



Copyright © 2025 The author/s

This work is licensed under the CC BY 4.0 license

(*) Corresponding author

Peer review method: Double-blind

Original scientific article

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70995/jsme.v1i1.02>

Received: 5.9.2025 • Accepted after revision: 26.11.2025 • Published: 31.12.2025.

Pages: 25-34

HOW SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED STATES SHAPE THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Prof. Dr.sc. Tatjana Gerginova, PhD

Faculty of Security-Skopje, University “Sv. Kliment Ohridski”- Bitola, North Macedonia

tatjana.gerginova@uklo.edu.mk

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3669-0209>

Abstract: Research topic – Medium-sized countries can achieve significant and sustainable global influence, confirming their status as a reliable actor on the international stage. The Republic of Serbia actively participates in shaping the regional and global order, confirming its role as a reliable and strategically important actor.

Within the framework of the paper, the author provides an overview of the role of the Republic of Serbia, which, through coordinated diplomatic activities, infrastructure projects, digital innovations and regional initiatives, actively participates in shaping the regional and global order (confirming its role as a reliable and strategically important actor).

In the final part of the paper, the author concludes that for the Republic of Serbia, the new year 2026 brings new geopolitical dynamics - continued redefinition of the European enlargement policy, intensification of regional connectivity through strategic initiatives and final preparations for EXPO 2027 (a project of key importance for Serbia's international recognition). Serbia will continue to implement activities (strengthening institutions, building a policy of accountability, developing mechanisms for dialogue and streamlining relations with international partners) that contribute to building itself as a stable, resilient state based on a European perspective with preserved strategic autonomy and strong international integrity. When preparing the paper, the author uses general methods, including descriptive, normative, comparative, and content analysis methods.

Keywords: stability, regional cooperation, shaping the regional and global order.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the world is in a new era of global dynamics, marked by growing interdependence and shifts in geopolitical balance.

These circumstances open up extraordinary opportunities for small and medium-sized states, through strategic diplomatic, political, and economic initiatives, to take a visible and influential position in shaping the global order.

Today, traditional powers still have significant influence, the ability to adapt to new trends, and innovatively connect regional and global interests. Creating sustainable economic and infrastructure models allows smaller states to become active creators of international processes (See: <https://www.ifimes.org/ba/istrazivanje/mali-igraci-veliki-uticaj-kako-male-i-srednje-drzave-oblikuju-medunarodni-poredak/5670?>)

The ability of small and medium-sized states to balance the interests of great powers, develop sophisticated diplomatic networks, and implement projects that connect continents, regions, and key economic corridors is becoming a key factor in their international influence.

These countries do not act in isolation - their impact comes from coordinated initiatives that integrate digital technologies, innovation, sustainable infrastructure projects, and multi-regional economic strategies.

In this way, they strengthen not only their international reputation, but also regional and global stability, demonstrating that strength in the modern world is no longer determined solely by the size of the territory or the number of inhabitants, but by strategic vision, effective diplomacy, and the ability to create synergy between different global actors.

Examples of successful initiatives include the modernization of transport and logistics networks connecting Europe, the Middle East and Asia, the development of startup ecosystems and the digitalization of industries, as well as the creation of international innovation and technology platforms that provide access to global markets and attract investment.

Small and medium-sized players are demonstrating that innovation is a key component of their influence, and the integration of modern technologies and sustainable economic models can generate effects that go beyond their formal geopolitical importance (See: <https://www.ifimes.org/ba/istrazivanje/srbija-2025-vracanje-politicke-stabilnosti/5663?> NATO accession helps prepare countries in the region for EU accession and strengthens their EU approach. The only exception to this is Serbia, as the country seeks to preserve its military neutrality and prefers to remain outside NATO. In this sense, it is said that the prospect of NATO accession sustains democratic and market reforms in the region, helping to contribute to the prospects of EU membership. In all successful cases of accession in the Western Balkans, NATO accession preceded EU accession.

2. REGIONAL COOPERATION – MECHANISM (INSTRUMENT) FOR STABILIZATION OF THE REGION

Regional cooperation is defined as a multidisciplinary process whose success is determined through continuous dialogue and communication, active participation and collective decision-making by all involved entities. Understood and accepted only through this aspect, regional cooperation can be an effective instrument for promoting and strengthening regional security (Gerginova, 2024).

The Western Balkans is a region that faced serious threats to peace and security until the end of the 20th century. That is why in the past period, serious attention has been devoted to the re-establishment of peace, security and stability in this region.

Even today, this region faces certain internal regional security risks and threats, both from a traditional perspective, i.e. the existing open issues between Serbia and Kosovo, then the issue of the status of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and additionally developed perceptions among the Macedonian and Albanian communities in Macedonia, i.e. risks and threats related to corruption, organized crime, the rule of law, living standards, environmental protection, etc. From this aspect, it can be emphasized that regional cooperation occupies an important place in the agenda for dealing with the indicated risks and threats and consequently for promoting regional security dynamics, as an instrument that should create new, positive energy in the Western Balkans region. The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century is characterized by the common vulnerability and common concerns of states regarding security risks and threats.

Cooperation between countries in the Western Balkans (as cooperation between countries in a particular region) is perceived as a universal process, which does not only imply the formation of security alliances or trade arrangements, but also includes numerous connections and relationships in the spheres of: economic and social life, political structure, public order and peace, protection of natural resources, culture, etc (Gerginova, 2024).

In fact, the main feature of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, starting from the 1990s until today, is its international and multilateral character. Namely, regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has been largely initiated by the international community, primarily the EU, with the main goal of contributing to overcoming the consequences of the conflicts of the 1990s. It is used as an effective mechanism for reconciliation and for preventing further negative events in the region. In that context, in the past period, a series of initiatives were undertaken by the international community, aimed at establishing and strengthening regional cooperation in various spheres, as a prerequisite, first of all, for the security stabilization of the countries, and then as a condition for their Euro-Atlantic integration.

In general, we are talking about the following initiatives: in the political sphere - the Central European Initiative, the Royaumont Process, the Stability Pact for SEE, the Stabilization and Association Process, the Regional Cooperation Council; in the economic sphere: the SEE Cooperation Initiative, the Free Trade Area Agreement; in the military-security sphere: The SEE Defence Ministers' Process, the NATO SEE Initiative, the Adriatic Charter, the SEE Civil-Military Emergency Planning Council and the SEE Clearing House. In terms of scope, it should be noted that in the mentioned initiatives, in addition to the Western Balkan countries, countries from the wider South-Eastern European region also participate.

A common feature of all the initiatives mentioned is the effort to contribute to the comprehensive stabilization and progress of the Western Balkans. Hence, regional cooperation is taken as a central determining factor for the success and efficiency of such stabilization. In this regard, it should be emphasized that in addition to cooperation within the initiatives, intensive cooperation has been established between the initiatives themselves, as well as their cooperation with international actors.

The first reason for promoting regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is the security stabilization of the region.

The second reason for actualizing and promoting regional cooperation in the Western Balkans stems from the fact that it is one of the prerequisites for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries. In this regard, the countries of the region must demonstrate capacities for long-term cooperation and building trust, both among themselves and with the wider international community. The credibility of the countries in the region is directly determined by their capacities to overcome mutual differences (especially negative differences from the past) through active and effective participation in regional cooperation.

However, it must be pointed out that the outcome of the EU and NATO accession processes, in addition to the priorities and political will of these two institutions – the EU and NATO, is also influenced by internal factors in the Western Balkan countries. Many internal factors have prevented engagement in constructive reform processes that should lead to successful integration into the EU and NATO. It must also be stated that this trend has sparked criticism from civil society organizations that state that Euro-Atlantic actors have long preferred regional stability and security over democratization.

In many Western Balkan countries, political elites who benefit from the existing system have become less willing to change the status quo and fight organized crime and

corruption. Criticism has emerged of the failure to respect the principles of good governance, transparency, accountability, transitional justice, and security sector reform. There is a culture of impunity. Realizing their diminishing prospects for EU entry, many Western Balkan countries have begun to look for alternative venues, and have also slowed down their reform processes towards EU membership.

One of the main obstacles to Euro-Atlantic integration is the democratic setback experienced by many countries in the region. There is a growing populist wave in the region, which is creating additional tensions between the different countries in the region, seriously threatening regional stability and peace.

3. REPUBLIC OF SERBIA – A LEADER OF PROSPERITY IN THE BALKANS

Serbia occupies a central geostrategic position in the Balkans, serving as a key factor for stability, development and regional integration. Its position between Central Europe, the Adriatic Sea and the Middle East allows the country to balance the interests of various international actors. Developing diplomatic initiatives, strategic partnerships and multilateral cooperation with neighboring countries and global powers further strengthen its international reputation and influence.

Serbia's economic development in recent years has been characterized by intensive infrastructure modernization, energy transformation, digitalization, and the development of innovative technologies. Serbia is investing heavily in infrastructure development, in the development of the IT sector, technology parks and innovation centers in Belgrade and other urban centers, attracting international companies, startups and global investments. Such a strategy encourages technological development, digital transformation and the competitiveness of the domestic economy, further strengthening its international reputation and contribution to regional growth.

A particularly prominent place in the country's modern history is occupied by the organization of EXPO 2027 in Belgrade, the largest event in the last 30 years, which confirms the strategic vision and allows citizens to be proud of the leadership of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. His policies, despite some criticism from the opposition and from abroad, lead to the strengthening of the country's international reputation, prosperity and stability. Through coordinated diplomatic activities, infrastructure projects, digital innovations, and regional initiatives, Serbia is demonstrating that medium-sized countries can achieve significant international influence. By connecting transport corridors, improving technology, and promoting its economic and cultural potential, the country is actively participating in shaping the regional and global order, confirming its role as a reliable and strategically important actor (See: [Unlocking the Western Balkans: Why Serbia Holds the Geopolitical Key](https://ecipe.org/blog/unlocking-the-western-balkans-serbia/?utm_source=chatgpt.com), link: https://ecipe.org/blog/unlocking-the-western-balkans-serbia/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

3.1. Political, social and institutional turmoil in Serbia

The political, social and institutional turmoil that followed the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy on November 1, 2024, is a symptom of deeper processes in Serbian society. This event is a reflection of the structural crisis of trust in institutions, the political system and the media and should be understood only in the context of the long-term transformational challenges that Serbia has been going through since 2000.

The event is a symbol of systemic weaknesses and lack of accountability within the chain of decision-making and institutional control. This tragic event deeply shocked the public and revealed the low level of coordination between political structures,

institutions and professional services (See: <https://www.ifimes.org/ba/istrazivanje/mali-igraci-veliki-uticaj-kako-male-i-srednje-drzave-oblikuju-medunarodni-poredak/5670?>)

In fact, any attempt at political change through the streets, physical confrontations, or pressure on institutions directly threatens democracy and the rule of law.

Only institutions, dialogue and free elections can provide a legitimate framework for political change and the expression of the will of the citizens. Restoring trust in these mechanisms remains the basis for Serbia's stability and progress in the coming period.

The political response to such circumstances must be thorough, systematic, and transparent. It must not be reduced to individual changes, but requires a redefinition of the relationship between politics, institutions, and citizens.

It is necessary to establish a policy of accountability based on: transparency, professionalization of public administration and depoliticization of control of public investments. Only institutional renewal can prevent the politicization of tragedies and the abuse of emotions for political purposes.

Initially, the protests were portrayed as a student reaction to a tragic event. However, it soon became clear that they were not exclusively student demands, but part of a broader, pre-planned political mobilization. The fall of the canopy only served as an occasion for scenarios aimed at an institutional crisis, a disruption of the constitutional order, and an attempt to overthrow President Aleksandar Vučić (SNS) without democratic procedures. Instead of discussing reforms, the rule of law, and public policies, the public space is increasingly becoming an arena for personal attacks, discrediting, and emotional manipulation, which further reduces citizens' trust in democratic processes. The protests did not serve to improve the situation of the students. Their essential goal was a political change of power outside the constitutional framework. Such action not only destabilizes the state, but also seriously disrupts the constitutional order and deepens social divisions.

Institutions must react thoughtfully, through systematic and transparent measures, in order to restore stability, trust among citizens, and the functionality of the state order.

The political response to these events must be thoughtful and institutionally based and be realized through a comprehensive reform of the relationship between politics and institutions, with a special emphasis on accountability, transparency and integrity.

The information space in Serbia remains deeply polarized and burdened with a high degree of media fragmentation. Traditional media, social networks, and alternative information platforms often operate in parallel narratives, shaping the perception of reality according to political, ideological, or commercial interests.

The increasing influence of social media, along with the growing presence of disinformation, fake news, and sensationalist journalism, is seriously undermining the quality of public discourse and preventing rational discussion on key social and political issues. In such an environment, public opinion becomes susceptible to manipulation, while reasonable dialogue and professional journalism lose space and influence.

For democratic consensus, sustainable dialogue and citizens' trust in institutions to exist, the media must be free, independent and professional.

The media scene in Serbia faces numerous challenges: concentration of ownership, political pressures, self-censorship and the lack of financial sustainability of independent editorial offices. In this context, building social resilience becomes crucial. This can be achieved through: strengthening media literacy of citizens, especially young people, institutional support for independent journalism and investigative media, restoring professional and ethical standards in journalism, and transparency of media financing and ownership structures. The media must not be an instrument of political

struggle, but a channel of information, education and public accountability. Their role is to connect society, not divide it, to serve the public, not the centers of power.

Only through the pluralism of media sources, the institutional protection of journalists, and the active media culture of citizens, is it possible to build a resilient, informed, and democratic society in which truth and responsibility become the foundation of political and social stability. Citizens expect the full truth to be established: who was behind the logistics, financing, and political instructions that led to violence and blockades.

President Aleksandar Vučić's announcement of early parliamentary elections in 2026 represents an important opportunity for a democratic reality check in Serbia. These elections could become a key test of political maturity - whether institutional dialogue, accountability and democratic processes will prevail or whether the trend of polarization, street confrontations and distrust of institutions will continue.

4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

The European Commission must restore objectivity and apply an equal approach to all countries of the Western Balkans. Only in this way can it preserve its political authority, integration, credibility and the credibility of the European idea in the region. At the same time, the EU needs to offer Serbia a real European perspective - not declaratively, but through concrete steps: opening new clusters, supporting reforms, and actively engaging in key Union policies. Without this, the risk of political fatigue and Euroscepticism in Serbian society grows, jeopardizing the country's long-term stability and reform momentum.

Today, Serbia stands at a historical turning point. In the coming years, there is a real opportunity for it to consolidate its institutions, restore the trust of its citizens, and reaffirm its status as a key factor of stability in the Western Balkans. The key levers of this process are: dialogue, institutional accountability, regional cooperation, and a clearly defined European perspective. However, progress in implementing structural reforms remains slow, limiting potential economic growth, social cohesion and Serbia's capacity to respond to internal and external challenges. It is particularly important that Serbia remains firmly committed to the dialogue with Pristina, within the framework of the European Union-led process.

The international institute IFIMES emphasizes that Serbia's political stability in 2025 and 2026 is possible only through accountability, institutional renewal and a clear commitment to dialogue. The key points of this process include: (See: <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/serbia-2025-restoring-political-stability/5665>)

restoring citizens' trust in institutions, protecting the constitutional order, economic sustainability and energy security policy, a European-oriented policy, while preserving strategic independence.

Serbia can achieve a return to “normal life” only if politics becomes a service to citizens, and institutions function in the interest of society, and not as an extended arm of political power. Such an approach would allow Serbia to consolidate internal stability, restore international credibility, and strengthen its position in regional and global frameworks - as a guarantor of peace, stability, and predictability in the Western Balkans. Serbia occupies a key geopolitical and economic position in the Balkans, Europe and Eurasia, making it a particularly important partner for major powers, including the United States and China, within the informal G2. Both countries are following Serbia with great attention, recognizing its potential as a point of balance in the region, a gateway to the Balkans and a bridge to the European market (See: <https://www.ifimes.org/ba/istrazivanje/trumpova-vizija-multipolarnog-svijeta-g2-i->

strateska-uloga-srbije-i-bjelorussije/5709? For the United States, Serbia is crucial to preserving regional stability and the security of the transatlantic alliance. Its neutral policy reduces tensions and provides space for strategic initiatives without direct confrontation with Russia or other regional actors. For China, Serbia is an important investment hub and a gateway for expanding its economic influence in the European Union. Through infrastructure projects, energy and technology investments, Chinese companies are using Serbia as a bridge to enter the wider European market. Both powers are listening carefully to and following Belgrade's political and economic decisions, aware that the country's stability and predictability allow for long-term investments and strategic cooperation that benefits all parties. Today, Serbia has created a stable and predictable environment for economic growth, international cooperation, and regional security and stability. The country balances among the great powers, develops its own strategic vision, and builds a favorable environment for foreign investment, positioning itself as a key bridge between East and West and as a focal point in the multipolar world, with a special place in the plans and interests of the great powers within the G2 (See: US-Serbian Relations on the Move? - link: https://cepa.org/article/us-serbian-relations-on-the-move/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) Today, Serbia occupies a key position (along with Belarus) in Europe and Eurasia. Their ability to balance between great powers and develop their own makes them important factors in shaping the strategic policies of the future global order. Serbia and Belarus serve as examples of countries that, through a thoughtful and pragmatic approach, strengthen regional stability and open channels for international cooperation. They act as bridges between major powers, enabling predictability in economics, diplomacy, and security matters and providing the foundations for the long-term development of their regions.

The future of the multipolar world depends on the ability to act strategically in key regions, as well as on coordination and quality cooperation with countries that can balance the interests of the great powers. A thoughtful and partnership approach is the only way to ensure stability, economic growth and peace in the global environment. In this sense, Serbia and Belarus are becoming pillars of the new multipolar architecture in Europe and Eurasia, making the G2 vision sustainable and prosperous.

5. CONCLUSION

In the modern world, international influence is no longer the exclusive privilege of great powers. Small and medium-sized countries, through strategic policy, innovation and active participation in multi-regional initiatives, make a significant global contribution. Their role is becoming increasingly visible as the combination of flexibility, innovation and stable policies enables the creation of new global models of cooperation and the strengthening of regional and global stability. Examples such as Serbia, Belarus, (Montenegro and Oman) clearly show that the size of the country is not decisive - the key is vision, effective diplomacy and the ability to balance the interests of great powers. These countries build bridges between continents, connect economies and contribute to global peace, while strategic economic projects and investments in infrastructure open up new opportunities for partnership. Small and medium-sized players have proven that strategic focus, innovation and visionary policies can achieve significant international influence. Their initiatives in economics, technology and diplomacy clearly confirm that the size of a country is not a decisive factor for global success. Through coordinated action, long-term vision and active cooperation with major and regional powers, these countries are becoming drivers of stability, prosperity and global development.

Throughout 2025, Serbia demonstrated a high level of institutional, economic and geopolitical resilience, despite a combination of strong external political pressures, sanctions against NIS, internal political tensions and global instability. Rather than destabilising, restrictive measures against NIS acted as a catalyst, accelerating the process of diversification, modernization of energy capacities and transformation of the strategic approach to security of supply. Serbia has profiled itself as a stable and predictable actor, capable of balancing between East and West, strengthening its regional role and remaining committed to European integration, while at the same time preserving its strategic autonomy. Entering 2026, the country faces new political and economic challenges, but also important opportunities to further consolidate stability, strengthen institutions, and improve its international position. Serbia enters 2026 with clear messages: political stability is achievable, economic and energy resilience are unquestionable, the regional position is consolidated, and the European path remains a strategic obligation - with an insistence on equality, partnership, and objectivity. If the course of reforms, responsible policy, and energy modernization continues, Serbia has the potential to confirm its status as a key factor of stability and one of the most resilient actors in the region. However, for the coming period, potential risks remain in several key domains: geopolitical (changes in the regional and global balance of power); energy (dependence on external suppliers and potential disruptions in the energy market); economic and financial (impact of global recessions, inflation and currency fluctuations) and political and institutional (internal pressures, institutional crisis of confidence and challenges in the consolidation of democratic processes). Today, the Republic of Serbia has significant capacities to build resilience. By consistently implementing reforms and strategic policies, the country can further strengthen its role as a stable, predictable and credible actor in the region and the broader international environment.

LITERATURE

[1] Gerginova, Tatiana., (2024). "THE ROLE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS IN BUILDING EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY". Published in the Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference "Harmonization of Domestic Law with the Acquis of the European Union"
<file:///C:/Users/Tatjana%20Gerginova/Downloads/FPN%20APEIRON%20Zbornik%20radova%202024.pdf>

[2] Unlocking the Western Balkans: Why Serbia Holds the Geopolitical Key, link: https://ecipe.org/blog/unlocking-the-western-balkans-serbia/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[3] US-Serbian Relations on the Move? There are signals from Washington that an improved relationship is on the cards, with Serbia arguing the US has much to gain, link: https://cepa.org/article/us-serbian-relations-on-the-move/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[4] <https://www.ifimes.org/ba/istrazivanje/mali-igraci-veliki-uticaj-kako-male-i-srednje-drzave-oblikuju-medunarodni-poredak/5670?>

[5] <https://www.ifimes.org/ba/istrazivanje/srbija-2025-vracanje-politicke-stabilnosti/5663?>

[6] <https://www.ifimes.org/ba/istrazivanja/mali-igraci-veliki-uticaj-kako-male-i-srednje-drzave-oblikuju-medunarodni-poredak/5670?>

[7] <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/serbia-2025-restoring-political-stability/5665>

[8] <https://www.ifimes.org/ba/istrazivanja/trumpova-vizija-multipolarnog-svijeta-g2-i-strateska-uloga-srbije-i-bjelorusije/5709?>