

CHAPTER 2
POSITIONING OF THE WESTERN BALKANS IN
THE RESTRUCTURING CHAPTER OF
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: BETWEEN
ECONOMIC COHESION AND POLITICAL
DISAGREEMENTS

Sanja Jelisavac TROŠIĆ¹

Mitko ARNAUDOV²

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

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

INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans political entities are the most suitable "formula" for naming the members of this "political" framework bearing in mind that the statehood in certain cases is a disputable question on bilateral and regional level, but also taking into account the fact that the process of acquiring full statehood is, not in formal, but in pragmatic way, still not completed. From academic perspective, naming Western Balkans members as political entities provides a huge and essential explanation about the challenges, risks and threats which are facing, but it also refers a lot about their sustainability in the context of contemporary international relations faced with the probably multi-level forced process of restructuring.

Namely, there are huge possibilities from certain scholars to problematize this thesis about the uncompleted statehood process of Western Balkans actors, but, if we analyze the obstacles which Western Balkans is facing during the last 35 years, since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, we could reach certainly relevant data in favor for placing such thesis. In fact, it is not appropriate thesis just for explanation the past 35 years of political, security and economic flows within the mentioned, politically framed region, but certainly for providing explanation about the upcoming period which also should include recommendations about the regional positioning within the international relations mosaic.

The essence of the issue is, through this paper, to find out what kind of essential obstacles is facing Western Balkans actors, precisising their similarities and differences, and thus trying to determine their foreign policy positioning, including comprehensive sustainability in the new waves of international relations analyzing from the perspective of potentials for regional cooperation, coordination and integration.

Bearing in mind that we are talking about so-called micro and small political entities, with reached formal statehood or with statehood intentions, this study will have also important contribution in understanding the positioning and, thus, sustainability of small and micro states in the new chapter of international relations where the principles of UN Charter are mostly violated.

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Bearing in mind the role of security, economic and political processes in restructuring the international relations framework, using the security, economy and policy as indicators in the paper will provide comprehensive mosaic not only for understanding small states, but also for understanding the new relations between so-called big powers from one side, and micro and small states, from another side, which will indicate quite an opposite thoughts to the positions of classical realists which, on certain way, through the politics of alignment of small states, are guarantying their sustainability, as an optimal foreign policy step.

The Western Balkans political entities are sufficient case study for this academic purpose bearing in mind their "qualification" as developing micro and small countries and entities with intentions for statehood, as well as taking into account the challenges, risks and threats those actors are facing on internal level, but also imported obstacles which consequences are even more prominent bearing in mind the limitations that this group is facing due to already mentioned internal issues which, from one side - questioning the sustainability internally, as well as making this political entities essentially vulnerable due to internal inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Namely, the Western Balkans flows in political, economic and security sense provides triple answer: from academic point of view, about the positioning of small and micro states in the new chapter of international relations, including the issue of their sustainability; second, provides an alternative explanation about the classical realist understanding of small states and their foreign policy abilities through the prism of regionalism; third, provides explanation about the importance of the concept of regionalism in the context of national, regional, and global sustainability.

1. UKRAINIAN WAR AS A MOST ACTUAL EMPIRICAL EXAMPLE

The beginning of the Ukrainian War represents the most current empirical example and indicator of the possibilities of cooperation, coordination and synchronization in the Western Balkans in the context of foreign policy positioning.

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In fact, the Ukrainian War provides a twofold explanation: first, that at the internal level, the institutional framework in most cases of foreign policy decision-making is only a formal momentum that absolutely narrows the room for maneuver for adopting decisions in line with national interests; second, that in foreign policy decision-making, the regional context is absent, as is the least common denominator at the regional level, within the Western Balkans. There has been no regional cooperation, coordination, or synchronization in the context of foreign policy positioning in relation to the Ukrainian conflict, and thus, to a large extent, no respect for the so-called national interests of political entities within the Western Balkans framework.

On the one hand, Belgrade and Sarajevo have refused to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation and thus "join" the policy of the European Union, whose membership they strategically aspire to. 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, synchronized with the European Union, including with the Western Balkans entities which are pledging to become EU member-states (Jelisavac-Trošić & Arnaudov, 2025). Sarajevo also has not adopted economic restrictions against the Moscow, as a measure against the Russian aggression to the Ukrainian territory, due to the opposition of Serbian authorities from the Republika Srpska entity and the Republika Srpska's official representatives within the BiH institutions (EuroNews, 2025; Tanjug, 2024).

From the other side Skopje, Pristina, Tirana and Podgorica have strictly followed the EU foreign policy decisions against Russian Federation. In the context of the Ukrainian War, Skopje, Pristina, Tirana and Podgorica have gone even a step further and launched the 'latest' regional initiative, namely the informal forum "EU QUAD", without Belgrade and Sarajevo, which promotes 100 percent compliance of this Western Balkan four with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union. They stated that "each of the four political entities has individually proven to be a reliable partner of NATO and the EU, respecting the sanctions regime of the European Union and the US, but also through concrete humanitarian and other assistance to Ukraine" (Arnaudov, 2023).

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Unsynchronized regional approach of Western Balkans Six towards to Ukrainian War represents an example about the missed opportunity for merging and consolidation of the foreign policy common regional goals, as it is European membership, as strategic for all six political entities. Hypothetically, synchronized approach would provide more pronounced visibility of the region, as a whole, but also of each political entity in the international "stage", thus contributing to the quality in the realization of foreign policy goals. Oppositely, as it is the situation on ground, different approaches and misunderstanding of the "actors" within the region, including the multisided political blaming for supporting the positions of Moscow or positions of Brussels, without evident benefits, qualitatively reduces the foreign policy effectiveness of the political entities in the region, including their sustainability, as a whole, because of the lack of effectiveness in the foreign policy services in such vibrant stage of international and European flows. In fact, by analyzing contemporary geopolitical developments and the foreign policy actions of small and micro states, we can establish that the foreign policy mechanism of these states is actually an efficient and effective instrument in foreign policy actions if it is based on strong tactical tools, which are sufficiently flexible to regional and international tendencies, but also on a strong internal institutional infrastructure that simultaneously ensures political, social and economic stability and predictability (Jelisavac Trošić & Arnaudov, 2024).

2. ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES OF INTEGRATION PROCESSES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

In the OECD's Economic Convergence Scoreboard for the Western Balkans 2025, is stated that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Western Balkans per inhabitant at purchasing power parity in 2023 was slightly below 40 percent of the EU average or about 13 percentage points higher than in 2003. The approximation of GDP per capita to that of the EU was contributed by significant progress in maintaining the economic growth of the Western Balkans in the last two decades, so the GDP per capita according to purchasing power parity in the Western Balkans increased from 2003 to 2023 by 120 percent, i.e. from 9,725 dollars to 21,305 dollars (OECD, 2025).

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The economies of the Western Balkans in the last 20 years have recorded only modest progress in reducing the gap with the EU, so economic convergence with the EU remains a strategic necessity for the six Western Balkan economies, because, in addition to improving the standard of living, a more competitive and sustainable Western Balkans is crucial for stimulating trade, attracting investments and deepening integration into European markets. Corruption and the informal economy continue to undermine fair competition and deter investors, as do trade flows in the Western Balkans, which remain lower than the EU average.

The World Bank forecasts that the combined economic growth of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia will reach 3.2% in 2025, and growth is expected to accelerate to 3.5% in 2026. Uncertainty in global trade is likely to affect the Western Balkans primarily as a result of the slowdown in economic activity in the euro area. This slowdown could reduce trade in goods and services, as well as investment and remittances. During periods of uncertainty, diversifying sources of growth and renewing the structural reform agenda would be the most effective strategies for maintaining economic resilience.

Key measures include removing barriers in the labor market – including those affecting women – strengthening regional economic integration, improving governance standards and increasing market competition to boost productivity and support long-term growth. In addition, for the Western Balkan countries, faster implementation of EU accession reforms – such as joining the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) and introducing “green lanes” to simplify cross-border trade – could further boost business confidence, attract investment and boost job creation (World Bank Group, 2025).

At some point in time, all the countries of the Western Balkans decided that one of their strategic priorities was to join the EU. Compared to other post-1989 EU enlargements, the European integration process of the WB countries in the third decade of the 21 st century is stalled. Political disputes and divisions in the region and within the EU have resulted in a lack of meaningful and long-term cooperation, which is essential for successful integration into the EU (Qorraj, Hajrullahu & Qehaja, 2024).

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Absorption capacity and the European integration of the Western Balkans. *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, 16(8), 100043.). The EU's conditionality has become more demanding. The EU has broadened the set of conditions, especially by expanding the 'enlargement acquis' beyond the regulatory public policy rules and into fundamental state-building, rule-of-law, administrative and economic reforms; it has improved the precision of its conditions in some of these areas; and it has strengthened its monitoring, feedback, and sanctioning mechanisms. Not all Western Balkans countries are in the same position regarding EU integrations. For the current position of Western Balkans' countries, three different groups of countries can be distinguished: The first group consists of countries that have already opened accession negotiations - Serbia and Montenegro. In the second group are countries that have recently, on 19 July 2022, started accession talks after many years of vetoes and disputes - North Macedonia and Albania. The third group includes only one country that has not yet received the status of a candidate country. Bosnia and Herzegovina has been recognized as a potential candidate for the EU integration since 2003 (Ćeranić Perišić, 2023).

Today, when the world is globalized, companies face much greater competition, and smaller companies are at a disadvantage because they do not have the resources to compete on a global level (Jelisavac Trošić, 2016). Membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) gives small countries the opportunity to place their products on other markets under equal, not worse, conditions. Serbia and Bosnia and Hercegovina are the only one in the Western Balkans that are not members of the WTO (Jelisavac, 2006). Both of them as small countries, with its capacities are not able to actively create, develop and maintain economic relations with many countries in the world. Entry into the WTO would enable domestic companies and businessmen to export under significantly more favorable terms to countries with which they do not already have agreements that regulate trade relations (Trošić, 2018). When the prospects for the Western Balkans to join the EU seemed unattainable, the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans were launched. Both initiatives have similar goals, among which two of the most important ones stand out - strengthening regional cooperation, but also continuing the path towards EU accession (Jelisavac Trošić & Arnaudov, 2023).

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The European integration process for the Western Balkan countries is a complex and multifaceted journey, and each nation faces unique challenges and obstacles. The path to EU membership for the Republic of Serbia has been marked by significant progress in meeting criteria and implementing reforms, but the country is also struggling with internal political disputes, and in particular the normalization of relations with Kosovo. These challenges facing Serbia also affect the overall balance in the region. Montenegro has actively engaged in the accession process, implementing broad reforms in various areas to align itself with EU laws and regulations. Overall, the path of the Western Balkan countries towards EU membership depends less on economic factors and more on a range of internal and external factors, including political and institutional reforms, resolving disputes with neighboring countries, and aligning laws and regulations with the EU *acquis*. These countries will need to carefully navigate these complexities, demonstrating continued efforts, comprehensive reforms, and diplomatic engagement to move closer to their goal of EU membership (Hadzhipetrova-Lachova, 2024).

The Western Balkans can count on significant gains from any form of economic integration in terms of the free movement of people, goods and capital, cooperation in the field of disaster protection and ensuring lasting peace. So far, Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania have fully joined the regional cooperation initiative "Open Balkans". However, the full implementation of the initiative faces significant political obstacles, such as the unresolved status of Kosovo*, major problems in the functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina, etc. In addition, Montenegro has its own agenda, according to which it expects to join the European Union soon and before other countries in the region, and therefore does not show much interest in the aforementioned regional initiative. Therefore, for the "Open Balkans" initiative to be successful, a flexible approach is required, taking into account the specific benefits that each Western Balkan country could have from participating in the regional cooperation initiative. Countries in the region that have not yet joined the Open Balkans should be given the opportunity to engage in specific issues of interest to them on a project, network and flexible basis for a certain period of time, for example, in some dimensions such as investments, transport, culture, sports, youth.

The principle of cooperation between border regions could also be applied, which, for example, could solve current energy supply problems in the Western Balkans and environmental challenges. (Rikalović, Molnar & Josipović, 2022).

3. OPEN BALKANS INITIATIVE – QUESTION OF MATURITY OR CONFIRMATION OF UNFINISHED DEVELOPING PROCESSES

At the beginning of the third decade of 21st. century political authorities of Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia has launched the idea for regional economic and trade integration initiative, based to the principles of EU common market, which from one side should accelerate the EU path of the region, while, from the other side, should contribute to deepening regional integration processes, including the mutual trustiest. From the media perspective, Open Balkans, at the beginning known as Mini Schengen, was the "main game in the town".

Serbian, Macedonian and Albanian representatives were strictly focused to the deepening the ties within Open Balkans, including the effectiveness of the reached arrangements. From the perspective of EU integrations, synchronized positioning of the Open Balkans participants during the certain of summits between EU and Western Balkans, has been an example of the maturity of the region in the context of the importance of regional cooperation on the EU path. From the eco-social perspective, installation of pillars for common labor market between Skopje, Belgrade and Tirana, structured through national digital platforms, has shown the other side of maturity, namely about the importance of social well-being, released of so-called traditional political barriers and myths about the amenity.

From the other side, lack of maturity has been shown through the prism of inclusiveness. Western Balkans Six have missed the opportunity, through the frameworks of Open Balkans to show the readiness for the future, placing the regional cooperation as an imperative, thus proving the understanding of regional integration as a pre-condition in the of contemporary sustainability.

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From the security perspective, “the interdependence of risks and threats, as well as causes and consequences, in the security context require a multiple and multi-dimensional response of political and security factors in one political entity or an independent state, which in most cases is not sufficient, because as such, modern security risks and threats, it is not possible isolate them physically, and in that way approach their solution, i.e. overcoming them” (Jelisavac-Trošić & Arnaudov, 2024). In that context, Open Balkans initiative, within the Western Balkans as a whole, represents the most concrete empirical example of "proving" the thesis that regional cooperation, coordination and integration in the Western Balkans is to a large, significant, if not essential, extent conditioned by existing disputes and open issues (Jelisavac-Trošić & Arnaudov, 2025).

If not Skopje, Belgrade and Tirana, aforementioned thesis has been confirmed by Pristina, Sarajevo and Podgorica in theirs positioning toward the Open Balkans:

- The former president of Montenegro characterized the Open Balkans, at the very beginning of the initiative, as a project that undermines the state attributes of certain countries in the Balkans (Arnaudov, 2023), assessing that the authors of the Open Balkans idea aim to see the disappearance of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia (Đukanović, 2022);
- "Within the framework of Bosniak political elites, there is a lot of skepticism regarding the country's joining the Open Balkans initiative for the reason that in some ways that initiative is equated with the idea of a "Serbian world", and therefore, between the lines, the thesis of the "Great Serbian aspiration" that existed in the nineties of the 20th century runs through, and that is why the idea of an Open Balkans is rejected a priori in this part of the political structures of the entities of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Knežević, 2022);
- Pristina refuses to accept the Open Balkans, claiming that it is a dangerous initiative without a clear vision, but also that the refusal is a consequence of Serbia not treating Pristina as an equal party (Arnaudov, 2023).

Although, there were not objective or proved claiming against the Open Balkans initiative, in the actual regional and European context, especially in the context of slowed European integration processes and the necessity of regional cooperation, coordination and integration, due to ongoing domestic, regional and imported challenges, risks and threats, media positioning of thesis against such regional initiative has played significant role in the process of the its marginalization, thus showing the lack of understanding European flows in the context of integration, but, what is essentially important, the lack of understanding of the contemporary challenges, risks and threats closely related, from one side, to the point of integration, while, from the other side, to the issues of sustainability, especially for micro and small subjects of international law, as those are Western Balkans political entities.

4. INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION, INCLUDING SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Empirical examples of Ukrainian War and Open Balkans Initiative represent mix of classical and neoclassical realism understanding for political positioning of small and micro states without strategic and tactical understanding about ongoing internal, regional and international flows. Why classical? Because the thesis of realists is that small states are incapable to create or deal with foreign policy on the sovereign basis.

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 (Jelisavac-Trošić & Arnaudov, 2025) - in the case of Skopje, Pristina, Podgorica and Tirana in the context of adoption of restrictive measures against Russian Federation due to the Ukrainian War. From the other side, why neoclassical? Because 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 – which have been proved and applicable in the cases of the decisions of Belgrade and the political representatives of Republika Srpska entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina, also on the occasion of Ukrainian War.

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From the third side, Open Balkans "destiny" has shown the lack of theoretical, as well as pragmatic understanding of domestic, regional and European flows when it comes to the political entities which were opponent to aforementioned economic initiative with potentials for security and political coordination. If Skopje, Belgrade and Tirana has used the neoclassical approach of the creativity in decision-making processes on the case of Open Balkans, the other three entities (Podgorica, Pristina and Sarajevo) has played the role which is even the contrary to the beliefs of classical realistic, bearing in mind the fact that also so-called big powers, as those are Washington, Moscow Beijing and Brussels did not oppose the existence of initiative.

From the perspective of institutionalism, in the Ukrainian War all six actors have shown immaturity, because all of them has reached foreign policy decisions, thus positioning toward the Ukrainian War in a one-two days range, without deep and institutionally analyzed and justified decision about the benefits and consequences of such decision. Probably from the neoclassical perspective of creativity, certain scholars could justify the decision adopted by Republic of Serbia, but without the indicator of potentials of regional cooperation, coordination and integration such justification could be limited to an important extend.

From the perspective of regionalism, including contemporary challenges, risks and threats as a common denominator for all Western Balkans Six, both Ukrainian War and Open Balkans initiative are empirical examples about the limited understanding of regional potentials, in the context of cooperation, coordination and integration, thus, lack of understanding about the importance of integration and synchronization in the foreign policy positioning and its benefits to the issues of sustainability. Thus, in the context of security and modern security challenges, risks, and threats, as it explains authors, bilateral and multilateral partnerships along with cooperation also play a dominant role in facing, managing, and overcoming existing security phenomena (Jelisavac-Trošić & Arnaudov, 2024).

From the perspective of sustainability, both Ukrainian War and Open Balkans initiative in the case of Western Balkans political entities have shown the lack of strategic, tactical and political understanding and maturity about the ongoing challenges, risks and threats.

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Empirical examples are showing giving priority to everyday political appearances, instead of strategic-tactical institutional decisions and positioning, which causes multiple and long-term damage to the entities in question.

Based on empirical examples of the study, recommendations of the paper would go to the following direction:

- Political framework should be institutionally framed, instead opposite
- The rule of law should be practiced from the top of social ladder
- Political responsibility should be legally framed, not just on election basis process
- Small and micro states due to limited political, economic, diplomatic and natural resources should have medium-term strategies accompanied by tactical guidelines
- Foreign policy strategic goals should be strictly based on national interests, but at the same time adaptable to regional and international flows in the context of potentials of their accomplishment.

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