

Strategic Autonomy of Small States in the Western Balkans vis-à-vis Great-Power Projections

Denur Paçaku, South East European University and University of Graz
denurpacaku@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines how Euro-Atlantic alignment and hedging shape strategic autonomy among small states in the Western Balkans through a qualitative comparison of Kosovo and Serbia. Kosovo represents aligned autonomy, combining a clear Western orientation, external security anchoring, and the pursuit of full international recognition. Serbia represents hedging, maintaining multi-vector relations with the EU, Russia, China, and other actors while remaining exposed to ambiguity, external leverage, and hybrid influence. The article argues that autonomy is relational and multidimensional: alignment may reduce diplomatic manoeuvring while strengthening credibility and security predictability, whereas hedging may broaden short-term options while weakening policy coherence and institutional resilience. Drawing on official EU and NATO sources, policy reports, expert interviews, and selected V-Dem indicators, the analysis shows that small-state autonomy depends not simply on the number of external partnerships, but on security dependence, recognition constraints, institutional capacity, and the ability to convert strategic orientation into coherent and resilient policy.

Keywords: strategic autonomy; small states; Western Balkans; hedging; Euro-Atlantic alignment

Introduction

The Western Balkans occupies a strategic position in contemporary European security. The region remains formally embedded in the EU enlargement framework, while being exposed to competing foreign policy agendas pursued by the EU, the United States (US), Russia, China, Turkey, and some Gulf and Arab states through diplomacy, investment, religious-cultural ties, infrastructure projects, and strategic narratives. This overlap creates a specific strategic

environment for small states: they are not passive objects of external pressure, but their room for manoeuvre remains shaped by asymmetry, institutional dependence, and unresolved regional disputes.

The central research puzzle is not whether small Western Balkan states possess autonomy in an absolute sense. They do not. The puzzle concerns how different foreign policy strategies produce different forms and limits of autonomy. Kosovo and Serbia illustrate this problem in sharply contrasting ways. Kosovo has built its foreign and security orientation around alignment with the US, NATO, and the EU, but it does so under conditions of contested sovereignty and incomplete international recognition. Serbia has pursued a multi-vector foreign policy that combines EU accession rhetoric, military neutrality, close ties with Russia, expanding cooperation with China, and selective engagement with the US.

The article asks the following research question: How do Euro-Atlantic alignment and hedging shape the strategic autonomy of Kosovo and Serbia in the context of great-power competition, EU conditionality, and hybrid influence in the Western Balkans?

The argument is that strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans is best understood as a multidimensional and relational capacity rather than as a binary condition. Kosovo's alignment produces a coherence-dependence dilemma. It strengthens security predictability and Western credibility, but it limits independent diplomatic manoeuvring because Kosovo's statehood and security remain deeply dependent on external support. Serbia's hedging produces an autonomy-vulnerability paradox. It expands diplomatic flexibility and bargaining space, but also opens channels for external influence and weakens policy coherence. The article's contribution lies in showing that both alignment and flexibility generate autonomy, but in different domains and with different vulnerabilities.

This contribution refines the small-state and hedging literature in two ways. First, it shows that hedging in the Western Balkans differs from the Southeast Asian cases that dominate the literature. In the Western Balkans, hedging takes place inside a dense normative and institutional order structured by EU accession conditionality, NATO-centred security arrangements, unresolved statehood disputes, and hybrid influence. Second, the article shows that alignment should not be equated mechanically with loss of autonomy. For a state such as Kosovo, with incomplete international recognition, alignment may reduce diplomatic flexibility, but it can also increase security predictability and international credibility.

The article is structured into several interconnected sections. The literature review addresses the main debates on small states, strategic autonomy, balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging, placing them within the Western Balkan context, where the influence of external actors, international recognition, regional security, and political transformation shape the room for action available to small states. The methodology section explains the logic of the comparison between Kosovo and Serbia and the way in which the key concepts are operationalised. The empirical section analyses both cases in relation to diplomatic flexibility, security autonomy, institutional resilience, and vulnerability to hybrid influence, while the discussion and conclusion draw out the theoretical and practical implications of the analysis for the study of strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans.

Literature Review

Small States, Shelter, and Strategic Autonomy

The literature on small states begins from the premise that smallness is a relational condition produced by asymmetry rather than only a demographic or territorial category. Classic work by Fox and Rothstein shows that small states face narrower strategic options, yet still exercise agency through alliances, diplomacy, institutional participation and selective adaptation to external constraints.¹

Shelter theory is particularly relevant to the Western Balkans because small states often rely on larger actors or institutions for political, economic and security support.² In this article, shelter is treated as a condition that can protect small states while also limiting their independent room for manoeuvre.

Strategic autonomy should not be understood as complete independence. Lippert et al. define it as the capacity to set priorities and make sovereign decisions in foreign and security policy, while Fiott stresses the ability to act when necessary, including with allies.³ In practical terms, Kosovo illustrates autonomy exercised through NATO and US security anchoring while seeking wider recognition, whereas Serbia illustrates autonomy pursued through relations with several external partners. These examples show that autonomy may exist inside relationships of dependence, but only when a state retains enough decision-making space and policy coherence.

Morneau is useful for operationalising strategic autonomy because he links it to the reduction of external constraints, the limitation of foreign interference, and the preservation of decision-making space.⁴ This understanding is especially relevant for small states, where autonomy often means managing dependence rather than escaping it.

Balancing, Bandwagoning, and Hedging

The classic realist vocabulary distinguishes between balancing and bandwagoning. Waltz treats balancing as an attempt to counter a threatening or dominant power, a strategy that small states usually pursue through alliances, while Schweller shows that bandwagoning may also reflect interest-seeking behaviour towards stronger powers.⁵ These categories are useful, but they do not fully capture the more ambiguous strategies used by small states in contested regional orders.

Hedging fills part of this conceptual gap. Kuik defines hedging as a risk-management strategy through which states avoid irreversible alignment with one major power and preserve fallback

¹ Fox, Annette Baker. 1959. *The power of small states: Diplomacy in World War II*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Rothstein, Robert L. 1968. *Alliances and small powers*. New York: Columbia University Press.

² Thorhallsson, Baldur, and Sverrir Steinsson. 2017. *Small state foreign policy*. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 24 May 2017.

³ Lippert, Barbara / von Ondarza, Nicolai, and Volker Perthes (eds.). 2019. *European strategic autonomy: Actors, issues, conflicts of interests*. SWP Research Paper 4. Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik; Fiott, Daniel. 2018. *Strategic autonomy: Towards "European sovereignty" in defence?* EUISS Brief 12. Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies.

⁴ Morneau, Louis-Philippe. 2024. *Theory of strategic autonomy: U.S. foreign policy between 1823 and 1921*. PhD thesis. Montréal: Concordia University.

⁵ Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of international politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley; Schweller, Randall L. 1994. Bandwagoning for profit: Bringing the revisionist state back in. *International Security* 19(1), 72-107.

options. Lim and Cooper similarly emphasise that hedging combines cooperation, diversification and limited balancing rather than simple neutrality.⁶

Koga offers a more precise way to identify hedging because he locates it between balancing and bandwagoning and links it to observable behaviour in military, economic and diplomatic fields. Grzelczyk further clarifies that bandwagoning itself can have defensive and opportunistic variants.⁷ Taken together, these studies help avoid conceptual overextension: in this article, hedging refers to sustained ambiguity across policy fields, partner diversification, resistance to exclusive alignment, and exposure to the costs produced by strategic ambiguity.

Most hedging literature has been developed in relation to Southeast Asia and the US-China rivalry, but the Western Balkans differs because hedging operates within EU accession conditionality, NATO-centred security arrangements, unresolved statehood disputes and exposure to hybrid influence. Serbia's multi-vector policy is therefore not only a response to great-power uncertainty, but also a strategy connected to Kosovo, relations with Russia and China, and the domestic uses of geopolitical ambiguity.

Western Balkan Specificity: External Actors, Statehood, and Political Transformation

In the Western Balkans, strategic autonomy is shaped not only by material capacities or formal foreign policy choices, but also by the legacies of Yugoslavia's dissolution, unresolved recognition disputes, external actors and uneven political transformation. Kosovo and Serbia should therefore be analysed as cases in which autonomy is conditioned by statehood, institutions and regional security, not simply by abstract choices between alignment and hedging.

Research on external actors shows that Russia often operates less as a full alternative to European integration than as an obstructive power exploiting enlargement fatigue, institutional ambiguity and unresolved conflicts. Staletović adds an important comparative insight from North Macedonia, arguing that Russian influence can remain largely symbolic when dominant elite preferences and coalition dynamics limit institutional penetration.⁸ This supports the article's broader argument that external influence depends on domestic receptivity and institutional conditions.

This literature matters because Western Balkan states do not operate in a simple East-West choice. The EU remains the main normative and institutional framework, while Russia and China remain the most consequential alternative external actors; however, Turkey and some Gulf and Arab states also shape the regional environment through investment, infrastructure, and diplomatic engagement. For Kosovo and Serbia, strategic autonomy must therefore be assessed through the interaction between external partnerships, statehood constraints and domestic resilience.

⁶ Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. 2021. Getting hedging right: A small-state perspective. *China International Strategy Review* 3(2), 300-315; Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. 2008. The essence of hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's response to a rising China. *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30(2), 159-185; Lim, Darren J., and Zack Cooper. 2015. Reassessing hedging: The logic of alignment in East Asia. *Security Studies* 24(4), 696-727.

⁷ Koga, Kei. 2018. The concept of hedging revisited: The case of Japan's foreign policy strategy in East Asia's power shift. *International Studies Review* 20(4), 633-660; Grzelczyk, Virginie M. 2019. From balancing to bandwagoning: Evaluating the impact of the sanction regime on North Korea-Africa relationships. *North Korean Review* 15(1), 9-33.

⁸ Bechev, Dimitar. 2017. *Rival power: Russia in Southeast Europe*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Staletović, Branimir. 2026. Russian influence in the Western Balkans: Elite receptivity and the limits of institutional penetration. *East European Politics and Societies* 40(1), 249-268.

Studies of post-Yugoslav foreign policy further show that autonomy is constructed through narratives as well as material options. Kovačević links positioning between East and West to the marginality of post-Yugoslav small states, while Subotić and Ejodus show how state identity and the Kosovo issue shape Serbia's foreign policy choices.⁹

Bieber adds that formal pro-European commitments in the Western Balkans can coexist with institutional capture and crisis politics.¹⁰ This matters for the present article because diplomatic flexibility does not automatically produce sustainable autonomy if institutions cannot transform external room for manoeuvre into accountable and coherent policy.

Ejodus and Juncos make the reading of Euro-Atlantic alignment more cautious by showing that local actors may adapt, delay or resist external frameworks depending on domestic legitimacy, institutional capacities and political interests.¹¹ Alignment therefore needs to be analysed as a negotiated relationship, not as passive implementation.

Within this framework, domestic agency is central. External actors can create incentives and pressure, but the effects of those pressures depend on how local institutions and elites receive, filter and translate them into policy. This is why the article treats strategic autonomy as a relational capacity shaped by external orientation, statehood status, institutional quality and exposure to hybrid influence.

The case of Kosovo requires special treatment because its foreign policy is inseparable from the pursuit of international recognition. Visoka shows that Kosovo's foreign policy has been constructed through diplomatic performance and statehood consolidation, while Newman and Visoka emphasise recognition as a central strategy for entering international society.¹²

Consequently, strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans should be understood as the result of interaction between external orientation, international status, domestic institutions and hybrid vulnerability. Hedging may expand diplomatic flexibility, but it can weaken coherence if it rests on continuous ambiguity. Strong alignment may limit manoeuvring, but it can increase credibility and security predictability when a state remains dependent on external recognition and security guarantees.

Methodology and Analytical Framework

This article adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design focused on Kosovo and Serbia because they represent contrasting state-level strategies within the same regional security environment. Kosovo is treated as a case of aligned autonomy under incomplete international recognition and reliance on Euro-Atlantic security support, while Serbia is treated as a case of

⁹ Kovačević, Marko. 2019. Understanding the marginality constellations of small states: Serbia, Croatia, and the crisis of EU-Russia relations. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 27(4), 409-423; Kovačević, Marko. 2016. What place for East and West? Discourses, reality and foreign and security policies of post-Yugoslav small states. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 1(1), 110-131; Subotić, Jelena. 2016. Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12(4), 610-627; Ejodus, Filip. 2019. *Crisis and ontological insecurity: Serbia's anxiety over Kosovo's secession*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁰ Bieber, Florian. 2018. Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics* 34(3), 337-354.

¹¹ Ejodus, Filip, and Ana E. Juncos. 2018. Reclaiming the local in EU peacebuilding: Effectiveness, ownership, and resistance. *Contemporary Security Policy* 39(1), 4-27.

¹² Visoka, Gëzim. 2018. *Acting like a state: Kosovo and the everyday making of statehood*. Abingdon: Routledge; Newman, Edward, and Gëzim Visoka. 2018. The foreign policy of state recognition: Kosovo's diplomatic strategy to join international society. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 14(3), 367-387.

hedging and multi-vector diplomacy. Methodologically, Kosovo is analysed as a unitary state actor for reasons of analytical focus: the article compares official state-level strategic orientation, security alignment, recognition strategy and external vulnerability, rather than domestic political competition. Internal variation is therefore bracketed in order to keep the comparison centred on state-level foreign and security policy outputs.

The empirical basis consists of academic literature on small states, strategic autonomy and hedging; official EU and NATO documents; policy reports on Kosovo, Serbia and external influence; selected expert interviews; and V-Dem indicators for the information environment, institutional constraints and liberal democratic resilience. These sources allow the article to connect conceptual distinctions with observable patterns in diplomacy, security, institutional coherence and hybrid vulnerability.

Operationalisation of Key Concepts

To clarify the internal coherence of the analysis, the article operationalises strategic autonomy and the intensity of hedging through observable dimensions. Strategic autonomy is not measured through a single index; rather, it is examined through four key dimensions: diplomatic flexibility, security autonomy, institutional resilience, and policy coherence. The intensity of hedging is assessed through multi-vector engagement, partner diversification, ambiguity in alignment, and resistance to exclusive foreign policy commitments. Euro-Atlantic alignment is evaluated through policy harmonisation, reliance on Western security guarantees, the pursuit of recognition through Western institutions, and commitment to the strategic language oriented towards the EU and NATO.

Following Morneau, strategic autonomy is operationalised here as the quality of the decision-making space available under external constraint, not as a claim to independence from external actors. Therefore, the analysis asks whether Kosovo and Serbia can set priorities, preserve credible options, resist excessive dependency, and act coherently across the diplomatic, security, institutional, and informational domains. Following Koga, the intensity of hedging is operationalised more narrowly as the degree to which a state combines cooperation with competing actors, avoids exclusive commitments, separates economic and security alignments, and turns ambiguity into a bargaining lever.¹³ This distinction is necessary because flexibility alone may indicate either autonomy or vulnerability; the decisive question is whether flexibility produces coherent agency or merely multiplies the channels of external leverage.

This operationalisation is deliberately qualitative, and its aim is not to produce a numerical ranking of autonomy, but to compare how different strategies generate different profiles of autonomy. One state may score low in diplomatic flexibility but higher in security predictability and institutional coherence, as in the case of Kosovo. Another may score high in diplomatic flexibility but low in policy coherence, as in the case of Serbia. The comparison therefore evaluates autonomy as a differentiated outcome rather than as a single linear variable.

To make these conceptual distinctions analytically clearer, Table 1 summarises the main dimensions through which strategic autonomy, hedging intensity, and Euro-Atlantic alignment are operationalised in this article. The table does not aim to reduce these concepts to fixed numerical indicators, but rather to provide a structured qualitative framework for comparing

¹³ Morneau, *Theory of strategic autonomy*; Koga, *The concept of hedging revisited*.

Kosovo and Serbia. By identifying the observable dimensions of each concept, Table 1 makes it possible to assess how different foreign policy strategies produce different forms of autonomy, dependency, coherence, and vulnerability under conditions of external constraint.

Table 1: Operationalisation of key concepts

Concept	Indicators used in the analysis	Analytical function
Strategic autonomy	Decision-making room for manoeuvre; ability to set foreign and security policy priorities; minimisation of excessive external constraints; preservation of credible alternatives; capacity to resist dependence; coherent agency in international forums.	Dependent outcome. Used to distinguish meaningful autonomy from symbolic flexibility, shelter-based dependence, or declaratory foreign-policy language.
Hedging	Multi-vector engagement; avoidance of exclusive alignment; economic, diplomatic, and security-domain divergence; partner diversification; preservation of fallback options; selective cooperation with competing powers; policy costs generated by ambiguity.	Independent strategic pathway associated mainly with Serbia. Used to assess whether hedging creates sustainable autonomy or redistributes vulnerability across external partners.
Euro-Atlantic alignment	Consistent pro-Western orientation; policy harmonisation; reliance on NATO, the US, and EU frameworks; recognition-seeking through Western support.	Alternative autonomy pathway associated mainly with Kosovo.
Hybrid influence	Disinformation; political interference; strategic economic leverage; exploitation of institutional or sovereignty vulnerabilities.	Condition that can reduce the quality and sustainability of autonomy.
Institutional resilience	Rule of law capacity; policy coherence; administrative functionality; ability to protect the information space and critical sectors.	Mediating condition between foreign policy strategy and autonomy outcome.

Source: Own illustration.

Based on the literature review and the operationalisation of the key concepts, this article formulates two research hypotheses that guide the comparative analysis between Kosovo and Serbia. The hypotheses aim to clarify the relationship between the foreign policy strategies of small states and the different forms of strategic autonomy produced in the context of the Western Balkans. In this framework, Euro-Atlantic alignment and hedging are not treated as mechanically opposed categories, but as strategies that may produce different types of autonomy, with specific benefits and limitations.

H1: Euro-Atlantic alignment may limit the diplomatic flexibility of small states, but in cases of incomplete international recognition and external security dependence, it may strengthen strategic coherence, international credibility, and security predictability.

In this hypothesis, the independent variable is Euro-Atlantic alignment, while the dependent variable is the strategic autonomy of the small state. The relationship between them is conditional rather than linear. Euro-Atlantic alignment may limit diplomatic flexibility because the state has fewer opportunities to manoeuvre among competing actors. However, in the case of Kosovo, where statehood remains only partially consolidated internationally and security is closely linked to Western support, alignment may produce a more sustainable form of autonomy through the strengthening of security, international recognition, strategic coherence, and credibility vis-à-vis Euro-Atlantic partners.

H2: Hedging increases the diplomatic flexibility of small states, but it does not necessarily guarantee sustainable strategic autonomy when accompanied by exposure to external influence, disinformation, economic leverage, and weak institutional coherence.

The second hypothesis treats hedging as the independent variable, while the strategic autonomy of the small state serves as the dependent variable. The relationship between them is also conditional. Hedging may increase diplomatic flexibility because the state maintains relations with different actors and avoids exclusive alignment with a single power. However, in the case of Serbia, this flexibility does not automatically translate into sustainable autonomy, because multi-vector engagement may generate strategic ambiguity, multiple dependencies, exposure to hybrid influence, and weakened institutional coherence.

Results and Analysis

Kosovo: Aligned Autonomy in Pursuit of Full International Recognition

Kosovo represents a small-state configuration in which strategic autonomy is pursued through strong Euro-Atlantic alignment. Its foreign and security policy relies on partnership with the US, future integration into NATO and the EU, and Western support for recognition and security. Because Kosovo still seeks full international recognition and because some EU and NATO members do not recognise its independence, its room for hedging is structurally narrower than that of fully recognised small states in the region.

Kosovo's alignment does not maximise diplomatic flexibility; instead, it strengthens credibility, security predictability and institutional anchoring. Western support is not merely one foreign policy option among others, but a central condition of Kosovo's international agency. The European Commission links Kosovo's European path to reform, dialogue obligations and regional stabilisation,¹⁴ which shows that alignment creates both opportunities and constraints.

This alignment has clear benefits, since it reduces ambiguity in Kosovo's strategic orientation and makes its foreign policy more coherent than that of states seeking to balance between competing actors. Kosovo does not face the same dilemma as Serbia regarding sanctions against Russia or the symbolic role of Moscow in status politics. Kosovo's pro-Western orientation structures its space for action and makes the pursuit of open geopolitical alternatives less likely. The analytical value of Kosovo's case lies in this balance: alignment may limit diplomatic flexibility, but it may also increase credibility and strategic predictability in pursuit of full international recognition. This interpretation is also supported by one interviewee, who notes that "Kosovo seems to be relatively protected from the influence of anti-Western currents and remains largely pro-Western, especially pro-American."¹⁵ This assessment reinforces the argument that Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic alignment is not merely a structural constraint, but also a strategic choice aimed at preserving credibility, predictability, and a clear Western orientation.

At the same time, Kosovo's alignment with Euro-Atlantic actors creates a certain degree of interdependence in the field of security. As one interviewee warns, "The risk of non-Western influence in implementing the objectives of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and

¹⁴ European Commission. 2024. *Kosovo 2024 report*. SWD (2024) 692 final, 30 October 2024.

¹⁵ Interview with expert EJ, conducted by the author; identifying details withheld.

Western objectives in the Western Balkans region is high.”¹⁶ This observation nuances the Kosovo case by showing that a clear Euro-Atlantic orientation does not fully remove vulnerability to external influence, especially when such influence operates through regional tensions, unresolved disputes, and institutional fragmentation. However, this does not imply an absence of state agency. Rather, it shows that Kosovo’s security autonomy develops within a specific international architecture, in which the presence of KFOR, coordination with Western partners, and the management of regional sensitivities remain important elements of decision-making. In this sense, the actions of Kosovo’s institutions on security matters, especially in the north of the country, cannot be understood as an isolated process, but as one intertwined with the expectations, assessments, and coordination mechanisms of international actors.

The tensions in northern Kosovo during 2023 made this dynamic more visible. These tensions included disputes over municipal authority after boycotted local elections, violent protests against the installation of Albanian mayors, attacks on KFOR peacekeepers in May 2023, and the armed attack in Banjska in September 2023. NATO emphasised KFOR’s role in maintaining a calm and secure environment after attacks against peacekeepers, reaffirming the importance of the international presence for stability on the ground. Along the same lines, NATO called for de-escalation, which shows that the exercise of Kosovo’s state authority in crisis situations takes place in a context where the demand for order, functional sovereignty, and security must be balanced with the need for allied coordination and the avoidance of regional escalation. Therefore, Kosovo’s case shows that Euro-Atlantic alignment can strengthen credibility and strategic security, while at the same time placing its security autonomy within the limits of a managed interdependence with international partners.¹⁷

Kosovo’s dependency also appears in the diplomatic dimension, especially because the international consolidation of its statehood remains incomplete. Partial recognition limits Kosovo’s access to certain international organisations and complicates its ability to act with the same diplomatic room for manoeuvre as fully recognised small states. In this context, Kosovo’s foreign policy is oriented not only towards expanding partnerships, but also towards securing new recognitions, preventing withdrawals of recognition, and strengthening its international subjectivity, which makes Kosovo’s diplomacy more focused and more conditioned by the objective of full international recognition.

For this reason, the pursuit of international recognition consumes considerable diplomatic resources and narrows the range of acceptable foreign policy options. Unlike small states that can pursue more open diversification strategies, Kosovo must assess external partnerships in relation to the impact they have on the consolidation of its statehood. A hedging strategy towards Russia or China would be structurally difficult and politically dysfunctional, because both actors are positioned against Kosovo’s full international acceptance. In this sense, the limitations on Kosovo’s diplomatic manoeuvring do not stem simply from its strategic orientation or from its foreign policy choices, but from the interaction between its particular international position, incomplete recognition, and the need to further consolidate its international subjectivity.

¹⁶ Interview with expert E.J.

¹⁷ North Atlantic Treaty Organization. 2023. *Statement by the NATO spokesperson on unprovoked attacks against KFOR troops*, 29 May 2023; North Atlantic Treaty Organization. 2023. *Secretary General statement on the situation in Kosovo*, 29 September 2023.

Therefore, Kosovo's strategic autonomy cannot be understood as the freedom to diversify partners equally among competing international actors. It should be understood more as the ability to deepen institutional anchoring within the Euro-Atlantic order, to increase credibility towards Western partners, and to gradually expand its space for action through diplomatic consolidation. Within this framework, Kosovo's autonomy is not measured by the number of geopolitical alternatives it can pursue, but by its ability to transform strategic alignment into a source of security, recognition, international legitimacy, and institutional strengthening. Thus, the limitation of multi-vector manoeuvring does not exclude autonomy, but directs it towards a more specific form: aligned autonomy in pursuit of full international recognition and the gradual consolidation of Kosovo's position in the international system.

Kosovo's case illustrates a dilemma between strategic coherence and external interdependence. Euro-Atlantic alignment creates normative clarity, strengthens international credibility, and places Kosovo's foreign and security policy within a more predictable strategic framework. However, this alignment simultaneously limits the space for independent manoeuvring, especially in situations where state decision-making must be harmonised with the expectations, interests, and coordination mechanisms of Western partners. Therefore, Kosovo's autonomy does not appear as complete freedom of action, but as the ability to act within an alliance-based order that provides support, security, and international legitimacy, while also placing political and diplomatic limits on how this autonomy is exercised.

In this sense, Kosovo's autonomy is stronger in normative clarity, security anchoring, and pro-Euro-Atlantic consistency, but more limited in diplomatic flexibility, diversification of strategic partners, and unilateral crisis management. This shows that alignment does not eliminate autonomy, but reshapes it by orienting it towards the construction of credibility, institutional strengthening, and the consolidation of Kosovo's international position. Therefore, the central question is not whether Kosovo can exercise autonomy outside the Euro-Atlantic framework, but whether it can transform this alignment into sustainable state capacity and more consolidated international agency. In this form, Kosovo's autonomy can be understood as aligned autonomy in pursuit of full international recognition and the gradual reduction of vulnerabilities arising from the incomplete international consolidation of its statehood.

Serbia: Hedging, Multi-vector Diplomacy, and the Ambiguity of Autonomy

Serbia represents the clearest case of hedging in the Western Balkans, where its foreign policy combines formal aspirations for EU membership, partnership with NATO without membership, strategic ties with Russia, deepening economic and infrastructural cooperation with China, and selective engagement with other actors. This model enables Belgrade to avoid full alignment with a single strategic camp and to preserve bargaining leverage in relation to the Kosovo issue, EU conditionality, and domestic political legitimacy.

The empirical logic of Serbian hedging can be seen in three policy areas.

At the diplomatic level, Serbia presents EU membership as a formal objective but has avoided full alignment with EU restrictive measures against Russia. This approach increases short-term diplomatic flexibility, yet it weakens trust with the EU and reinforces uncertainty about Serbia's strategic orientation.

In the security domain, Serbia's declared military neutrality provides Belgrade with a language of autonomy while enabling selective cooperation with NATO and the preservation of symbolic and political ties with Russia. This layered positioning allows Serbian elites to maintain negotiating space in relations with the EU and Russia and on the Kosovo issue, but it also perpetuates strategic ambiguity.

From an economic and infrastructural perspective, diversification, particularly through cooperation with China, expands Serbia's external options but also creates vulnerabilities related to debt exposure, procurement opacity, strategic sectors and political narratives that portray authoritarian development models as alternatives to EU conditionality. Hedging therefore reshapes dependency rather than eliminating it.

The relationship with Kosovo remains central to Serbia's hedging strategy. Russia's support in the UN Security Council and China's non-recognition of Kosovo provide Belgrade with diplomatic resources, while divisions within the EU over recognition also give Serbia leverage in the Brussels dialogue. This leverage is useful but fragile, because it depends on continued ambiguity and the absence of a decisive settlement.

The Serbian case confirms the autonomy-vulnerability paradox. Hedging preserves diplomatic flexibility and partner diversification, but it can weaken policy coherence and expand exposure to hybrid influence through Russian narratives, Chinese economic instruments, domestic media polarisation and the instrumentalisation of identity politics linked to Kosovo.

Comparative Assessment: Different Autonomy Profiles

The comparison between Kosovo and Serbia shows that strategic autonomy should not be understood as a single capacity that can be measured linearly, but rather as a configuration of capacities that varies across policy domains. A state may have more autonomy in diplomacy but less in security; it may have greater flexibility in relations with external actors but weaker institutional coherence; or it may have less room for manoeuvre while possessing greater strategic clarity and international credibility. For this reason, the comparison should not be limited to the question of which state has more autonomy, but should analyse in which fields this autonomy is produced, through which instruments it is exercised, and what costs it generates in terms of dependency, coherence, and exposure to external influence.

Within this framework, Kosovo and Serbia present two different profiles of autonomy. Kosovo has less diplomatic flexibility and fewer opportunities for geopolitical diversification, but it gains greater strategic clarity, higher credibility with Western partners, and stronger security anchoring within the Euro-Atlantic order. Serbia, on the other hand, has greater diplomatic flexibility, broader external partnerships, and a stronger ability to exploit competition among the EU, Russia, China, and other actors. However, this flexibility does not necessarily translate into more sustainable autonomy, because it may generate strategic ambiguity, multiple pressures, and weaker institutional coherence. Therefore, the central analytical distinction does not lie in a simple division between autonomy and dependency, but in the type of autonomy produced by different strategies: in Kosovo's case, a more aligned form of autonomy that is more limited in manoeuvring but clearer in orientation; in Serbia's case, a more flexible form of autonomy that is also more exposed to external vulnerabilities.

Kosovo's autonomy is centred on credibility and rests on alignment, alliance reliability, and the pursuit of recognition through Western institutions. This produces security benefits and diplomatic coherence, but limits independent manoeuvring. Kosovo's dependence on Western actors is not accidental; it is structurally linked to its statehood status. Therefore, its autonomy is narrower than Serbia's in diplomatic terms, but potentially more coherent in institutional terms if alignment is translated into rule-of-law capacity, professionalisation of the security sector, and more effective state diplomacy.

On the other hand, Serbia's autonomy is centred on flexibility and rests on ambiguity, diversification, and negotiation among competing actors. This produces short-term benefits because Serbia can resist exclusive pressure and keep several options open. However, this model also produces cumulative vulnerabilities, meaning that the more Serbia relies on ambiguity, the more difficult it becomes to demonstrate policy coherence, meet the expectations of the EU's foreign policy, or insulate domestic politics from external narratives. Its autonomy may expand in the short term, but it remains unstable in the long term.

This comparison also helps clarify the role of hybrid influence in relation to strategic autonomy. Euro-Atlantic alignment may reduce some channels of external influence because it makes the strategic orientation clearer, increases the predictability of foreign policy, and strengthens ties with key security partners. However, it does not fully eliminate vulnerability, especially in cases where the state still seeks full international consolidation, where state authority is challenged in specific areas, or where domestic institutions face political, informational, and security pressures. In Kosovo's case, exposure to hybrid influence is mainly linked to sensitivities in the north of the country, dependence on external security guarantees, and disinformation campaigns that seek to challenge its legitimacy, functionality, and international subjectivity.

In Serbia's case, exposure to hybrid influence takes a different form. As one interviewee argues, "Russia's strategies in the absence of such an alternative Russian model undermine Euro-integrative processes by promoting ideas that directly contradict the Euro-integrative model."¹⁸ The same interviewee adds that "Russia does not have the capacity to inspire the states of the Western Balkans toward any process other than that offered by the West... therefore it tries to create schisms/divisions within the societies of the Western Balkans."¹⁹ These assessments support the argument that Russian influence in the Western Balkans often operates less as a coherent alternative order and more as an obstructive strategy aimed at weakening Euro-Atlantic coherence. In this sense, hybrid influence functions primarily through the exploitation of internal divisions, political polarisation, and social vulnerabilities, rather than through the provision of a fully developed institutional alternative.

Multi-vector engagement gives Belgrade more room for manoeuvre among the EU, Russia, China, and other actors, but at the same time creates more channels for political, economic, informational, and symbolic influence from outside. This means that hedging may expand diplomatic flexibility, but it may also make it more difficult to preserve strategic coherence and institutional resilience. Therefore, in both cases, strategic autonomy cannot be separated from the quality of institutions, the ability to manage external pressures, and the capacity to maintain

¹⁸ Interview with expert DS, conducted by the author; identifying details withheld.

¹⁹ Interview with expert DS.

coherence in foreign and security policy. The comparison shows that the issue is not only how much room for manoeuvre Kosovo and Serbia have, but how sustainably they can protect this space from influences that seek to weaken their strategic decision-making.

To organise the comparative analysis more clearly, Table 2 presents the main dimensions through which different forms of strategic autonomy are assessed. The table serves as a synthetic framework that connects strategic orientation, diplomatic flexibility, security autonomy, institutional coherence, and hybrid vulnerability with their analytical implications. In this way, it helps clarify how strategic autonomy takes different forms depending on the policy field, the degree of institutional resilience, and the way states manage external pressures.

Table 2: Comparative autonomy profiles of Kosovo and Serbia

Dimension	Kosovo	Serbia	Analytical implication
Strategic orientation	Firm Euro-Atlantic alignment.	Hedging and multi-vector engagement.	Both strategies produce autonomy, but in different domains.
Diplomatic flexibility	Low to moderate, because recognition and security depend mainly on Western support.	High, because Serbia maintains relations with competing actors.	Flexibility is not identical to sustainable autonomy.
Security autonomy	Externally anchored through NATO/KFOR and US support.	Ambiguous, due to neutrality, NATO partnership, and Russian ties.	Security guarantees can both protect and constrain small states.
Institutional coherence	Stronger in strategic orientation, but constrained by incomplete international recognition.	Weakened by strategic ambiguity and external influence channels.	Policy coherence depends on domestic resilience and status conditions.
Hybrid vulnerability	High through incomplete international recognition, northern Kosovo tensions, and recognition disputes.	High through disinformation, economic leverage, and geopolitical ambiguity.	Hybrid influence operates differently across strategies.
Autonomy profile	Coherence-dependence dilemma.	Autonomy-vulnerability paradox.	The article's key contribution is to differentiate types of autonomy rather than rank states mechanically.

Source: Own illustration.

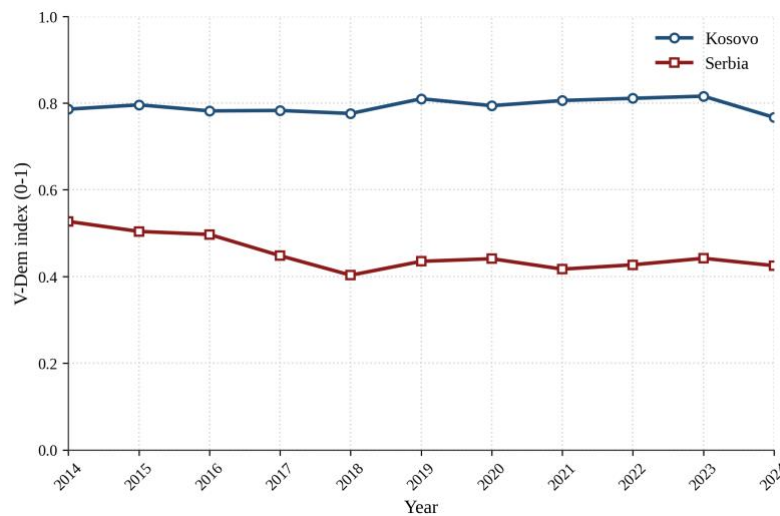
V-Dem Indicators: Information, Institutional Constraints, and Liberal Democratic Resilience

To strengthen the empirical link between strategic autonomy and domestic resilience, this section includes a descriptive comparison based on V-Dem data for Kosovo and Serbia for the period 2014-2024. The comparison relies on selected indicators that are directly connected to the main mechanisms of the argument: the quality of the information environment, the strength of institutional constraints, and the level of liberal democratic resilience. In this way, the data help to illustrate how domestic institutional and informational capacities shape the way small states manage external pressures and preserve strategic coherence. The data are taken from the V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v15.²⁰

²⁰ V-Dem Institute. 2025. *V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v15*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

The first indicator measures the quality of the information environment, a dimension directly relevant to the analysis of hybrid influence. The more stable, plural, and credible the information environment is, the more limited the space becomes for the spread of externally amplified narratives, the distortion of public debate, and informational pressure that may influence domestic political orientations. In this sense, the information environment serves as an important indicator of domestic resilience against hybrid instruments of influence.

Figure 1: Information environment in Kosovo and Serbia, 2014-2024

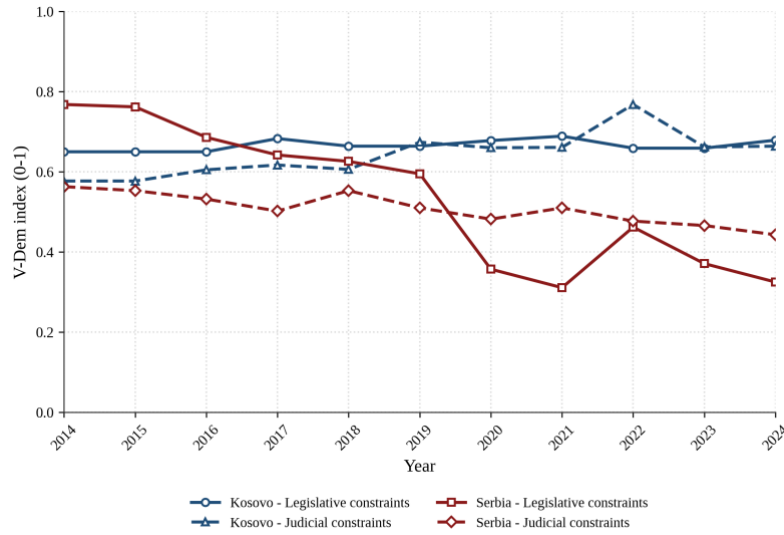


Source: V-Dem Institute. 2025. *V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v15*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

As shown in Figure 1, the information environment in Kosovo and Serbia during the period 2014-2024 reveals a consistent and sustained gap between the two countries. Kosovo remains in a more favourable position throughout the entire period, with comparatively higher and more stable values, moving from 0.786 in 2014 to 0.767 in 2024. Serbia, by contrast, follows a weaker trajectory, declining from 0.527 in 2014 to 0.425 in 2024. This difference indicates that Kosovo has a more resilient information environment, while Serbia faces a more fragile information environment, which may increase its exposure to disinformation, external influence, and the manipulation of domestic narratives. This finding is important for the article's argument because it shows that diplomatic flexibility and multi-vector engagement may expand foreign policy options, but they do not necessarily guarantee a more stable information environment or higher institutional resilience.

The second group of indicators examines institutional constraints on executive power. Legislative and judicial constraints are relevant because strategic autonomy requires not only external room for manoeuvre, but also domestic institutions capable of limiting discretionary power, protecting decision-making from external pressures, and preserving policy coherence.

Figure 2: Institutional constraints in Kosovo and Serbia, 2014-2024



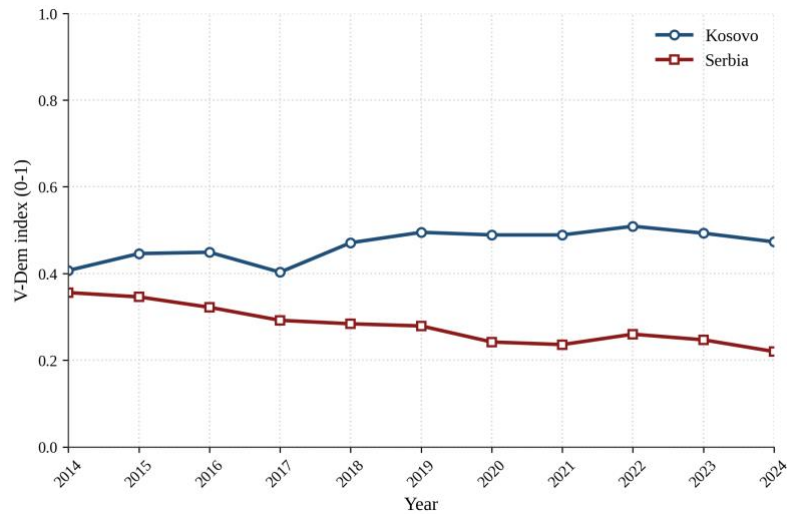
Source: V-Dem Institute. 2025. *V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v15*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

As shown in Figure 2, institutional constraints in Kosovo and Serbia during the period 2014-2024 reveal a clear difference in the institutional trajectories of the two countries. Kosovo appears in a more favourable position, as it records a moderate improvement in the average of legislative and judicial constraints, moving from 0.613 in 2014 to 0.671 in 2024. Serbia, by contrast, follows the opposite trajectory, declining from 0.665 in 2014 to 0.384 in 2024. This difference shows that Kosovo has managed to preserve and gradually improve the institutional mechanisms that constrain executive power, while Serbia has experienced a significant weakening of these mechanisms during the same period.

This change supports the claim that strategic autonomy is conditioned not only by external room for manoeuvre, but also by the quality of domestic institutions. A state may have several diplomatic and strategic channels at the same time, for example, through the process of European integration, security partnership with NATO, political ties with Russia, and economic cooperation with China. However, if constraints on executive power weaken, these channels do not necessarily translate into more sustainable autonomy, but may instead produce less accountable decision-making, strategic ambiguity, and greater exposure to external influences. In this sense, Figure 2 shows that diplomatic flexibility is not sufficient without a strong institutional foundation that supports decision-making and protects it from the personalisation of power, external pressures, and the weakening of strategic coherence.

The third indicator measures the broader quality of liberal democratic resilience. This dimension does not replace the concept of strategic autonomy, but helps to clarify whether foreign policy action is supported by stable institutions, democratic mechanisms, and domestic capacities to cope with external pressures. In this sense, liberal democratic resilience serves as an important indicator for assessing whether strategic autonomy has a sustainable institutional foundation or remains dependent on short-term diplomatic manoeuvring.

Figure 3: Liberal democratic resilience in Kosovo and Serbia, 2014-2024



Source: V-Dem Institute. 2025. *V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v15*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

As shown in Figure 3, liberal democratic resilience in Kosovo and Serbia during the period 2014-2024 follows a trend similar to the previous indicators. Kosovo appears in a more favourable position, as it records an improvement from 0.407 in 2014 to 0.473 in 2024. Serbia, by contrast, follows a weaker trajectory, declining from 0.356 in 2014 to 0.220 in 2024. This difference shows that Kosovo has managed to preserve and gradually improve a more stable liberal democratic foundation, while Serbia has experienced a significant weakening in this dimension.

This finding does not imply that Kosovo has full strategic autonomy, since its room for manoeuvre remains limited by the process of full international recognition and by reliance on Western security guarantees. Nevertheless, the data show that Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic alignment is situated within a comparatively stronger democratic and institutional trajectory. In Serbia's case, hedging and multi-vector engagement coexist with a decline in liberal democratic resilience, which makes it more difficult to transform diplomatic flexibility into sustainable, coherent, and institutionally grounded autonomy.

Table 3 summarises the three indicators and clarifies the direction of change between 2014 and 2024. It is included to keep the visual evidence transparent and to avoid treating the figures as isolated illustrations.

Table 3: Summary of selected V-Dem indicators for Kosovo and Serbia, 2014-2024

Dimension	Country	2014	2024	Change 2014-2024	Mean 2014-2024
Information environment	Kosovo	0.786	0.767	-0.019	0.793
Information environment	Serbia	0.527	0.425	-0.102	0.451
Institutional constraints	Kosovo	0.613	0.671	0.058	0.654
Institutional constraints	Serbia	0.665	0.384	-0.281	0.523
Liberal democratic resilience	Kosovo	0.407	0.473	0.066	0.466
Liberal democratic resilience	Serbia	0.356	0.220	-0.136	0.280

Source: V-Dem Institute. 2025. *V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v15*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

Taken together, the V-Dem indicators support the article's central distinction between Kosovo's coherence-dependence dilemma and Serbia's autonomy-vulnerability paradox. Kosovo has a narrower diplomatic space, but performs more strongly in the institutional and informational dimensions that support autonomy over time. Serbia maintains broader flexibility in foreign policy, but the data indicate a weaker information environment, a decline in institutional constraints, and lower liberal democratic resilience. The descriptive evidence therefore reinforces the article's main contribution: strategic autonomy should be assessed not only through the range of external partnerships available to a small state, but also through the domestic conditions that enable or constrain the coherent use of those partnerships. This is consistent with the assessment of one interviewee, who argues that "Without functional institutions and without a clear strategic vision, even states that are formally aligned with the West remain exposed to external influences."²¹ This observation reinforces the argument that strategic autonomy depends not only on external orientation or diplomatic flexibility, but also on the institutional capacity to translate strategic choices into coherent, resilient, and sustainable policy.

Discussion

The findings of this study address two main issues raised by the theoretical debate. First, they show that alignment should not automatically be understood as strategic passivity. Kosovo has fewer diplomatic options than Serbia, but its Euro-Atlantic alignment is not simply the result of external constraints. Rather, it represents a strategic response to Kosovo's distinctive international position, its incomplete process of international recognition, and its reliance on Western security guarantees. In this sense, Kosovo exercises agency by investing in international credibility, institutional anchoring, and recognition-seeking through Western partners and institutions. Its autonomy is constrained and mediated by external actors, but this does not mean that it is absent. The main challenge is that this autonomy may be weakened when domestic decisions are perceived by international partners as uncoordinated, risky for stability, or incompatible with their strategic expectations.

Second, the findings show that hedging is not automatically a superior strategy for small states. The case of Serbia demonstrates that hedging can expand diplomatic room for manoeuvre, but this room for manoeuvre carries costs. The Serbian state can negotiate with several external actors, yet the same model weakens the credibility of its EU trajectory and increases exposure

²¹ Interview with expert MV, conducted by the author; identifying details withheld.

to external leverage, which may affect domestic political space and state performance. Therefore, hedging should be treated as a strategy that redistributes dependence rather than one that directly eliminates or replaces it.

The theoretical contribution of the article lies in differentiating autonomy across policy domains. Diplomatic flexibility, security autonomy, institutional resilience, and policy coherence do not always move together. A state may be flexible but incoherent, or aligned but strategically credible. This distinction helps avoid overly simplistic interpretations of small-state behaviour. It also explains why Kosovo and Serbia cannot be assessed through the same analytical lens. Kosovo's problem is not the absence of strategic orientation, but the limited capacity to transform that orientation into fully independent international agency. Serbia's problem, by contrast, is not the absence of flexibility, but the fragility of flexibility when it becomes dependent on ambiguity.

The empirical contribution of this article lies in situating the debate on hedging and strategic autonomy within the specific context of the Western Balkans. The existing literature on hedging has been developed mainly through Southeast Asian cases, where states seek to manage the rivalry between the US and China through economic, diplomatic, and security diversification. The Western Balkans presents a different environment, because the states of the region do not operate within an open and symmetrical space of strategic choices. They are embedded in a dense European framework shaped by EU conditionality, NATO's security architecture, the legacy of post-conflict governance, unresolved political issues, and the presence of external actors such as Russia and China. In this context, hedging does not simply mean equal diversification among great powers, but rather an attempt to preserve room for manoeuvre within an asymmetric integration process, where the degree of international consolidation, unresolved disputes, and domestic legitimacy directly affect the real possibilities for strategic autonomy. For this reason, the Western Balkans expands the empirical understanding of hedging by showing that, in semi-peripheral European environments, diplomatic flexibility often coexists with institutional dependency, external pressure, and vulnerability to hybrid influence.

The practical implication is that Western policy towards the region should not treat alignment declarations as sufficient evidence of resilience, nor should it treat hedging only as pragmatic neutrality. In Kosovo, the challenge is to strengthen institutional capacity and diplomatic professionalism so that Western alignment becomes a source of durable agency rather than permanent dependence. In Serbia, the challenge is to reduce the rewards of strategic ambiguity by linking EU progress more consistently to foreign policy alignment, rule of law, and constructive behaviour in the dialogue with Kosovo. Across the region, EU credibility remains central. When enlargement appears uncertain or reversible, strategic vacuums widen and external actors gain opportunities to influence domestic and foreign policy choices.

Conclusion

This article has examined how Euro-Atlantic alignment and hedging shape the strategic autonomy of Kosovo and Serbia in the Western Balkans. The analysis shows that the strategic autonomy of small states cannot be understood as a single and fixed category, but rather as the result of the interaction between foreign policy orientation, institutional capacities, security guarantees, and external pressures. In this sense, Kosovo and Serbia produce different autonomy profiles. Kosovo illustrates the coherence-dependence dilemma, where Euro-Atlantic alignment

strengthens international credibility, strategic clarity, and security anchoring, while at the same time placing Kosovo's diplomatic manoeuvring within a narrower framework of action and coordination in relation to international partners. Serbia, on the other hand, illustrates the autonomy-vulnerability paradox of hedging, where diplomatic flexibility and multi-vector engagement expand room for manoeuvre, but also create strategic ambiguity, exposure to external influences, and challenges for policy coherence.

The main conclusion is that strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans is relational, multidimensional, and institutionally conditioned. It cannot be reduced to the ability to avoid alliances, nor can it be equated with formal alignment. Kosovo has less diplomatic flexibility, but its alignment can produce security predictability and credibility if supported by institutional resilience and effective diplomatic statecraft. Serbia has more diplomatic flexibility, but this flexibility is vulnerable to external influence, internal ambiguity, and declining policy coherence. In both cases, autonomy is shaped by the interaction between external constraints and domestic capacities.

The article also contributes to the broader study of small states by showing that hedging in semi-peripheral Europe differs from hedging in regions where integration frameworks are less institutionalised. In the Western Balkans, the EU and NATO do not simply represent external poles in a balancing game, but structure the political and legal environment within which autonomy is defined. Russia and China, meanwhile, often operate less as full alternative orders and more as sources of selective leverage, obstruction, investment, and narrative contestation. Therefore, strategic autonomy in the region depends not only on the ability of states to position themselves diplomatically among external actors, but also on the capacity of their institutions to manage the pressures, dependencies, and influences that arise from this positioning.

Future research should expand the empirical basis through interviews with senior policymakers, diplomats, security officials and representatives of international missions. It should also compare Kosovo and Serbia with other Western Balkan cases and disaggregate domestic political preferences within each case to examine how internal variation affects state-level strategic autonomy.

For policymaking, the findings suggest that strengthening strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans requires more than encouraging formal alignment with Western actors. It requires more resilient institutions, more credible and predictable EU engagement, more effective protection of the information environment, transparent management of strategic investments, and a security architecture that reduces the space for destabilising ambiguity. Small states in the region will continue to seek room for manoeuvre among external actors, but the value of this space depends on how it is used. If external partnerships strengthen institutions, decision-making capacities, and policy coherence, they can expand strategic autonomy. If, by contrast, they create new dependencies, uncontrolled external influence, or ambiguity in strategic orientation, then room for manoeuvre may become a source of vulnerability. In this sense, strategic autonomy is not the opposite of interdependence, but the ability to act coherently within it, without allowing external pressures to determine the fundamental direction of foreign and security policy.

Note on author:

Denur Paçaku is a PhD candidate in Political Science at South East European University and a doctoral researcher at the University of Graz. His research focuses on hybrid warfare, security policy, diplomacy, European Integration and the Western Balkans.

References

- Bechev, Dimitar. 2017. *Rival power: Russia in Southeast Europe*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bieber, Florian. 2018. Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics* 34(3), 337-354.
- Ejdus, Filip. 2019. *Crisis and ontological insecurity: Serbia's anxiety over Kosovo's secession*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ejdus, Filip, and Ana E. Juncos. 2018. Reclaiming the local in EU peacebuilding: Effectiveness, ownership, and resistance. *Contemporary Security Policy* 39(1), 4-27.
- European Commission. 2024. *Kosovo 2024 report*. SWD(2024) 692 final, 30 October 2024.
- Fiott, Daniel. 2018. *Strategic autonomy: Towards "European sovereignty" in defence?* EUISS Brief 12. Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies.
- Fox, Annette Baker. 1959. *The power of small states: Diplomacy in World War II*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Grzelczyk, Virginie M. 2019. From balancing to bandwagoning: Evaluating the impact of the sanction regime on North Korea-Africa relationships. *North Korean Review* 15(1), 9-33.
- Koga, Kei. 2018. The concept of hedging revisited: The case of Japan's foreign policy strategy in East Asia's power shift. *International Studies Review* 20(4), 633-660.
- Kovačević, Marko. 2019. Understanding the marginality constellations of small states: Serbia, Croatia, and the crisis of EU-Russia relations. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 27(4), 409-423.
2016. What place for East and West? Discourses, reality and foreign and security policies of post-Yugoslav small states. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 1(1), 110-131.
- Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. 2021. Getting hedging right: A small-state perspective. *China International Strategy Review* 3(2), 300-315.
2008. The essence of hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's response to a rising China. *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30(2), 159-185.
- Lim, Darren J., and Zack Cooper. 2015. Reassessing hedging: The logic of alignment in East Asia. *Security Studies* 24(4), 696-727.
- Lippert, Barbara / von Ondarza, Nicolai, and Volker Perthes (eds.). 2019. *European strategic autonomy: Actors, issues, conflicts of interests*. SWP Research Paper 4. Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik.
- Morneau, Louis-Philippe. 2024. *Theory of strategic autonomy: U.S. foreign policy between 1823 and 1921*. PhD thesis. Montréal: Concordia University.
- Newman, Edward, and Gëzim Visoka. 2018. The foreign policy of state recognition: Kosovo's diplomatic strategy to join international society. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 14(3), 367-387.
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization. 2023. *Secretary General statement on the situation in Kosovo*, 29 September 2023.
2023. *Statement by the NATO spokesperson on unprovoked attacks against KFOR troops*, 29 May 2023.
- Rothstein, Robert L. 1968. *Alliances and small powers*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schweller, Randall L. 1994. Bandwagoning for profit: Bringing the revisionist state back in. *International Security* 19(1), 72-107.
- Staletović, Branimir. 2026. Russian influence in the Western Balkans: Elite receptivity and the limits of institutional penetration. *East European Politics and Societies* 40(1), 249-268.

- Subotić, Jelena. 2016. Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12(4), 610-627.
- Thorhallsson, Baldur, and Sverrir Steinsson. 2017. Small state foreign policy. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 24 May 2017.
- V-Dem Institute. 2025. V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v15. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.
- Visoka, Gëzim. 2018. *Acting like a state: Kosovo and the everyday making of statehood*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of international politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.