

## Regional integration of the Western Balkan countries “Open Balkans” (The case of Albania)

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### Abstract

National economies in general are developed in specific natural and social conditions in relation to other countries. The need to meet the demands of consumers, as well as other reasons related to the benefits of the development and expansion of economic activity, make necessary the cooperation and integration of countries in joint organizations for mutual benefit, to facilitate the conditions of economic social and political development. The degree of achievement of the level of integration between countries depends a lot on the development and emancipation of national societies, to accept and understand the need for integration as an opportunity to improve the life of all countries together. An important factor is the history of relations between these countries in the past in all directions of development of the human activity. Many times the spirit of past grudges between peoples is a barrier in building trust and in building relationships, mutually beneficial collaborations and development opportunities. State policies that follow a philosophy they cannot live alone create a positive climate and lighten integration, by creating a spirit of friendship in every direction of social life and building relationships based on reciprocity.

**Keywords:** Regional integration, Western Balkan, “Open Balkans”, Albania.

### Introduction

In recent years, in the framework of regional cooperation and integration, Albania has joined several organizations such as CEFTA, “mini-Schengen” and recently “Open Balkans”. This has been accompanied by a debate within the countries of the Western Balkans, but also within the national societies of the countries that should be present, such as Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. The purpose of this paper is to bring an analysis of the benefits and consequences of integration regarding Albanian society, in particular in economic terms. In fact, the integration in the “Open Balkans” has been opposed and rejected, by not participating in meetings, from Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. This very opposition comes from countries that have experienced such an experience in the framework of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Of the 6 participating countries, three openly oppose it. Despite the European Union’s efforts to integrate the Western Balkan countries into CEFTA, the Berlin Agreement, the countries sometimes show problems of respecting sovereignty in their relations with each other, such as the case of the clash of the Montenegro church with Serbia (September 2021). The other case is the recognition of car license plates in Kosovo with people of Serbian nationality and Kosovo citizenship (September, 2021).

Precisely in this article will be as an object, the analysis of cultural similarities and

divergences as a source of trust in integration relations, and the analysis of today's trade exchanges between countries.

Given that the countries of the Western Balkans are in the process of joining the European Union, launching other forms of integration into the arena, demoralizes and misleads these countries. European integration processes have played an important role in stimulating and creating favorable conditions for the countries of the Western Balkans, through a functional legal framework (K. Rama). Trade activity operates between these countries in the framework of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). This article does not discuss the analysis of what CEFTA, the Berlin Agreement, the Mini-Schengen or the "Open Balkans" contain, because some of the goals of the free movement of citizens have been achieved or facilitated, as well as in easing and removing trade barriers between countries with each other.

### Literature

The benefits of economic integration (free trade) are achieved only when the countries that will be part of such agreements give up their national independence, in order to have a natural integration through market forces. The benefits come from the specialization and economies of scale by utilizing national natural and human resources, and by removing customs tariffs and trade barriers (I. Kristo, 2011). The countries of the Western Balkans, regarding economic development, are in the conditions of a free market with few restrictions and trade barriers (K. Rama, 2018: 23)

As an example of the impact on the integration economy we can mention South Korea and Ghana, South Korea pursued a free trade policy, Ghana created a barrier to free international trade, and in the end this attitude led Ghana to a drastic decline and South Korea to an already known development (Charles W.L.Hill. 2000: 118).

Levels of integration between countries include economic integration which naturally leads to Political Union. The level of economic integration includes (I. Kristo, 2004: 78)

1. The Free Trade Area, created only for certain products and services, includes the removal of all trade barriers between countries.
2. The Customs Union, removes barriers to trade in goods and services, predicts a common policy in relation to non-members.
3. The Common Market, the freedom of movement of the factors of production between members, comprises common foreign policies. (TPE)
4. Economic Union, integration of economic policies, harmonization of monetary policies, taxes and government spending (EU)
5. Political union, decision-making and common policies



International trade theories give us the results of economic and political philosophy such as mercantilism, where it is emphasized that the wealth of nations depends on the size of the treasury. This is achieved when a country exports more than it imports, so it has a positive trade balance (surplus). The consequence of this policy is the punishment of imports and the promotion of export subsidy. Neomercantilism which differs from mercantilism in objectives other than defense, such as increasing employment, and accumulating capital for investment in production. In Japan's relations with the United States of America they were not honest in applying this theory by defending food and cosmetics products, as well as in the automotive industry by maintaining a neo-mercantilistic attitude, exporting and importing from America only 2% automobile (Y. Sazanami, S. Yrata, H. Kawai, G. Hill, 2000).

Classical economists (Smith & Ricardo) argued that all countries would gain if they determined to engage in the production of those goods that had preponderance and natural resources in relation to the economies of other countries. Goods in most cases are exported because there is a market gap in other countries for them (demand). But the cost of their production in other countries is very high in relation to the country that has the absolute advantage for their production.

Goods that for their production require large quantities of factors of production available at wholesale and small quantities of factors available at retail, are exported in exchange for goods, whose demand for factors of production is in inversely proportional (H. Denis)

The well-being of citizens depends on the possibility of consuming goods, which is enabled by the free market.

Based on the absolute advantage, each country can produce products like other countries, but another reason for free trade is the use of the comparative advantage that a country has in the production of a good in relation to another country.

One of the successful integration efforts is the European Union, but a large number of economic alliances have existed and exist in the world, such as KNER (COMECOM CMEA), LAJA (Association for Latin American Integration), CACM (Central American Common Market), ECOWAS (Economic Committee of African-Western Countries), ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Opec (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), etc.

What should be emphasized is that these economic organizations have been more successful in countries that have a sustainable economic development as is the most

successful case of the EU (European Union).

Developing countries have more benefits from economic integration, they are small and poor, the main activity is agriculture and they are not competitive in industry. Many of these countries have applied policies to replace imported products in order to boost the economy, and their success depends on integration efforts to reach export markets. In many organizations in developing countries the removal of trade barriers was illusionary (LAFTA), and they were protectionists in protecting domestic production.

The policies of developing countries should encourage the manufacture instead of imported products (I. Kristo, 2004: 90). Many industries can only be efficient if they have a high level of production that can be consumed in the domestic economy. The success of these production activities depends on the integrative orientation to reach export markets.

Africa, which has poor countries, very little to integrate, and are countries that deal with agriculture, has very little opportunity to create integration, the industry is not competitive and opening the door to competition would bankrupt the local economy. In Asia (ASEAN) it is a special case, because for its members incomes have increased, the economies of these countries depend more on exports with industrialized countries than on trade with each other, the success has been the increase of exports in the Japanese market.

Referring to the practice of developing countries, we can say that the Balkan countries are small economies, poor and most of them have an agricultural priority, this would make regional integration difficult if we refer to poor countries. The experience of Asian countries where countries established integration with developed countries (Japan) should be taken into account by the Balkan countries. Moreover, the Balkan countries should seize the chance to integrate into the European Union.

For most of the countries of the western Balkans, including Albania, the main economic partners are outside the region, Italy, Germany, Turkey (INSTAT 2021), despite the fact that many of these countries have close cultural and social ties with each other, directly or through minorities living in the respective countries (K.Rama. 2018: 23)

Taking into consideration the political environment in the Balkans, which is the result of an interethnic conflict, I think that this is an obstacle to creating a spirit of trust and mutual honesty between countries for mutual benefits. Considering that countries entering integration must give up independence on certain trade issues, the Balkan mentality is difficult to conceive (Kosovo government tax 100% on Serbian goods). Recall that Serbia does not recognize Kosovo as a state, then this calls into question its sovereignty, also the purpose of an honesty in relations between equals which is a condition of integration.

One of the factors in international business is the climate of trust between the parties that has as a condition the cultural proximity, which creates conditions for effective communication between the parties, but also increases the preferences of the citizens of the respective countries for consuming goods and services of other countries. It would be effective to invest in cross-border infrastructure, eliminating institutional and physical obstacles, increase cross-border cooperation at the local level, to bring

more intensive economic and social interaction (K. Rama, 2018: 39).

The heterogeneity of the national culture of the Western Balkan countries makes communication difficult and ethnic conflicts in the past are influential factors in creating a business climate between the countries. Albania is part of the small Balkan countries, where cultural diplomacy plays an important role in extending the international status of its representation (Ben Andoni, 2018: 40).

The approximation of culture in regional and international parameters is a challenge for the countries of the Western Balkans and should be related to the philosophy of culture of the European Union.

### **Methodology**

Started from the problematic and the purpose of working, to analyze the impact of nation culture and trade exchanges in facilitating of the integration of western Balkan countries, working is based on data obtained from the statistical institutions of the respective countries.

On the analysis of national culture and the cultural overlap important for facilitating of integration it used comparative method. Ethnic groups in neighboring countries are taken as factors to create cultural relationships in order to increase social-economic interaction. In this case are taken seriously those groups that have a specific weight on the population of the respective country, so they have an official recognition as ethnic groups. Important cultural overlaps are calculated according to the percentage of the ethnic population of the respective country.

Records for the structure of population are taken from statistical institutions of the respective countries according to the last years of population census. Considering that cultural elements create the spirit of trust and an effective communication among citizens of these countries, in order to make business and to be open to integration in a region, the percentage of ethnic groups has been identified as a heft to do the analysis. But it was taken into account that trade relations can be developed for the interests of the business itself regardless of the climate that exists.

In the analysis of economic activity, we start from the activity data between the countries obtained from the institute of statistics. The method used for the analysis is tabular and graphical, where we analyze the indicators realized in the export and import of Albania with all countries in the region. Comparing important cultural overlaps with economic activity is one way to draw conclusions about the impact of culture and economic activity on regional integration.

The experience realized by different countries in the world in economic integration has been used as a tool to compare it with the situation and the path that the Balkan countries should follow in integration.

### **Analysis of important cultural overlaps**

There are 164 definitions for the term culture (Murphy, Hilderbrandert & Thomas, 1997), which makes it difficult to understand the term culture itself, but the term culture refers to the behaviors and characteristics of a group. What interests us in the

context of culture is ethnocentrism (A.Koxhaj, F. Tomini, 2011: 257), that has to do with judging other groups or countries in terms of their acceptability, which in the Balkans is difficult after the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. These prejudices are obstacles to creating a spirit of trust and effective communication between the Balkan countries.

Differences in behavioral characteristics in the organization of organizational and social groups, bring the spirit of mistrust between groups but are also the object of conflict between them (Harris, P. R., Moran, R.T.1987).

The countries of the Western Balkans have a strong ethnic structure, which can be a bridge of cooperation between the Balkan states but also a possibility of conflict as it happened after the 90s in the conflict Serbia-Croatia, Serbia-Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia-Kosovo. Ethnic minorities are to a significant extent, and through mutual respect and international law, countries can avoid conflicts and use minorities as bridges of cooperation.

Table .1 shows the population structure by ethnicity for all Western Balkan countries.

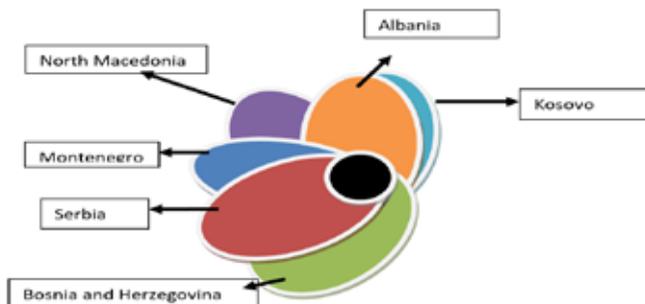
Table.1 Ethnic structure of the population of the Western Balkan countries

Countries	Population	Albanian population	Kosovar population (Albanian)	Macedonian population	Serbian population	Montenegrin population	bosnian population
Albania	2,876,591	82.58%	(88.1)%	0.2%	0.01%	0.01%	(5)%
Kosovo	1,121,342	(82.58)%	88.1%	(0.2)%	7%	(0.01)%	5%
Macedonia	2,000,000	30.17%	(30.17)	60.17%	1.78%	-	17.018%
Serbia	6,945,321	(0.82)%	0.82%	(60.17)%	82.9%	0.2%	2.07%
Montenegro	644,578	5%	(5)%	0.13%	31%	43.16%	7.7%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2,571,372	4%	(4)%	2%	31%	10%	44%

Source: Population demography (Wikipedia), author's elaboration

In order to understand a national culture we must mention the factors that form a certain culture. Many ethnic groups carry the characteristic essential values of their state and on the other hand adhere to the traditions, characteristic morals for their ethnicity. What constitutes the essence of mutual relations for integration despite cultural differences is being human and as such we have physiological and spiritual needs that if we cannot fulfill ourselves we must cooperate with others.

Fig 2. Cultural overlaps of national cultures of the western Balkan countries



Source: Author

The scheme of cultural overlap gives a compliance of the cultural similarity of the Balkan countries taking into account: ethnicity, language, religion, and proximity to common traditions and customs.

In this section (fig.2) we see two groups of cultural overlaps: first Albania has a cultural overlap with Kosovo due to the Albanian ethnicity, Albanian language but also religious affiliation, traditions and customs between the populations, to the extent of 80% starting from the number of Albanian population in Kosovo, as well as in North Macedonia, based on the number of Albanian population in North Macedonia, the cultural overlaps between Albania and North Macedonia would be approximately 30.17%.

Also with Montenegro and Serbia, Albania would have a cultural overlap of up to 0.01%, due to the number of Albanian population in Montenegro and Serbia, but are not important to create cultural overlap, consequently Albania with Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina has great cultural differences to create the spirit of trust in mutual cooperation in all socio-cultural, economic and political directions. Concerning the cultural overlap between Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania has very little chance of reconciling with these countries due to the historical past of these countries.

On the other hand, due to the constituent factors of culture, ethnicity, language, religion, Serbia has many cultural overlaps with Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, respectively: with Montenegro 31%, with Bosnia and Herzegovina 37% and starting from the classification of the Northern Macedonian population as Slavic culture population almost 60%...

From the scheme, we see that we have two groups where in the first group was Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and in the second group Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. In the inclusion in the "Open Balkans" the two countries that are part of the second group, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina oppose such an organization, how is it possible that Albania is part of such a group, considering that Kosovo also opposes this initiative.

Based on the two areas (fig.2) of the important cultural overlap, it would be good if countries with Albanian nationality to integrate with each other, due to the proximity for a lower cost, but also integration in any field due to the cultural overlap, which helps to create a spirit of trust between them for economic integration.

If we look at the mutual movement of Balkan citizens, Albania has been visited by citizens from Kosovo and Northern Macedonia as well as from Montenegro (table.3) that have an Albanian nationality, as a result of the creation of restrictive facilities in the documentation, but also the factor of a culture common to the Albanian population.

Table.2 Movement of the inhabitants of the Balkan countries towards Albania

Years	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Montenegro
2010	1,179,300	432,646	174,500
2018	174,500	515,130	324,464

Source: INSTAT

Ethnic groups are a connecting communication bridge in all spheres of social and economic life of the Balkan countries, but the states themselves must give up the principled conceived culture, which has hindered and hinders the creation of a spirit of trust between the countries.

**Economic analysis.**

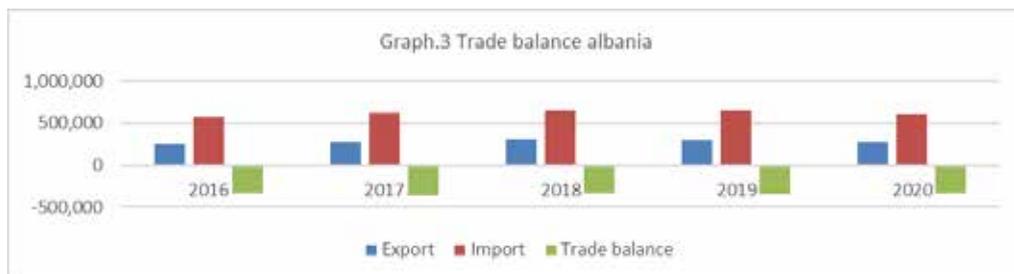
In order to see the method and possibilities of integration, we conduct an analysis of the data of the trade activity of Albania, with the countries of the European Union as well as with the countries of the Western Balkans.

Table.3 Trade balance of Albania, in million ALL

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Export	243,498	272,988	310,436	298,752	271,952
Import	579,243	626,186	651,466	649,118	605,975
Trade balance	-335,750	-353,198	-331,030	-350,327	-333,307

Instat source : author processing

If we compare the balance sheets in the years 2016-2020, they are negative (Table.3, fig.3), and almost in a tendency of negativity, the average is 340,722 million ALL. In 2019, before the pandemic, the balance was negative, above the average at 7,342 million ALL, due to the lack of imports reduction and due to government policies in the field of agricultural policies as a priority of the Albanian economy and rural development (Table 3).

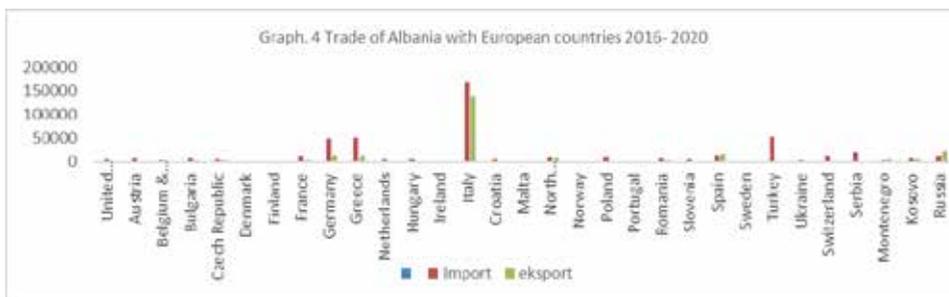


Source: author

Considering that the economies of the Western Balkan countries have almost the same economic structure and non-industrial nature, Albania has a negative trade balance in food products and those of light industry processing (table.6). Countries with low economic potential do not have the opportunity to invest in heavy industry due to the investment force, they should prioritize light industry and processing industry. Albania has a constant negative trend, because economic development policies are not directed at the natural priorities of economic development.

Albania has potential trade activity with the countries of the European Union, Italy, Germany, Greece, as well as with Turkey (graph.4) in case that there is an acceptable export-import difference with Italy, with Germany and Greece there is a bigger difference, but this difference is very large in relation to Turkey, therefore Albania

with these countries should look at the possibility of exporting, or replacing imported products for which there are resources.



Source: Author

Indicators of trade activity (INSTAT, 2021) show that Albania exports 57.4% to Italy and imports 45.6% from Italy. The indicators that marked an increase in exports were minerals, electricity, hydrocarbons 7.5% and construction materials 13.2%, imports construction materials 4.8%, spare parts and machinery 8.9%, plastic products 4.4% (table.4).

Table 4. Trade balance Albania 2020 milion All

Trade balance (Exp-Imp.) total	-335,751	-353,198	-331,030	-350,327	-333,307
Food,beverages, tobacco	-75,018	-76,657	-74,174	-74,991	-71,877
Minerals, fuels, electricity	-3,279	-22,875	-11,987	-26,961	-14,637
Chemical and plastic products	-75,650	-82,156	-81,557	-81,076	-83,607
Leather and leather manufactures	-14,782	-16,017	-16,168	-14,885	-10,820
Wood manufactures and articles of paper	-15,592	-15,383	-15,529	-16,226	-15,363
Textile and footwear	26,637	30,266	35,519	30,999	26,888
Construction materials and metals	-44,111	-32,822	-25,202	-33,057	-36,450
Machineries, equipments and spare parts	-119,681	-118,981	-124,333	-117,861	-111,424
Others	-14,274	-18,573	-17,597	-16,268	-16,018

Source: INSTAT

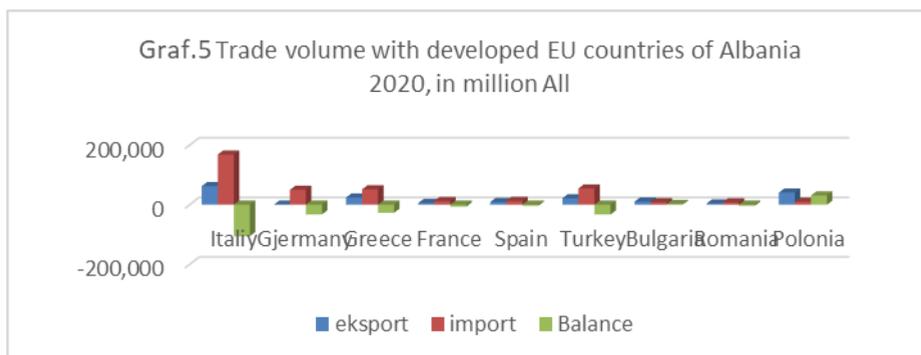
Albania continues to have a skewed trade ratio in the export / import ratio due to lack of production capacity, year 2021: 209 billion lek exports and 426 billion lek imports; in 2020: 150 billion exports and 328 billion imports. The trade deficit in 2021 was ALL 217 billion, while the trade balance for the same period 2020 was ALL 178 billion. Albania’s trade volume with the most developed countries (EU) occupies 69% of exports and 61% of imports (table. 5), therefore we should look at the orientation towards the enforcement of the Berlin agreement which leads to the European Union

Table.5 Trade volume with developed EU countries of Albania 2016-2020 (average), in million ALL

Country	Export	import	Balance
Italy	61,959	168,053	-106,094
Germany	17,034	49,664	-32,630
Greece	23,828	51,258	-27,430
France	5,223	11,946	-6,723
Spain	8,812	12,706	-3,894
Turkey	21,212	54,073	-32,861
Bulgaria	10,260	8,287	1,973
Romania	4,061	7,859	-3,798
Poland	40,645	9,919	30,726
Total	176,017	373,765	-180,731

Source: INSTAT, author processing

The country with the most negative trade volume with Albania is Italy with 61.959 million ALL exports and 168.053 million ALL imports (table.5). Poland where Albania exports 40.645 million ALL and imports 9.915 million ALL, is the only country that has a positive balance in trade relations in the European Union (table.5).



Source: author

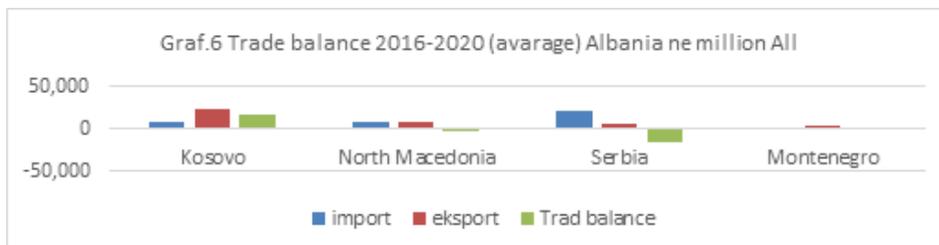
Concerning the countries of the Western Balkans region (GraphTable.6), Albania has a pronounced negative trade balance with Serbia (16,314 million all). In case Albania facilitates trade barriers, considering the economic nature of the two countries, this difference will deepen a lot (Recall, the Haradinaj government tax made Albanian exports pass Serbian ones to Kosovo). The role of important cultural overlaps appears in the relations between Albania and Kosovo. Kosovo is the only country in the region with which Albania has a positive trade balance (16,294 ml all) and Montenegro (2,529 million all).

Tabel.6 Trade balance Albania 2016-2020 (average) ne million All, with Balkan country

Country	import	export	Trade balance
Kosovo	7,842	24,136	16,294
North Macedonia	8,751	8,613	-138
Serbia	22,160	5,846	-16,314
Montenegro	2,618	5,147	2,529

Source: author

Judging by the literature and the example of the integration of African countries, we can say that the countries of the Western Balkans are countries with low economic potential, with the same economic structure as well as poor countries. The industry does not influence economic activities and non-specialized human resources. They can sell each other, products that are produced in other countries. (eg agricultural products). These countries need to integrate with developed countries, to be able to export to those countries that need their products (Example of Asian countries). On the other hand, the trade balance with Serbia is negative 16,314 million ALL and Northern Macedonia 138 million ALL is negative (table.6). Serbia has no significant cultural overlap with Albania, and it is one of the countries with the greatest economic potential in the Balkans. In particular, Serbia subsidizes agricultural production, which makes it unfair to trade, to the detriment of countries that prioritize agriculture, as well as Macedonia. Therefore, the removal of trade barriers will make the trade balance with Serbia and Macedonia more negative in the future and will interest Serbia more as a country with more potential economies.



Source: author

Capital movement, Albanian foreign direct investments in Kosovo in 2007 was 3.4 million euros and 28.6 million euros in 2016. Meanwhile, Kosovo investments in Albania ranged from 5 million euros in 2007 to 29 million euros in 2016, so it is almost at equal levels of investment admissibility.

Capital movement, North Macedonian immediate investments in Albania from 20 million in 2007 to 42 million in 2016; Albanians in North Macedonia from 30.5 in 2007 to 39.6 million euros in 2016, at equal and increasing levels. This shows that the capital movement is fulfilled only in those countries that have citizens with Albanian nationality, due to important cultural overlaps. The opposite happens with

Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina where the movement of capital is not at satisfactory levels.

Albania realizes 15.5% of the trade volume for export with the countries of the Western Balkans and 8.7% of the total volume of import (table.7).

Albanian trade volume with EU countries occupies 77%, while with Cefta countries (North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina) occupies 11%, based on these results, Albania must pursue policies to integrate into the European Union. Turkey, Germany, Serbia occupy the largest share of Albanian imports, importing food, beverages, tobacco (table.4). While we prioritize agriculture, and the largest share of imports is occupied by food (wheat, flour from Serbia), we must pursue policies for the development of the agriculture and processing industry.

Table.7 Comparisons of cultural overlap in relation to the export/import of Albania with the Western Balkan Countries 2020

	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Cultural overlaps	88.1 %	5%	30.17%	0.01%
Export ratio	3.07	1.96	0.98	0.26
Import ratio	0.3	0.5	1.01	3.81
Export/Import ratio	10.2	3.92	0.97	0.06

Source : author

Albania has a 10/1 export/import ratio with Kosovo, which has the greatest cultural overlap in favor of Albania. With Serbia, which has the lowest percentage of cultural overlap, the export/import trade ratio is 1/18 in favor of Serbia (table.7). Considering that, the Berlin Agreement is more administrative; "Open Balkans" is without a fundamental act among the adhering countries, it is thought that Albania should continue its efforts for integration into the European Union, based on the analysis of cultural overlap and trade activity.

## Conclusions

- The experience of economically poor African countries with low economic potential has not been successful in regional integration.
- Poor and small countries need to integrate with developed countries that have a different nature of economic development.
- Cultural differences and inherited conflicts are factors that encourage distrust in honest relations between countries in international trade.
- Removing trade barriers with countries importing goods that are a priority of the economy of the country of origin favors and reduces domestic production.
- Albania should fight for integration into the European Union.

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