



## **Weekly Briefing**

**North Macedonia external relations briefing:  
The OpenBalkan initiative officially announced in Skopje**  
**Gjorgjioska M.Adela**


### **China-CEE Institute**

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 [office@china-cee.eu](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)

 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

# The OpenBalkan initiative officially announced in Skopje

## Summary

*On the 29th of July 2021 in Skopje, the leaders of N.Macedonia, Serbia and Albania announced the “Open Balkan” initiative, as a new phase of the project for regional cooperation, which was previously known as “Mini Schengen”. On the same day it was also announced that border controls between the three countries will be abolished by 2023. Furthermore, the leaders signed three documents: Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation on Facilitating Import, Export and Movement of Goods in the Western Balkans, the Memorandum on Free Access to the Labor Market and the Agreement on Cooperation in Disaster Protection.*

According to the leaders from the three countries, Vucic, Rama and Zaev, the establishment of the OpenBalkan zone between N. Macedonia, Albania and Serbia, aims to increase trade and co-operation as well as to improve bilateral relations between the member-states. The idea for the project seems to have first emerged at a regional summit in Trieste in 2017, when the leaders of the Western Balkan countries agreed on an action plan for a regional economic area. The first meeting dedicated to advancing this idea took place in October 2019 in Novi Sad in Northern Serbia and it was attended by the prime ministers of Albania and N. Macedonia, Edi Rama and Zoran Zaev, and the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. During that meeting, they signed a declaration of intent to establish the free movement of people, goods, services and capital between the three countries.<sup>1</sup> It was also specified that the initiative will be open to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo to also join. On that occasion the Macedonian prime minister stated: “The EU is welcome, but this initiative is focused on the interests of the countries in the region”. Several other meetings have taken place since with the aim of speeding up implementation of ‘mini-Schengen’. The initiative however was received with particular scepticism by Kosovo and Montenegro. At a press conference in Tirana in February 2020, the prime ministers of Kosovo and Albania Albin Kurti and Edi Rama seemed

---

<sup>1</sup> Three countries agree mini Schengen in the Balkans, published on 11.10.2019 available at

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/three-countries-agree-mini-schengen-in-the-balkans/>  
accessed on 30.07.2021

to hold contrasting views on the “Mini-Schengen” initiative, with Rama being strongly in its favour and Kurti being strongly opposed.

In spite of such opposition however the project gained new momentum in July 2021 in Skopje, when the three leaders, Rama, Zaev and Vucic, announced the renaming of Mini Schengen into the OpenBalkan initiative. The Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev described the move as starting “a new era of cooperation in the region of the Western Balkans”. Moreover, he added, “I want to assure you, and I think it is obvious, that our political will, that of President Vučić, Prime Minister Rama and mine, is an expression of our maximum commitment to provide all conditions that depend on the governments of our three countries for effective regional cooperation”.<sup>2</sup> The Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama said that the region cannot continue to move forward if it remains a prisoner of the past as he urged other countries from the region to join the initiative. Similarly, President Vucic stated that the “Open Balkan” initiative is open to all other countries in the region that want it and that anyone who wants to join is welcome, but no reason for someone to pray.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the three leaders issued a joint statement where they emphasized that its aim is to build “a shared future of our citizens and the entire Western Balkan” and that its goal is to have a single market, without borders. The statement added that “the initiative will make us better and will make Europe better”.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the three leaders announced that three documents had been signed: Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation on Facilitating Import, Export and Movement of Goods in the Western Balkans, the Memorandum on Free Access to the Labor Market and the Agreement on Cooperation in Disaster Protection. The timeline for the practical implementation of these agreements was also announced. By mid-October ministers from each of the three countries will be expected to provide practical plans on implementing the three agreements. Then on 4-5 November a meeting will be held in Belgrade with the relevant ministers in order to proceed on the full implementation of the

---

<sup>2</sup> European Western Balkans (2021). “Mini Schengen” renamed “Open Balkan”; Vučić, Rama and Zaev sign three documents, published on 29.07.2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/07/29/mini-schengen-renamed-open-balkan-vucic-rama-and-zaev-sign-three-documents/> accessed on 10.08.2021

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Joint statement of the leaders of "Open Balkan" published on 29.07.2021, available at <https://vlada.mk/node/26063?ln=en-gb> accessed on 01.08.2021

commitments. Finally, a second meeting was announced to take place in Tirana in December in order to track progress, with the option to hold further meetings as needed to deepen additional ties.<sup>5</sup>

Two concrete action-plans were outlined for the autumn period. Firstly, each of the three governments pledged to instruct their respective Chambers of Commerce to work on helping businesses and workers on specific policies aimed at the free movement of labour and improved collaboration opportunities. Secondly, it was agreed that line ministries will work together on a VAT information sharing system, which will enable a cargo to cross without stopping at any border within the Balkans. Other areas of potential collaboration were also mentioned in the joint statement including: Balkan Film Commission, Balkan Wine Festival, and cooperation on the advancement of the green agenda across the three countries. Finally, the statement concluded: “While the EU accession perspective remains the catalyst of our regional cooperation, we do not need to wait for every issue to be resolved, or for Europe to come to consensus, in order to make lives better for our people. In that spirit, we invite all the Western Balkan parties to join us in initiatives, legal instruments, and practical projects such as these.”<sup>6</sup> Importantly, the joint statement also mentioned a mining project that was announced in Serbia for the extraction of Lithium by Rio Tinto. In the statement an apparent support seemed to be given to Vucic who is facing high domestic opposition to this project. It was stated that “If this project goes forward our countries will work together so that the opportunities created by this will bring industry to Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania, and elsewhere in Europe and the region.”<sup>7</sup>

The position of the EU on the initiative has so far been lukewarm. Following the announcement European Commission Spokeswoman Ana Pisonero stated: “We understand the desire to move forward, at the same time, one process involving the entire Western Balkans is essential. In that context, it is important that the entire region progresses towards the establishment of the Common Regional Market, which is a political commitment made by the six leaders of the region at the summit in Sofia last autumn”.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

The newly renamed Balkan Initiative is a puzzling project because of several reasons. First of all, it brings together three countries, whose relations were assumed to be on the path of divergence rather than convergence at the time when the initiative took off. Secondly, it is presented as a regional initiative, which is driven by regional leadership at a time when the path to EU accession for the region seems to be blocked. The lukewarm response by the EU suggests that it is also unsure with regards to the direction the Initiative is taking and with what interests in mind. At the same time however, it may be naive to assume that the publicly declared objectives of the initiative are the only goals and interests that drive it. In view of this, it is only by observing the concrete outcomes of the Open Balkan initiative that its initial purpose and objective can start to be unravelled. Regional cooperation is long-overdue in the Balkans. The prosperity of the region and its people depend on it. Ultimately however it is the initial purpose, the long-term objective and the concrete outcomes of the Open Balkan Initiative which determine its factual impact on the affected people and countries across the region.