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MANAGEMENT WITH  
ENGINEERING APPLICATION**



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## EVALUATING MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGIES AND PSYCHOSOCIAL PREPAREDNESS IN DISASTER RESPONSE: LESSONS FROM THE TÜRKIYE EARTHQUAKE RESCUE MISSION 2023

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**Abstract:** Caring for the mental health of first responders is imperative because they are also vulnerable, taking into consideration the nature of their job, the frequency, and the intensity of work-related traumatic exposure. Establishing mental health care for first responders or adapting the present curriculum would avoid potential bad consequences for their mental health. This study examines the availability of comprehensive mental health care resources in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for first responders before intervention. The focus was made to document the emotions that arose during the execution of the tasks in an earthquake rescue mission in the Republic Türkiye in February 2023. The results show that structured and comprehensive measures to protect the mental health of rescuers and volunteers are limited or inconsistently applied across organizations. The revealed findings indicate that predeploying training in order to protect mental health and prevent the harmful effects of stressful situations does not correspond to the challenges they encountered during the rescue mission. The results of the research may contribute to the development of appropriate training and preparation practices to mitigate the negative psychosocial effects on rescuers and volunteers.

**Keywords:** First Responders, Mental Health, Türkiye Earthquake 2023, Psychosocial Preparedness, Disaster Response Training

### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Global Natural Disasters Report for 2021 (Govt. China, IFRC, NDRCC 2022), made by China Government together with International Federation of Red Cross

and Red Crescent Societies and National Disaster Reduction Center of China and published in October 2022, the total frequency of global natural disasters in 2021, compared to the average over the last 30 years (1991-2020), was 13% higher, with 81% lower in deaths, 48% less in the affected population, and 82% more in direct economic losses. When it comes to the kind of natural disaster frequency, report showed that the global flood disasters in 2021 were the most frequent, 48% more than the historic levels, causing 4,393 deaths, which was more than the death toll from other natural disasters but 35% less than the historical average of flood-related deaths; there were fewer strong earthquakes and their disaster losses were relatively small; the number of deaths from wildfires decreased, but the population affected rose by 219%. Regionally, Asia has seen the highest frequency of natural disasters in 2021, and Asia had the largest number of deaths due to those disasters. Moreover, this report showed that compared with developed countries, developing countries were more severely affected by natural disasters, mostly floods, storms, and extreme temperatures. (Govt. China, IFRC, NDRCC 2022)

The Republic of Türkiye, located in a geographical area prone to natural disasters, is third in the world in earthquake victims and eighth in total victims. Every year, the country experiences at least one earthquake with a magnitude of 5 on the Richter scale (AFAD 2024). To respond, the Presidency for Disaster and Emergency Management (Turkish: Afet ve Acil Durum İletimi Başkanlığı - AFAD) organizes training in services such as saving life and property, health care, nutrition, accommodation, security, and social and psychological support. AFAD volunteers are trained in areas needed before, during, and after disasters. The strategic plan for 2019-2023 was prepared in collaboration with domestic and international humanitarian aid and disaster recovery institutions (AFAD 2020). AFAD aims to manage disasters efficiently by providing prepared materials for training personnel and psychosocial services (AFAD 2020). The strategic area focuses on efficient disaster management, aiming to meet the needs of personnel in training and psychosocial services through three activities: providing psychosocial services training, providing prepared materials, and ensuring activities for staff's psychosocial needs. By 2022, the total number of trained personnel and realized activities is expected to reach 140 (AFAD 2019). However, the total number of trained staff and activities implemented to achieve the strategic goal remained unknown during the earthquake.

The earthquake in the Republic of Türkiye in February 2023, was devastating and especially in Kahramanmaraş and Hatay districts, causing significant material losses and resulting in over 47.000 deaths and 280.000 buildings that collapsed or were severely damaged (SBB 2023). The earthquakes triggered a series of other earthquakes, causing widespread damage and destruction in 11 districts. The Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina reports that 22 members of the rescue team of the Republican Administration of Civil Protection of the Republic of Srpska (RACP RS), 42 members of the rescue team of the Federal Administration of Civil Protection of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FACP FBiH), 10 members of the rescue team of the Department of Public Security of Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina (DPS DB) and 167

members of the Mountain Rescue Services (MRS) from entire Bosnia and Herzegovina, have participated in rescue assistance in the Republic of Türkiye (МБ БиХ 2023), while 10 members of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AF BiH) were also involved in humanitarian missions to minimize the consequences of the earthquake in the Republic of Türkiye (МО БиХ 2023).

The main goal of the present study was to record the emotions of volunteers and responders while they perform their designated tasks for the mission. These emotional states, whether positive, negative, or neutral, play a critical role in influencing the psychological well-being of the subjects. The results reveal that rescuers and volunteers face significant challenges, with negative emotions impacting both their performance and overall well-being. These findings may determine the effectiveness of present mental health programs of work organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina that sent their members on rescue missions. The results of the analysis indicate that work organizations only partially employ disaster risk management strategies to safeguard rescuers' mental health and avoid the negative effects of stressful events. The outcomes of this study should motivate the formulation of effective strategies for managing natural disasters across all three essential phases: preparedness, response, and recovery. Incorporating Psychological First Aid or Emergency Psychological Aid into initial training programs could significantly improve the psychological readiness of rescuers and volunteers.

This paper is structured and consists of six parts. At the beginning of the work there are an introduction and literature review. The third part contains search methods. In the fourth part, the findings of research conducted in the period March - June 2023 are presented. The fifth part refers to the discussion of the research results, while the conclusion is given at the end.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is “A state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, to realize their abilities, to learn well and work well, and to contribute to their communities. Mental health is an integral component of health and well-being and is more than the absence of mental disorder” (WHO 2024). In recent decades, one of the least appreciated aspects of public health has been mental health, which receives only a fraction of the resources and attention it requires and deserves. Furthermore, the Comprehensive Action Plan for Mental Health 2013–2030 has been ratified by WHO member states (WHO 2013). They pledged to accomplish world-wide goals to enhance mental health with an emphasis on strengthening research, information systems, community care, promotion and prevention, and leadership and management (WHO 2022). Initially adopted in 2013, the WHO Comprehensive Action Plan for Mental Health 2013–2020 was extended in 2019 to 2030 to ensure its alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The largest review of world mental health in last decades was published in 2022 by the World Health Organization (2022). The WHO report recommends expediting the



implementation of the Comprehensive mental health action plan 2013-2030, addressing the significant underrepresentation of mental health in public health (WHO 2022). With the objective to reduce risks, promote resilience, and establish favorable conditions for mental health, promotion and prevention interventions have to determine the individual, social, and structural factors that determine mental health. Interventions could be tailored to be designed for a single individual, a particular group, or the entire population, while internationally accepted guidelines require the provision of mental health care for rescuers and volunteers.

Natural disasters can have significant consequences on mental health, affecting the mental well-being of affected populations. Non-governmental organizations, in collaboration with UN agencies, in last 30 years have developed projects to maintain mental health and provide psychosocial assistance. Manuals and guidelines have been published to reduce the negative impact of natural disasters on human health (OPSIC 2016; CORDIS 2017; IASC RG MHPSS 2017; PFA-CE 2017; Sphere Association 2018).

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 strongly promotes health resilience (UNDRR 2015). By referring to health, as many as 39 times, health is presented as one of the key elements of the Sendai Framework. Out of a total of seven global goals, four have direct links to health and focus on reducing mortality, population well-being, early warning, and promoting the resilience of health systems (Reifels 2018). Mental health is defined in Priority 4 as a responsibility at the national or local level with a clear remit: Improve recovery schemes to provide psychosocial support and mental health services to all people who need them. Efforts to reduce disaster risks to mental health depend critically on the implementation of Disaster Risk Reduction and effective Disaster Mental Health strategies. That is, they depend on the effective integration of disaster risk reduction principles into existing national and local health domains and established fields of practice as defined in the Sendai Framework.

People are frequently badly impacted by traumatic events, which include natural and man-made calamities, including technology disasters and mass violence (Norris et al., 2002). Increased exposure to the direct aftermath of disasters is linked to a higher prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); however, secondary traumatization can occur in first responders who have only interacted with trauma survivors and have not themselves experienced a traumatic event (Neria, Nandi, Galea 2008; Greinacher et al. 2019). The majority of research that is currently available on the effects of natural and man-made catastrophes on mental health focuses on the effects on immediate victims or trained rescue personnel (Bills et al. 2009; Thormar et al. 2010, 2013; Brooks et al. 2015).

Stressogenic factors impact first responders' psychological stability, reducing effectiveness and increasing the risk of PTSD. Despite this, mental health is frequently seen as a completely positive phenomenon characterized by emotions of contentment and a sense of control over one's surroundings (Waterman 1993; Lamers et al. 2011; Galderisi et al. 2015). Disaster response requires both logistical and psychological preparedness, as it significantly impacts response and recovery efforts, making it crucial to include

psychological preparedness in emergency response plans. Safeguard mental health by addressing local and global risks, promoting interventions across sectors to mitigate potential dangers and improve overall well-being (WHO 2024).

Even those with good mental health occasionally experience emotions such as sadness, illness, rage, or unhappiness; this is a normal aspect of living a fully realized life. It is hard to understand emotions because it is hard to classify emotions, define genres, identify first and subsequent events, and identify characteristics and measurement levels. Quantitative characteristics are recognized as a criterion due to the complex and inconsistent nature of defining emotions and moods in literature. Emotion theorists do not have a universally accepted definition of emotion. Contemporary theories of emotions strive for a comprehensive understanding, challenging the notion that reason and emotions exist as distinct systems. Instead, they question the traditional belief that emotions are characterized by intensity and brevity, while moods are comparatively smaller in scale and longer-lasting (Čorlukić, Krpan 2020).

Researchers categorize emotions into dimensions, focusing on valence and arousal. These dimensional models propose a shared neurophysiological system for all affective states. Notable models include the circumplex, vector, and Positive Activation – Negative Activation (PANA) models (Posner, Russell, Peterson 2005; Rubin, Talerico 2009). James Russell's circumplex model places emotions in a two-dimensional circular space with arousal and valence (Russell, Feldman 1999). Emotional states can vary in valence and arousal levels, often used to test stimuli. The vector model emphasizes vectors pointing in opposite directions to indicate emotion direction based on valence and arousal. The PANA model by Watson and Tellegen defines positive and negative emotions as distinct systems with arousal levels affecting valence (Watson, Tellegen 1985). Robert Plutchik's three-dimensional model arranges emotions in concentric circles based on basic-complex categories (Plutchik 1991). The PAD emotional state model by Mehrabian and Russell measures emotions using Satisfaction, Arousal, and Dominance dimensions (Mehrabian 1980).

Complexity and inconsistency in defining emotions and moods in literature necessitate quantitative criteria. The socio-constructivist perspective on emotions contrasts with individualistic psychological approaches by viewing emotions as socially constructed entities that influence social interactions, instead of solely individual, subjective physiological states. Debate over emotion classification is still present and researchers have approached the classification of emotions from one of two fundamental viewpoints: discrete vs dimensional viewpoints in research. Emotions are intense, fleeting affective experiences, while moods are lower intensity, long-lasting states (Čorlukić, Krpan 2020). Emotion is essential to human experience in general and to mental disorders in particular. Despite the significance of emotion, our current understanding of emotional phenomena is limited by the relative absence of objective approaches in scientific research (Gu et al. 2019). Emotions can be considered a measure of well-being, regardless of whether they are positive or negative (Frijda 1988). Feelings can give us clues about our surroundings:



feeling bad at work usually means we are facing difficulties, while feeling good is a sign of safety and can lead to more social interactions (Fredrickson 1998, 2000; Lazarus 1991). When thinking about how emotions play a part in adaptation, it is important to keep in mind that the main goal of adaptation is to encourage the most effective behavior based on biological and social needs (Lazarus, Folkman 1984). Also, it's important to note that for an organism to exhibit contingent behavior, it must satisfy two key conditions: detecting when environmental conditions impact its survival needs and responding in a way that enhances the chances of meeting those needs.

Negative emotions are states that are unpleasant or not desired. However, despite being unpleasant, they can still be beneficial (Ekman 1999). Negative emotions play a crucial role in assisting us with important tasks in our lives. Negative emotions are essential just like positive emotions in our lives. When it comes to our health, we simply need to understand how to control emotions in a productive manner. While positive and negative emotions have received substantial attention from researchers and psychology practitioners, there's another category of emotions that have been all but ignored in many circles: neutral emotions. Neutral emotions, on the other hand, involve a lack of strong affective response and include terms like indifference and surprise. These emotions often denote a state of emotional equilibrium or detachment. Neutral emotions, characterized by the absence of pain and suffering, may be considered positive, although they have no valence. They are often overlooked in emotional experiences, but they are an important part of the Buddhist perspective (Anālayo 2017). Despite the attention given to positive and negative emotions, neutral emotions remain largely ignored (Kennedy 2018).

Psychotic disorder is a widespread mental disorder, affecting one in eight people worldwide, while in emergencies one in five (22%) sufferers experience depression, anxiety, bipolar illness, schizophrenia or PTSD (WHO 2024). The voluntary and non-binding Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 recognizes that the state has a primary role in disaster risk reduction and that this responsibility should be shared with local governments, the private sector, and other stakeholders. By signing the aforementioned Framework, the signatory states have effectively committed themselves to it. Rescue service organizations are responsible for their employees, while humanitarian organizations are responsible for volunteers (World Health Organization, War Trauma Foundation, & World Vision International 2011; Thormar et al. 2013).

Moreover, psychosocial support is crucial for safeguarding public health and promoting recovery following emergencies (Janković et al. 2025). Disasters frequently elicit intense emotional responses, including fear, anxiety, helplessness, and a perceived loss of control. For many individuals, these experiences are further exacerbated by the loss of loved ones or separation from family members. Such psychosocial impacts can be as debilitating as physical injuries, underscoring the importance of addressing them to foster both individual and community resilience. Rescuers exposed to extreme stress often experience anxiety, panic attacks, and heightened nervousness, amplified by repeated exposure to reminders of the traumatic event (Janković, et al. 2025). Rescue teams must



respond effectively without succumbing to panic or emotional distress. Besides theoretical and practical training, having a psychologist on hand during interventions is extremely helpful, with immediate intervention to avoid psychological stress (Horváth 2023). Rescuers must not only deal with physical challenges but also with the psychic stress of having to handle dead bodies and not being able to save all the victims. Good organizational planning—such as consideration of human factors, design of tools and processes, task pacing, work schedules, and reduction of psychosocial risks—reduces these stresses to a minimum. Risk assessments by employers must cover role-specific psychological hazards so that preventive measures can be taken. Reactions of individuals to traumatic incidents differ in that some experience immediate distress while others develop symptoms after a delay, necessitating long-term psychological support.

In RACP RS and MRS FBiH, capacities for developing measures are not systematically established but carried out by individuals through competent public health institutions. Training programs for supervisors, managers, and health professionals are essential for identifying vulnerable groups of employees needing additional support during traumatic events (Brooks et al. 2016). These programs aim to provide peer-to-peer support, with supervision groups led by professionally trained moderators (Малкина-Пых 2005). In order to provide evidence-based care, including psychological interventions and psychosocial supports, task-sharing requires mental health professionals to use their experience and skills while supervising, educating, and mentoring community providers and general health workers (Kestel 2022). The options are Psychological First Aid or Emergency Psychological Aid, bearing in mind that Psychological First Aid is a non-medical, non-professionalized activity performed by non-medical staff and volunteers in a vulnerable community (Bisson, Levis 2009; Kordić 2018), while Emergency Psychological Aid is a professional activity of psychologists and a unique independent field of psychological practice (Shoigu 2014). However, the Ministry of Defense and AF BiH have implemented a policy since October 2014 defining mental health protection and psychosocial assistance (МО БИХ 2014). Military psychologists exclusively implement basic methods, while specialist methods are implemented in health institutions.

### **3. METHODS**

The purpose of this paper was to examine the availability of system resources for the protection of the mental health of work organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina that sent their members on a rescue mission to minimize the consequences of the earthquake in the Republic of Turkey in February 2023. The primary goal was to document the volunteers' and rescuers' feelings as they were carrying out their assigned roles for the expedition. The feelings arose from carrying out the work successfully or unsuccessfully, were documented, and could provide justification for the effect on volunteers' and rescuers' psychological capacity. These findings may evaluate the efficacy of the current mental health programs of work organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina that deployed its members on rescue missions. Taking into account that positive emotions are associated



with perceived benefits while negative emotions are negatively related to perceived benefits, these findings could also underscore the importance of positive emotions in understanding perceived benefits and emotional reactions. In order to accomplish the goal of this work, the research was performed with protection and rescue personnel of the Republican Administration of Civil Protection of the Republic of Srpska (RACP RS), volunteers from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Mountain Rescue Service (MRS FBiH), and members of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AF BiH), who were involved in a rescue mission to minimize the consequences of the earthquake in the Republic Türkiye in February 2023.

The study sample consisted of 34 participants who were directly engaged in the international humanitarian mission following the February 2023 Türkiye earthquake and voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. The selection of respondents reflected the main operational components of the country's disaster response system, encompassing state, volunteer, and military sectors. The sociodemographic structure of the sample indicates a workforce that is predominantly male (94.1%), with only two female participants (5.9%), both serving within MRS FBiH. The age distribution shows that the largest proportion of respondents (74%) were between 31 and 50 years old, with the most represented groups being 31–35 and 46–50 years (each 20.59%). This indicates a predominance of mature, mid-career personnel combining operational experience with psychological stability.

In terms of work experience, the majority of respondents (29.41%) had between 11 and 20 years of professional service, while 41% reported 6–30 years, confirming a solid mid-career composition. Only one-fifth (20.59%) had less than five years of experience, representing early-career rescuers. The distribution of experience varied across institutions, with RACP RS showing a concentration of personnel with 6–10 years of service (37.5%), AF BiH with 11–20 years (40%), and MRS FBiH presenting the widest range, including senior rescuers with up to 40 years of engagement.

The educational structure was diverse. Respondents with secondary education (38.24%) formed the largest group, followed by those with university degrees (26.47%), and a smaller share with specialist (8.82%) and magister-level qualifications (11.76%). No respondents held doctoral degrees. RACP RS personnel predominantly had secondary education (75%), AF BiH participants showed higher academic qualifications (40% university, 20% magister level), while MRS FBiH had the most educationally varied composition, including master's degree holders.

Self-report questionnaires were created to assess state emotions, and the response list was signed using the scale sensitive to 14 different emotional states. The research questions were formulated in a specific way following the adapted Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANEX). The study measures the presence and frequency of positive, negative, and neutral emotions using 14 discrete emotions. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 [completely yes] to 5 [not at all] was used to determine the implementation of adequate measures to protect the mental health of rescuers and volunteers from



stressful situations, particularly in natural disasters, and to assess the impact of training on these situations.

A portion of the findings of a larger research project, which was implemented from March to June 2023, are presented to a sample of respondents: members of the protection and rescue forces of the Republican Administration of Civil Protection of the Republic of Srpska (RACP RS), volunteers from the Mountain Rescue Service of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MRS FBiH), and members of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AF BiH) who were engaged in a rescue mission to minimize consequences of the February 2023 Türkiye earthquake. Members of the MRS FBiH were surveyed from MRS stations: Visoko, Tuzla, Zenica, Novi Grad - Sarajevo, Kakanj, Mostar and Travnik.

#### 4. RESULTS

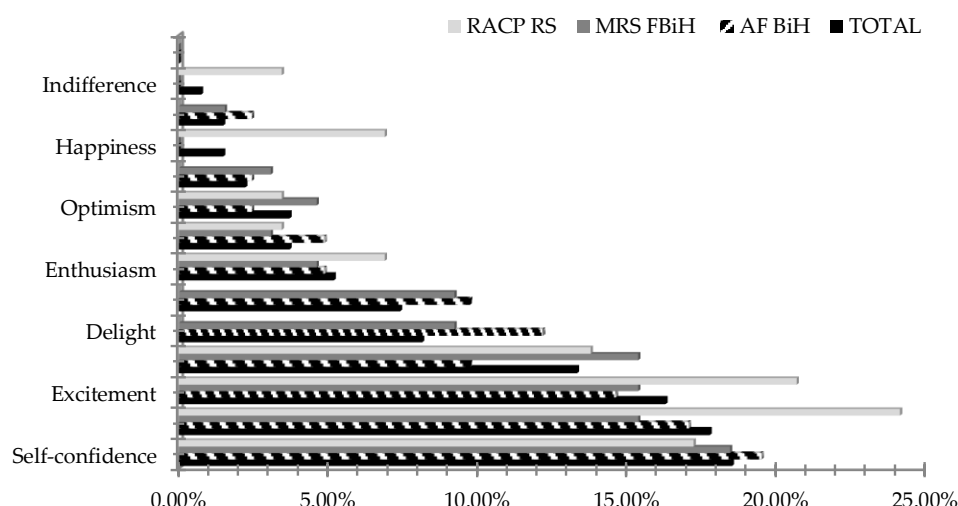
In total, 34 responders were included in this analysis. The research will be presented through six tables and two graphics. All results were shown for all responders together and for three main groups that were involved in response to the Türkiye earthquake 2023, and those are: the Republican Administration of Civil Protection of the Republic of Srpska (RACP RS), volunteers from the Mountain Rescue Service of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MRS FBiH), and members of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AF BiH). The two graphics just show the same result in different and for some more understandable way, from the tables above them.

Answers to the first question were collected using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 [completely yes] to 5 [not at all], with the goal of determining the implementation of appropriate measures and activities aimed at protecting the mental health of rescuers/volunteers and preventing the harmful effects of stressful situations before a natural disaster. Respondents' work organizations partially implement disaster risk management measures to protect rescuers' mental health and prevent stressful situations' harmful effects (Table 1). Three (8.82%) responders do not answer this question for unknown reasons.

**Table 1.** Question Q1 – Implementation of measures and activities through three phases of disaster risk management

Q1 In my work organization, to protect the mental health of rescuers/volunteers and prevent the harmful effects of a stressful situation, appropriate measures and activities are implemented before, during and after a natural disaster.		RACP RS		MRS FBiH		AF BiH		TOTAL	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
Completely yes	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	
Mostly yes	1	12.50	5	31.25	0	0.00	6	17.65	
Partially	3	37.50	3	18.75	7	70.00	13	38.24	
Mostly no	1	12.50	3	18.75	1	10.00	5	14.71	
Not at all	2	25.50	4	25.00	1	10.00	7	20.59	
I do not know	1	12.50	1	6.25	1	10.00	3	8.82	

**Graph 1.** Question Q2 – Emotions caused by successful in completing the task!



The Question Q2 – “Emotions caused by successful in completing the task!”, was provided for all three main groups. Table 2. shows the frequencies of answers to the question Q2. The answers with higher frequency were satisfaction with score 25 (18.52%), pride with score 24 (17.78%), will and elan with score 22 (16.30%), and feeling of extra strength with score 18 (13.33 %).

**Table 2.** Frequency of answers to question Q2

Frequency of answers to the question Q2: Emotions caused by successful completing the task!								
	RACP RS	MRS FBiH	AF BiH	F	%			
Surprise	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	<b>0</b>	<b>0.00</b>
Indifference	1	3.45	0	0.00	0	0.00	<b>1</b>	<b>0.74</b>
Elation	0	0.00	1	1.54	1	2.44	<b>2</b>	<b>1.48</b>
Happiness	0	0.00	6	9.23	4	9.76	<b>10</b>	<b>7.41</b>
Joy	1	3.45	3	4.62	1	2.44	<b>5</b>	<b>3.70</b>
Optimism	0	0.00	6	9.23	5	12.20	<b>11</b>	<b>8.15</b>
Satisfaction	5	17.24	12	18.46	8	19.51	<b>25</b>	<b>18.52</b>
Enthusiasm	2	6.90	3	4.62	2	4.88	<b>7</b>	<b>5.19</b>
Feeling of extra strength	4	13.79	10	15.38	4	9.76	<b>18</b>	<b>13.33</b>
Delight	0	0.00	2	3.08	1	2.44	<b>3</b>	<b>2.22</b>
Pride	7	24.14	10	15.38	7	17.07	<b>24</b>	<b>17.78</b>
Excitement	1	3.45	2	3.08	2	4.88	<b>5</b>	<b>3.70</b>
Will and elan	6	20.69	10	15.38	6	14.63	<b>22</b>	<b>16.30</b>
Self-confidence	2	6.90	0	0.00	0	0.00	<b>2</b>	<b>1.48</b>
							<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>135 100.00</b>

The absence of the emotion of *surprise* as a response was recorded. The options offered were not adequate for one (2.94%) respondent; the respondent gave the answer *None of*

the above, while 29 of them (85.29%) gave multiple answers (Table 3.). The 27 variants of emotions caused by successful completion of the task were recorded, with which the respondents combined two to nine (out of the 14 offered) answers to the situation.

**Table 3.** 27 variants of emotions caused by success in completing the task

Composition of individual answers in multiple answers to a question Q2: Emotions caused by successful in completing the task

Label	RACP RS	MRS FBiH	AF BiH	N	%
V1		1		1	3.44
V2		1		1	3.44
V3		1		1	3.44
V4	1			1	3.44
V5	1			1	3.44
V6			1	1	3.44
V7	1			1	3.44
V8	1		1	2	6.89
V9		1		1	3.44
V10		1		1	3.44
V11	1			1	3.44
V12			1	1	3.44
V13	1			1	3.44
V14		1		1	3.44
V15		1		1	3.44
V16		1		1	3.44
V17			1	1	3.44



V18	Pride, Satisfaction, Enthusiasm, Feeling of extra strength, Will and elan, Optimism	1	1	3.44	
V19	Pride, Satisfaction, Delight, Feeling of extra strength, Will and elan, Happiness, Excitement, Optimism, Elation	1	1	3.44	
V20	Pride, Satisfaction, Feeling of extra strength	1	1	3.44	
V21	Pride, Satisfaction, Feeling of extra strength, Will and elan	1	1	3.44	
V22	Pride, Satisfaction, Feeling of extra strength, Will and elan, Optimism	1	1	2	6.89
V23	Pride, Satisfaction, Feeling of extra strength, Will and elan, Happiness, Optimism	1	1	3.44	
V24	Pride, Satisfaction, Feeling of extra strength, Will and elan, Happiness, Optimism, Elation	1	1	3.44	
V25	Pride, Satisfaction, Feeling of extra strength, Optimism	1	1	3.44	
V26	Pride, Satisfaction, Indifference	1	1	3.44	
V27	Pride, Feeling of extra strength, Happiness	1	1	3.44	
<b>TOTAL: 27 variants of multiple answers</b>				<b>29</b>	<b>100.00</b>

When it comes to Question 3. (Table 4.) “Emotions caused by failure in completing the task”, a report on the results is given in the lines that follow, detailing the feelings that were brought on by the task's failure to be completed. It was observed that first four emotions in this contest were: *sadness* with frequency of 15 responds (22.73%), *grief* with 13 (19.70%), *dissatisfaction* 9 (13.64%), and *disappointment* 7 (10.61%). Also, it was interesting to notice that none of the responders felt *indifference* or *self-doubt*.

**Table 4.** Frequency of answers to question Q3

Frequency of answers to the question Q3: Emotions caused by failure in completing the task!								
	RACP	RS	MRS	FBiH	AF	BiH	F	%
Indifference	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Self-doubt	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Surprise	0	0.00	1	3.13	0	0.00	1	1.52
Fury	1	6.25	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	1.52
Fear	0	0.00	1	3.13	0	0.00	1	1.51
Shame	0	0.00	1	3.13	1	5.56	2	3.03
Feeling guilty	1	6.25	1	3.13	1	5.56	3	4.55
Concern	0	0.00	2	6.25	1	5.56	3	4.55
Anger	3	18.75	1	3.13	1	5.56	5	7.58
Weakness	3	18.75	2	6.25	1	5.56	6	9.09
Disappointment	0	0.00	4	12.50	3	16.66	7	10.61

Dissatisfaction	1	6.25	6	18.75	2	11.10	<b>9</b>	<b>13.64</b>
Grief	2	12.50	6	18.75	5	27.78	<b>13</b>	<b>19.70</b>
Sadness	5	31.25	7	21.87	3	16.66	<b>15</b>	<b>22.73</b>
							<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>66</b>
								<b>100.00</b>

**Graph 2.** Question Q3 – Emotions caused by failure in completing the task

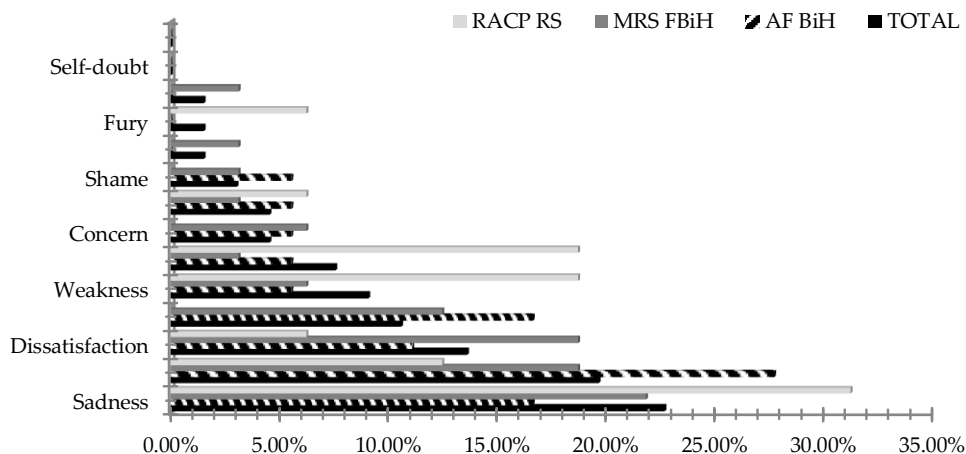


Table 5. shows that out of the respondents, 18 (52.94%) gave more than one response. Out of the 14 responses that might be made, the respondents gave two to eight answers to the 15 distinct emotional fluctuations that the task's unsuccessful completion caused. Two respondents (5.88%) reported *disappointment*, *dissatisfaction*, and *sadness* as unique emotions.

**Table 5.** 15 variants of emotions caused by failure to complete the task

Composition of individual answers in multiple answers to a question Q3: Emotions caused by failure to complete the task

Label	RACP RS	MRS FBiH	AF BiH	N	%
V1 Grief, Dissatisfaction		1		1	5.55
V2 Grief, Sadness	1	2	1	4	22.22
V3 Grief, Sadness, Anger			1	1	5.55
V4 Grief, Sadness, Disappointment			1	1	5.55
V5 Surprise, Dissatisfaction		1		1	5.55
V6 Weakness, Grief		1		1	5.55
V7 Weakness, Grief, Concern, Dissatisfaction			1	1	5.55
V8 Weakness, Grief, Sadness, Anger	1			1	5.55
V9 Weakness, Sadness, Anger, Fury	1			1	5.55
V10 Weakness, Sadness, Anger, Feeling guilty	1			1	5.55
V11 Shame, Grief, Feeling guilty, Disappointment			1	1	5.55
V12 Shame, Weakness, Grief, Sadness, Feeling guilty, Dissatisfaction, Disappointment		1		1	5.55



V13	Fear, Grief, Sadness, Anger, Concern, Dissatisfaction, Disappointment	1	1	5.55
V14	Sadness, Concern, Dissatisfaction, Disappointment	1	1	5.55
V15	Sadness, Disappointment	1	1	5.55
<b>TOTAL: 15 variants of multiple answers</b>			<b>18</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Next question (Question 4.) was related to the relationship between training and challenge. Formulation of this question was: “Training aimed at protecting mental health and preventing the harmful effects of stressful situations in my work organization corresponds to the challenges I encountered during the rescue mission in the Republic of Türkiye in February 2023.” A five-point Likert scale was used (1 [completely yes] to 5 [not at all]) for responses to the question to determine whether the training is aimed at protecting mental health and preventing the adverse impact of stressful situations on the status of rescue team members during the earthquake rescue mission in Türkiye. At this question most respondents think that training does not meet the challenges they encountered during the mission. (Table 6.). Few respondents (8.82%) think that the training primarily addresses the challenges they faced during the rescue mission in the Republic of Türkiye in February 2023. For unexplained reasons, up to 12 (35.29%) respondents are unclear about the answer to this question.

**Table 6.** Question Q4 – Relationship between training and challenge

Training aimed at protecting mental health and preventing the harmful effects of stressful situations								
<b>Q4</b> in my work organization corresponds to the challenges I encountered during the rescue mission in the Republic of Türkiye in February 2023.								
	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
Completely yes	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Mostly yes	1	12.50	2	12.50	0	0.00	3	8.82
Partially	1	12.50	3	18.75	4	40.00	8	23.53
Mostly no	1	12.50	1	6.25	2	20.00	4	11.76
Not at all	1	12.50	3	18.75	3	30.00	7	20.59
I do not know	4	50.00	7	43.75	1	10.00	12	35.29
	RACP RS		MRS FBiH		AF BiH		<b>TOTAL</b>	

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Institutional Mental Health Preparedness and Disaster Risk Management

The finding that mental health protection measures are only partially implemented across organizations aligns with established disaster risk management frameworks, particularly the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, which emphasizes the importance of psychosocial preparedness as a core component of resilience (UNDRR 2015). The absence of comprehensive mental health measures before, during, and after disasters

suggests a structural gap in organizational preparedness, rather than an individual shortcoming of rescuers. This result is consistent with research indicating that emergency response systems in transitional and post-conflict societies often prioritize technical and logistical preparedness while neglecting psychological resilience (Alexander 2015; Paton, Johnston, 2006). The high proportion of respondents uncertain about the existence of such measures further supports the notion of insufficient institutionalization and communication of mental health policies within disaster response organizations.

### **5.2. Positive Emotions, Meaning, and Post-Event Functioning**

The predominance of positive emotions—such as pride, satisfaction, enthusiasm, and a feeling of extra strength—following successful task completion can be interpreted through Fredrickson’s Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions (Fredrickson 2001). According to this theory, positive emotions broaden cognitive and behavioral repertoires, enhancing resilience, problem-solving capacity, and social bonding, all of which are essential in disaster response contexts.

Moreover, the strong presence of pride and satisfaction reflects what Antonovsky (1987) conceptualized as a high sense of coherence, particularly the dimensions of meaningfulness and manageability. Rescuers who perceive their actions as meaningful are more likely to endure extreme stress without immediate psychological breakdown. However, Antonovsky also emphasizes that sense of coherence must be supported by systemic resources, an element shown to be insufficient in the present study.

### **5.3. Emotional Impact of Failure and Moral Stress**

The dominance of sadness, grief, dissatisfaction, and disappointment following unsuccessful task completion is consistent with the concept of moral stress and moral injury, increasingly discussed in disaster and emergency psychology (Litz et al. 2009; Williamson et al. 2021). Rescuers often experience distress not because of personal failure, but due to perceived inability to prevent harm or loss of life despite maximal effort.

The absence of indifference and self-doubt suggests sustained emotional engagement, which is generally viewed as adaptive in the short term but may increase vulnerability to cumulative stress and burnout if not addressed (Maslach, Leiter 2016). Research has shown that unresolved grief and guilt among emergency responders are significant predictors of long-term psychological difficulties, including depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Benedek et al. 2007).

### **5.4. Training Adequacy and the Stress–Coping Framework**

The perceived mismatch between mental health training and real operational challenges supports Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional model of stress and coping, which emphasizes that stress outcomes depend on the individual’s appraisal of demands relative to available coping resources. When training is perceived as inadequate, operational demands are appraised as exceeding coping capacity, increasing psychological strain.



Furthermore, disaster preparedness literature emphasizes that scenario-based, experiential training is more effective than generic psychological education in preparing responders for extreme events (Everly, Mitchell 2008; Paton, Johnston 2006). The high percentage of respondents uncertain about training relevance suggests that current programs may lack contextual realism and fail to address mission-specific stressors, such as mass casualties, prolonged exposure, and cross-cultural operational environments.

### **5.5. Systemic Implications and Regional Context**

Taken together, these findings reinforce the argument that psychological preparedness must be treated as a system-level responsibility, not an individual attribute. As noted by Hobfoll et al. (2007), effective disaster mental health systems should prioritize safety, calmness, self-efficacy, connectedness, and hope—principles that require organizational commitment and structured interventions.

The results of this study are consistent with broader regional evidence suggesting that protection and rescue systems in Southeast Europe face persistent gaps in psychosocial preparedness, particularly in integrating mental health into operational doctrine, training, and post-mission recovery (Alexander 2015; Paton, Johnston 2006). This underscores the need for institutional reforms that embed psychological resilience into disaster risk management frameworks.

### **5.6. Limitations and Future Research**

The study's limitations include a relatively small sample size and reliance on self-reported emotional data, which may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability. Nevertheless, the inclusion of participants from state, volunteer, and military sectors strengthens the relevance of the findings. Future research should involve longitudinal designs, larger samples, and qualitative methods to further explore the long-term psychological effects of disaster response missions and the effectiveness of institutional mental health interventions.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

This study demonstrates that while rescue personnel involved in disaster response missions exhibit significant psychological resilience and strong intrinsic motivation, institutional mechanisms for mental health protection remain insufficiently developed and inconsistently implemented. The findings clearly indicate that mental health preparedness within protection and rescue organizations is treated as a secondary concern, rather than as an integral component of disaster risk management.

Positive emotional responses following successful missions—such as pride, satisfaction, and enhanced self-efficacy—highlight the importance of meaning-making and professional identity in sustaining short-term psychological functioning. However, reliance on positive emotions and personal coping capacities alone is neither sustainable nor protective in the long term. The emotional burden associated with unsuccessful rescue outcomes, characterized by sadness, grief, and moral stress, underscores the cumulative

psychological risks faced by responders, particularly in the absence of structured post-mission support.

The perceived inadequacy of mental health training further reinforces the mismatch between operational demands and available coping resources. Generic or insufficiently contextualized training fails to prepare responders for the complex emotional realities of large-scale disasters, increasing vulnerability to stress-related outcomes such as burnout, moral injury, and post-traumatic symptoms.

Overall, the results support a systemic interpretation of psychological preparedness, emphasizing that resilience must be embedded within organizational structures, policies, and training frameworks. In the regional context of Southeast Europe, where disaster response systems often operate under transitional constraints, there is a clear need for institutional reforms that integrate mental health protection across all phases of disaster management—preparation, response, and recovery.

Strengthening psychosocial preparedness through evidence-based training, clear protocols, and accessible support mechanisms is essential not only for protecting the mental health of rescuers, but also for ensuring the long-term effectiveness, sustainability, and ethical integrity of disaster response systems.

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## HOW SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED STATES SHAPE THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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**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/istrazivanja/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/istrazivanja/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](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/istrazivanja/trumpova-vizija-multipolarnog-svijeta-g2-i-strateska-uloga-srbije-i-bjelorusije/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](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.

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## MANUSCRIPT PREPARATION

### ARTICLE GUIDELINES

**Article title:** Times New Roman; 14 pt; bold; alignment centered; single-line spacing; ALL CAPS (max. 100 characters with spaces).

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**Abstract and keywords:** Between **125 and 135 words (5–7 keywords. Use words that will help others find your work)**; Times New Roman; 12 pt; single-line spacing; justify. Write your abstract using concise but complete sentences. Get to the point quickly and always use the past tense because you are reporting on a study that has been completed. You need to include four things:

1. your research problem and objectives,
2. your methods,
3. your key results or arguments, and
4. your conclusion.

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## **STRUCTURE OF THE ARTICLE**

### **1.INTRODUCTION**

- **Background:** Provide context and background information on the topic.
- **Problem Statement:** Clearly state the research problem or question.
- **Objective:** Outline the main objectives or hypotheses of the study.
- **Significance:** Explain the importance and potential impact of the research.

### **2.LITERATURE REVIEW**

- **Previous Research:** Summarize relevant previous studies and how they relate to the current research.
- **Gap in Knowledge:** Identify gaps in the existing literature that the current study aims to address.

### **3.METHODS**

- **Study Design:** Describe the overall design of the study.
- **Participants/Samples:** Detail the characteristics and selection criteria of participants or samples.
- **Materials and Instruments:** List and describe the tools, instruments, or materials used in the study.
- **Procedure:** Explain the procedures and protocols followed during the study.
- **Data Analysis:** Describe the statistical or analytical methods used to interpret the data.

### **4. RESULTS**

- **Findings:** Present the main findings of the study clearly and logically.
- **Tables and Figures:** Include relevant tables, figures, and graphs to illustrate the results.
- **Statistical Significance:** Report the statistical significance of the results where applicable.

### **5. DISCUSSION**

- **Interpretation:** Interpret the results and discuss their implications.
- **Comparison:** Compare the findings with previous research and theoretical expectations.
- **Limitations:** Acknowledge the limitations of the study.
- **Future Research:** Suggest areas for future research based on the findings and limitations.

### **6. CONCLUSION**

- **Summary:** Summarize the main findings and their significance.
- **Final Thoughts:** Provide a final takeaway or recommendation based on the study's results.

The conclusion is intended to help the reader understand why your research should matter to them after reading the article. In conclusion, you summarize the article's findings and generalize their importance, discuss ambiguous data, and recommend further research. These include:

- Presenting the last word on the issues you raised in your article.
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- Introducing possible new or expanded ways of thinking about the research problem.

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