BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/VCFY7504

Balkan Research Journal(BRJ), 2025; 2(2): 85-91.

brj.ibupress.com

Online ISSN: 2955-2524

Application :01.10.2025

Revision :01.11.2025

Acceptance :30.11.2025

Publication :30.11.2025

Bajrami, L. (2025). Dilemmas of the Foreign Policy of Small States in the Western Balkans: Between Integration and Geopolitical Insecurity. Balkan Research Journal, 2(2), 85-91. https://doi.org//10.69648/VCFY7504

Leonora Bajrami

South-East European University, Tetovo, N. Macedonia

0009-0008-9758-2655

PhD Candidate,

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Leonora Bajrami.

Email: lb32351@seeu.edu.mk

BALKAN JOURNALS

Dilemmas of the Foreign Policy of Small States in the Western Balkans: Between Integration and Geopolitical Insecurity

Leonora Bajrami

Abstract

This paper analyzes the foreign policy dilemmas of small states in the Western Balkans within the context of an increasingly fragmented and multipolar global order. In this environment, where power is distributed among the United States of America, the European Union, Russia, China, and Turkey, the small Balkan states face complex and often contradictory choices. On one hand, they view European and Euro-Atlantic integration as the strategic horizon of their development and security, while on the other hand they remain vulnerable to the economic, political, and cultural influences of other powers.

The paper is based on a constructivist theoretical framework that emphasizes the importance of identity, perceptions, and interactions in shaping the foreign policy interests of small states. Methodologically, it employs a comparative analysis of six states in the region: Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, drawing on official documents, national strategies, public discourses, and academic literature.

The central argument is that although small states face structural constraints and depend on great powers, through flexible diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and balancing strategies they manage to create presence and minimize uncertainties. The paper contributes to the literature on the foreign policy of small states by highlighting the interconnection between security, integration, and economic development in the context of the new international order.

Keywords: small states, foreign policy, Western Balkans, multilateral diplomacy, security.

Introduction

The past decades have brought significant transformations to the global geopolitical landscape. The war in Ukraine, the U.S.–China rivalry, tensions in the Middle East, as well as global challenges such as climate change and mass migration, have created a highly unstable new international order. In this environment where the interests of great powers collide, small states must maneuver carefully, as they constitute an integral part of the international system. About two-thirds of the members of the United Nations fall into this category. They operate within the same broad political and economic environment as all other states. In their foreign policy, they pursue the same security objectives and employ the same diplomatic tools as larger states. However, the lack of significant military or economic capabilities to influence global developments directly forces small states to define their role and strategies in a system where power is distributed asymmetrically.

The Western Balkans, due to its strategic position, historical legacy, and ethnic complexity, remains a region highly sensitive to international developments. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the conflicts of the 1990s, the states of the region have faced major challenges in state-building, ensuring stability, and defining their foreign policy orientation.

This paper aims to analyze the survival and development strategies of the small states of the Western Balkans within the new global order, examining how they manage the dilemmas between Euro-Atlantic integration and the influences of other powers.

Methodology

This study employs a combined theoretical and empirical approach, tailored to the analysis of the foreign policy of small states in the Western Balkans within the context of a fragmented global order. The methodology is based on two main pillars: the constructivist theoretical framework and comparative analysis.

The theoretical framework of the study is grounded in constructivism, which emphasizes the role of identity, perceptions, and social interaction in shaping foreign policy interests. The constructivist approach is complemented by elements from small-state security theories, particularly Thorhallsson's *Shelter Theory*, as well as the classical literature of Keohane, Rothstein, and Vital on the capacities and structural limitations of small states.

The study adopts the method of comparative analysis, examining six Western Balkan states: Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This method aims to identify: similarities in foreign policy patterns, differences in diplomatic strategies, and domestic factors influencing external orientation. Comparative analysis was chosen as the primary method because it enables a systematic evaluation of state behavior in historically, geopolitically, and institutionally similar contexts.

The study relies on qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including reports from international institutions (EU, NATO, Freedom House), academic publications and theoretical works on small states, as well as analyses from regional and international think tanks. The use of secondary sources is appropriate for this type of study, as the focus is on the interpretation of policies and discourses rather than the collection of primary data.

Theoretical Framework: The Role and Security of Small States

The main challenge in studying small states lies in defining what constitutes a small state. This issue is complex, as many scholars do not rely solely on objective criteria such as geographic size or population. Thus, if we refer only to quantitative concepts, small states are viewed as countries that often depend on a few key export products and a limited number of foreign trade partners, and that build their international legitimacy through multilateralism, participation in international organizations, and the promotion of normative values such as human rights, democracy, and sustainable development. Therefore, the concept of a "small state" is not limited only to territorial size, population, or economic–political power but is linked to the capacity to influence the international system.

Smith, Pace, and Lee, in their recent discussion on small states, raise a fundamental question: should small states be categorized along geographic, demographic, or economic lines, or do institutions, resources, and power hold the key (Hey, 2003, p. 2)? Meanwhile, a more rational (qualitative) approach emphasizes that small states are those that cannot independently shape the global order but must maneuver within the hierarchies established in the international system. Hans Morgenthau, one of the classical realists, defines a small state as a state that is unable to impose its will on a larger state. For this reason, the concept of a "small state" is more appropriate when grounded in the perceptions that leaders and citizens have about their state and its role within the international hierarchy.

According to Keohane (1969), small states are those that cannot secure their defense through their own capabilities but depend on the support of great powers. Rothstein (1968) and Vital (1971) stress that such states often compensate for their lack of power through multilateralism and active diplomacy.

In an insecure international system, the issue of security becomes a central dimension of the foreign policy of small states. According to Jervis (1978), the security dilemma arises when the defensive measures of one state are perceived as a threat by others, creating spirals of mistrust and tension. This logic is clearly visible in the Western Balkans, where any action to strengthen sovereignty is often interpreted as a provocation by neighboring states.

According to *Shelter Theory* (Thorhallsson, 2018), small states seek security and prosperity through connections with international organizations and alliances with great powers. This explains why Western Balkan states view integration into NATO and the EU as an economic, political–diplomatic, and security shelter, as well as a guarantee of stability and international recognition.

Analysis of the Western Balkan States

The small states of the Western Balkans share common characteristics: limited economic and military capacities, dependence on external assistance, and aspirations to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures. The weakening of the international subjectivity of small states in the Western Balkans is linked to the concentration of power, state capture, and the lack of democratic reforms by their leaders, which has created serious dilemmas in their foreign policy and strategic orientation (Berisha, 2024). The six Balkan countries, despite historical and political differences, are characterized by a similar style of governance, classified as "hybrid regimes," where the dominance of strong leaders, clientelism, ethno-nationalism, and the lack of democratic consolidation directly influence the dynamics of regional cooperation (Freedom House, 2024). These governing models create an environment in which personal and political interests often dominate over institutions, producing selective and strategically motivated cooperation initiatives. An illustrative example is the rapprochement between Aleksandar Vučić and Edi Rama who, although coming from states with historical rivalries, have managed to build joint economic projects, such as the Open Balkan initiative, conceived as a regional market between Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia (Mirkovic, 2024).

However, each state has developed different political strategies. Kosovo represents a case of survival diplomacy. Since the declaration of independence in 2008, it has built its foreign policy around international recognitions and Euro-Atlantic integration. Nevertheless, the lack of membership in the UN and NATO on one hand, and persistent tensions with Serbia on the other, keep Kosovo in a highly fragile position. Despite this security dilemma, support from the United States and the EU provides it with a "security umbrella." Albania, as a NATO member since 2009, pursues an active foreign policy promoting integration and stability. Its participation in international missions and engagement in regional initiatives increases its diplomatic profile. North Macedonia, after joining NATO in 2020, has secured a framework of collective security; however, its EU integration process has been hindered by disputes with Bulgaria, creating political and societal frustration. Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina are more exposed to Russian influence and internal ethnic tensions, which limit their capacity for independent action. Serbia, although a candidate for EU membership, follows a balanced policy between the West and the East, maintaining close relations with Russia and China. This strategy of "multi-vector balancing" provides flexibility but increases regional uncertainties.

According to the Clingendael Institute report (2025), tensions in northern Kosovo, separatist tendencies in Bosnia, and the lack of progress in the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue remain the biggest threats to regional stability. Although the EU has reiterated its commitment to the region's integration, the process remains slow and often conditional. As a result, these states remain vulnerable and with limited capacities to protect their interests in the international arena, making EU and U.S. pressure and support essential to halt regressive tendencies.

Security Transformations in the Balkans After the War in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has significantly heightened geopolitical tensions and restored the centrality of security in the foreign policies of small states. For the Western Balkans, it has exposed both their dependence on Western security guarantees and the risks posed by Russian influence. Kosovo and Serbia continue to perceive each other as existential threats. Meanwhile, countries such as Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are increasingly focused on non-traditional risks, including cyberattacks, foreign interference, and energy vulnerability. Albania and Montenegro are experiencing strong Russian influence and hybrid security challenges, while North Macedonia is consolidating its Euro-Atlantic orientation (Marleku, 2025).

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains the most fragile case, where internal ethnic tensions and the destabilizing role of actors such as Milorad Dodik expose the country to the risk of fragmentation and external interference. Overall, after 2022, the region is facing a far more complex security environment in which traditional threats coexist with new hybrid and cyber challenges (Bushati, 2025).

As major powers such as the United States, Russia, and the European Union openly pursue policies based on national interests, the small states of the region are compelled to adapt to this new reality, where balancing has become increasingly difficult. Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia demonstrate that foreign policy is deeply shaped by domestic factors, partisan dependencies, and international pressure—reflecting institutional weaknesses and a lack of strategic coherence. The rise of right-wing parties in the EU and the United States adds further instability, making the resolution of outstanding issues—such as the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue—even more distant. In this context, the survival of small states requires rapid adaptation to the shifts of global actors, as acting outside this rhythm risks producing new crises and regional instability. Meanwhile, the outcome of peace negotiations in Ukraine is expected to be a key factor shaping foreign policy behavior in the Balkans (Ibrahimi, 2025).

The small states of the Western Balkans, therefore, face a strategic dilemma: maintaining their Euro-Atlantic orientation while not excluding cooperation with other actors. This "careful balancing" is a defining feature of the diplomacy of small states in today's multipolar order

Conclusion

In everyday international relations, small states continually face limitations imposed by their restricted possession of key power resources. At the same time, the international system is changing in multiple dimensions, and these transformations increasingly constrain the actions of small states. The new global circumstances—particularly the war in Ukraine—have made it more difficult for small states to secure a respected position and to realize their foreign policy interests, especially when priorities are not carefully defined in accordance with existing conditions and capabilities.

The small states of the Western Balkans operate in a complex environment where security, integration, and identity are closely intertwined. While structural constraints prevent them from exerting significant international influence, flexible

diplomacy and multilateral cooperation enable them to protect their national interests.

This study concludes that, despite the challenges, small states can leverage their advantages through:

- maintaining a consistent orientation toward the EU and NATO,
- adopting careful balancing strategies toward major powers, and
- strengthening their role as constructive actors in the region.

In the new fragmented global order, the survival and success of small states will depend on their ability to combine multilateral diplomacy with internal reform and the building of inter-state trust across the region.

References

Berisha, F. (2024, November 17). *Forcimi i pushtetit nga liderët e Ballkanit Perëndimor dhe dobësimi i subjektivitetit ndërkombëtar të shteteve*. [The strengthening of power by Western Balkan leaders and the weakening of the international subjectivity of states]. Bota Sot.

Bushati, D. (2025, November 12). *Frikë, poshtërim dhe shpresë në procesin e zgjerimit të BE-së*. [Fear, humiliation and hope in the EU enlargement process]. Balkanweb.

Clingendael Institute. (2025, March). *Security and stability scenarios for the Western Balkans*. The Hague: Clingendael Institute.

Hey, J. A. K. (2003a). Introduction of small states foreign policy. In J. A. K. Hey (Ed.), *Small states in world politics: Explaining foreign policy behaviour* (p. 2). Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Hey, J. A. K. (2003b). *Small states in world politics: Explaining foreign policy behavior*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Ibrahimi, S. (2025). *Ndërveprimi i interesave kombëtare në stabilitetin e Ballkanit Perëndimor*. [The interaction of national interests in the stability of the Western Balkans]. Portalb.mk.

Keohane, R. O. (1969). Lilliputians' dilemmas: Small states in international politics. *International Organization, 23*(2), 291–310.

Marleku, A. (2025). *Ballkani përballë kërcënimeve të reja: Lufta në Ukrainë ndryshon pikëpamjet e sigurisë* [Balkans facing new threats: War in Ukraine changes security views]. SBunker.

Rothstein, R. L. (1968). *Alliances and small powers*. Columbia University Press.

Thorhallsson, B. (2018). *Small states and shelter theory: Iceland's external affairs*. Routledge.

Vital, D. (1971). *The survival of small states: Studies in small power/great power conflict*. Oxford University Press.