs across the region, caused an increase in support for nationalist and radical right-wing political parties in Europe.



The existence of this type of reaction implies that globalisation may not be sustainable in the long run if the benefits of trade are not shared equally within society. They conclude with some concern that the success of nationalist parties could jeopardise the very survival of the open world that we have known for the last 30 years. If parties and candidates proposing economic nationalist platforms become more influential in advanced democracies, they are likely to launch a coordinated protectionist agenda. Therefore, according to the authors, the world needs a better, more inclusive model of globalisation.

Having in mind that populism could be seen as a discourse between “the people” and the “elite” constructed through a down/up antagonism between “the people” as a large powerless group and “the elite” as a small and powerful group (De Cleen 2017), our idea is to present that the “Open Balkan” Initiative is a concept of political populism directed at the EU leaders, the so-called “elite”, because populism is not necessarily opposed to the existence of an elite *per se*, but is a claim to represent “the people” against a (some) illegitimate “elite” and constructs its political demands as representing the will of “the people”. Populists mobilise and simultaneously stimulate or reinforce dissatisfaction with “the elite” for its (real and/or perceived) frustrating or endangering of several demands, interests, or identities. Although “the elite” often refers to certain powerful groups within the nation – national politicians, intellectuals, artists, etc., it can be much more common for populists to construct an antagonism between the (nationally defined) people-as-underdogs and non-national elites. In some cases, the nation in its entirety even comes to be identified as the underdog in opposition to an international or foreign elite (De Cleen 2017).

To test our hypothesis that the “Open Balkan” initiative is a political populist concept directed toward the EU elite – hence, directed outward, we will use the concept of transnational populism defined by De Cleen (2017). According to his point of view, populism is certainly not necessarily national or nationalist. All that is needed to speak of transnational populism is a politics that discursively constructs and claims to represent a transnational people-as-underdog. However, whereas populism has frequently opposed a nationally defined people-as-underdog to supra-national and international *elites*, the construction of a transnational people-as-underdog has been far less common and straightforward. One of the features of transnational populism is the international cooperation between nationally organised populist parties and movements, which is why truly transnational populism is more profoundly transnational in that it constructs a transnational people-as-underdog as a political subject that *supersedes* the boundaries of the nation-state rather than merely *linking up* national people-as-underdogs. De Cleen (2017) makes a distinction between international and transnational populism, where international populism does create a transnational people-as-underdog, while transnational populism brings together nationally organised political actors and nationally defined people-as-

underdogs. The key point of his research is that transnational populist resistance against a shared foreign or transnational elite has often gone hand in hand with the construction of a pan-national or regional identity. Such pan-nationalist identities show strong similarities with nationalism, as they too are based on shared territory and history and constructed through the opposition to out-groups. Here can be seen the articulation of pan-nationalism or regionalism and populism. Transnational populism is not necessarily incongruous with the thorough articulation between populism and nationalism. And it points to the articulation of populism with politics that revolves around a logic very similar to nationalism, only on a larger scale.

Having all this in mind, we will test our main hypothesis that the “Open Balkan” initiative is a political populist concept directed outward, i.e., toward EU leaders and not an initiative that can bring something completely new and different compared to all previous bilateral and multilateral initiatives of this type. We will use quantitative content analysis of communication patterns in this endeavour, with a focus on messages delivered to the Serbian public via domestic media (social media, internet portals, print, TV, and radio).<sup>6</sup> The units of analysis were the posts and comments with their descriptive data (publishing time and date, author, and type of post). The content analysis consisted of these categories: type of post; time of post; time of the comment; the number of likes; and the number of comments. Due to the analysis of the subject of the research, which is the verification of the assumption about the “Open Balkan” initiative as populism, which is mostly external, we will analyse two periods: *the first*, from March 1 to March 31, 2022, during the election campaign in the Republic of Serbia (for general elections – both the president and members of the National Assembly, as well as the local elections in 12 municipalities and 2 cities, including Belgrade), during which the most important political messages (such as the “Open Balkan” initiative) have been sent to the public; and *the second*, the first week of June 2022, as a period in which there were no significant internal political processes on the territory of the Republic of Serbia.

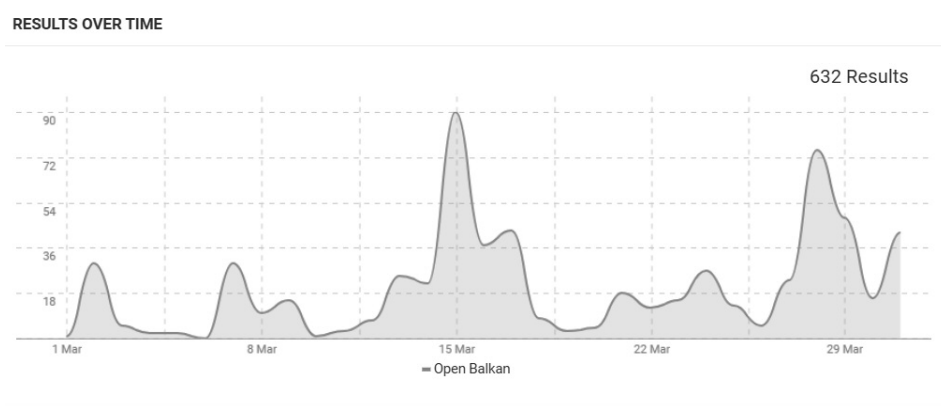
By analysing the content in the domestic media and the representation of the “Open Balkan” Initiative in them in the previous period (a month earlier, that is, during February 2022), we came across interesting data.

Namely, from March 1 to March 31, 2022, the “Open Balkan” initiative was mentioned **632 times** in the online media, and the most mentions were recorded in the middle and end of the month.

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<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this research, we used the Talkwalker software (it is a social media management tool that’s laser-focused on tracking a brand’s global online reputation and sentiment through online, social, print, TV, and radio; the tool generates actionable insights and competitive metrics). We would like to take this opportunity to thank the marketing agency *Digital Element* from Belgrade, which helped us to conduct this research.

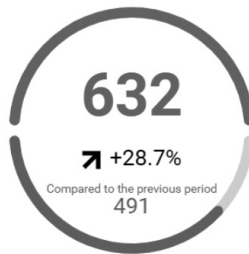
Graph 1: The number of the “Open Balkan” initiative mentions in domestic media – March 2022



Source: The authors calculations.

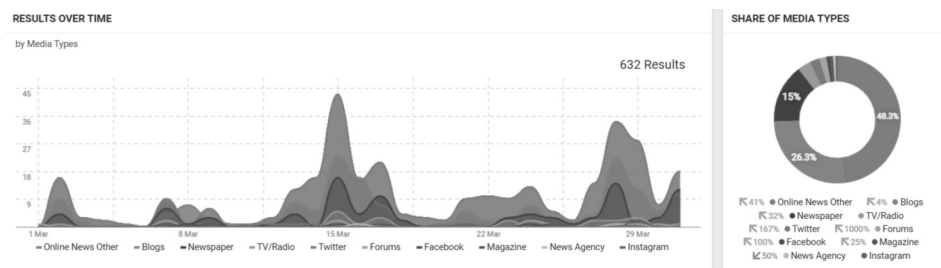
Graph 2: The “Open Balkan” initiative mentions that compared to the previous period – February 2022

RESULTS



Source: The authors calculations.

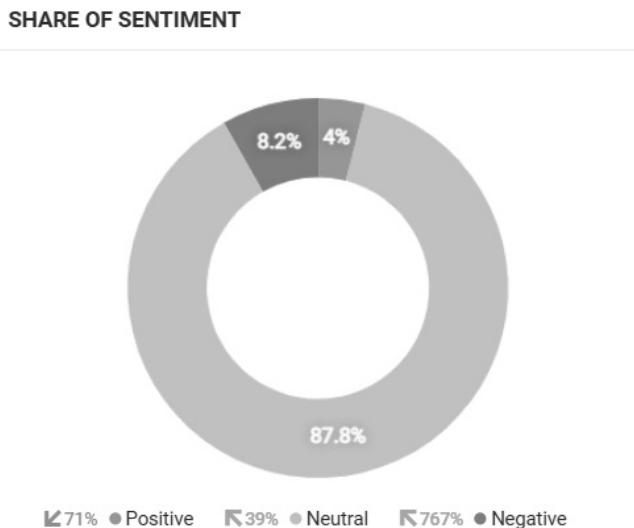
Graph 3: The “Open Balkan” initiative mentions in March 2022 – the share of media types



Source: The authors calculations.

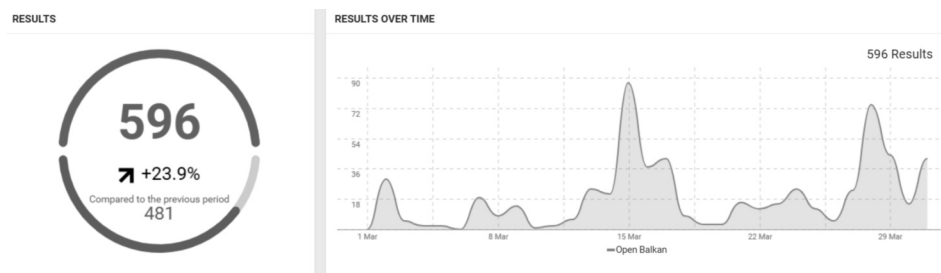
The sentiment of the posts **was mostly neutral (88 percent)**, while positive (4 percent) and negative (8 percent) were less common. The most mentions (596) came from online portals.

Graph 4: The “Open Balkan” initiative mentions in March 2022 – the share of sentiment



Source: The authors calculations.

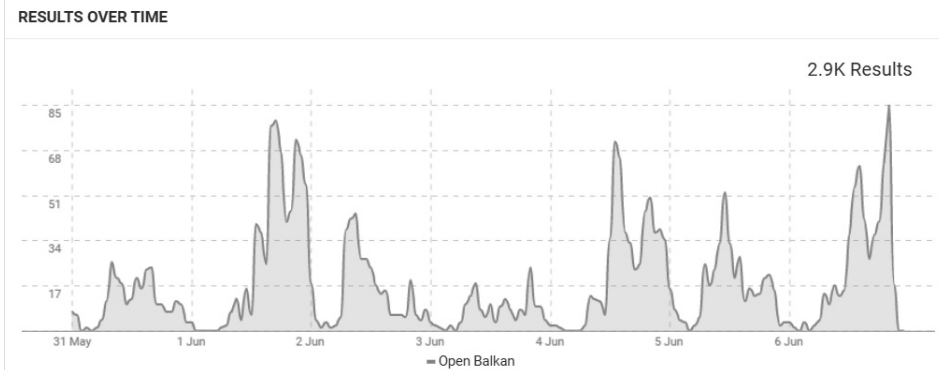
Graph 5: The “Open Balkan” initiative in March 2022 mentions – only portals



Source: The authors calculations.

It is interesting that in the first week of June alone, the “Open Balkan” initiative was mentioned **2.9K times** on digital channels. In this period, most mentions were recorded on Twitter, but online portals also significantly participated in creating the entire media image with 972 mentions.

Graph 6: The number of the “Open Balkan” initiative mentions in domestic media – the first week of June 2022



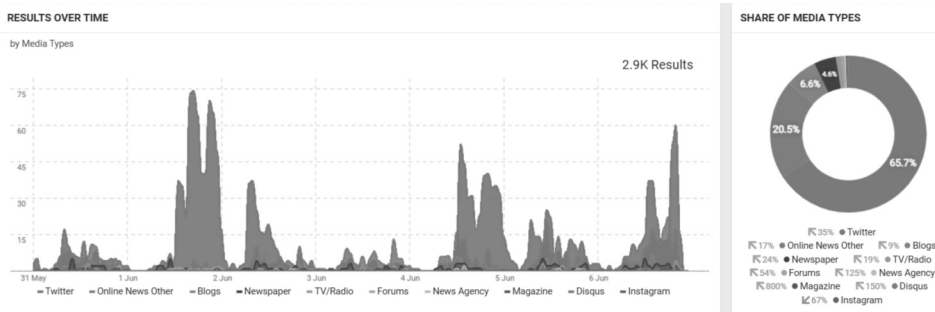
Source: The authors calculations.

Graph 7: The “Open Balkan” initiative mentions compared to the previous period – the first week of May 2022



Source: The authors calculations.

Graph 8: The “Open Balkan” initiative mentions in the first week of June 2022 – the share of media types



Source: The authors calculations.

Graph 9: The “Open Balkan” initiative in the first week of June 2022 mentions – only portals

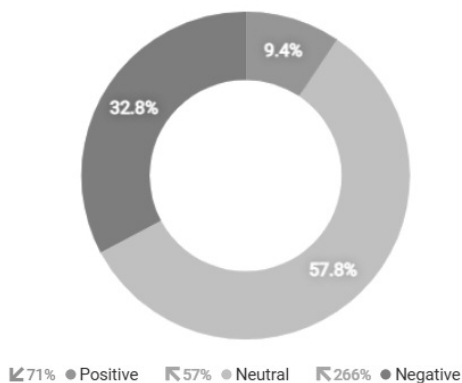


Source: The authors calculations.

In this period too, **neutral sentiment is dominant (58 percent)**, although at the beginning of June there **was a noticeable increase in positive sentiment (9 percent)**, but also **negative sentiment (33 percent)**.

Graph 10: The “Open Balkan” initiative mentions in the first week of June 2022 – the share of sentiment

**SHARE OF SENTIMENT**



Source: The authors calculations.

If we compare the period of the election campaign, i.e., the number of the “Open Balkan” initiative mentions that were collected from March 1 to March 31, 2022, when the campaign heated up, and only the first week of June 2022, we can conclude that this initiative was certainly not the focus of the election campaign, but gained relevance after the end of the elections in Serbia. This confirms that the “Open Balkan” initiative as a political or economic populist concept is by no means aimed at the domestic electorate.

We conclude this based on the data that the “Open Balkan” initiative was discussed in the online media as much as 359 percent more in the first week of June compared to the entire period of March, and if we compare only the web portals during the election campaign (March 1–31) and the first week of June, the presence of the “Open Balkan” initiative in domestic media during the first week of June was increased by 63 percent.

Therefore, the obtained data indicates that the “Open Balkan” initiative is not aimed at the domestic population. Therefore, it can be concluded that it is not a question of political or economic populism, which political parties often resort to during the election campaign. However, if we look at the obtained data within the framework of the concept of transnational populism, mentioned earlier, we can conclude that it is a regional initiative aimed primarily at EU leaders, intending to gain their support for this project to reduce the existing political tensions due to the long-term delay in the admission of these countries to the EU. Therefore, on the one hand, this initiative tries to overcome the shortcomings of other similar initiatives — especially CEFTA — but also to offer a kind of alternative to the EU itself, which with this initiative gains time in deciding on the admission of these countries. Of course, in addition to the political leaders in these countries as well as the EU leaders, it seems that the biggest winners of this initiative are foreign direct investors who get one market, now integrated, of cheap labour and that in the lobby of the EU. Of course, we have already mentioned that the realisation and implementation of this initiative will face numerous challenges of a political, economic, and legal nature. What currently stands out as its advantage over previous similar initiatives is the strong political will of the signatory countries of this initiative, which is mostly reflected in the fact that the political problems of the past that burdened their mutual relations are now put on the backburner, and that the focus of those countries should be prosperity and economic progress as an economic goal, and as soon as possible, accession to the EU as a political goal.

### **Conclusion**

Created out of “mini-Schengen”, as a result of the political will of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania, the “Open Balkan” initiative had the goal of overcoming some basic shortcomings within the existing CEFTA 2006 agreement. When it became evident that there was no political will for improving economic cooperation within the CEFTA 2006 and that there was obstruction by certain members, on the initiative of Serbia as the largest economy in the region, the idea was created to unite those CEFTA 2006 members who have the political will for further liberalisation and the removal of non-tariff barriers. Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia were guided by the principle that, through an example of good practice, they would encourage other countries in the region, primarily Bosnia and

Herzegovina and Montenegro, to join this initiative. However, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and especially Kosovo\* and Montenegro, maintained a negative attitude towards the “Open Balkan” initiative, considering it to be a kind of demagoguery and populism with the aim of creating a regional organisation that would be economically and politically dominated by Serbia. Also, they consider the Open Balkan initiative to be distancing their countries from the process of accession to the European Union.

Is the “Open Balkan” all about populism and what kind of populism? This is a key question that we tried to answer in this paper, in which we defined the “Open Balkan” initiative, made its distinction in relation to the CEFTA 2006 agreement, and gave an overview of its economies, and therefore its economic potential.

All economies of the “Open Balkan” initiative have limited capacities, with relatively low average real GDP growth in the previous ten years, as well as low and relatively similar GDP *per capita*. These countries cannot be considered significant economic successes, and their average salaries are still at a significantly lower level than the least developed EU countries. High unemployment, especially high youth unemployment, stands out as the biggest drawback and common denominator for all observed countries. All these indicators, as well as numerous others, speak in favour of the thesis that by uniting the markets of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania, significant economic results cannot be achieved that would represent a momentum for economic development. The structural problems of the observed countries cannot be solved by the mere liberalisation of trade, the establishment of a common labour market, or even the total abolition of non-tariff barriers.

The average citizens of Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia are not familiar with the integration processes that follow and imply the “Open Balkan” initiative, nor are they able to distinguish between this idea and the existing CEFTA 2006 agreement. The decision-makers in these three countries did not even bother to familiarise their voters with the mentioned processes in more detail, while, on the other hand, they made significant efforts to present the idea of the “Open Balkan” initiative to EU leaders, that is, to get support for it. Therefore, our main hypothesis was that the “Open Balkan” initiative is a political populist concept directed outward – towards EU leaders and not an initiative that can bring something completely new and different compared to all previous bilateral and multilateral initiatives of this type.

By analysing the content in the domestic media and the representation of the “Open Balkan” initiative in 2022, we have seen that this initiative was not the focus of the election campaign in Serbia, from March 1 to March 31, 2022, which is why we came to the conclusion that the “Open Balkan” initiative is by no means aimed at the domestic electorate. Therefore, we used the concept of transnational populism in order to explain that the “Open Balkan” initiative is a regional initiative



aimed primarily at EU leaders to gain their support for this project. So, we concluded that this initiative represents a political populist effort, on the one hand, to overcome the shortcomings of other similar initiatives, such as the CEFTA, but also an attempt to bridge the period until these countries of the “Open Balkan” initiative join the EU. In addition, one must not lose sight of the fact that foreign direct investors are also the winners of this initiative, as they get one integrated market of cheap labour in the lobby of the EU.

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### **ИНИЦИЈАТИВА „ОТВОРЕН БАЛКАН”: ПОПУЛИЗАМ УСМЕРЕН КА СПОЉА**

*Анстракт:* У овом раду се анализира иницијатива „Отворени Балкан”, користећи неке од теоријских претпоставки економског, а самим тим и политичког популизма, како би се показало да се економске користи од ове иницијативе не разликују превише од постојећих економских користи ЦЕФТА (2006) споразума, чије су све три земље (потписнице иницијативе „Отворени Балкан”) чланице. Међутим, за разлику од економских, много јасније се виде политичке користи ове иницијативе. Конкретно, иницијатива „Отворени Балкан” може се посматрати као механизам за „премошћивање” периода чекања ових земаља на улазак у ЕУ, односно превазилажење неких препрека постојећих билатералних трговинских споразума које земље овог региона имају са ЕУ. Показаћемо, уз помоћ квантитативне анализе садржаја, да је иницијатива „Отворени Балкан” политички популистички концепт усмерен ка споља – ка лидерима ЕУ, а не иницијатива која може донети нешто сасвим ново и другачије у односу на све досадашње билатералне и мултилатералне иницијативе овог типа.

*Кључне речи:* иницијатива „Отворени Балкан”; Србија; Северна Македонија; Албанија; ЦЕФТА; популизам; међународна трговина.

*Received: 01 August 2022*

*Accepted: 15 September 2022*