

Political and Economic Challenges and Opportunities of Small States in the Chapter of Re-Building Infrastructure of International Relations:

A Case Study of Serbia and N. Macedonia

Sanja Jelisavac Trošić and Mitko Arnaudov

Introduction

Classical realists viewed small states as a “necessary evil” in the so-called system of international relations. The focus of classical realists on great “powers” logically placed small states in a subordinate position. The realist thesis on small states was largely based on these foundations. That is, they are largely political entities with limited capacities and opportunities, and political entities “incapable” of taking care of themselves, and finally, political entities that are in an absolutely dependent position in relation to great “powers”. Such theses have largely influenced the significantly limited research into the foreign policy activities of small states, and subsequently their positioning in international relations in general. The “dominant” thesis was that small states adjust their foreign policy decisions and positioning in accordance with the interests and needs of large “powers”. It is likely that this thesis could have been justified in the international order before World War II, more precisely before World War I. When large empires “divided” spheres of interest in the political, economic and security domains. When colonialism, primarily economically motivated, represented a legal mechanism in international relations, and when geography, at the then level of technological development, played a significant role in international relations. Realists are absolutely correct in their description of the international system, as a field in which self-help is the primary motivation of states, because, as they explain, they must ensure their own security due to the fact that they cannot count on any other agency or actor to do it for them, (Walt, 2017, as cited in Arnaudov, Jelisavac Trošić, 2024) even in actual international relations flows. But the understanding of self-help should be also applicable in the context of small states, because not always national interests of small states could be coordinated with national interests of the so-called big powers. Especially in the contemporary international relations, where

political, security and economic flows are dependable, but not always synchronized. In such circumstances, small states, although they do not intend to oppose the positions of the great “powers”, ongoing circumstances often position them that way.

From the other side, bilateral cooperation of small states is also questionable for the majority of scholars. There are numerous of scholars which are claiming that bilateral or regional cooperation between small states is forced outside, by the big powers, if it is in their own interest. Such approach, from the other perspective, is also based on the realists’ position regarding the small states. Because it also claims that small states foreign policy activities, even in relation “small entity with small one”, is also dependable of the interests and forecasts of big “powers”. „However, unlike classical realists with their classical understanding of foreign policy action, in the context of the analysis in this paper, a significantly more favourable position is offered by one of the most famous representatives of structural realism, the American political scientist James Rosenau (James N. Rosenau), who, unlike his classical realist predecessors, leaves more room in the understanding of foreign policy action, especially when it comes to small states“ (Trošić & Arnaudov 2024, p. 266). Thus, Rosenau, also known as the godfather of comparative foreign policy, presented three possibilities for understanding foreign policy action based on three assumptions: size, the rate of development, and the political system of a particular state (2003, as cited in *ibid*, p. 266). On these foundations, Rosenau broke down his possibilities of understanding foreign policy into five categories: the international system; roles (meaning bureaucratic actors); government (the relationship between government representatives); society (public attitudes and national culture); and eccentricity (individual behaviour) (*ibid*).

In this context, the authors will use the international system as a variable in understanding the foreign policy decisions of small states, while the relationship between government representatives will be a determinant in promoting or retarding the foreign policy actions of small states. Serbia and N. Macedonia were chosen as case study precisely because of their different security positioning in international relations, as well as the overlap in relation to foreign policy and foreign economic strategic goals, the implementation of which is largely determined by

their accession to the European Union. The beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in this paper will provide a time frame, where new challenges, risks, and threats in international relations can be identified, and at the same time the actions of the mentioned states can be analysed. Finally, the analysis of foreign policy and foreign economic decisions of the states taken as case study from the beginning of the Ukrainian war to the present day will provide us with an answer to the question of how much the foreign policy “room for manoeuvre” of small states in the process of restructuring international relations has improved, and the authors will simultaneously offer a projection of foreign policy action, as well as recommendations valuable for the foreign policy positioning of these subjects of international law.

Generally, this paper is focused to the thesis that even in the re-building chapter of international relations the perception of big powers to the small states is mostly the similar, based on the national interests and ongoing circumstances, defined by instrumentalisation of the foreign policy of big “powers” and applicable on the different traditional approaches of the big powers in the international relations framework. In such a context, relations between big powers and small states are still pragmatic on the big powers side and in a huge manner paternalistic from the small states perspective. While, from the other side, manoeuvring space for the small states is the consequence of the international relations circumstances, big powers current interests, as well as the institutional framework of small states.

The Case of Serbia

Foreign policy positioning of Serbia in the ongoing international relations could be analysed through three perspectives: security domain (positioning to the Ukrainian War and EU sanction policy), political domain (Belgrade-Pristine dialogue and EU integration) and economic domain (diversification of energetic supplies). The three indicators provide scientifically reliable and sustainable understanding of this small state positioning in the current international flows. And it is in a huge manner in accordance with the understanding of neorealism.

In the context of the Ukrainian War, official Belgrade has decided to take a position which is not at full range following the position of the

European Union. In fact, the position of Serbia is fully adapted to the international law and UN Charter principles but it is not in the context of relations with the Russian Federation, synchronised with the European Union, including with the Western Balkans entities which are pledging to become EU member-states. Before we start with the explanation of the foreign policy positioning of Serbia in the context of the ongoing Ukrainian War, we have to mention that “neoclassical realism, like realism, does not represent a normative theory that deals with the desirable behavior of states, but tends to explain the foreign policy and actions of states without defining correct behaviour” (Meibauer, Desmaele, et al. 2021, as cited in Gjurovski, Arnaudov, Hadžić, 2023, p. 16). In fact, neoclassical realism seeks to explain the variation in the foreign policy of one state in a certain period or between several states facing similar foreign policy constraints (Mintas, 2020, as cited in *ibid*, p. 16). Therefore, in neoclassical realism, it is important to include the so-called ideation (creative) variable in the analysis, which can help leaders understand opportunities and dangers, and as such, provide them with guidelines in the decision-making process (Meibauer, 2020, as cited in *ibid*, p. 16). The adoption of the Conclusion of the National Security Council of the Republic of Serbia on 25th February 2022 presents an official document which, in the context of Ukrainian War, in a huge manner explains the foreign policy positioning of small states in the ongoing international relations. Although so-called traditional interpretation of the small states foreign policy positioning in the chapters when international relations are at a crossroads mostly in context of taking a certain side, without any room for sovereign decision-making process, in the classical way of understanding, aforementioned decision adopted by Serbian authorities at the beginning of Ukrainian War shows certain new, or not enough researched tendencies in the understating of foreign policy of small states.

Serbia with the mentioned document declares that “provides full and principled support for respect for the principles of territorial integrity of Ukraine”, but at the same time states that “the Republic of Serbia, when considering the need to possibly adopt restrictive measures or sanctions against any country, including the Russian Federation, will be guided exclusively by the protection of its vital economic and political interests”, at the same time remembering the public that, “as a country that experienced Western sanctions in the recent past and whose compa-

triotis in the Republika Srpska are suffering sanctions today, believes that it is not in its vital political and economic interest to impose sanctions on any country at this time, not even its representatives or economic entities” (Gjurovski et al. 2024, p. 19).

Such a decision, analysed from the perspective of neorealism, or structural realism, testifies to three contemporary tendencies that provide significant opportunities for small states in their foreign policy activities, and thus their foreign policy positioning. From the perspective of the given international circumstances, the decision-making of the National Security Council of the Republic of Serbia established that such conclusions will not negatively affect Serbia’s foreign policy positioning in terms of security, because later empirical examples, such as the signing of an agreement between Serbia and France, one of the most prominent countries within NATO and Europe, on the most modern air combat systems and aviation, testify that official Belgrade is still viewed as a responsible and reliable partner in the Western Balkans, even though it opposed the decision to follow the EU’s foreign and security policy in the context of imposing sanctions on Russia. In fact, the aforementioned agreement between France and Serbia on the procurement of fighter jets, as well as the previously adopted conclusions within the framework of the National Security Council, demonstrate, through an empirical example, three tendencies that directly relate to small states: current international relations allow for a certain degree of creativity in foreign policy action (condemn Moscow for aggression, but refuse to join the policy of sanctions (*Conclusion of the National Security Council* 2022, n.d.)), current international relations depend to a large extent on the personal relationships of political leaders and statesmen (the relationship between the current presidents of Serbia and France (Stojanović 2024), but also Serbia and the Russian Federation (Taylor-Braçe 2024), current international relations in the era of absolute interdependence between large and small, primarily on the economic and security level, open up space for small states to create sovereign foreign policy decisions (the interests of the so-called political West in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, but also economic interests in Serbia allow Belgrade to implement foreign policy tactics).

In the context of European integration, Serbia also did not face negative consequences due to the decision not to impose sanctions on

the Russian Federation. Although it persisted in its decision almost five years after the beginning of the conflict, despite significant international pressure, (Lazarević, 2023) this did not negatively affect its European integration path, in the context of foreign policy positioning. Even the postponement of the EU-Serbia intergovernmental conference on the opening of Cluster 3 in the negotiation process was not a consequence of the failure to impose sanctions on Moscow, but primarily issues from the domain of Serbia's domestic policy with which a certain number of EU member states disagree (Čongradin, 2024). In fact, no clear and strong political consequences have been observed due to the decision not to impose sanctions on Russia, neither in the context of European integration, nor in the context of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

The dialogue is at the same level as in the period before the start of the Ukrainian war due to two evident reasons: diametrically opposed positions between the negotiating parties, Pristina insists on status solutions, while Belgrade is focused primarily on the status of the Serbian people living in Kosovo and Metohija; (*BBC News na srpskom*, 2023) on the other hand, international circumstances de facto marginalize this regional dispute, placing it at the level of a potential security challenge in the Western Balkans, but at a time without evident capacities to worsen regional security developments. Although a parallel is drawn between the war in Ukraine and the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, the security dynamics in Kosovo and Metohija are not threatened at the level of armed danger, except in the media and public discourse that Moscow is trying to "justify" its military aggression in Ukraine using the example of NATO's aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Anđelković, 2022).

In the given international environment, it seems that Serbia's foreign policy positioning, both in the economic, political, and security context, is largely favourable. At the same time, it is largely based on national interests, triple in the context of the development of the Serbian economy, and in the context of Serbia's security sustainability, and in the context of Serbia's political predictability.

In an attempt to analyse, explain and understand the foreign policy actions of small states, the authors have shown in this paper, using the example of Serbia, that independent foreign policy actions based on state interests are possible, primarily in a tactical sense, bearing in mind

that the period of the empirical example used is very narrow. Namely, the given international circumstances enable sovereign and tactical foreign policy actions of small states, but this does not confirm the thesis that the aforementioned actions are realistic in the event of confrontation with the interests of great powers and that such actions will be a practice in the emerging stages of international relations. The thesis offered by the authors is exclusively based on the Serbian experience in the context of the period from the beginning of the Ukrainian war to the present day.

The Case of N. Macedonia

In the context of N. Macedonia, as a model of a small state with limited political, economic, security and diplomatic capacities, it is important to emphasize the fact that its foreign policy positioning is largely determined by its strategic foreign policy goal, as well as by strategic foreign policy goals that are most often the subject of internal political and social disagreements due to the ever-present debate about their alignment with national interests.

N. Macedonia faces challenges in the implementation of foreign policy goals that to a certain extent encroach on the national identity of this country, more specifically on the national attributes of the largest national community. These are the overcome disputes with the Republic of Greece over the constitutional name of the state, over the existence of the Macedonian language, over the Macedonian identity to which both Athens and Skopje claim to have a right. On the other hand, there are current disputes with official Sofia, which refuses to accept the existence of the Macedonian nation, Macedonian identity, language, history and uniqueness. A relatively sustainable solution was reached for the first dispute with Greece, by changing the constitutional name from “the Republic of Macedonia” to The Republic of North Macedonia”, but while maintaining and respecting the right to exist of the Macedonian nation, Macedonian language and history, separate from the identity, language and history of the ancient Macedonians, and thus this country became a member of NATO, achieving one of the two main foreign policy goals (*Final Agreement* 2019). We are emphasizing the point “a relatively sustainable solution,” because it is an agreement that has not met with the support of Macedonian society (taking into account the results of advi-

sory referendum), and at the same time, according to certain Macedonian constitutionalists, an unconstitutional agreement. From the referendum perspective, as explained by Saveski (2020), the Decision for announcing a referendum adopted by the Assembly outrages the basic constitutional principles. For pronouncing the consultative referendum, the majority of the Assembly in that period refers to Article 73 of the Constitution, but in the quoted constitutional provision only is regulated the obligatory, and non-obligatory referendum, but not the advisory referendum. From the other, geopolitical perspective, Vankovska (2020) claims that the Prespa Agreement was an imposed solution by the great Western powers with one very unique term, represented in domestic political and scholarly circles, called geopolitics in denial (Vankovska 2020). In contrast, Mileski argues (2024), proponents of the treaty highlight its importance because of the security threats if a small country does not resolve the dispute. Based on the two above mentioned controversies related to the adoption of Prespa Agreement, also we could refer to the remark of Vankovska when it comes to clear, unconditional and strong support of the “deal” between Skopje and Athens which also strengthens the issue of controversy: “Although a number of high-ranking international officials and dignitaries attended the ceremony, unlike the Ohrid Agreement, neither the EU nor the US formally appeared as a co-signatory or a guarantor of the Agreement” (Vankovska 2020).

From the other side, but at the same “isolated Macedonian island”, the dispute with Bulgaria, if we isolate the factor of marginalization of the European Union’s enlargement policy in the given international circumstances, continues to be a significant determinant in the process of realizing the first strategic foreign policy goal - EU membership. N. Macedonia is *de facto*, but also *de jure* - by insisting on accepting Bulgarian positions, conditioned in the process of foreign policy positioning, i.e. membership in the European Union, (Kohnen 2024) which largely determines the degree of its independent foreign policy positioning.

Additionally, its dependence in foreign policy positioning is conditioned by an internal factor, i.e. different discourses on national interests from which foreign policy goals are derived by definition. While one part of the political establishment advocates for the strict implementation of the conditions arising on the path of European integration, with special emphasis on Sofia’s demands as an EU member state, arguing that

this ensures the preservation of national interests, i.e. the sustainability and development of the country, with all its national, ethnic, linguistic and religious attributes, the other part believes that Bulgaria's conditions on the European path directly interfere with internal issues and threaten the country's national interests. This leads to the thesis that the European integration of N. Macedonia, in the given format with the existing pre-requisites, is opposed to the national interests of the state.

From a realist perspective, analysing Macedonia's NATO membership from the standpoint of accepting the agreement with Greece on changing its constitutional name, we argue that this country has been pursuing a dependent foreign policy, largely conditional. Representatives of classical realism would say that it is quite logical for a small and powerless state to adapt to the interests of large ones - in this case, the interests of Greece's significantly larger neighbour with all its comparative advantages in the format of a member state of both NATO and the EU. From the perspective of structural realism, as well as the postulates of international law and the UN Charter, it could be argued that N. Macedonia apparently pursues an independent foreign policy. In the context of NATO membership, the country signed an internationally binding agreement that resulted in constitutional changes. It is important to stress that Skopje officially sought NATO membership of its own accord, without any external coercion. In December 1993, the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia adopted the Resolution on NATO Accession, and five years later, on October 17, 1998, the Strategy for the country's integration into NATO was published in the Official Gazette (Arnaudov 2021). It is precisely these strategic documents that testify to the country's commitment to Atlantic integration, which logically implies certain conditions, through defined and undefined principles. It is therefore very controversial to claim that N. Macedonia, in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration, which is still current on the EU side, has pursued a conditional foreign policy, because in theory there is always room to abandon any foreign policy goal and positioning if internal national and political consensus is achieved on the conflict between the aforementioned goals and national interests. Political instability and institutional unpredictability within N. Macedonia further contribute to the clumsiness of this country in its sovereign foreign policy positioning. On the domestic level, for almost 35 years, from the moment of gaining independence

to the present day, no political party and socially agreed platforms have been set that would have a harmonized understanding of national and state interests, but also the determination and setting of foreign policy goals. Both national interests and foreign policy goals themselves are the subject of daily political debates, the collection of party points and social divisions.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, N. Macedonia, as a candidate country for membership in the European Union, has strictly aligned its foreign policy positioning with the foreign policy positioning of the European Union (Арнаудов, 2022, p. 299). In addition, it went a step further and, despite its significantly limited economic, financial, and military capacities, agreed to send military aid to Ukraine (ibid).

On the other hand, from the perspective of economic and energy challenges, it is important to recall the data from 2022:

- There are a total of about 70 companies with Russian capital operating in N. Macedonia;
- These are business entities that employ around 1,250 citizens;
- They generate an income of 210 million euros, according to data from 2020;
- One of the ten companies “TeTo” is engaged in the production of electricity, which, according to Macedonian media, is an important factor in the Macedonian energy market (it has capacities for the production of 220 megawatts of electricity annually, as well as 160 megawatts for the production of thermal energy, which, as it is emphasized, is the total supply of central heating in the capital city of Skopje (Вечер 2022; Арнаудов 2022, 301).

Based on the Macedonian experience in Euro-Atlantic integration, but also the country’s positioning in the context of the Ukrainian war, we can establish that Skopje has officially positioned its foreign policy actions and positioning at the level of a cause-and-effect relationship, which does not lead to the ultimate conclusion that this is a dependent foreign policy action, but rather a conditioned foreign policy response/re-action of the Macedonian diplomatic service, without any evident attempts to create a national, social and state platform, strategy and capacity to relativize the given conditions through diplomatic and institutional mechanisms. It is therefore worth emphasizing, using the

example of N. Macedonia, that the foreign policy positioning of small states, in the past thirty years, but also the emerging circumstances of international relations, has been largely conditioned and determined by the internal capacities of the country, which timely recognize the emerging dynamics within the framework of the international order, but at the same time create institutional and personal mechanisms for adapting to the given circumstances while respecting national interests and foreign policy goals. Adaptation as such should not be interpreted as the acceptance of external guidelines, conditions and policies, but rather an internal restructuring aimed at foreign policy efficiency and effectiveness.

The Case of the Open Balkans Initiative

The authors decided to take into account the regional initiative Open Balkans because it is an authentic project that emerged within the so-called Western Balkans and based on whose empirical example the international positioning of small states can be explained through the prism of structural realism. This is an initiative that is primarily based on the common interest of local leaders, and one of the theses of structural realists about the relationship between political leaders is largely explained through the Open Balkans, taking into account the relationship between the leaders of the participating countries in this initiative in the process of launching, developing and sustaining the initiative itself. Analysing the meetings between the leaders of the participating states of the Open Balkans through various frameworks, from summits, to online meetings during the Covid pandemic, to a joint and coordinated appearance in the context of European integration (*NI Beograd*, 2022), we come to the conclusion that the component of inter-leadership relations has played a key role within the framework of this regional project. It is precisely the joint appearance in Brussels at the EU-Western Balkans summit that largely empirically proves the room for manoeuvre that small states enjoy in foreign policy.

On the other hand, the Open Balkans represents a doubly good empirical example:

- “on the way” to proving the foreign policy space that small states enjoy in the current international environment
- “on the way” to proving that the great powers do not explicitly

oppose the foreign policy ambitions of small states, unless they contradict their interests.

When it comes to foreign policy, the Open Balkans initiative is a clear sign that small states enjoy a certain degree of independence in foreign policy decision-making. An example of this is N. Macedonia and Albania, which are NATO member states, which have numerous fundamental disagreements with Serbia (primarily regarding the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue), but which have independently decided to take a foreign policy step in the direction of economic integration with Serbia, which in the current circumstances may be criticized in certain “Western” metropolises due to the good relations between Serbia and the Russian Federation, but also due to Belgrade’s refusal to accept the status dialogue with Pristina. Although the Open Balkans is primarily an initiative with an economic focus, in this context it is difficult to confirm the thesis that Skopje and Tirana, as examples of small states, are pursuing a dependent and exclusive foreign policy.

On the other hand, what is even more important for this study in proving the foreign policy effectiveness of small states, is an example of the support that the great powers provided to the launch of the Open Balkans. But, before we show this support, it is important to remember that the goal of the Open Balkans is to create a single market in the Western Balkans that will be based on the principles of the European Union market and the free movement of people, goods, capital and services (Trošić and Arnaudov 2023, p. 69). In this context, it is worth recalling that the main goal of the Berlin Process (an initiative launched in 2014 by Berlin in cooperation with the EU) is a common regional market, (*ibid.*) and that the single market is certainly one of the basic postulates in the European integration processes. That is precisely why the Open Balkans enjoyed the “tacit” support of official Brussels. On one occasion, even a spokeswoman for the European Commission welcomed the fact that the participating states were committed to greater regional cooperation, (Arnaudov, 2023, p. 70) but at the same time noted that the greatest benefits would be achieved by the inclusiveness of all six political entities of the Western Balkans.

As for Washington, as Arnaudov (*ibid.*, p. 74) explains, the United States has supported the Open Balkans initiative, always emphasising its economic dimension, which means that the initiative itself should not

threaten American political and security interests in the region. In this context, American officials have also publicly supported this initiative, always insisting on its inclusiveness, and economic character, but also its compatibility with EU membership, as a foreign policy goal of the Western Balkans and all actors in the region.

Additionally, Moscow has also instrumentalised the Open Balkans in line with its national interests and foreign policy goals. Thus, at the height of the Ukrainian war, the ban on Russian aircraft flying through the airspace of a NATO member state, which prevented the Russian foreign minister from visiting Serbia, was used by Moscow to accuse “Brussels of not wanting to provide space for Russia to express its views on numerous regional issues in Belgrade, but also to provide support to Belgrade and its *Open Balkans* initiative, which should improve relations in the region”, stating that “NATO and Brussels want the Balkans for themselves, or rather, they want a closed Balkans” (ibid., p. 80).

The empirical example of the Open Balkans can largely be used to understand the relationship between great powers and small states as well as how this relationship can be used to understand the foreign policy actions of small subjects of international law. Namely, regional integration within the framework of the Open Balkans testifies to the fact that in the given international circumstances, the foreign policy actions of small states are not isolated and impossible, but as such cannot be defined as a rule for two reasons: because it is an initiative that does not oppose the interests of great powers; because it is an initiative that has additionally contributed to the increase in regional disagreements, which is also an evident interest of certain great powers.

Conclusion

Structural realism as a theoretical approach in this paper represents a good basis on which the authors analysed the foreign policy actions of the case study states and initiatives (in the context of regional cooperation). On the other hand, classical realism is also applicable to the case of N. Macedonia, especially if the foreign policy actions of this country in the context of the Ukrainian war are analysed in isolated conditions. For a comprehensive demonstration of the stated thesis, structur-

al realism serves as the ideal theoretical foundation. Analysed from the perspective of empirical examples, the authors managed to prove that foreign policy actions, and thus the positioning of small states in current international relations, are to a significant extent achievable, without predicting how much such sovereign action is guaranteed and predictable in the long term. The period from the beginning of the Ukrainian war to the present day represents, in a qualitative sense, a significant indicator on the basis of which the capacities of foreign policy actions of small states can be established. Most states have taken a position in relation to conflicting and opposing parties. Therefore, it was possible to quantitatively measure the “space” that small states “enjoy” in their foreign policy positioning. On the other hand, in a quantitative, time frame, this is a very small space on the basis of which a solid thesis can be built that the foreign policy sovereignty of small states is the rule, rather than the exception, in given historical chapters of international relations. Therefore, the authors, using the example of N. Macedonia and Serbia, conclude that the foreign policy sovereign action of small states in contemporary and current international relations is realistic and feasible if the positioning in question is not fundamentally opposed to the interests of the great powers and if small states, on the internal level, have a consensus according to the model of the lowest common political, social and institutional denominator, on the key foreign policy priorities of the country based on national interests.

There are several factors that can determine the “degree” of foreign policy independence of small states: medium-term adjustment of foreign policy strategies depending on current international circumstances (these are subjects of international law that do not have the capacity and resources to maintain long-term foreign policy strategies, therefore a medium-term adaptive model, aligned with unchanging national interests, is a quality basis on the path to creating “foreign policy independence” a stable and sustainable internal institutional framework, protected and resistant to phenomena such as politicization, corruption and clientelism (this is the basis for independent action, protected from potential external threats, challenges and risks which, in current international relations, are one of the key instruments for “interference” in sovereign decision-making processes) creating realistic “pictures” of the situational interests of the great powers in a given geographical area, general (comprehensive)

and individual (a dual understanding of the comprehensive and individual interests (security, political and economic) of the great powers in the Western Balkans can represent the basis for understanding Serbia's foreign policy actions in the context of the Ukrainian War, but also the actions of N. Macedonia and Albania in the context of the Open Balkans) regional cooperation and coordination based on the "lowest common denominator" (because historical experience shows that regional disagreements largely contribute to "interference" in the foreign policy decisions of small states, and thus to the impossibility of their foreign policy independence and effectiveness).

Acknowledgement: The paper presents findings of a study developed as a part of the research project "Serbia and challenges in international relations in 2024", financed by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, and conducted by Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade during year 2024.

References

Anđelković, N. (2022, October 19). Politika: Gde se prepliću Kosovo i regioni na istoku Ukrajine ili Srbija i Rusija. *BBC News na srpskom*. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-63297019>.

Arnaudov, M. (2023). *Otvoreni Balkan: ekonomska integracija između političkih i bezbednosnih razmimoilaženja*. Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Beograd. https://www.diplomacy.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Otvoreni_Balkan.pdf.

Arnaudov, M. K. (2021). *Foreign Affairs Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia from 2006 to 2015* [PhD dissertation, University of Belgrade]. <https://nardus.mpn.gov.rs/bitstream/handle/123456789/18739/disertacija.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>.

Арнаулов, М. (2022). Усклађивање државне спољне политике са спољном политиком Европске уније – пример Северне Македоније. *Evropsko Zakonodavstvo*, 21(77–78), 291–304. https://doi.org/10.18485/iipe_ez.2022.21.77_78.18.

BBC News na srpskom. (2023, September 14). Srbija i Kosovo: Vučić i Kurti u Briselu bez dogovora, Priština insistira na priznanju nezavisnosti. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-66806257>.

Conclusion of the National Security Council of Serbia from 25 February 2022. (n.d.). Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/news/conclusion-national-security-council-serbia-25-february-2022>.

Čongradin, S. (2024, December 18). Zbog čega je Srbija opet propustila da otvori Klaster 3 u procesu evropskih integracija? *Dnevni list Danas*. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/klaster-3-eu-intergracije/>.

Final Agreement between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. (2019). Available at treaties.un.org (No. 55707). Retrieved December 28, 2024, from <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/No%20Volume/55707/Part/I-55707-0800000280544ac1.pdf>.

Gjurovski, M., Arnaudov, M., & Hadžić, N. (2024). Towards a better future: peace, justice, and strong institutions. In *Conclusion of the Council for National Security of the Republic of Serbia, Adopted on the Occasion of the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine that Began on 24 February 2022*. University “St. Kliment Ohridski” - Bitola, Faculty of Law - Kicevo. https://pfk.uklo.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2024/01/con_proc_tbf_peace_justice_and_strong_institutions-1.pdf.

Kohnen, T. (2024, December 18). *Costa: We must work for North Macedonia to meet the precondition for the formal opening of the negotiations*. European Newsroom. <https://europeannewsroom.com/cost-we-must-work-for-north-macedonia-to-meet-the-precondition-for-the-formal-opening-of-the-negotiations-2/>.

Lazarević, A. (2023, August 18). *Vučić: Sledeće nedelje najjači pritisci da uvedemo sankcije Rusiji, ne isključujem to, ali mine iz gleda verovatno*. NOVA Portal. <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/uzivo-vucic-sledece-nedelje-najjaci-pritisci-za-sankcije-rusiji/>.

Mileski, T. (2024). The Prespa Agreement: Macedonian diplomatic gambit or geopolitical game changer. *Global security and international relations after the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis*, 480-505. https://doi.org/10.18485/iipe_gsirescu.2024.ch21