

THE ROLE OF SMALL STATES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AFTER THE BEGINNING OF UKRANIAN WAR IN 2022 – CASE STUDY OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA

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Abstract

The role of small states in international relations throughout history has been the subject of theorists of the science of international relations, and even today there is a lively debate about whether, in what way and to what extent small states contribute to international relations in ongoing processes in international relations. The key question that dominates the realistic theory of international relations is whether small states can have an independent foreign policy at all, thus whether they can have independent foreign policy strategies or their role in international relations is subordinated to the great powers. In this paper, on the example of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Serbia, we will try to analyze and explain the role of small states in current international relations, and in the context of the Ukrainian war. Thus, we will provide a new contribution to the science of international relations on the foreign policy role and foreign policy activities of small states in international relations, while, on a practical level, we will show that there are no unchangeable rules determining foreign policy actions of small states, both in theory and practice. The positioning of North Macedonia, as a permanent member state of NATO and Serbia, as a military neutral country, but both politically committed to the European future, respectively membership in the EU, will serve as an example in this paper that will provide a scientific explanation that not always small countries make dependent foreign policy decisions, regardless of the fact of their foreign policy orientation.

Keywords: Small states, foreign policy strategy, Ukrainian war. North Macedonia, Serbia

1. Small states foreign policy - existence of unsustainable

In the history of international relations, many representatives of the theories have raised into question the foreign policy of small states. According to Steinsson and Thorhallsson “small states are certainly disadvantaged in the international system. Having a small population inherently inhibits the aggregate structural power of that state, as well as creating hurdles that need to be compensated for and unique needs

that have to be fulfilled. Small states are geographically and economically diverse, and thus face different challenges in terms of security and welfare”(Steinsson & Thorhallsson, 2017).

From different angles researchers of international relations have analyzed the potentials of small states foreign policy, from one side, while from the other side representatives of realistic theory have brought into question the topic - do small states at all could have their national foreign policy strategy. Until today in the science of international relations there are no clear theoretical position whether small states could have its own foreign policy, what are the capacities of foreign policy of small states and which resources are in disposal to small states in the process of realization their foreign policy, as well as their foreign policy goals. If we compare big states with the small ones, we could understand about the dependence of foreign policy from national resources and capacities of one certain state. Realists usually are pointing out on hard power, visible in national military resources, which according to them plays key role in the foreign policy activities of one state, but there are also different types of soft power which could also essentially contribute in foreign policy activities - like economic performances, natural resources, cultural heritage, traditional inter-state partnerships, as well as many different technological areas which especially in contemporary international relations play significant role in foreign policies. In contemporary international relations many small states play important role on the international stage. Some of them, because of their geostrategic position, important for so-called great powers, while the other ones, because of their natural resources, at the same time also important for great powers from economic perspective. “It is futile to analyze small states’ foreign policies without considering the inherent disadvantages to being small, which shape both foreign policy choices and outcomes. Most importantly, small states have less aggregate structural power (the total amount of resources and capabilities that can be employed) than large states”(Steinsson & Thorhallsson, 2017). What is essential in creating a foreign policy strategy for small countries and in implementing such a foreign policy is the need for political decision-makers in small and micro countries to always have a clear understanding and synchronization of national security interests, on the one hand, and national economic interests, on the other side.

As an example, from economic perspective, we can mention Norway, as a small state in the northern Europe, but with huge amounts of natural gas, which is one of the key determinants for further strengthening of European economy. From the other side, from geostrategic perspective, we can mention Bulgaria, as a country with significantly small economic performances, but with important position for its allies within NATO and European Union. But such thesis raises another question on board. What about the small states without strong economic performances, without natural resources and without geographic position which could be of interest for so-called great powers? Do these small states are absolutely unable to lead any kind of

foreign policy, or there is some adequate space for performing it? If we are trying to explain this theoretical issue, visible in practice on daily basis, through realistic approach, then it is very difficult to expect success of foreign policies of those small states. But, we cannot accept realistic approach in this case study as a defined rule, because on the example to ongoing Ukrainian war we can find out different small state's experiences in leading their foreign policies in this so-called multipolar era, without clear visibility in which direction it moves on. In fact, also on the example of Ukrainian war we could see numerous of small states which are adjusting their foreign policies in accordance with foreign policy guidelines of great powers, but also there are certain small states which their foreign policy is not in accordance with the stated discourse of great powers, no matter whether we are talking about powers which are close to the position of Kiev or Moscow.

Before we start with concrete explanation of foreign policy activities of small states since the beginning of Ukrainian war we have to point out that the case study is not only focused on Serbia and North Macedonia just because the fact the one of them has declared military neutrality, while the other one is NATO member, but because of the fact the both states are on the EU path, so with clear political commitment and precise foreign policy goal, but at the same time without identical coordination with EU institutions related to conflict between Ukraine and Russian Federation. Serbia, as well as North Macedonia is on European path toward fully membership, although Belgrade is leading in that process not just in comparison to Skopje, but also to all other actors of Western Balkans. But none of those actors from Western Balkans, including Belgrade and Skopje are close to fully EU membership. European Union in the last twelve years has not have clear and unanimous position on the enlargement policy, bearing in mind its internal financial, institutional and structural issues, while, from the other side, Western Balkans actors in the mentioned period did not succeed to convince the European leaders why it is so important to integrate the region within EU, which is also at this moment visible as a certain issue on the case of Ukrainian conflict.

2. Position of the European Union

To meet their economic and security needs, small states must also rectify the power asymmetry between them and large states in negotiations and fill gaps in diplomatic resources. The diplomatic forces that small states can muster are far smaller, less skillful, and less diverse than those deployed by large states (Steinsson & Thorhallsson, 2017). In that context it is very important to stress out that Serbia and North Macedonia, as well as their neighboring states within Western Balkans, have decided, after the disintegration of Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, to apply for European Union membership as an adequate platform based on economic and political interests and criteria which allow realization of foreign policy goals of the states on the European continent, without significance whether we are talking about

great powers or small states. But the path to the European Union fully membership requests fulfillment of numerous European criteria, so-called Copenhagen criteria which includes not only candidate's states adjustment to the single market or to human and political rights recognized by the Union as a political entity, but also acceptance of its foreign and security policy represented by its mechanism called European External Action Service (EEAS).

In the context of fulfilling criteria on the European path which final goal is fully membership, candidate states also should reach absolute synchronization of their foreign and security policy with the European Union foreign and security policy positions. Although, from theoretical point of view, such fully alignment should be reached in the moment of membership, new circumstances on global level, including in the region of Western Balkans, have raised the necessity in Brussels to play more strict role when it is about the process of alignment of foreign and security policy questions, especially with the newly established role of Russian Federation and People's Republic of China in the region.

When it comes to Serbia's compliance with the European Union's foreign and security policy, it is important to point out, as stated in the Report, that in 2020, Serbia's compliance rate with relevant statements by the High Representative on behalf of EU and Council decisions was 56%, but it has rose to 61% in August 2021 (European Commission Annual Report for the Republic of Serbia, 2021). From the other side, North Macedonia in relation to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the country's compliance rate with the relevant statements of the EU High Representative and the Council's decisions was 96% as of August 2021, compared to 92% in 2019 and 94% in 2020) (European Commission Annual Report for the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021). In this context, we must emphasize that this does not mean that North Macedonia has made faster progress in European integration, given the fact that Serbia is already in the process of accession negotiations, while, on the other hand, North Macedonia still expects a date to start accession negotiations with European Union. In fact, on the example of Serbia and North Macedonia we can find out that all conditions for EU membership have no same importance to the candidate states, bearing in mind their geopolitical position, as well as position in international relations. Serbia, as a military neutral country and North Macedonia as a NATO member country provide us such example in the process of EU integrations. While Serbia, which has clear foreign policy goal to become member of EU, could lead certain different security policy, bearing in mind its military neutrality, which is not always in accordance with European positions, North Macedonia as a NATO member provides fully alignment with European security policy, bearing in mind the fact of alignment in security and defence policy between EU and NATO. That does not should mean that Serbia leads security policy which is opposite to the European security policy, but it just provides Serbian authorities to adopt decisions in the field of foreign, security and defence policy which are in accordance with Serbian national

interests. From the other side, North Macedonia authorities, as a NATO member state, does not have always fully political sovereignty in the process of leading security and defence policy, which represents some kind of obligation in the NATO infrastructure. Representatives of the theory of realism would say that small states always adapt to the foreign and security policy of large and powerful states, but on the example of Serbia, and more specifically in the context of the Ukrainian war, we can determine that this “realistic rule” is not always applicable in practice. Having in mind the aggression faced by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 and the experience of today’s Serbia with the Kosovo problem and violation of its territorial sovereignty, which is contrary to international law and the principles of the United Nations Charter, we can see relevant facts that contribute to Serbia’s neutral military policy, but also foreign policy which is not always fully harmonized with the foreign policy of the European Union.

3. Ukrainian War

Since the beginning of Russian military operation on the territory of Ukraine on February 24th European Union has imposed six packages of sanctions against Russian Federation as a response to Russian aggression, as it is defined within EU. President Charles Michel of the European Council, President Ursula von der Leyen of the European Commission and High Representative Joseph Borrell stated to condemn in the strongest possible terms Russia’s unprovoked and unprecedented military aggression against Ukraine. At the same time EU calls on Russia to immediately cease the hostilities, withdraw its military from Ukraine, fully respect Ukraine’s territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence, and to abide by its international obligations (Press Statement of President Charles Michel of the European Council and President Ursula von der Leyen of the European Commission on Russia’s unprecedented and unprovoked military aggression of Ukraine, 2022). In that context, officials from Brussels have requested not only alignment with their position by the member states of European Union, but also from the states which are in the process of integrations, such as Serbia and North Macedonia.

When it comes to the positions of North Macedonia to the Russian military activities in Ukraine, Macedonian Government has announced that “the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in charge of informing, through the permanent mission in Brussels that North Macedonia joins the new package of restrictive measures of the EU Council, together with all previous decisions on restrictive measures from 2014 until now regarding the situation in Ukraine and to start the procedure for their implementation” (Politika, 2022, Citation: Severna Makedonija se priključuje sankcijama EU Rusiji. *Politika Journal*, Retrieved from <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/500379/Severna-Makedonija-se-prikljucuje-sankcijama-EU-Rusiji>). In that context, North Macedonia joined all the sanctions adopted by the European Union in response to the Russian military aggression in Ukraine. Starting with the ban on

flights for Russian planes, through the ban on the functioning of Russian televisions on the territory of that country and the ban on the operation of Russian banks, to the imposition of sanctions on Russian citizens and the expulsion of some Russian diplomats from North Macedonia. Commenting on the current Ukrainian crisis, the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia, Dimitar Kovacevski, stated that “North Macedonia is a NATO member, and that all decisions adopted by that country are in accordance with the alliance’s decisions in the process in which they participate”. As he stated, “North Macedonia supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine in the name of protecting international values, but also for the purpose of overall harmonization with economic sanctions imposed by the European Union against Russia, and in order to stop the escalation of this conflict”.

From the other side, Serbian authorities has decided not to impose sanctions against Russia with explanation that in this moment it is not in the interest of Serbian national interests. But, what is most important in this context, Serbia has condemned military operation of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine within the United Nations, adding that it is unacceptable any violation of the international law, on that basis also violation of the territorial integrity of any state. Immediately after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the authorities in Serbia adopted the Conclusion of the National Security Council, which most clearly states Serbia’s position regarding the Ukrainian war. When we say the clearest, from that document we single out two points that clearly indicate that Serbia does not support any aggression on the territory of another state, and in this context on the territory of Ukraine:

- “The Republic of Serbia is committed to respecting the principles of territorial integrity and political independence of states, as one of the basic principles of international law contained in the United Nations Charter and the Helsinki Final Act (1975), which guarantees the right of states to inviolability of borders.
- Starting from Article 16 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, which stipulates that the foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia is based on generally accepted rules and principles of international law, one of the basic principles of foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia is consistent respect for the inviolability of sovereign integrity. As committed to preserving the sovereignty and integrity of its territory, the Republic of Serbia is also committed to respecting the territorial integrity of other sovereign states and the principle that borders can be changed only in accordance with the rules of international law” (RTS, *Zaključak Saveta za nacionalnu bezbednost povodom situacije u Ukrajini u 15 tačaka. RTS – National broadcaster*, Retrieved from <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/4718279/zakljucak-savet-za-nacionalnu-bezbednost.html>).

However, such a conclusion of the Republic of Serbia was not accepted with enthusiasm within the European Union. Although Serbia has most clearly and directly stated that it condemns the violation of the territorial integrity of any country, and thus

clearly stated that it opposes Russian military operations on the territory of Ukraine, the refusal to join European sanctions against the Russian Federation has contributed to this country facing enormous foreign policy pressures, including threats to freeze the accession negotiation process with Brussels. Member of European Parliament Vladimir Bilcik has stated that “Putin’s attack against Ukraine is a watershed moment for the Western Balkans, too. Everyone should therefore understand that Serbia’s choice not to join EU sanctions is a defining foreign policy decision for much broader relations between European Union and the Republic of Serbia” (Bilcik, 2022). Also, spokesperson of the European External Action Service Peter Stano commenting the conclusions of the Council for national security of the Republic of Serbia related to the Ukrainian war has written: “What is at stake is not only Ukraine, but stability in Europe. Not only the EU, but Europe as a continent - that means security and stability of every country. EU sanctions are binding on EU member states and countries that decide to comply with these sanctions. “Countries in the accession process are expected to gradually harmonize with EU decisions in foreign and security policy, and that also applies to Serbia as a candidate country” (Radio Slobodna Evropa, Stano: Zemlje kandidati treba da usklade politiku sa EU. *Radio Slobodna Evropa Journal*, Retrieved from <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/eu-reakcije-srbija-ukrajina/31723817.html>). Since then, Serbian authorities are subject of the continuous pressure by the EU representatives and the political authorities of EU member states requesting from Serbia to impose sanctions against Russian Federation, at the same time explaining that the territorial issues which is facing Serbia with Kosovo are not the same example, so there should not be place for parallels between Serbian territorial integrity and the question of Ukraine. Unlike North Macedonia, which has absolutely harmonized its foreign policy decisions on the issue of the Ukrainian crisis with the decisions of the European Union, Serbia has adopted decisions which, according to the Serbian authorities, are primarily based on national interests. Serbia will not impose sanctions on Russia, but it respects the territorial integrity of Ukraine, said the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, after the session of the National Security Council (Telegraf, Srbija između podrške teritorijalnom integritetu Ukrajine i odluke da ne uvodi sankcije Rusiji: Šta dalje?. *Telegraf Journal*, Retrieved from <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/3463611-srbija-izmedju-podrske-teritorijalnom-integritetu-ukrajine-i-odluke-da-ne-uvodi-sankcije-rusiji-sta-dalje>). Also he pointed out that “Serbia in accordance with its policy and respect for international law, provides support for the integrity and respect for Ukraine’s borders. We will be guided by our national interests when considering the need for sanctions. This includes the Russian Federation. We believe that it is not in our vital interest to impose sanctions and added that Serbia was faced with numerous pressures and that decisions were made with a cool head” (Telegraf, Srbija između podrške teritorijalnom integritetu Ukrajine i odluke da ne uvodi sankcije Rusiji: Šta dalje?. *Telegraf Journal*, Retrieved from <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/3463611-srbija-izmedju-podrske->

teritorijalnom-integritetu-ukrajine-i-odluke-da-ne-uvodi-sankcije-rusiji-sta-dalje). But at the moment, it seems that many international actors do not understand the national interests of Serbia, on the basis of which Serbian foreign policy is based. Not only EU officials, but also representatives of EU member states insist that Serbia impose economic sanctions on the Russian Federation, claiming that it is in line with Belgrade's European integration process, but also that non-imposing will de facto mean supporting Moscow in its military operations on the Ukrainian territory, although Serbia has already condemned Russian military aggression at the United Nations level. For example, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock told official Belgrade that if it wants to join the European bloc, Serbia must impose sanctions on Russia over its aggression in Ukraine (Radio Slobodna Evropa, Baerbock poručila Srbiji da treba uvesti sankcije Rusiji ako želi biti deo EU. *Radio Slobodna Evropa Journal*, Retrieved from <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/berbok-nemacka-srbija-sankcije/31797422.html>). On the other hand, after the meeting with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in Berlin, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz pointed out that “Serbia has repeatedly and unequivocally advocated the position of the European Union in the UN General Assembly that it is a Russian aggression on Ukraine and that it is unacceptable, and added that the fact that we do not agree in every detail is the topic of our talks, but in the end we should not overlook that attitude and such behavior of Serbia” (Beta, Šolc o srpskim sankcijama Rusiji: Ne treba prevideti da je Srbija osudila napad Rusije na Ukrajinu. *Danas Journal*, Retrieved from <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/solc-o-srpskim-sankcijama-rusiji-ne-treba-prevideti-da-je-srbija-osudila-napad-rusije-na-ukrajinu/>).

In fact, the Ukrainian war shows the maneuvering space that small states has in international relations, respectively in creating and conducting their national foreign policy. In that sense, small states have two options, on the one hand to fully comply with the policy of great powers and blocs or to try, as Serbia has done, to pursue an independent foreign policy based on national interests, but at the same time be subject to reprimands and condemnations. This is clearly seen in the example of Serbia and North Macedonia in the context of the Ukrainian war. The decision of the authorities in North Macedonia to fully harmonize with the policy of the European Union on the issue of the Ukrainian crisis, without explaining to the public how much it is in line with the national interests of that country, was widely approved by European officials. On the other hand, Belgrade's refusal to join the European Union's economic sanctions against the Russian Federation, even though Serbia has condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine at all international levels, has met with numerous condemnations from European officials, including threats that Serbia's European integration process should be frozen, but also the possibility of imposing economic sanctions to it, and even the withdrawal of investors from European Union countries which are already operating in the Serbian market.

4. Conclusion

Ukrainian War in contemporary international relations represents an excellent example which shows the behavior of small and economic dependent states in the foreign policy. Example on the Serbia and North Macedonia is even more relevant bearing in mind the fact that one of them has declared military neutrality, while the other one is member state of NATO, although both of them are in the process of European integration. If we put aside the military policy and take into account the foreign policy and its alignment with the European foreign policy we could also problematize the foreign policy alignment of states which are in the candidate status, bearing in mind the fact the fully alignment is requested in the moment when candidate states reach the full EU membership. In that context, European Union still has not provide clear membership agenda neither for Serbia, nor for North Macedonia, from one side, while from the other side, Brussels officials are insisting on imposing economic sanctions against Russian Federation to the candidate states, although their European perspective is not predictable. But representatives of realistic theory are not far from the truth even in the 21st century, bearing in mind the fact that small states do not have enough space for creating sovereign foreign policy if it is not always in accordance with foreign policies of big states. On the other hand, for small states that are among the enemy's great powers, neutrality may be the only reasonable way to act (Steinsson & Thorhallsson, 2017). Republic of North Macedonia, although not a neutral country in the political and security context, but aspires to join the European Union, and at the same time is a full member of NATO, it does not mean that in the current conflict in Ukraine it was forced to take a side, especially in a security context. Because the economic sanctions imposed by the European Union on the Russian Federation, at least in the case of North Macedonia, are not crucial, nor will be in the future, a determinant that will determine the dynamics of this country's membership in the European Union. The position is almost identical in the case of Serbia, regardless of the fact that Belgrade did not impose economic sanctions against Russia, although, we must emphasize once again, it clearly condemned the military aggression on the territory of Ukraine. The process of European integration of Serbia will not be slowed down or accelerated if that country adopts sanctions against the Russian Federation, which have already been imposed by the European Union, by adopting six packages of sanctions. The process of European integration depends on various factors, primarily political, institutional and internal, which do not determine external circumstances, even circumstances on the European continent. Unless the European Union changes its current perception of the enlargement process and understands the importance of integrating the Western Balkans, and thus Serbia and North Macedonia, in the direction of ensuring sustainable and predictable European stability and sustainability. If we go back to the beginning, in this paper we managed to prove that from the point of view of realism theorists, Serbia as a small country managed to pursue its foreign policy regardless of the foreign policy positions and

positions of big countries, in this case the European Union. But due to its limited capacity for successful and independent action in the field of foreign policy, that country is subject to constant and strong external pressures in the direction of its adjustment to the foreign policy guidelines of the great powers. In fact, the reality has not changed in the 21st century either, but it is still based on the postulates of realism when it comes to the foreign policy activities of small states. Even today, they have only one possibility open, that is, to fully adapt to the foreign policy guidelines of the great powers. On the other hand, such states become the subject of constant pressure and condemnation, and even the subject of threats of various sanctions, which today are primarily economic sanctions due to weak economic capacities of small states, except those with large amounts of natural resources necessary for economic systems of great and powerful states.

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