

COMMON SECURITY DENOMINATOR OF THE WESTERN BALKANS IN THE THIRD DECADE OD 21ST CENTURY: RISKS, OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Marjan Gjurovski¹

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute for Security, Defence and Peace

Mitko Arnaudov²

Institute of International Politics and Economics
Centre for Neighboring and Mediterranean countries, Belgrade

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to identify the key security risks in the area of the Western Balkans, which are actually the common denominator in attempts at cooperation, coordination and integration in the field of creating defense and security policies, on regional and national level. Apart from the identification of security risks that determine the viability of Western Balkan actors, the fact that it is a region that is not fully integrated within the NATO defense and security infrastructure, partial integration will be used as a variable in the analysis of cooperation opportunities, in the political and contractual context. Finally, the capacities of regional cooperation in the field of security, determined by bilateral and regional agreement frameworks, will be presented. The contribution of this work in a scientific sense will be the answer to the question of how much the potential joint action of small states in the face of modern security risks affects the process of creating security sustainability at the individual (state) level, as the ultimate goal in understanding national interests.

Keywords: Western Balkans, NATO, security, common denominator, risks, cooperation, coordination, integration.

Introduction

Security in the contemporary international relations represents the most used word within political and business elite. From one side, politicians are worried about ongoing negative trends in the context of security, bearing in mind the widening of war zones throughout the world. From the other side, business elite (economic, investment and financial companies) are worried about the endangering of their business routes because of the security challenges, threats and risks, as a consequence of numerous armed clashes. In fact, the concept of security (in contemporary international relations) is taken as the most sensitive and important issue for each individual, society and country (Baral, 2017, p. 1).

Generally, security politics plays important role in national politics of each state, but nowadays, it is also subject of foreign policy strategies of national states, bearing in mind the international platforms based to security issues. NATO is one of the most prominent and

¹ Contact address: marjan.gjurovski@zf.ukim.edu.mk

² Contact address: mitko@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs

media represented international organization which is based on the security issues, risks and threats of its member-states. At the beginning, established as an military alliance during the Cold War era, modern NATO represents an organization which focus is multi-vector, based not only to so-called traditional threats which are endangering national security mosaic from the perspective of territorial integrity and political sovereignty, but it represents a platform for dealing a huge number of contemporary and modern threats which are present in different sectors - from classical military threats, throughout the health and economic risks, to the cyber space obstacles and challenges.

In this context, closely related to international security and military platforms, there are small states which are facing limited resources when it comes to instruments and mechanisms in establishing and managing national security politics. From the perspective of realists, stable, sustainable and predictable security politics could lead exclusively big states, or so-called big powers which are possessing wide and permanent resources for establishing and performing security politics in according with their national interests. From the other side, as the realist scholars understand, small states are not able to lead independent security policy because of the lack of power and resources, so, in such context, they are exclusively dependent to adjustment to security policy courses of big powers.

In this article authors will try to explain the maneuvering space of small states in the processes of establishing and managing security politics within the Western Balkans framework using their limited resources and NATO membership as an double indicator which will lead us to the answer the three following questions: Do small states could lead independent security policy?; Do NATO membership in the context of Western Balkans represents a variable which determines the security sustainability of Western Balkans actors?; and Do Western Balkan actors are able to perform coordinated security politics on regional basis in the actual circumstances?

From the empirical perspective, authors will use the examples of Covid-19 pandemic, Ukrainian War and Balkan migrant routes - three different security challenges for Western Balkans actors that could be sufficient platform for reaching answers to the previously placed questions in this study.

At the same time, empirical examples of security issues within Western Balkans will represent a good basis for contemporary understanding of security, as a phenomena that is part of each social sector and as a phenomena which is not related only to the political sovereignty and territorial integrity, but to numerous institutional flows, national and regional, which determine sustainability, as a key point in contemporary understanding of security on different levels, as it explains professor Ejodus (Ejodus, 2022).

In the context of small states, but also generally in the context of security, as a science, the findings of the paper would be relevant platform for understanding the importance of cooperation, coordination and integration when it comes to contemporary security challenges, risks and threats, but also for understanding the concept of sustainability in actual international relations which could be analyzed as a contrary point of isolation - as a political, economic or security instrument. In fact, paper will provide an explanation about interdependence that is, in the process of facing with contemporary security issues, placed as a pre-condition.

Security policy of small states

Throughout the history, “decisive element in the concept of security was a military force. In the second half of the 20th century, the security dilemma it suddenly has moved towards a wider area of social life, whereby non-military security threats has become increasingly important place, and the source of state power is shifting from strictly military factors and its accompanying elements towards technology, human education potential and market control” (Gaćinović, 2018, p. 176). This explanation given by Radoslav Gaćinović provides essential basis for understanding the role of small states in the international security framework. At the same time, such explanation leads us toward wider understanding of the concept of national security which is still composed with military elements, but not exclusively. In that context, we could move further and add that “the security of each country rests on its elements national powers, which are primarily: the size of the territory; economic strength; geographical position; raw materials; dependence on foreign markets; technical and technological capacity; national character; effectiveness of government to implement decisions; production power; reserves; educational level of the population and national morale and internal solidarity” (Gaćinović, 2018, p. 176). Such explanation of the concept of security provides much more options for understanding the management of security policy from the perspective of small states, allowing them to play important role not exclusively in creation its own security policy, but also on the regional and international level. In fact, mentioned explanation, contrary to the position of classical realists, provides to small states numerous mechanisms for acting in the security politics sphere, and, on that basis, promoting its own national interests. The modern understanding of security is more multidimensional and more comprehensively, and not only in terms of its interior vertical, sectoral and horizontal breakdowns meaning (Ejdus, 2022): it is seen as a state, organization and function. “Security as a state represents protection.” of some good, value, legacy of society (Gajic, 2020, p. 64).

Concretely, from the challenges perspective, „small states face many challenges, some of which are crucial to their existence. In addition to traditional military threats, small states today also face non-traditional security challenges such as terrorism, environmental disasters, hybrid threats, cyber attacks or economic and social vulnerabilities” (Vaicekauskaitė, 2017, p. 9). In a huge manner, non-traditional challenges, risks and threats represent the focal point of understanding the role of small states within contemporary security flows. Those are challenges, risks and threats which consequences do not endanger the territorial integrity and political sovereignty directly of the states (no matter whether it is small states or big powers), but indirectly cause damages to the different sectors and levels (as it explains professor Filip Ejdus) that subsequently brought into question the sustainability of the states as a whole system. In that context, “opposite of the claiming of Thorhallson that small states need security guarantees of powerful states or organizations to survive” (Vaicekauskaitė, 2017, p. 9), nowadays this so-called group of states are also active part of the wider cross-border security infrastructure which is a kind of pre-condition for facing and managing with contemporary and ongoing security challenges, risks and threats.

But, active performing of security policy by small states, does not mean that this group of states are exclusively autonomous in creation its own, national security policy. At the same time previous statement do not cofirms the classical realists position that small states are incapable to lead its own security policy. The truth is, in the context of

contemporary regional and international flows, somewhere in the middle. Small states are actively participating in creation and managing security policies, on internal, regional and international level, but their role is limited, like the role of big powers, although the resources and their capacities seems that are unlimited. In fact, the precise understanding is that contemporary security challenges, risks and threats do not recognize the power which is able to face them on unlimited basis in the context of capacities. Each subject of international relations nowadays has a substantial role in the security context because of the cross-border nature of challenges, risks and threats. In that context, small states could be operational player in security policies, with certain internal preconditions which make them reliable on the regional and international scene. As it explains Walt, "alliances usually bring together members with similar strategic interests and ideologies and are mutually reinforcing" (Vaicekauskaitė, 2017, p. 11), but we have to add that being part of alliances nowadays does not mean only common interests and goals, but also certain internal institutional preconditions fulfillment which, especially in the case of small states, allows this group of states to take active part of certain alliances.

Small states active performing of security policy in contemporary international relations is not just a provided benefit by scholars and strategists which have found the place of these states in creating and managing security policies, but huge responsibility which allows these states to create effective and efficient internal institutional infrastructure, to become reliable and equal player within international relations and thus to reject the negative opinions about their incompetence in leading security policy, including promotion of national interests on the autonomous basis, but in partnership with other actors.

WESTERN BALKANS ACTORS IN THE FIELD OF SECURITY - POTENTIALS AND OBSTACLES FOR COOPERATION, COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION

There are no doubts that political entities within the Western Balkans states are facing with the similar or the same challenges, risks and threats from the security perspective. Those are political entities which are placed in a narrow geographic area which by default means that it is almost impossible to discuss about different security flows between mentioned actors. In fact, since the desintegration of the former Yugoslav Federation, Belgrade, Skopje, Pristine, Podgorica, Sarajevo and Tirana are facing on internal, regional, wider European and global level with same security obstacles which are challenging their national security.

SECURITY CHALLENGES, RISKS AND THREATS – WESTERN BALKANS			
	DOMESTIC		
	Political / Institutional (Freedom House (2023, pp. 7–8, as cited in Proroković et al., 2024, pp. 431-432))	Economic	Security
B E L G R A D E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ elite-driven politics and diplomacy have excluded the voices of civil society and ordinary citizens ▪ antidemocratic and authoritarian leaders ▪ elections marred by irregularities ▪ power concentration and weak institutions, coupled with low public trust and political favouritism (Zamfir, 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Serbia scores below at least two of its Western Balkan ▪ neighbours in the areas of trade, energy and tax policies, highlighting the areas requiring improvement for ▪ achieving convergence with the European Union (EU) (OECD, 2024, p. 22) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ potentions for crisis and clashes on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija ▪ criminal settlements ▪ administrative line between central Serbia and Kosovo and Metohija ▪ Islamist radicalism in the Sandžak region ▪ political radicalization ▪ international migrant routes (so-called Balkan route)
S K O P J E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ elite-driven politics and diplomacy have excluded the voices of civil society and ordinary citizens ▪ antidemocratic and authoritarian leaders ▪ acute political dysfunction ▪ strong political polarization ▪ parliamentary blockades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ North Macedonia is among the lowest performers in the areas of tourism, digital society and transport policy, scoring below four of its Western Balkan neighbours, highlighting the areas requiring improvement for achieving convergence with the European Union (EU) and the OECD (OECD, 2024, p. 24) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Capacites of potential ethnic tensions ▪ international migrant routes (so-called Balkan route) ▪ Islamist radicalism ▪ terrorist cells ▪ political extremism (attack of National Assembly in 2017 ("Završena Evakuacija iz Sobraanja; Deseci Povrijeđenih," 2017)

<p>S A R A J E V O</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ elite-driven politics and diplomacy have excluded the voices of civil society and ordinary citizens ▪ antidemocratic and authoritarian leaders ▪ ethnically aligned political parties contributes to hindering or boycotting normal government decision-making (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bosnia and Herzegovina is significantly lagging in the areas of digital society, agriculture, education and tourism policy, scoring below all of its Western Balkan neighbours, highlighting the areas requiring substantial improvement for achieving convergence with the European Union (EU) (OECD, 2024, p. 23) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ political confrontations between Sarajevo and Banjaluka as a generator of armed conflict ▪ Islamist radicalism ▪ heritage of inter-ethnic and civil war ▪ unresolved civil issues from the nineties wars on ethnic lines ▪ overlapping of police and defense powers between entities ▪ international migrant routes.
<p>T I R A N A</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ elite-driven politics and diplomacy have excluded the voices of civil society and ordinary citizens ▪ antidemocratic and authoritarian leaders ▪ institutions are challenged by clientelistic party politics ▪ lagging judicial vetting process ▪ special anticorruption courts made small strides in addressing graft 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Albania scores under the regional average in both SOEs and science, technology and innovation (STI) (OECD, 2024, p. 24) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ international migrant routes (so-called Balkan route) ▪ criminal activities with weapons and drugs ▪ weak border control ▪ political polarization and extremism ▪ unresolved status of Kosovo and Metohija
<p>P R I S T I N E</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ elite-driven politics and diplomacy have excluded the voices of civil society and ordinary citizens ▪ antidemocratic and authoritarian leaders ▪ an uptick in violence in the Serb-majority north 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Kosovo government's move to impose a ban on the use and import of the Serbian dinar (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 11) ▪ Kosovo authorities raided Serbian villages across its southern territories and confiscated Serbian dinars from local post 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ tensions and violent clashes in northern Kosovo between ethnic Serbs and Kosovo Police (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 2) ▪ A row over new license plate requirements in 2021 reignited tensions in northern Kosovo

<p>P R I S T I N E</p>		<p>offices (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kosovo falls behind in the areas of science, technology and innovation (STI), employment, anti-corruption, and access to finance policies, scoring below at least four of its Western Balkan neighbours, highlighting the areas requiring substantial improvement for achieving convergence with the European Union (EU) (OECD, 2024, p. 19) 	<p>(Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 10)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ about 30 gunmen clashed with police in Banjska in northern Kosovo and barricaded themselves inside a Serbian orthodox monastery, resulting in a siege that killed one police officer and the three attackers (Dunai (2022, as cited in „Siege of Serb monastery in Kosovo ends after militants withdraw“, 2023) ▪ vulnerable in the political domain because of uncertainty about a future conflict due to Kosovo’s status (unrecognised statehood), lack of trust in institutions and political parties, political favouritism and inefficiency of the political system (Zamfir, 2020, p. 12)
<p>P O D G O R I C A</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ elite-driven politics and diplomacy have excluded the voices of civil society and ordinary citizens ▪ antidemocratic and authoritarian leaders ▪ acute political dysfunction ▪ political polarization ▪ lawmakers pushed through legislation that undermined citizens’ basic rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Montenegro scores below at least four of its Western Balkan neighbours in the areas of tax, energy and agriculture policies, highlighting the areas requiring substantial improvement for achieving convergence with the European Union (EU) (OECD, 2024, p. 22) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ spreading criminal activities with drugs and weaponing led by mafia groups ▪ weak border control ▪ inter-ethnic animosities ▪ political polarization and extremism

REGIONAL			
	Political/Institutional	Economic	Security
WESTERN BALKANS SIXIX	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ border disputes and minority rights continue to fuel political disputes across the region ▪ the most high-profile enduring and volatile regional security challenge is the ongoing dispute between Belgrade and Pristina ▪ Kremlin could use its influence in the Western Balkans to destabilise the region (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 9) ▪ Russia and China have extensive ties to the region – Russia through energy and political cooperation and China through investment and economic ties (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 12) ▪ Since the Cold War, Russia has leveraged the region’s sectarian divisions, making inroads with local leaders (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 12) ▪ deep domestic divisions over the strategic agenda (Zamfir, 2020, p. 8) ▪ state capture (Zamfir, 2020, p. 8) <p>paralysed capacities of state to fulfil its functions (Zamfir, 2020, p. 8)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kosovo issue is a hurdle to closer and more effective regional economic cooperation (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 8) ▪ Pristina has imposed 100 % tariffs on Serbian goods and imports from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2018) ▪ Easy access to Russian natural gas from pipelines spanning the Black Sea has complicated regional efforts to diversify energy supplies (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 12) ▪ Unlike European loans which come with conditions to safeguard social, political, economic and environmental rights, Chinese loans have few strings attached. This makes Chinese capital attractive, but it comes at a cost: contracts lack transparency, Chinese firms use low quality materials, and their practices entrench corruption, damage the environment, and violate human rights (Stanicek & Tarpova, 2022) ▪ reducing border clearance (World Bank Group, 2024) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kosovo issue is a contributor to the power vacuums that create opportunities for criminal networks to exploit the region as avenue, arena and area for the trafficking of arms, drugs and people (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 8) ▪ The mass resignation of Serbs from the police forces in northern Kosovo has left a relative security vacuum in the region that will likely only feed further security challenges in the region (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 11) ▪ A steady uptick in violence since 2022 in Kosovo is a worrying trend and is further complicating (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 10) <p>Introduction of Chinese arms in the Western Balkans threatens to increase military tensions (Defence and Security Committee (DSC), 2024, p. 14)</p>

<p>W E S T E R N B A L K A N S S I X</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the standards of living in WB6 are well below those of the OECD and EU (OECD, 2024) ▪ persistent inflation (World Bank Group, 2024) ▪ outward migration (World Bank Group, 2024) ▪ modernizing payment systems (World Bank Group, 2024) ▪ reforms and investments to expand public transport systems (World Bank Group, 2024) ▪ shifting to greener, more energy-efficient buildings (World Bank Group, 2024) ▪ Extreme heat in cities, with temperatures up to 4.5–7.5°C hotter in summer compared with rural surroundings negatively affect productivity and human health (World Bank Group, 2024) ▪ modernizing payment systems (World Bank Group, 2024) ▪ reforms and investments to expand public transport systems (World Bank Group, 2024) ▪ shifting to greener, more energy-efficient buildings (World Bank Group, 2024) ▪ Extreme heat in cities, with temperatures up to 4.5–7.5°C hotter in summer compared with rural surroundings negatively affect productivity and human health (World Bank Group, 2024) 	
--	--	--	--

INTERNATIONAL			
	Political/Institutional	Economic	Security
W E S T E R N B A L K A N S S I X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ hybrid threats ▪ COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank Group, 2024) <p>Malign influence in the Western Balkans undermines the governance of these countries, the rule of law, their Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and in extreme cases may even lead to (de facto or de jure) loss of sovereignty (Zamfir, 2020, , p. 8)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Persistent weakness in global growth, especially in the Eurozone, would translate into weaker investment and trade with the region (World Bank Group, 2024) <p>energy crisis (World Bank Group, 2024)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ flare-ups in geopolitical tensions (World Bank Group, 2024) ▪ Ukrainian War ▪ Tactical and non-tactical nuclear threats ▪ Global warming <p>Climate changes</p>

The multiple tabular presentation composed of various relevant sources and the analysis of the author of the paper points to the thesis that we put forward at the very beginning of this paper, respectively. that political actors (Western Balkans Six) in the Western Balkans are facing similar and the same challenges, risks and threats that have arisen on the basis of internal, regional and international political, economic and security developments and flows. We have actually used Ejduš's understanding of security in modern international relations to show, using the example of political entities in the Western Balkans, how modern security challenges, risks and threats represent a common denominator within the mentioned region that through cooperation, coordination and integration can contribute to essential regional integration, but also to the sustainability of political entities in this geographical area.

Ukrainian war and Covid-19 pandemic as indicators in potentials for security cooperation, coordination and integration

Covid-19

Both crises with a significant global influence have also had a huge impact to the political, economic and security flows within Western Balkans. The first one, Covid-19 pandemic has shown the vulnerabilities of the health infrastructures of political entities in the mentioned region. Although Western Balkans Six have had different approach in resolving this global health crisis, the negative impact of the pandemic, especially at the beginning of it, had shown numerous of health care obstacles which Western Balkans Six are facing. As an example we could mention the data-tracking Johns Hopkins University from 2020 according which Western Balkans see highest COVID deaths per 100,000 globally (Ozturk, 2022). As of 31 January 2022, the historical average of excess deaths in the region was at 560 deaths per

100 000 inhabitants, well above the OECD (407) and EU (249) averages (OECD, 2022, p. 58). Such numbers provide concrete information about the health system issues that are facing Western Balkans political entities. From such perspective, there were no differences in the process of dealing with the crises, although Serbia was the first country in the region that was able to import different sources vaccines, as well as to build specialized health centers and hospitals for dealing Covid-19's challenges.

The high percentage of death cases within Western Balkans, mostly as a consequence of weak health care institutional framework during the Covid-19 pandemic is a textbook example about the challenges, risks and threats that are facing political entities of the mentioned region. There were numerous examples of inter-regional assistance, especially from Serbia, as it were donating vaccines to neighboring political entities, as well as opening its borders for vaccinating the citizens from the region, but obviously it were not absolutely sufficient measures that could lower the percentage of deaths in the Covid-19 period. The point could be pre-pandemic cooperation, coordination and integration with the ongoing challenges, risks and threats, as a pre-condition for sufficient facing with upcoming issues and obstacles. In the context of Covid-19 pandemic, if there was regional interest for coordinated resolving national health care issues that have been acute for decades, it could be assumed that Western Balkans Six would be prepared for efficient and effective dealing with such global crisis.

In the article Covid-19 pandemic represents an indicator that has shown two assumptions: first one, if there were common regional approach with pre-pandemic coordination from the point of health care systems. we could assume that political entities within the region would be more adequately prepared for facing a health crisis with such intensity; from the other side, almost the same challenges and consequences that Western Balkans Six have faced during pandemic, from health, but also economic and social perspective, explains the necessity of cooperation, coordination and integration in the context of providing stronger and unified response for large-scale and cross-border security threats, as it was Covid-19.

Ukrainian War

Ukrainian War is another essentially important indicator for understanding the welfare of regional cooperation, coordination and integration within Western Balkans framework. Including the cooperation, coordination and integration in the field of contemporary security challenges, risks and threats which in the case of above mentioned war have shown that are intersected and interdependent. In fact, Ukrainian War which for the first time after World War 2 brought into question the peace in the whole Europe has caused so-called traditional security threats, as well as, at the same time, numerous political, energetic, economic and migrant risks and challenges. From the Western Balkans perspective there was evident political divergence in the context of the European sanctions against Russian Federation. While other political entities in the Western Balkans has followed the EU sanctions imposed against Moscow, Belgrade has decided to point out that "it is very wrong to violate the territorial integrity of any country, including Ukraine", but at the same time not to follow EU foreign policy measures against Russia, referring 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, not even its representatives or economic entities, as well as reminding it was not possible

to impose sanctions on Russia, because it was the only one that did not impose sanctions in the 90s, did not impose sanctions on Republika Srpska, protected Serbia in 2015 at the United Nations when it vetoed the adoption of the resolution on Srebrenica, and maintains the position of the Resolution 1244 as a permanent member of the Security Council (Gjurovski et al., 2023, pp. 18-19).

This different Serbian approach regarding the EU measures against Russian Federation in comparison to other Western Balkans parties has brought misunderstanding not only in the relations between Belgrade and Brussels, but also within Western Balkans. While the Open Balkans Initiative was brought into question due to the lack of comprehensive Western Balkans involvement, Skopje, Tirana, Pristine and Podgorica has launched new regional platform on 100% compliance with the foreign policy of the European Union "Western Balkans QUAD - 100 percent compliance with EU foreign policy" ("Sjeverna Makedonija, Albanija, Kosovo i Crna Gora pokrenuli regionalnu platformu," 2023). "After Russia's aggression against Ukraine, alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU, but also more broadly with the positions and values of the democratic world, turned into one of the most important priorities of the countries that strive for EU membership. It is also a clear message of where these countries belong", said former North Macedonia foreign minister Bujar Osmani ("Sjeverna Makedonija, Albanija, Kosovo i Crna Gora Pokrenuli Regionalnu Platformu," 2023).

From the energetic and economic perspective, Ukrainian War has also shown how much the regional cooperation, coordination and integration in the field of security is important. If there was a common pre-war approach in energetic issues, as a necessity of resources diversification, Western Balkans entities, except Serbia, would not be faced with substantial energetic crisis during the first year of the conflict, as well as high resources prices in the ongoing period. From the other side, common regional approach in the field of energy probably would not brought official Belgrade to the position to be continuously criticized at the political level because of energetic ties with Moscow, although the absolute dependence of this country of the Russian energetic resources.

With lower intensity, but at the same time respectable from the point of Western Balkans security mosaic, are also migrant and social challenges as a consequence of Ukrainian War. There are intra-state and regional polarization between national, ethnic and religious groups and societies regarding positioning toward mentioned conflict, but also the positioning to the flows of Ukrainian refugees and Russian emigrants. Bearing in mind the weak and fragile social cohesion within Western Balkans, it is important, from the negative perspective, to point out the Ukrainian War represents one additional contributor of tensions at the regional level. Although it is political, social and media discourse, bearing in mind fragile and weak inter-social peace in the Western Balkans, such contributor has a strong negative impact to the long-term process of reconciliation.

In fact, Ukrainian War represents an important indicator which shows numerous of obstacles that are the reason and the consequence of the lack of regional cooperation, coordination and integration. From one side, different political positioning and public discourse are raising the instability potentials in the Western Balkans. From the other side, lack of regional cooperation, coordination and integration raises other modern security aspects - endangering economic sustainability, lack of energetic diversification, additional political polarization, slow down to European integration path and, because of that, endangering the

strategic foreign policy goal - EU membership, as a crucial common denominator in the region.

Conclusion and recommendations

In the tabular presentation, we have shown through model levels and sectors how modern security challenges, risks and threats are similar, and to a large extent identical, in the politically defined area of the Western Balkans. In fact, the tabular presentation served as a case study in this work, which is actually the basis for understanding first - the security challenges, risks and threats faced by the political entities in the Western Balkans, then showed their intertwining on the internal, regional and international level, and then also hinted at the consequences of lack or, more precisely, insufficient regional cooperation, coordination and integration in the field of security.

On the other hand, we have shown that these are challenges that do not fundamentally determine the level of cooperation, coordination and integration in the Western Balkans, even though we are talking about political entities, some of which are fully integrated into NATO (Tirana, Podgorica, Skopje), some enjoy a degree of close cooperation and coordination with NATO (especially Pristina and Sarajevo) and some that have reached the level of quality cooperation and communication with NATO (Belgrade) based on the sovereign decision on military neutrality.

This is actually a fundamentally important indicator that provides a double answer, one in an academic and one in a pragmatic context: first, that contemporary challenges, risks and threats require regional cooperation of small states, thus making them a relevant factor in the comprehensive global security mosaic; secondly, membership in NATO in the context of contemporary challenges, risks and threats does not determine or exclude cooperation with partners outside the security and military framework of the Alliance.

When it comes to the global pandemic Covid-19 and the Ukrainian war, the challenges, risks and threats faced by the Western Balkan six are shown, as well as the consequences that would be significantly reduced if a coordinated response was provided at the regional level. Although there was noticeable regional cooperation, especially at the technical level of procurement of medical supplies and vaccines, in the context of the consequences, there was a lack of synchronized pre-pandemic coordination in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of the health system, which would have a significant impact on dealing with security risks in the health sector. The pandemic Covid-19 was a textbook example of modern security challenges, how important preventive action and coordination are, and how small states actually play a role in modern security trends. In addition, how much potential regional cooperation, coordination and integration would contribute to a more efficient and effective response. When it comes to the Ukrainian war, the empirical example of the positioning and approach of political entities in the Western Balkans shows how dangerous the absence of essential cooperation in modern security trends is in the process of creating a sustainable security environment, especially in parts of the world, such as the analyzed region in this study, where so-called negative peace still represents a significant determinant of political, social, economic and security conditions. Although there was a compromise related to condemning the Russian military action on the Ukrainian territory, different national approaches in the context of sanctions policy and relations with Moscow in the following period, were determinators of new wave of political

and rhetoric clashes between regional political elite which additionally contributed to the anymosities within the Western Balkans.

Thus this paper has accomplished the defined goal, from academic/theoretical, as well as empirical perspective. Contemporary security challenges, risks and threats have shown that small states, as well, are playing important role in the global security framework, in the context of reaching sustainability. Contemporary security challenges, risks and threats have shown that cooperation, coordination and integration represents a kind of pre-condition for facing with them, especially because of their cross-border nature. In that context cooperation, coordination and integration on regional level plays even more substantial role. And, at the end, limited cooperation, coordination and integration within the Western Balkans shows the consequences of it, while numerous ongoing challenges, risks and threats at different levels and in different sectors are showing the potentials and capacities of the essence of security cooperation, coordination and integration.

Three key measures are crucial in the process of establishing regional grounds, in the context of Western Balkans, for cooperation, coordination and integration in the security sector:

- Political will that isolates daily politics as a benchmark for political decisions, especially those one decisions related to potentials of regional platforms
- Social understanding isolated from the rhetoric and interpretations of civil wars in the post-Yugoslav area
- Essential understanding of contemporary challenges, risks and threats, as well as understanding of the regionalism as a strong and positive momentum in contemporary international relations in the process of reaching sustainability.

References

- Baral, B. (2017). Security challenges of small states. *Journal of Political Science*, 17, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jps.v17i0.20510>.
- Defence and Security Committee (DSC). (2024). Preliminary Draft Report Lord Mark LANCASTER (United Kingdom) Rapporteur: Western Balkans: Renewed Security Challenges on Nato's Doorstep. In nato-pa.int. NATO Parliamentary Assembly. <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2024-05/050%20DSCFC%2024%20E%20rev1%20-%20WESTERN%20BAL-KANS%20-%20LANCASTER%20REPORT.pdf>.
- Ejdus, F. (2022). *Međunarodna bezbednost: teorije, sektori i nivoi* (3rd edition (1st edition in Clio)). Fakultet političkih nauka Univerziteta: Clio. <https://filipejdus.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/02-Medunarodna-bezbednost-teorije-sektori-i-nivoi-web.pdf>
- Gaćinović, R. (2018). Politika bezbednosti malih država. *Srpska Politička Misao*, 59(1), 169-183. <https://doi.org/10.22182/spm.5912018.9>.
- Gajic, A. (2020). Bezbednosne strategije malih država u savremenom svetu: Slučaj Srbije. *Politika Nacionalne Bezbednosti*, 19(2/2020), 63-87. <https://doi.org/10.22182/pnb.1922020.3>.

- Gjurovski, M., Arnaudov, M., & Hadžić, N. (2023). Towards a Better Future: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions [International Scientific Conference]. In *Conclusion of the Council for National Security of the Republic of Serbia adopted on the Occasion of the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022*. University "St. Kliment Ohridski"- Bitola, Faculty of Law - Kicevo. https://pfk.uklo.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2024/01/con_proc_tbf_peace_justice_and_strong_institutions-1.pdf.
- OECD (2022), *Multi-dimensional Review of the Western Balkans: From Analysis to Action*, OECD Development Pathways, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/8824c5db-en>.
- OECD (2024), *Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024: Serbia, Competitiveness and Private Sector Development*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3699c0d5-en>.
- Ozturk, T. (2022, January 28). Western Balkans see highest COVID deaths per 100,000 globally. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/western-balkans-see-highest-covid-deaths-per-100-000-globally/2488457>.
- Proroković, D., Sellari, P., & Mifsud, R. (Eds.). (2024). Global security and international relations after the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis. https://doi.org/10.18485/iipe_gsirescu.2024.
- Radio Slobodna Evropa. (2018, November 21). Kosovo uvelo carine od 100 odsto Srbije i BiH, Mogerini pozvala na ukidanje odluke. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-uvelo-carine-od-100-odsto-srbiji-i-bih/29613265.html>.
- Siege of Serb monastery in Kosovo ends after militants withdraw. (2023, September 24). *The Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/2a99e631-dc6e-4788-b1f-0d021c9694add>.
- Sjeverna Makedonija, Albanija, Kosovo i Crna Gora pokrenuli regionalnu platformu. (2023, March 29). *Al Jazeera Balkans*. <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2023/3/29/sjeverna-makedonija-albanija-kosovo-i-crna-gora-pokrenuli-regionalnu-platformu>.
- Stanicek, B., & Tarpova, S. (2022). China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. In *europarl.europa.eu*. European Parliamentary Research Service. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf).
- Vaicekauskaitė, Ž. M. (2017). Security strategies of small states in a changing world. *Journal on Baltic Security*. *Journal on Baltic Security*, 3(2), 7–15. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jobs-2017-0006>. (*Global Security and International Relations After the Escalation of the Ukrainian Crisis*, 2024).

- *Western Balkans Economic Growth to Quicken This Year and Next but Reforms Crucial to Bolster Long-Term Prospects.* (2024, April 11). worldbank.org. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/04/11/western-balkans-economic-growth-to-quicken-this-year-and-next-but-reforms-crucial-to-bolster-long-term-prospects> PRESS RELEASE NO: 2024/ECA/089.
- Zamfir, R. Risks and Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans. (2020). In stratcomcoe.org. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/risks_and_vulnerabilities_in_the_wb_30apr_1-9931a.pdf.