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# Unlocking the Regional Initiatives’ Full Potential with the Staged Accession Model to the EU

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## I. Introduction

EU’s approach towards the Western Balkans (WB), from the very beginning, was focused on establishing good-neighbourly relations and promoting regional cooperation, which were and still are a precondition for WB’s association and later accession to the EU. Starting from Stabilisation and Association Process in 1999, the EU attempted to stabilise this post-conflict area and prepare WB countries for membership by proposing and supporting various regional initiatives. However, a quick glance at the past decade illustrates that in the face of multiple crises, the European Union has been unable to keep the enlargement to the WB high on its agenda. When the then-newly elected President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, presented his programme in 2014, he explicitly stated that “in the next five years, no new members will be joining us in the EU,”<sup>1</sup> causing strong concerns that the Western Balkans would fall into the background.

1 European Commission, “A new start for Europe”, 15 July 2014, Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_14\\_567](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_14_567) (Accessed 30 May 2023).

Recognising the danger of leaving the region empty-handed with such discouraging discourse at play, while accounting for the potential of third, non-EU actors' influence to grow, then-German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, launched the Berlin Process. Although the aim was to keep the WB on the European path while enhancing the intra-regional interconnectivity, over time, it became clear that despite some successes, the Berlin Process had underdelivered. The countries' progress toward the EU remained at a standstill, whereas numerous initiatives launched under its framework have not been fully implemented. Therefore, certain WB countries started to explore alternative avenues and pursued deeper regional integration on their own, all while maintaining EU membership as the ultimate goal. This gradual process, which started as "Mini-Schengen", eventually materialised as the Open Balkan initiative.

Led by the same motives and values that have guided the work of all regional initiatives, while recognising the need for innovative but concrete solutions to overcome the impasse that enlargement has faced, the European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade) and the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS - Brussels) have developed the Staged Accession Model.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, aware of the need to establish a general political consensus on the integration of the European continent, it has been suggested that the Model should be implemented through the adoption of a Joint European Integration Plan, which would define a broad timeline for enlargement and further motivate political elites to focus on reforms.<sup>3</sup> Building upon the mentioned works, this paper aims to analyse the relationship and compatibility between the Staged Accession Model and regional initiatives, particularly the Berlin Process, based on their joint aim to enhance the EU's credibility in the region and ultimately achieve the accession of all WB states to membership. In addition, several other regional initiatives were examined to assess their possible contribution to the WB's accession process and their alignment with the enlargement framework outlined by the Staged Accession Model. Although the Model is a method for the accession process and thus substantially different from regional initiatives, this paper also tried to analyse how the Model can support and enhance regional cooperation.

## II. The Berlin Process - a long way from ideas to implementation

Despite the ambitious announcement of projects, most notably the Common Regional Market (CRM), the significant gap between their expected scope on the one hand and the implementation difficulties on the other, proved to be the greatest weakness of the Berlin Process. Namely, the CRM Report on Implementation for 2021 identifies four groups of hindering factors for the establishment of the CRM, among which, besides the lack of administrative capacity and unresolved bilateral disputes, the key problem lies in the fact that there are different levels of alignment with EU legal acts among the countries in the region.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it is also highlighted that achieving the high ambitions of this project would require significant capital investments in addition to those envisaged by the Economic and Investment Plan.<sup>5</sup> As the CRM is still one of the leading projects of the EU *vis-à-vis* the region, leaving these issues unaddressed could potentially undermine the legitimacy of the initiative and jeopardise the effectiveness of the EU's overall efforts to support the region.

2 Michael Emerson, Milena Lazarević, Steven Blockmans and Strahinja Subotić, "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU", European Policy Centre (CEP) and Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 14 May 2022, Available at: <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/A-Template-for-Staged-Accession-to-the-EU.pdf> (Accessed 30 May 2023).

3 Srđan Majstorović, "Joint European Integration Plan 2030: A new pan-European agreement for resetting the enlargement process", European Policy Centre (CEP), 22 December 2022, Available at: <https://cep.org.rs/en/blog/joint-european-integration-plan-2030/> (Accessed 30 May 2023).

4 Common Regional Market Report on Implementation for 2021, Regional Cooperation Council, April 2022, Available at: <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/145/common-regional-market-report-on-implementation-for-2021> (Accessed 30 May 2023).

5 Similar arguments can be made regarding another important regional project – initiated at the same Berlin Process Summit in Sofia as the CRM – the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

Noting the identified implementation gap, what hinders the readiness of the WB to fully engage in implementing the CRM is the arguable absence of a more direct link between the Berlin Process and EU membership as the ultimate goal. Originally, the Berlin Process was designed to “further endeavours to make additional real progress in the reform process”<sup>6</sup> – something that was reinstated by German Chancellor and host of the last summit, Olaf Scholz.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, some of the most important goals of the Berlin Process, such as the infrastructure connectivity of the region and resolution of bilateral disputes, were intended to act as a preparation for the WB countries to join the EU and participate in the EU single market. In this regard, the Berlin process brought some concrete benefits to the WB, such as the creation of a roaming-free space in the region and a significant reduction in roaming prices between the WB and the EU,<sup>8</sup> as well as the expansion of the Green Lanes initiative throughout the region, all of which contributed to bringing the region closer to the EU single market.<sup>9</sup> However, apart from declarative statements that projects within this framework can contribute to the European integration of the region, a clear “roadmap” has never been developed to more directly link the implementation of projects within the Berlin Process with the accession processes of the WB countries. Consequently, full-hearted commitment to the Process as something that goes beyond “a debating club” has been noticeably lacking and has thus failed to tangibly commit to advancing the reform processes in the region.

### III. The Staged Accession Model – a framework for Berlin Process’s goals

The lack of political will and financial resources necessary for implementing the projects agreed upon within the framework of the Berlin Process can be overcome by applying the Staged Accession Model. By providing concrete benefits to candidate countries during the accession process itself, the Model can create an incentivising structure that would encourage the states to implement the agreements reached during the Berlin Process. By progressively increasing the available resources for structural and investment projects from one stage to another, the WB countries would become better equipped to achieve the ambitious goals of the Berlin Process, thereby strengthening the credibility of its initiatives and preventing them from remaining a dead letter on a paper. Restoring optimism in the process of European integration would also bring the necessary political will among candidate countries for the devoted implementation of agreements from the Berlin Process, which could consequently provide a strong incentive for further alignment with the EU acquis. Consequently, this would assist WB countries in their progress from one stage to another, through which they would gain significant benefits along the way to the EU membership.

Moreover, although most of the projects and initiatives covered by the Berlin Process now find their place in European Commission reports, assessments of their implementation have been done in a largely descriptive way, while the Staged Accession Model supports a stronger linkage between implementation of Berlin Process’s initiatives and the progress of WB states towards the EU. Namely, by stressing the need to start quantifying the European Commission’s assessments and establishing clear criteria for progress through stages, the necessary predictability would

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- 6 “Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans”, 28 August 2014, Available at: [https://www.transport-community.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Final-Declaration-by-the-Chair-of-the-Conference-on-the-Western-Balkans\\_Berlin-2014.pdf](https://www.transport-community.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Final-Declaration-by-the-Chair-of-the-Conference-on-the-Western-Balkans_Berlin-2014.pdf) (Accessed 30 May 2023).
- 7 European Western Balkans, “Berlin Process: Western Balkans leaders sign agreements on increased mobility”, 3 November 2022, Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/11/03/berlin-process-western-balkans-leaders-sign-agreements-on-increased-mobility/> (Accessed 30 May 2023).
- 8 “Western Balkans Roaming Report 2022”, Regional Cooperation Council, January 2023, Available at: <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/153/western-balkans-roaming-report-2022> (Accessed 30 May 2023).
- 9 “Common Regional Market Report on Implementation for 2022”, Regional Cooperation Council, May 2023, Available at: <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/157/common-regional-market-report-on-implementation-for-2022> (Accessed 30 May 2023).

be introduced into the enlargement process. Similarly, the Commission could also, among other things, numerically assess the level of implementation of Berlin Process initiatives as part of the assessment of the level of progress and preparedness for EU membership and recommend the transition to an upper stage for those countries that demonstrate a high level of implementation of the reforms foreseen in the existing negotiating frameworks. This could potentially motivate the WB states to implement initiatives agreed under the framework of the Berlin Process, not only because they contribute to countries' overall development and prepare them for EU membership, but also because their implementation would be a prerequisite for moving to an upper stage, all the way to the status of a new EU member state.

Building good neighbourly relations, as another partially achieved goal of the Berlin Process, can also be supported by the Staged Accession Model. Although the Agreement on the delineation between Montenegro and BiH was signed at the Vienna Summit,<sup>10</sup> and the Summit in Sofia was jointly organised by Bulgaria and North Macedonia,<sup>11</sup> which was supposed to guarantee the normalisation of their relations, there are still many bilateral disputes in the Balkans.<sup>12</sup> New ones have also emerged in the meantime.<sup>13</sup> This has shown that, despite bringing regional issues higher on the candidates' political agendas, the Berlin Process has only managed to solve some of them, while it has not been successful in preventing the emergence of new ones. By implementing the Staged Accession Model, the ensuing higher involvement of WB countries in the work of EU institutions could contribute to regional cohesion and help these countries recognise their common regional interests, which would encourage further cooperation. Regularised meetings between the WB and EU officials would enhance the latter's ability to keep the former accountable. In other words, opening the doors of EU institutions in a merit-based and reversible manner would send a message that EU perspective of WB is indeed genuine and thus contribute to generating the political will necessary to resolve bilateral disputes in the WB. In parallel with the accession negotiations, resolving bilateral disputes can be subjected to a separate process and supported by political and financial benefits offered through the Staged Accession Model.<sup>14</sup> As the Model itself cannot directly resolve bilateral issues, this showcases that, at least indirectly, it can contribute to a positive-sum game of regional initiatives.

#### IV. United in Purpose: The Common Spirit, Values, and Goals of the Staged Accession Model and the Berlin Process

The Staged Accession Model provides a framework for implementing agreements reached under the Berlin Process, but also shares many of its goals. First and foremost, like the Berlin Process, the Model emphasises the primary importance of the rule of law and other fundamental reforms. The special importance of reforms in fundamental areas (Cluster 1), verbally expressed at each summit of the Berlin Process, has been a foundational block of the Model. It foresees that progress from one stage to another cannot be achieved until all chapters and reform areas in the *Fundamen-*

10 "Final Declaration by the Chair of the Vienna Western Balkans Summit", 27 August 2015, Available at: [https://www.leopoldina.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Internationales/JSC\\_2015/2015\\_final\\_declaration\\_2nd\\_wb\\_summit\\_vienna.pdf](https://www.leopoldina.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Internationales/JSC_2015/2015_final_declaration_2nd_wb_summit_vienna.pdf) (Accessed 30 May 2023).

11 "Chair's Conclusions", November 2020, Available at: [https://www.wb6cif.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Chairs-Conclusions\\_Sofia-2020.pdf](https://www.wb6cif.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Chairs-Conclusions_Sofia-2020.pdf) (Accessed 30 May 2023).

12 For more details, see the following paper that will be published as part of the same project: Erwan Fouéré, Report on bilateral disputes in the EU's enlargement process in the Western Balkans.

13 This primarily refers to the ongoing identity dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, as well as Belgrade-Pristina, which came under high strain despite the fact that both sides accepted the EU proposed Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia.

14 Erwan Fouéré, Op. cit.



*tals* cluster reach the required level of preparedness.<sup>15</sup> Given that the implementation of projects within the framework of the Berlin Process requires simultaneous development of the rule of law in the region, the Staged Accession Model offers practical implementation of the Berlin Process's goal that the focus on fundamental reforms must be maintained throughout the accession process. Building stable democratic institutions, an independent judiciary, and effective public administration would not only bring the WB closer to the EU membership, but it will also contribute to the fulfilment of the prerequisites for the successful functioning of the CRM and the realisation of other planned projects under the framework of the Berlin Process.

The similarity between these two initiatives is reflected in the fact that the Staged Accession Model also recognises the necessity of parallel implementation of EU internal reforms and the enlargement process, which is why the Berlin Process was initially launched.<sup>16</sup> While acknowledging the need for the EU to implement institutional reforms, but also recognising that these reforms should not be an obstacle to the accession of new members, the Model envisages a temporary Stage III. This Stage would follow after the candidate country fulfils all obligations from the negotiation process and concludes the Accession Treaty, thereby becoming a new member state with all rights and obligations, but also with a temporarily limited "veto right" in the Council and an enhanced supervision of track record in fundamental reform areas. Therefore, the Model allows the EU to monitor the progress of new member states within a specific timeframe, while the EU continues its internal reforms focused on enhancing decision-making processes and upholding its fundamental values, which would enable the Union to simultaneously expand its membership and strengthen its integration.<sup>17</sup> By doing so, efforts undertaken with this approach would alleviate concerns that the work on the CRM, or the Berlin Process in general, serves only as a waiting room for membership or, worse, as a replacement for it.

The common spirit of the Staged Approach Model and the Berlin Process is reflected in the special significance given to civil society in both initiatives, which is further enriched in the Model. While the Berlin Process emphasises the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the reconciliation process and various forms of cooperation in the region, as well as stressing that CSOs should have a more significant role in the European integration process, the Staged Accession Model offers concrete proposals for empowering their role. Not only is the Model designed by think tanks, but it also recognises the necessity to increase the role of civil society by giving it a stronger role in the monitoring process all the way to full-fledged membership and after. In other words, by insisting on greater use of findings from civil society and think tank communities as third-party indicators, the Model stipulates an enhanced role in monitoring and assessing the undertaken reforms per stage. By empowering CSOs in such a manner, the EU would be able to highlight their indispensable role in holding their governments accountable when it comes to conducting reforms during the accession process in general, including the activities agreed within the Berlin Process framework.

15 For example, even if all clusters are on a moderate level of preparedness on average, a country would only move to Stage I if it has also reached this level of preparedness in all chapters and sub-areas of Cluster 1, without exception.

16 Marina Vulović, "The Berlin Process in the Western Balkans: Big Ideas, Difficult Implementation", German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), No. 70, December 2020, Available at: [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C70\\_Berlin\\_Process.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C70_Berlin_Process.pdf) (Accessed 30 May 2023).

17 Stage III is designed, among other things, in order to provide an additional period for EU27 to complete institutional and decision-making reforms that would not be burdened by new veto players, which could complicate and possibly undermine reform efforts.

## V. Other Regional Initiatives: Same Goals, Different Approaches

Other initiatives, originally established independently of the Berlin Process framework, hold notable relevance in any attempt to bring the WB closer to the EU, and, as such, are equally compatible with the Model. Starting from the 2006 Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), the EU has strongly advocated for economic integration of the WB, convinced that it would help the region to preserve stability and gradually integrate WB countries into the EU. In the Agreement's preamble, it is explicitly stated that the aim of contracting parties is to accede to the EU while CEFTA is being established, not only in order to create free trade market in the region but also to improve WB countries' readiness for EU membership.<sup>18</sup> In that regard, interregional trade in goods has experienced significant growth,<sup>19</sup> while most of the WB countries have reached the highest levels of preparedness for membership precisely in trade-related areas,<sup>20</sup> which can be considered part of CEFTA's success. The SAM not only reaffirms the economic incentives already covered by CEFTA but also fills the gap in incentivising reforms in fundamental areas, addressing the main obstacle on the Western Balkans' path to EU integration.

Despite significant results achieved by CEFTA and new strides made through the Berlin process, some WB countries recognised additional room for deepening economic integration in the region. The CEFTA blockage caused by Pristina's imposition of 100% tariffs on goods from Serbia and BiH, which coincided with certain EU member states unwillingness to open accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, motivating the leadership of Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania to launch a new intraregional economic initiative in 2019. By calling for the establishment of a "Mini-Schengen" in the Western Balkans,<sup>21</sup> three leaders sent a message that the Berlin Process's achievements were not deemed sufficient. Since its inception, this initiative, which would in 2020 evolve into the "Open Balkan," has been grounded in the principles of the four freedoms of the EU and thus represented a way of preparation for participation in the EU single market. In that regard, "Open Balkan" holds the potential to strengthen economic ties within the region, while simultaneously offering incentives for participating countries to align their trade-related legislation with EU standards, which would bring them closer to the EU single market.

The effects of the Staged Accession Model – which is there to revive the enlargement policy and enrich regional initiatives with necessary financial and institutional incentives – are equally valid for "Open Balkan". While the main criticism of the Open Balkan initiative is its insufficient inclusiveness,<sup>22</sup> it has also faced criticism for duplicating efforts already undertaken by the Berlin Process,<sup>23</sup> which some argue is a redundancy but also an alternative to the efforts of the WB to join

18 "Agreement on amendment of and accession to the Central European Free Trade Agreement", Available at: <https://cefta.int/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CEFTAMAINTEXT2006.pdf> (Accessed 20 June 2023)

19 Nina Vujanović, "CEFTA: Trade and Growth Patterns Fifteen Years since Establishment", The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, Research Report 466, April 2023, Available at: <https://wiiw.ac.at/cefta-trade-and-growth-patterns-fifteen-years-since-establishment-dlp-6508.pdf> (Accessed 20 June 2023).

20 For a detailed overview of each country's membership preparedness, see the national issue papers which address the potential application of the Staged Accession Model in all WB countries: <https://cep.org.rs/en/the-initiative-for-a-staged-accession-to-the-eu/> (Accessed 20 June 2023).

21 "Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia Sign 'Mini-Schengen' Declaration", Balkan Insight, 10 October 2019, Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/10/albania-north-macedonia-serbia-sign-mini-schengen-declaration/> (Accessed 30 May 2023).

22 It should be emphasised that the participating countries of the Open Balkan initiative have invited other WB countries to join them on multiple occasions, so arguments regarding the project's insufficient inclusivity may appear exaggerated.

23 "The human rights group claims that Open Balkan negatively competes with the Berlin Process", Radio Free Europe, 17 June 2022, Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zb6-otvoreni-balkan-berlinski-proces/31902891.html> (Accessed 20 June 2023).

the EU.<sup>24</sup> However, the fact that the objectives of “Open Balkan” surpass those of the CRM in certain aspects – such as the creation of a common labour market<sup>25</sup> – also shows that these two initiatives are not completely interchangeable but nevertheless have compatible goals. Overall, the CRM and “Open Balkan” could both be integrated under the umbrella of the EU enlargement policy, with the necessary political and institutional assistance offered by the Staged Accession Model, thus preserving the achievements of “Open Balkan” as part of a broader EU strategy for the WB region.

As a regionally owned roof organisation, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is important in enhancing the EU accession process in the WB. To ensure a fully merit-based accession process, it is crucial for the European Commission to receive robust operational support from an organisation deeply engaged in WB affairs, capable of enhancing the monitoring of reform processes in the region. In this regard, it is important to note that the RCC already plays a significant role in monitoring and coordinating the activities outlined in the initiatives of the Berlin Process. The fact that areas for cooperation in the RCC’s framework – such as economic development, energy, justice and home affairs, security cooperation, etc. – mostly follow the path of the EU enlargement policy shows that the RCC can also have an important role in assisting WB6 to enhance preparedness for EU membership. Therefore, regional cooperation that is going on under the RCC’s umbrella can be beneficial for WB countries’ overall preparedness for membership, while more cooperation between the Commission and the highly experienced RCC could support merit-based progress towards the EU membership, through stages proposed by the Model.

## VI. “All roads lead to Rome”, but how to get to Brussels?

The appearance of different regional interconnectivity-related initiatives is a sign that a singular and credible political framework is missing. Acknowledging the potential of the Staged Accession Model to act as a structured framework for incentivising reforms, the eventual endorsement of a Joint Integration Plan would represent the other side of the coin – acting as a political “roof” that would place an informal ceiling to the current open-ended accession processes. By agreeing on clear deadlines for the implementation of key reforms, and setting, for example, 2030 as the year in which the EU would be ready for a new enlargement, the shaken enthusiasm of European integration would be renewed. This way, the EU and its member states, on the one hand, and candidate countries, on the other, would define their obligations with clearly stated measures and deadlines. Such a broad European consensus would usher the path towards a renewed and compact enlargement strategy – with the Model at its core and the most successful aspects of regional initiatives as supporting and irreplaceable elements.

All in all, the analysed regional initiatives and the Staged Accession Model, led by shared spirit, values, and goals, complement each other and offer concrete content to enlargement policy that brings tangible benefits and encourages candidate countries on their path to the EU. Achieving aims such as regional economic integration or good neighbourly relations could be facilitated by implementing the Staged Accession Model, which would strengthen the transformative power of the EU accession process. Still, in order for regional initiatives and the whole accession process to gain the necessary political strength, the adoption of a “Joint Integration Plan” is proposed. Such

24 “Open Balkan could worsen political problems in region”, Deutsche Welle, 18 August 2022, Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/open-balkan-initiative-risks-aggravating-political-problems-in-the-region/a-62834261> (Accessed 20 June 2023).

25 See: “Agreement on conditions for free access to the labour market in the Western Balkans”, Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia, 27/2021-37, Available at: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/mu/skupstina/zakon/2021/27/2/reg> (Accessed 30 May 2023).

a plan would express the consensus of the EU27 and the WB in an unequivocal way that there is no peaceful, stable, and prosperous future for Europe until the process of uniting the continent is completed. Twenty years after the Thessaloniki Summit and at a time when the Russian aggression on Ukraine has put European solidarity to probably the greatest test so far, it is necessary for the EU to demonstrate its readiness to continue the process initiated after the fall of the Berlin Wall, not allowing Moscow to once again draw an iron curtain over the European continent.



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