

COOPERATION PERSPECTIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS SINCE THE UKRAINIAN WAR: CHALLENGES, OBSTACLES, AND POSSIBILITIES

Sanja JELISAVAC TROŠIĆ¹, Mitko ARNAUDOV²

ABSTRACT

Contemporary international relations, characterised by different challenges, risks, and threats, raise questions about the so-called traditional patterns of cooperation between states. On the other hand, the “traditional” theoretical framework related to the collaboration between states excludes concrete guidelines about the cooperation possibilities of small states. Based on the aforementioned, the double goal of this paper is the presentation of contemporary principles and conditions in the context of cooperation between states, while, on the other hand, the paper’s crucial scientific step is to examine the challenges, possibilities, and obstacles of international or regional cooperation of small and micro states, using the Western Balkans as a case study. The key research question is whether small states can lead cross-border regional cooperation and what the key determinants in that process are. From the theoretical perspective, the paper is based on neoclassical realism, a perspective which, in the contemporary context of international relations, explains the manoeuvring space of small states in their foreign policy actions.

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¹ Principal Research Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: sanja@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0949-7052>.

² Research Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: mitko@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3274-347X>.

Introduction

Cooperation in contemporary international relations presents multiple challenges due to current issues, risks, and threats, as well as the revival of ideological and populist beliefs and movements that further complicate cooperation at the bilateral, regional and international levels. When analysed from the perspective of contemporary security phenomena, one gets the impression that cooperation is imperative towards the goal of creating a sustainable future. However, on the other hand, when analysed from the perspective of the “revival” of right-wing extremist ideology and the popularisation of the concept of sovereignty and the delegitimisation of international and regional institutional infrastructures, it gives the impression that cooperation models have become, in themselves, a threatening factor in preserving statehood, sovereignty, political independence, and, at the same time, national interests. In fact, international relations are faced with a kind of collision of two concepts: one based on the principles of economic development, the necessity of developing international trade, and the cross-border nature of contemporary challenges, risks, and threats – thereby placing cooperation on a pedestal of necessity. The other is based on the principles of selfishness, sovereignty, fear of the other, and isolationism, which cannot be interpreted as the absolute closure of a society and state in relation to the outside world but significantly limits the capacities for efficiency and effectiveness of international, regional, and bilateral cooperation. In fact, contemporary international relations face the traditional concepts of realism and liberalism. Realists perceive the international system as a kind of necessary evil, lacking an institutional structure but led by anarchy. On the other hand, liberals find within the so-called international institutional framework the basis for development and sustainability.

In principle, it is also the major dimension of divisions between Western Balkans actors, but at the micro level. Cooperation, synchronisation, and integration are well-known approaches to regional development, both as a whole and at the national level for each state individually, including the management of the contemporary and ongoing security flows. On the other hand, taking into account long-standing interstate and intersocial mistrust as a consequence of the so-called “nineties”, the question of the erosion of sovereignty and interference in internal and ethno-national issues is always relevant when it comes to the potential for regional opportunities. In fact, the key dilemma in the so-called Western Balkans is not the “imported” obstacles to regional cooperation but the lack of internal political willingness for the aforementioned foreign policy activities.

In the context of cooperation, in addition to the existing “barriers” in contemporary international, regional and bilateral relations, small and micro states are faced with additional, “inherited” perceptions about their capacities for any cross-border cooperation. The classical realist view that the foreign policy activities of small states are determined by the positioning of great powers represents an additional burden for small and micro states in positioning themselves within international relations, that is, in conducting their foreign policy activities, including cooperation at the bilateral, international, and multilateral levels. Such a thesis, formulated by the authors and derived from the foundations of classical realism and liberalism, is applicable to the case study of the Western Balkans. As Šekarić explains, “Today, the Western Balkans is burdened by many security issues, both regionally and bilaterally... (including) the presence of (often opposing) international actors” (Šekarić 2021, 134).

However, contemporary trends in international, European, and regional relations represent an empirical example of a newly emerging experience in which small and micro states, as well as political entities, “enjoy” a kind of privilege in conducting an active and, to a significant extent, independent foreign policy. It is precisely along this track that neoclassical realists provide a more flexible understanding compared to their “fathers” (classical realists), and, in addition to holding the view that the foreign policy actions of small and micro states are predictable and realistic, they provide a precise explanation through dependent, independent, and conditional variables of the foreign policy actions of this category of states and political entities. As Živojinović explains, referring to Taliaferro (Živojinović 2008, 373), “in neoclassical realism there is no perfect ‘conveyor belt’ connecting the relative distribution of power and foreign policy behaviour of states. Politicians, military commanders and bureaucrats make foreign policy decisions based on their perceptions and calculations of the power and intentions of other countries. This means that, in the short and medium term, different states’ foreign policies cannot be ‘objectively’ efficient or predictable based on an objective assessment of power between states... Variables at the level of units mediate between incentives coming from the international system and the practical political responses of states” (Živojinović 2008, 373).

In fact, institutionally strong and well-established small and micro states have used contemporary international relations, with all their challenges, risks, and threats, not as a danger, but as an opportunity to “try” themselves in independent foreign policy action. In the midst of danger, they have sought to play an active role in international relations on an equal footing with the “great powers”. Such a thesis would be contrary to Michael Handel’s, titled “Weak States in International System”, which concluded that the international

factor is the most influential factor on the internal behaviour of small states (Handel 1990, 40-41). As an empirical example, this paper uses the experience of the political entities in the Western Balkans to evaluate the capacities, opportunities, and obstacles to the foreign policy actions of small and micro states in contemporary international relations, based on their challenges, risks, and threats in the context of regional cooperation in the politically defined area of the Western Balkans. The period after the outbreak of the Ukrainian War represents a particularly significant timeframe in this research, given the intertwining interests of the great powers and political entities that are the subject of this research, but also serves as a determinant of the efficiency and effectiveness of cooperation in the case-study political area, taking into account existing dependent variables such as open regional issues and disputes.

In the methodological context, as Vera Arežina (Arežina 2021, 274) explains, the topic was chosen based on its topicality and because it contributes to the verification of existing scientific knowledge, i.e., how researchers of the international system perceive small and micro states as an integral part of the system. The goal is also to acquire new scientific knowledge, particularly in the context of determining the room for manoeuvre of small and micro states in their foreign policy actions. More specifically, when it comes to methods, the authors will use basic analytical methods, such as content analysis of literature and documents and abstraction, to highlight the important characteristics that determine the foreign policy actions of small and micro states. Among analytical methods, specialisation will also be used to pay special attention to the correlation between the Ukrainian War and the foreign policy behaviour of small and micro states. When it comes to synthetic basic methods, concretisation will be used to analyse the empirical example of the Western Balkans. On the other hand, induction will be applied in the conclusion section to establish a broader contemporary understanding of the foreign policy actions of small and micro states in contemporary international relations based on the empirical example.

Theoretical Approach

There is no consensus within the discipline of international relations on the issue of the foreign policy actions of small states. For the most part, the field of international relations largely marginalises small states as legitimate subjects of international law, particularly in academic discussions and research dedicated to small states. According to Jean A.K., “the smallness of the state is based on the perception of its leaders of the role of the state in

the international hierarchy” (Hey 2003). On the other hand, Panke and Thorhallsson offer explanations from different angles for understanding the foreign policy capacities of small states. Thus, according to Panke and Thorhallsson, “the shelter-seeking approach points out that small states lack the capacity to become international-level leaders and are in need of shelter provided by larger states and regional and international organisations (IOs) to cope with domestic weaknesses associated with their size. On the other hand, there is a neutrality option as a determinant of foreign policy strategies for small states, which involves avoiding taking sides whenever a dispute or conflict arises. For small states, neutrality is motivated by national security concerns, but realists (and especially neorealists) see neutrality as an outcome of the balance of power (Simpson 2018).

In contemporary international relations, and contrary to Simpson’s position, two questions arise: To what extent can small and micro states be observed as balancers between the so-called great powers, and, on the other hand, what resources and capacities do these types of states have for a successful strategy of avoidance? On the empirical basis of the Western Balkans’ political entities from the perspective of the Ukrainian War, how can political actors in the region balance between the opposing sides, bearing in mind their dependence on both in terms of energy, finance, economy, and security?

“Another strand of small-state scholarship points out that small states, as actors on the international level, are prone to hedging by which they pursue economic, social, or military aims through cooperation with multiple regional powerhouses or hegemonies at the same time” (Panke and Thorhallsson 2024). The capacity-based approach stresses that small states often pursue similar substantive goals in bilateral or multilateral negotiations as larger states but face capacity-related challenges in doing so. Finally, small states’ actorness on the international level often involves status-seeking behaviour, by which small states try to obtain or assert recognition and legitimacy which larger states can take for granted (Panke and Thorhallsson 2024). Perhaps the closest explanation of the foreign policy of small states is provided by Goetschel, according to whom “the security dilemma of a small state consists of two elements – influence and autonomy. Small states seek both to increase their influence and to maintain their autonomy. Given existing conditions, small states choose policies which best reflect their needs—either a more passive, neutral role, or active engagement” (Goetschel 1998).

In fact, it is not only a question of a lack of consensus on the foreign policy actions of small states, nor of the marginalisation of small states in the discipline of international relations, but also of the absence of relevant empirical examples upon which it is possible to establish a clear and precise

understanding and classification of the foreign policy behaviour of small states. Numerous authors focus largely on the foreign policy of small states through approaches such as “shelter-seeking”, “neutrality”, and “hedging”, while neglecting the dimension related to the regional foreign policy actions of small states, which can be to a significant extent independent and, at the same time, in a broader understanding of regionalism, can indirectly influence the system of international relations. On the other hand, realism and (neo)realism are international relations theories that also question the “independence” of the foreign policy actions of small states. Smaller states have smaller militaries, and, as such, small powers have greater difficulties in expanding their influence vis-à-vis other great powers; neither can they pursue their substantive interests on the international stage as easily as larger states with greater forces (Panke and Thorhallsson 2024). If we look closely at the shelter-seeking behaviour or approach of small states, Thorhallsson explains that it is not only about foreign policy “sheltering”. He defines three forms of shelter: political, economic, and societal (Panke and Thorhallsson 2024). Such a position leads us to the view that small states, in addition to foreign policy independence, largely lack room for manoeuvre in making political and economic decisions, as well as decisions that affect their societies. As Marko Dašić explains, such a strategic approach “would provide them with a kind of refuge when it comes to threats arising from the level of the international system or posed by one of the neighbouring powers. In the meantime, the small state could use its already limited resources for the internal well-being of the nation, instead of spending them on achieving military security” (Dašić 2020, 63). In the context of contemporary international relations, a more comprehensive understanding of this strategy is provided by Živilė Marija Vaicekauskaitė, who, beside the security dimension, notes that small states need political, economic, and societal shelter: “Because of their size, small states tend to be more vulnerable to external factors such as reliance on foreign markets, trade, or political changes abroad” (Vaicekauskaitė 2017, 13).

On the other hand, as Dašić argues, the popular opinion we often encounter suggests that non-alignment is the most desirable status for small states (Dašić 2020, 75). According to Panke and Thorhallsson, neutrality is a strategy common to small states that prevents them from being drawn into conflicts that they otherwise cannot navigate successfully. At the same time, the mentioned authors use the period of the Cold War as a good example of the neutrality concept for small states (Panke and Thorhallsson 2024). However, the fundamental problem of neutrality in contemporary international relations is how to preserve it. In other words, the question that arises in the context of the case study is whether the Ukrainian War leaves

“room for neutrality”. More specifically, using the example of the Western Balkans, can the states in the region “position themselves” neutrally, taking into account their long-standing and continuous foreign policy struggle to preserve territorial integrity and their dependence on certain great and regional powers, such as in economic, financial, security, and energy matters? In this context, we can perhaps refer to Dašić’s position that the destiny of small states is to negotiate continuously: “They do so bilaterally, multilaterally, plurilaterally, and in any format that could facilitate the achievement of foreign policy goals. A small state requires the constant development of various negotiation strategies, whether through a permanent form of multilateral organisation or acting like an international organisation whose working conditions are fixed, geographically limited, and politically focused only on certain parts” (Dašić 2020, 63).

From a third perspective, there is the hedging approach of small states, where, in the contexts of power politics, small states can opt not only for neutrality or sheltering but also for the use of a hedging strategy in an attempt to maximise benefits and limit costs when dealing with larger states (Panke and Thorhallsson 2024). We can connect this strategic approach to Dašić’s observation about “the trend of a maximalist approach by small states that exploit the confusion caused by the uncertainty generated by the international system” (Dašić 2020, 84). This strategy aims to avoid a particular policy – balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality – and seeks to reduce the potential risk in relation to regional powers without confronting either of them (Sherwood 2016). Vaicekauskaitė provides Southeast Asian countries as a practical example of the implementation of such a strategy due to the direct influence of the United States and China, who employ strategic hedging as the most frequent alternative security strategy option (Vaicekauskaitė 2017, 12).

As Lee notes in his article “Hedging Strategies of the Middle Powers in East Asian Security: the Cases of South Korea and Malaysia”, this strategy allows them to maintain ties with both sides while not being tied to one particular power (Lee 2017). In the context of the Western Balkans vis-à-vis the Ukrainian War, the conclusions of the National Security Council of the Republic of Serbia, adopted after the beginning of the mentioned war, represent a textbook example of the so-called “hedging” strategy. Namely, the official Belgrade position was based on international law and the UN Charter and, at the same time, aligned with the so-called political West, arguing that Serbia consistently respects the inviolability of the territorial integrity of sovereign states. On the other hand, explaining that the Republic of Serbia believes that it is not in its vital political and economic interest to impose sanctions on any country at this time, including its representatives

or economic entities (Gjurovski, Arnaudov and Hadžić 2023, 18-20), Belgrade has indirectly aligned with a position closer to Moscow, thus temporarily preserving its economic benefits, as well as de facto balancing between opposing sides. Taking into account the approaches provided by scholars of international relations and the role of small states within the international system, it is very difficult to conclude that small states have an absolutely independent right to lead foreign policy activities. In fact, small states are forced to adapt their foreign policy to maximise their foreign policy goals but, at the same time, informally hedge in line with the interests and foreign policy goals of so-called great powers. The art of foreign policy positioning of small states, from this perspective, mostly lies in Dašić's thesis about constant negotiation skills and the necessity. Such a perception of foreign policy activism of small states is also applicable at the regional level and additionally strengthened by the so-called shared or similar political, economic, and security flows which neighbouring states face in the region in question. Coordination between alignment with the policies of the so-called great powers and regional necessities for cooperation aimed at development and sustainability could be the optimum regional policy approach for small states, which also creates "space" for an independent decision-making process.

Political and Security Framework of the Western Balkans

Building on the previous discussion of small-state strategies, if we take the Western Balkans as a case study, we may not have chosen the most successful example for explaining alternative concepts of foreign policy action by small states in contemporary international relations. However, we have chosen a relevant contemporary example that, through clearly identified cases, proves the thesis that the concept of regionalisation in terms of cooperation, coordination, and integration is a significant determinant for promoting the foreign policy activism of small states, including matters of security. Although we are using a case study of the politically framed region characterised by deep-rooted mistrust at all levels across the political, security and social domains, it is valuable for this research because, despite the existence of numerous obstacles, it provides a solid basis for developing and clarifying the formulated thesis.

Following the previous theoretical considerations, from a foreign policy perspective, the political entities of the Western Balkans are focused on the European Union (EU) integration process, thus promoting EU membership as a strategic foreign policy goal. On the other hand, from the security perspective, all five countries in the region are committed to the stabilisation of the regional security dynamics and, in that context, share common security

challenges, risks and threats, including cross-border crime, migration issues, hybrid threats, terrorism and radicalisation, as well as cross-border global problems such as health crises and energy crises. Based on these two variables – EU membership as a strategic foreign policy goal of the region and the common security challenges, risks and threats – we are already moving in the direction of understanding the foreign policy activities of small states at the regional level and their indirect contribution to international relations, grounded in the activities and results reached on the regional, micro level.

In the context of EU integration and the positioning of EU membership as a strategic goal for all five Western Balkans countries, the capacities for conducting foreign policy activities of the mentioned actors are, to a large extent, significant for two reasons: first, considering the so-called Copenhagen criteria, and second, taking into account the regional initiatives, with particular emphasis on the Berlin Process and the Open Balkan as the most prominent and relevant initiatives related to the EU path. Concretely, based on the Copenhagen criteria (Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria) 1993), Western Balkans actors enjoy considerable scope for regional foreign policy activities in the context of cooperation, synchronisation and integration, bearing in mind the fact that all these criteria represent important challenges (Jelisavac Trošić and Arnaudov 2024b, 431-432). To be specific, we identify the Copenhagen criteria as an important challenge that could shape regional cooperation from the perspective of Gjurovski and Arnaudov's assessment that "Western Balkans actors are faced with limited political security, economic and institutional capacities" (Gjurovski and Arnaudov 2025, 158). In fact, in the context of regional cooperation opportunities, these challenges could serve as stable ground for a cross-border and coordinated approach in addressing and managing them through mechanisms of shared experience and capacity expansion for effective resolution.

Building on the previous discussion of the Copenhagen criteria and regional cooperation, EU membership, as a key national and regional goal within the Western Balkans, represents an essential element and the lowest common denominator for regional foreign policy activities among all five countries in the region. As a goal, it provides a framework that shapes the foreign policy activities of the actors. As a process, it allows for an independent foreign policy decision-making process with substantial internal, regional, and international outputs, ranging from the micro level– EU membership–to the international level–a contribution to political and economic sustainability. In fact, a common approach to strategically or tactically addressing ongoing institutional challenges, risks and threats creates enough space for relevant foreign policy activities of all Western Balkans actors, while simultaneously reducing the pressure from foreign or so-called

great powers. Moreover, in the context of “visibility” on the international or European stage, one notable example – although it occurred only once – is the common positioning of the leaders of Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia at the EU Summit (Arnaudov 2023b, 65).

Shifting the focus from the political to the security dimension, and similarly to the political one, the case study of the Western Balkans also reveals a certain „space” for independent or sovereign foreign policy activities of the political entities in the region under research. In fact, based on the case of the Western Balkans, we could advance the argument that even small and weak states, with limited economic, political, diplomatic, security, and defence resources, are capable of pursuing independent security policies at a micro (regional) level.

Since the beginning of the Ukrainian War, energy-related threats to the economic and social stability of the Western Balkan states have represented one of the most pressing and empirically verifiable examples of the importance and necessity for regional cooperation, on the one hand, and independent foreign policy decision-making by small states, on the other. The importance and necessity of regional cooperation lie in the context of sustainability, particularly considering the existing oil and gas networks linking all Western Balkan actors through wider energy corridors. At the same time, the inflow of investments from developed countries (so-called great powers) in the Western Balkans region, combined with their declarative interest in regional stability, enables the countries of the Western Balkans to pursue sovereign foreign policy decisions within a framework of collective positioning when facing and managing ongoing security challenges. The current energy crisis, for instance, could potentially outweigh its economic consequences by generating broader political, social, and security risks.

Another example, particularly relevant to this research on a cross-border contemporary security challenge within the Western Balkans, was the multi-year global health pandemic of COVID-19. It was a textbook twofold example that illustrates the current positioning of small states in international relations from the perspectives of both foreign policy activity and security. At the same time, it serves as a valuable example that highlights regional cooperation, synchronisation, and integration as key determinants and the lowest common denominators for micro-level (regional) foreign policy performance by small and weak states.

Although different regional actors have taken different political positions regarding the sanctions policy against the Russian Federation, the common security threat, such as energy supplies and resources, serves as a reliable example of the possibility of independent foreign policy decision-making by

small and micro states at the micro (regional) level, thus supporting and diversifying the thesis of foreign policy capabilities of small states, including the possibilities for cross-border cooperation, effectively freed from the patterns of so-called great powers. By marginalising internal political and populist obstacles in the Western Balkans countries, including ongoing regional and bilateral open issues and disputes, the beginning of the Ukrainian War has de facto opened a new chapter in the understanding of foreign policy positioning and cross-border cooperation of small and micro states, significantly freed from rigid classical frameworks. Small and micro states can act independently in foreign policy while also doing so effectively, in line with the thesis regarding the key determinants of the research question on the art of their diplomacy. That largely aligns with the previously mentioned thesis of constant negotiation, with a hedging strategy approach running in parallel.

International Economy Dimension

Turning to the economic dimension of small-state foreign policy, only twenty years ago, the politics of economic globalisation were relatively clear. It was global capitalism and its international institutional manifestations through the World Trade Organisation, free trade agreements, and the International Monetary Fund (Oatley 2022). Today, such a global economic organisation faces serious challenges. With the collapse of the bloc division of the world, the economic growth of China, and numerous war hotspots, the most recent of which are the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Gaza Strip, the previous capitalist liberal economic system has suffered a series of blows. However, it is still not clear what the future system will look like, whether it will remain the same with minor changes, or if the restructuring will be significantly deeper and more dynamic. We can say that the whole world is currently undergoing transformation. In such difficult times, it may be even more difficult for small countries to find their place in the international economic space. Discourse in the international political economy often presents small states as a “problem to be solved” and highlights their vulnerability, but this distracts from the existence of unequal power structures that, far from being a natural result of smallness, are in fact contingent and politically contested. It is precisely these discourses about the vulnerability of small states that allow the responsibility for development to be shifted from the international community onto small states themselves (Lee and Smith 2010). Small states in the global economy have always been more vulnerable, both because trade accounts for a larger share of their overall economic activity and because these states lack the power to set the terms or enact any of the rules that govern globalisation

(Bräutigam and Woolcock 2001). The story of the inherent vulnerability of small states must be seen in the context of dominant discourses of neoliberal globalisation, in which globalisation is perceived as an inexorable economic logic. Globalisation is conceived as a harsh material reality that small states must adapt their political policies to, rather than as a political project that has produced the very inequalities between “big” and “small” states that are often wrongly attributed to the inherent shortcomings of smallness itself (Lee and Smith 2010, 1101). As Bräutigam and Woolcock (2001) observe, “Studies of small states tend to focus on the nature of their vulnerabilities, without taking into account that these countries have managed external pressures in different ways. Globalisation brings opportunities as well as risks, and a more integrated global economy can enable smaller states to adapt quickly to changing conditions and to more readily implement strategic development policies”. Many small countries have responded to the emergence of the territorial logic of great power rivalry by protecting their relations with the US and China, often avoiding the appearance of taking sides, and taking advantage of the opportunity to articulate and pursue long-term spatial goals. However, in many cases, these goals are so complex and grandiose that achieving them requires both “institutional calibrations, policy reorientations and regulatory experiments” and “state restructuring”. That includes rebalancing power within national institutions or establishing new ones, introducing regulatory reform for fast-track infrastructure projects, and increasing state capacity. Indeed, the competition between China and the US surrounding large-scale infrastructure projects, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative in recent years, has enabled countries to undertake spatial projects that were unthinkable in the post-Cold War unipolar world order, where the US was the unquestioned power (Schindler, DiCarlo, and Paudel 2022, 332). While both the US and China understandably dislike hedging by small states, both countries overlook that it is precisely the uncertainty arising from their actions that pushes weak states to protect themselves (Kuik 2021, 300). When there is no common opinion about the future development of the world, each country must develop its own strategy for increasing national competitiveness (Turgunpulatovich 2022, 69). Weaker states employ a variety of innovative and creative strategies to increase their power capabilities over time (Snidal et al. 2024, 406). An interesting example comes from Asia, where, contrary to predictions that smaller powers would balance or combat external threats, Southeast Asian states protect themselves by deepening their security cooperation with the United States and China (Marston 2024, 29). These experiences offer valuable lessons for our context, particularly for the countries of the Western Balkans, in terms of developing economic cooperation and diversifying economic ties.

The situation created after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has forced all countries, regions, and international organisations to re-evaluate the aspects of economic development, socio-economic development, and local, regional, and global development (Pereira et al. 2022; International Monetary Fund 2022; World Bank et al. 2023). The impact of the war in Ukraine has been primarily negative, manifesting in rising prices for goods supplied by Russia and Ukraine, including energy, wheat, fertilisers, and certain metals (Ben Hassen and El Bilali 2022; Zhang et al. 2023; Arndt et al. 2023; International Energy Agency 2022). In many emerging markets and developing economies, rising food and energy prices are exacerbating poverty and, in some cases, food insecurity, while also adding to inflationary pressures that were already building (Guenette, Kenworthy, and Wheeler 2022, 3). The Western Balkans have also been affected by these negative developments, but so far they have managed to mitigate the impacts and adapt effectively (Stanojević 2023; World Bank 2023).

The EU accession process, as well as everything that follows it, is a unique path pursued by all countries of the Western Balkans. This process has been ongoing for many years for most of them. In the meantime, Ukraine and Moldova applied to join the EU shortly after the outbreak of the war and received candidate status in June 2022. Both countries were at a lower level of integration and reform process than the Western Balkans countries. Shortly after granting candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine, the EU sought to mitigate the risk of distrust among the Western Balkan countries by taking decisions to deepen the European integration process for three of them: granting candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina and opening the negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (Kaličanin 2024, 38). Considering economic interests, in the case of Croatia, the Balkan state that is already an EU member state, the EU was perceived as a provider of stability and protection for a new, small, and still vulnerable state, as well as an instrument of modernisation and economic progress. Interestingly, while for states like Great Britain, EU membership was perceived as an obstacle to national sovereignty, for small and new states in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, it was perceived as an opportunity to enhance their power and, consequently, strengthen sovereignty (Jović 2023 121).

The European Union is one of the major foreign policy actors with a pronounced political and economic presence in the Western Balkans (Jelisavac Trošić and Arnaudov 2024a, 272). The EU has intensified its activities because of the war in Ukraine, ensuring that the region of the Western Balkans and Serbia does not fall under the influence of Russia, China, or Turkey, all of which have been deeply rooted in the region, especially China through the “Belt and Road Initiative” in Serbia and Turkey in Bosnia and

Herzegovina. According to Milutinović (2023, 83), China, for example, was able to influence certain countries of the Western Balkan region by providing benefits in sectors such as infrastructure, energy, and even policies that ultimately shaped the alignment of certain Western Balkan countries with China's foreign policy approach, thereby risking its "European path" and the perspective of potential full membership in the European Union. The strategic engagement of the European Union and China in the Western Balkans is shaped by distinct agendas grounded in national interests (Stekić and Nikolić 2025). Despite the fatigue shown by the enlargement, the continuation of this policy can bring greater importance and influence to the European Union in international politics, as well as access to new markets. It will also increase not only the economic power of the Union but also its security. For countries in the process of joining the EU, it enables the stabilisation of their political and economic development, as well as free movement of people and capital, making consumers the primary beneficiaries. As a result of the abolition of customs duties, they gain economically from a wide range of products and services under significantly more favourable conditions, including the abolition of roaming charges, the creation of a single telecommunications market, and stronger consumer rights. The advantage of living together lies in solidarity and mutual assistance, principles on which the European Union is founded (Simić 2024).

The EU's new growth plan for the Western Balkans is based on four pillars, aimed at improving economic integration and aligning the region with the rules of the single market. In line with the regional Single Market, their economies could potentially increase by 10%. The plan also aims to accelerate fundamental reforms, promote sustainable economic growth, attract foreign investment, and strengthen regional stability. In support of reforms, financial assistance has been increased through the new Reform and Growth Instrument for the Western Balkans for the period 2024-2027 to €6 billion (€2 billion in grants and €4 billion in loans), with disbursements conditional upon the implementation of reforms (European Commission 2023, 2).

Apart from being a prerequisite for joining the EU, the advantages of regional cooperation are numerous. Stronger economic cooperation can lead to the growth and development of all participating countries and attract foreign direct investments. The main beneficiaries of cooperation mechanisms between small states in this region should be the citizens. Regional initiatives can increase the connectivity of people, enhance their economic cooperation and progress, and possibly reduce the negative effects of brain drain (Jelisavac Trošić and Arnaudov 2024c, 117). Building modern, dynamic, technologically advanced and decarbonised economies in the

Western Balkans, with improved employment opportunities, would help reduce the incentive for brain drain.

Based on the results obtained in the Rikalović, Molnar, and Josipović (2022, 31) study, it can be concluded that Serbia is the “locomotive” of the Western Balkans and that all countries in this area should join the regional initiative for cooperation, the Open Balkan. That naturally takes into account the concept of the Open Balkans as a community of the Western Balkan countries, aimed at strengthening economic cooperation and development to accelerate integration into the European Union.

Membership in the European Union, as a common goal of the Western Balkan countries, has motivated the entire region towards economic and social progress, as well as regional stability. Increasing economic cooperation between the Western Balkans countries could be one of the main sources of economic growth in the coming years. However, the methods of regional cooperation have been the subject of frequent criticism by the governments of individual countries, which considered them arbitrary and disconnected from their realities (Draçi, Kraja, and Themelko 2022, 96). Cooperation in the Western Balkans and facilitation of trade with the EU provide opportunities for entrepreneurs. However, in a region fraught with political challenges and historical problems, achieving these goals is particularly problematic. To strengthen regional cooperation, the EU has supported the Balkan region with bilateral free trade agreements, generalised trade preferences, the SAA, and CEFTA (2006). In the Western Balkans, free trade agreements have had a greater impact on legal reform than on economic sustainability and trade promotion. Nevertheless, unless political and historical disputes are resolved, none of the trade agreements can deepen regional cooperation in this ethnically sensitive region (Leka, Daku, and Jusufi 2022).

It seems that regional cooperation, particularly economic, has become a key tool for assessing the Western Balkans countries on their path towards European integration. However, the current scale of such cooperation is insufficient, particularly considering their shared goal of full EU membership. Improved economic cooperation in the Western Balkans would undoubtedly contribute to easing political tensions in the region. It highlights the necessity for further economic integration, taking into account the interests of the great powers in this process (Ristić and Marinković 2022, 65). Introducing modern principles and conditions for cooperation between states across the entire region is truly necessary. It is also essential to intensify regional economic cooperation, regardless of the framework through which it takes place, whether via the Berlin Process, the Open Balkans, or some alternative mechanism.

Conclusion

There are numerous authors who, when focusing on the foreign policy of small states, are guided by the approaches of neutrality, shelter, and refuge, while neglecting the dimension related to their regional foreign policy activity. The regional activity of small states can be significantly independent, and at the same time, in a broader understanding of regionalism, it can indirectly shape the system of international relations. Considering the dilemma of the independent foreign policy activity of small states, we take the example of the Western Balkans. On the one hand, the states in this region have struggled in their foreign policy efforts to preserve their territorial integrity. On the other hand, they are constantly economically, financially, security-wise, and energetically dependent on large and regional powers. Small countries deal with external pressures in different ways. Globalisation has brought them opportunities, but also risks. Greater integration can enable smaller states to adapt quickly to changing conditions and more effectively implement their strategic development policies. Since there is currently no common opinion on the future development of the world, each country must develop its own strategy to strengthen its resilience to external influences and its competitiveness relative to other countries.

What emerges as a conclusion is that the fate of small states is to continuously negotiate. They negotiate in any format, bilateral, multilateral, or plurilateral, to facilitate the achievement of their own foreign policy goals. A small state must constantly develop different negotiation strategies. At the regional level, the perception of foreign policy activism among small states is also applicable and further enhanced by shared or similar political, economic, and security risks that neighbouring states face in the same region. Alignment with the great powers' policies and regional needs for cooperation could be the optimal approach to regional policy for small states. This approach creates space for an independent decision-making process. Due to the war in Ukraine, the Western Balkans region is being pulled in different directions by the interests of the EU, Russia, China, and Turkey. Among other things, the Ukraine conflict led to the emergence of an energy crisis. Small states in the Western Balkans managed and addressed newly emerging problems independently or within a regional framework by finding sources, building infrastructure, and so forth. On such issues, not directly in conflict with the interests of larger powers, it is evident that small states may be capable of independent foreign policy or regional solutions in response to newly emerging crises.

A common approach to risks and threats provides sufficient space for relevant foreign policy activities of all actors in the Western Balkans, free from

external or great power pressure. Even small and weak states with limited economic, political, diplomatic, security, and defence resources can conduct independent policies at the micro- and regional levels, as we can observe in the case of the Western Balkans. The most pertinent and empirical example that demonstrates the significance and necessity of regional cooperation, as well as the autonomous foreign policy decision-making process of small states, is the energy threats to the economic and social stability of the Western Balkan countries posed by the Ukrainian conflict.

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**PERSPEKTIVE SARADNJE NA ZAPADNOM BALKANU
NAKON UKRAJINSKOG RATA: IZAZOVI, PREPREKE I MOGUĆNOSTI**

Apstrakt: Savremeni međunarodni odnosi, obeleženi različitim izazovima, rizicima i pretnjama, dovode u pitanje takozvane tradicionalne obrasce saradnje među državama. S druge strane, „tradicionalni“ teorijski okvir koji se odnosi na saradnju između država isključuje konkretne smernice o mogućnostima saradnje malih država. Na osnovu navedenog, dvostruki cilj ovog rada je predstavljanje savremenih principa i uslova u kontekstu saradnje među državama, dok je, s druge strane, ključni naučni korak rada istraživanje izazova, mogućnosti i prepreka međunarodne ili regionalne saradnje malih i mikro država, predstavljeni na primeru Zapadnog Balkana kao studije slučaja. Ključno istraživačko pitanje jeste da li su male države u stanju da vode prekograničnu regionalnu saradnju i šta su ključne odrednice u tom procesu? Iz teorijske perspektive, rad se zasniva na neoklasičnom realizmu, ugla koji nam u savremenom kontekstu međunarodnih odnosa objašnjava manevarski prostor malih država u njihovom spoljnopolitičkom delovanju.

Ključne reči: Saradnja; male države; neoklasični realizam; Zapadni Balkan; spoljna politika.