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Neoclassical Realism and Small State Behavior: Understanding Kosovo's Foreign Policy

Despite recognition from the United States and many Western allies, Kosovo is not yet a member of the European Council or the United Nations. Seeing the Kosovo's case through the lens of neoclassical realism and small state concept, this article highlights the importance of the domestic political system and leadership image in the foreign policy making of Kosovo. It argues that Kosovo's political elite, affected by nationalism, largely shapes the country's foreign policy. The "small state" emphasized here is broader in meaning than the "weak state" used in realism and was attempted to be used as an analytical tool in the international relations discipline after the 1960s, when small states emerged in the system. The aricle explores the behavioral patterns associated with small states and notes Kosovo's inclination towards hedging behavior and questions the effectiveness of this strategy amidst the uncertainties and risks arise in its foreign policy.

Keywords: Kosovo, Neoclassical Realism, Small States, Hedging, Soft-Balancing

Neoklasik Realizm ve Küçük Devlet Davranışı: Kosova'nın Dış Politikasını Anlamak

Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve birçok Batılı müttefikin tanımasına rağmen Kosova henüz Avrupa Konseyi veya Birleşmiş Milletler üyesi değildir. Kosova'nın durumuna neoklasik realizm ve küçük devlet kavramı merceğinden bakan makale, Kosova'nın dış politika yapımında iç siyasi sistemin ve liderlik imajının önemini vurgulamaktadır. Milliyetçilikten etkilenen Kosova'nın siyasi elitinin ülkenin dış politikasını büyük ölçüde şekillendirdiği savunulmaktadır. Makale, küçük devletlerle ilişkili davranış kalıplarını araştırmakta, Kosova'nın korunma davranışına olan eğilimini not etmekte ve dış politikasında ortaya çıkan belirsizlikler ve riskler ortasında bu stratejinin etkinliğini sorgulumaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kosova, Neoklasik Realizm, Küçük Devletler, Riskten Korunma (Hedging), Yumuşak Dengeleme

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1. Introduction

Kosovo declared its independence on 17 February 2008, while under UN protection. This declaration partly resulted from international sympathy and support from the West, prompted by the atrocities committed in the Western Balkans and Serbia's rigid stance after 1999. The number of countries recognizing Kosovo has increased since that declaration. All its neighbors except Serbia recognize Kosovo. Four NATO and EU members (Greece, Slovakia, Spain, and Romania) have not recognized Kosovo yet. Although the United States and many of its allies recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence, it has yet to become a member of the European Council. Kosovo cannot become a UN member due to objections from Russia and China, both permanent members of the UN Security Council. Kosovo is de facto recognized by the UN, EU, and NATO since these organizations apply an "engagement without recognition" policy.

This study examines the composition and disposition of the political elite and its approach to some critical issues in domestic and foreign policy. Strategic culture, integral to the local elite's background, indirectly affects foreign policy. Kosovo's foreign policy can be understood by the distinctive behavioral patterns suggested by small state literature. It is unclear whether Kosovo's dialogue with Serbia is a hedging strategy that capitalizes on the prospect of EU membership. Another question is whether Kosovo should hedge bets to increase its international status within the limits and opportunities set by the international control.

Unlike neorealism, which focuses on the systemic results of interstate interactions and ignores the effect of domestic factors on foreign policy, neoclassical realism includes locally intervening variables in the analysis, such as the structure of the state, state-society relations, and strategic culture. However, neoclassical realism sees the external factors (independent variables) as more explanatory than those intervening variables and sees intervening variables as more explanatory for larger states. As Schweller (1992) argues, the impact of domestic factors is remarkably diminished in small states when they adjust their foreign policies to the most imminent threat.

However, as Devlen and Özdamar (2009) point out, since external factors rarely dominate domestic politics in the short term, it is more explanatory to include leadership as an intervening variable, in the analysis when small state foreign policy cannot be explained solely by the structure of the international system.

2. Definition, Characteristics, and Vulnerabilities of the Small States

There is no consensus within academia on how to define what a small state is. When determining whether a state is small, the quantitative and qualitative criteria considered in the literature are not exclusively explanatory since they are relative or relational. Small states have limited resources, weak military capabilities, economic and environmental vulnerabilities, small surface areas, and under-populations (Demir, 2008).

The most critical weakness the political elite prioritizes in minimizing may be the main criteria while defining a state as small. As Krause and Singer (2001) explain, a significant part of a small state's security problems arises from regulations regarding borders and jurisdictions. Thus, the most critical weakness of a small state is that it cannot be militarily self-sufficient due to its modest economy or small population. Whether a state is small can also be determined by looking at the domestic factors affecting foreign policy. To this end, a discourse analysis should investigate whether the political elite accepts the state's weakness, whether leaders comply with the behavioral patterns attributed to small states, and whether the state is eager to participate in international bodies composed of small states.

A small state cannot achieve its foreign policy goals without the help of larger states because external factors are the main variables that significantly affect a small state's foreign policy and limit its choices. So, small states should emphasize cooperation and compromise in their foreign policy discourse and pursue good relations with powerful states. Due to their weakness in political, economic, and strategic aspects, small states follow a reactive and defensive foreign policy (Baldur, 2005). Small states also try to establish close relations with some larger states or state blocs due to regional arrangements. According to Baker (1998), the dependency and obligation that develop over time in this network of relations, where the bargaining power of the small state is low, restrict their freedom of action.

Small states also have some advantages related to their size. Despite having few resources and capabilities, shared goals and determination are more easily formed in a small state than in a complex society with diverse elements. Shared goals and determination contribute to greater consistency in a small state's diplomacy. Moreover, it is easy for a small state to obtain what it requests from larger states, as its requests are often negligible. For example, as Baldacchino (2009) points out, the derogation granted to Malta in the EU acquis during the accession negotiations, "limiting the possibility of non-residents to purchase second homes," stemmed from the country's small size.

3. Compliance, Balancing, Soft-Balancing and Hedging Behaviors

There is a consensus in realism on the preferences of the weaker states in their relations with powerful states. Small states seek the support of powerful states to protect their rights against violations within the balance of power system (Morgenthau, 1948). Waltz (1979) argues that states will try to balance their potential rivals, and while in a hierarchy, they will prefer to be protected by a great power. Waltz argues that anarchy compels weaker states to allocate more resources for defense or to form alliances to sustain a balance of power. States will prefer to balance rather than be subordinate to or allied with a powerful state as they prioritize their security. While weaker states may hope to be on the winning side by allying with the stronger side, the most logical course of action is to balance the side with increasing power (Donnelly, 2005). When small states prefer economic prosperity over autonomy in their foreign policy, they entrust their security to their allies. While small states expect more protection, larger states act to exert more military and political influence (Krause & Singer, 2001).

Schweller (1994) highlights revisionist motives and incentives encouraging weak states to side with the winner. Wolfers (1962) also states that weak states may be subject to great powers to maintain their existence or gain more from the current situation. Brzezinski (1997) argues that in such a case, weak states will comply with the interests and views of the dominant power. Cooper and Shaw (2009) claim that this sensitivity of a small state increases with its proximity to the sphere of influence of the great power.

3.1. Balancing and Alliances

An existential threat from outside significantly restricts a small state's options. Several factors influence its freedom of action, including the small state's strategic importance, the rivalry between larger states, small state's position within the power cycle of these larger states, and the effectiveness of the small state's security institutions (Demir, 2008). On the courses of action taken to achieve a balance of power, Schweller (2004) argues that states may choose to create a balance of power or cause a security dilemma by misjudging their opponent or take rational steps to avert a danger if their aggregate power is not enough. Schweller lists the sensible steps that a small state can take to prevent a destructive conflict, such as accepting revisionist demands, getting other states to make concessions, opting for neutrality, or securing the intervention of a powerful state. If the small state is on a revisionist line, it may also see allying with the aggressor or group of states more profitable. Walt (1987) argues that balancing will not promise success to a small state facing an imminent threat. The intention of the opposing state can be revealed by looking at its means and capabilities, proximity, offensive capabilities, and political discourse. Walt posits that a small

state would rather have a powerful state behind it than balance a threat. The small state would prefer compromise or Finlandization when the perceived threat is significant and imminent, and no larger state opposes it.

Small states may enter alliances for reasons other than security; for example, they may strengthen new governing regimes or increase trade links with a particular bloc of states (Krause & Singer, 2001). Or, when their regime security is under threat, small-state leaders tend to seek foreign allies (Barnett & Levy, 1991). Domestic political instability can prompt leaders to integrate foreign policy into their domestic struggles (Rothstein, 1976). They can use foreign aid against opponents and leverage gains or grievances from foreign affairs in domestic policy (Larson, 1997).

Waltz (1979) argues that a small state that allies with a larger state may become dependent. Ingebritsen (2004), who examines the strategies of small EU states, states that although they are reluctant to transfer their sovereignty to a higher authority and Euro-Atlantic ties limit multilateralism, international challenges encourage small states to become members of NATO and the EU.

3.2. Soft-Balancing

Since the nature of security and alliances changed after the Cold War, allying has different costs for small states than during the Cold War. Duke (2001) states that small states preferred to enter broader security commitments after the Cold War instead of alliances. Schweller (2004) states that a small state loses some of its autonomy to its allies and that conflicts of interest among its allies complicate a small state's foreign policy. Similarly, Walt (1988) argues that a weak state is forced to make concessions to its allies and support their actions, which can even be called illegitimate. Small states can adopt methods other than alliances, such as soft balancing, when an external threat is manageable. Soft balancing can include non-military methods such as demanding the superior power's adherence to international law and obligations, failing to meet all its demands, counter-diplomacy, and questioning its legitimacy (Walt, 2005). Avoiding any conflict is the most preferred course of action by small states. Vital (1967) argues that since gaining a great power's support is not always possible, a small state's foreign policy goal should be to prevent, defuse, or postpone a conflict. Gerger (1975) believes that rather than engage in armed conflict, a small state will try to eliminate existing conflicts while not creating new ones. Larson (1997) argues that even if insecurity and uncertainty turn the conflict into a zero-sum game, states have a common interest in controlling the costs.

Small states' roles in a world based on cooperation are more significant than those dominated by military coercion (Handel, 1981). Although their limited resources reduce their spheres of influence, small states can find room for action by collaborating, complying with the rule of law, and setting limited goals in their relations with larger states. Therefore, small states must be careful about international regulations regarding their freedom and adjust themselves accordingly. Small states may appear insignificant when assessed individually. Still, their influence increases significantly when their collective actions in regional and international organizations such as the EU, UN, and WTO are considered. In addition to the relative guarantees stemming from the deterrence and balance of power provided by their allies, the principles of international law such as non-use of force, non-interference in internal affairs, independence, territorial integrity, collective security, and human rights are issues that small states passionately defend for their survival. A state's international status comes from the collective opinion of whether it has the characteristics valued by its peers. The pursuit of status is often associated with large states and unreasonably expensive projects (Wohlforth et al., 2017); however, small states can also pursue status as well. Chong (2010) states that small states can use their intellectual and persuasive abilities as symbolic or soft power. A small state increases its soft power by promoting its political-economic potential, good governance model, and diplomatic mediation. Lobby groups or diaspora can also be a valuable tool to improve a small state's effectiveness (Keohane, 1971).

Small states can gain influence in the organizations based on political equality. Mosser (2001) argues that organizations that act unanimously and whose presidency rotates from one country to another give a small state influence disproportionate to its power. Small states can be effective by acting with other small states within an organization and delicately processing the developments. According to Duke (2001), small states within the European Union can play an essential role by indirectly changing the parameters related to the security agenda their more prominent allies discussed.

Small states aim to gain status within a club of countries, whether ideological (liberal, democratic, etc.) or functional (neighbors, allies, etc.). Small states need the support of great powers to increase their status. A small state tries to rise among its peers by acting per the values and norms of large states. A small state tries to stand out by using its creativity in areas it is good at (such as mediating peace talks, playing third-party roles, and glorifying international institutions).

Since a small state seeking status cannot afford to compete with a large state, it prefers to use its soft power elements. Using the state's weakness to its advantage can be likened to a losing sports team receiving praise for its sportsmanship. The steps a small state can take in this context include using soft power elements, cultural values, norms, and ideas (Ward, 2017).

3.3. Hedging

'Hedging' is diversifying investments to protect against risk or taking a position opposite to the source of the risk. Small states may opt for hedging as a foreign policy strategy when there is uncertainty not to miscalculate and cause a decisive war. According to Ciorciari and Haacke (2019), the concept became widespread in international relations with studies on the behavior of small states in the Asia-Pacific region, where competition between the US and China has increased. There is no agreement on defining "hedging" and its application as a theoretical tool. According to Haacke (2019), describing the concept is difficult since it is an insurance term in trade and investments. Since risk and threat have the same meaning for some authors, risk protection and states' balancing behaviors are difficult to distinguish. Small states avoid admitting that they are hedging by claiming to be non-aligned, neutral, or at an equal distance from major powers, making it difficult to reach a standard definition (Kuik, 2021). In different uses of the concept, definitions such as improving the balance of risk and benefit by pursuing many political options simultaneously (Toje, 2010), managing risk with cooperation and protective measures (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019), or pursuing an assurance policy (Kuik, 2021) stand out.

Ciorciari and Haacke (2019) highlight four approaches to using the hedging concept within academia. The authors in the first group see hedging as assurances that enable the state to withdraw from its economic and diplomatic engagements in the future. The preemptive nature of the relationship between the US and China is an excellent example for this group of authors. The authors in the second group see hedging as the behaviors of a small state pursuing a balanced policy between two major powers. For example, the behaviors of small Asia-Pacific countries split between the US and China fall in this group. The authors in the third group define hedging as a mixed strategy that includes diplomatic engagements aimed at reducing and deterring risks alongside power balancing through force development and collective security arrangements. The authors in the fourth group see hedging as the non-military steps taken to eliminate a strategic or economic risk, such as energy security. China's initiatives on energy supply security and the Silk Road project are exemplary in this regard. It can be inferred that smaller states prefer to hedge, while more powerful states opt for pre-emption. Small states hedge to balance their relations with major states or avoid a possible a risk that may inflict in the future. Although there has yet to be a consensus on hedging and its analytical use in the IR discipline, a clear emphasis is placed on risk and uncertainty. There is a directly proportional relationship between uncertainty and hedging. In high uncertainty, hedging behavior aims to minimize risks and increase available options. Haacke (2019) argues that uncertainty and risk urge a small state to hedge. To distinguish between hedging and balancing power, Haacke looks at state behaviors to reduce security risks.

According to Haacke, a state hedges if there is risk, and the political elite suggests risk management strategies. While hedging, state actions to increase power should be routine, and security cooperation with other nations should be ambiguous. On the other hand, if elites perceive a security issue as a threat, one can accurately explain the state's behavior with the balance of power theory.

Kuik (2021) states that a small state can follow a balanced policy between two powerful states. Accordingly, the state is determined not to take sides or enter a rigid alliance. A small state takes a position where it can step back, when necessary, by taking contradictory and opposing steps on political, economic, and security issues between powerful states. Kuik suggests that small states hedge because they face uncertainty amid competing powers. While these states may show gestures of cooperation based on their expectations for political autonomy, survival, and development, this does not necessarily indicate a clear preference for one axis over another.

According to some authors, hedging behavior includes power balancing and diplomatic engagement. Studies on Gulf countries follow this line. For example, Guzansky (2015) argues that the Gulf Cooperation Union countries cannot implement a common foreign policy against Iran due to differences in their threat perceptions and interests and that countries other than Bahrain are hedging in one way or another. According to El-Dessouki and Mansour (2020), while the UAE is trying to balance Iran through the US-Saudi Arabia alliance, it is also engaging Iran in political, economic, and social matters. The UAE, whose main goal is survival, avoids confronting Iran alone. Hedging reduces the risks of confronting Iran one-on-one and becoming too attached to an ally. While balancing is for the worst-case scenario, diplomatic engagement is for the most optimistic scenario. Regarding Qatar's hedging behavior, Dersan (2023) argues that despite hosting a large US base, Qatar is not included in the axis of either Saudi Arabia or Iran and maintains diplomatic and economic relations within the scope of hedging. In his study on Oman, Binhuwaidin (2019) claims that this country pursues a pragmatic foreign policy aimed at deterring threats through bilateral relations and regional and international cooperation.

A small state's hedging stance against an opponent state is affected by the level of risk, the amount of support garnered from allies, and the level of uncertainty. A small state prefers to hedge in an uncertain environment where the opponent's intention and power are unclear. An ideal small state's hedging behavior will start with diplomatic engagement and continue with soft-balancing activities. Depending on the increase in the threat level and the decrease in uncertainty, the state will choose one of the power balancing, neutrality, or submission courses of action depending on the external support. Engagement and soft balancing continue as the threat becomes more apparent. The hedging strategy protects small states from the risky outcomes that their axis preferences may cause. For example, the risks of entering a strict alliance are abandonment and dependency, while avoiding the alliance reduces these risks. In this regard, states that prefer the status quo or are waiting for greater clarity usually hedge. However, the cost of the hedging strategy will be less in a bipolar order and in times of relative peace between the superpowers.

4. Intervening Variables of Neoclassical Realism

Since structural variables affect each state differently, states' preferences also vary. Depending on the amount of foreign aid available, a small state with capable political leadership would resort to one course of action, such as defiance, compromise, or bargaining (negotiation) against an imminent threat or risk. Within the framework of neoclassical realism, the failure of a small state to adopt a reasonable course of action is best explained by the stance of its political elite.

The courage and determination of the leader have a greater impact on the foreign policy of a small state than other domestic factors (Fox, 2006; Vital, 1971). The leader, political structure, and strategic culture are more prominent than state-society relations and institutional structures. Since only foreign aid can balance power, the importance of social solidarity decreases, while the

attitude and skills of the political elite gain importance (Schweller, 2004).

Neoclassical realism can also accept regime security as an important intervening variable for some small states. If the weak state receiving substantial foreign aid has a robust regime, it can resort to struggle or negotiation options when exposed to an external threat (Choi, 2007). Regime security, which depends on the leader's political power and legitimacy, may force the leader to externalize internal problems or internalize external problems (Azar & Moon, 1988).

5. Kosovo's Background

Kosovo is a region with myths dating back to 1389, underpinning Serbian nationalism that developed in the 19th century (Vulovic, 2023). It is also a place where Albanian nationalism emerged, with the League of Prizren founded before the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Kosovo, one of the two autonomous provinces of Serbia within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, achieved this status in the 1974 Constitution. When Slobodan Milosevic came to power in 1989, he abolished Kosovo's autonomy. Milosevic's abolition of Kosovo's autonomy and the ethnic cleansing that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina left Kosovars with no other path than independence (Hosmer, 2001).

In the early 1990s, Kosovo Albanian leaders organized themselves into an institutionalized and peaceful resistance movement. This movement evolved into an armed resistance aiming for independence, with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) established in 1997. In 1998, Slobodan Milosevic launched a police and military operation against the KLA, including widespread atrocities against civilians. Milosevic's operation led to the forced displacement of thousands of Albanians. Milosevic's refusal to accept the Rambouillet Accords, which resulted in an international outcry, triggered the NATO military operation (Warbrick, 2008). Milosevic surrendered after the bombardment, which lasted from March to June 1999. UN Security Council resolution 1244/1999 suspended Serbia's administration in Kosovo, established the United Nations Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK), and gave NATO a peacekeeping mandate. Resolution 1244, which determined Kosovo's new status, guided UNMIK in establishing new administrative institutions and structures in Kosovo. From 1999 to 2005, the international administration prioritized state-building over the Albanians' demand for independence.

The UN took over the law enforcement, justice, and civil administration units, the OSCE took over the democratization and institutionalization issues, and the EU took over the management of the development and economic development units. UNMIK has followed a process in which administrative powers have gradually passed to Kosovo. In 2001, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative Hans Haekkerup prepared the ground for the transitional government and left a constitution for the period after the transitional government. The UNMIK administration managed Kosovo's foreign affairs and policy as outlined in the Constitutional Framework for Provisional Self-Government (UNMIK Regulation 2001/9). During this period, Kosovo gained representation in various international organizations focusing on various subjects such as economy, security, and energy. Although UNMIK signed many agreements on Kosovo's behalf, it focused on something other than developing Kosovo's institutional capacity for foreign relations and foreign policy.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari as his special envoy to lead the process for Kosovo's future status in 2005. Marrti Ahtisaari, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy, prepared a solution plan after negotiating with the two parties to determine Kosovo's future and status. Ahtisaari's diplomatic efforts focused on strengthening local authorities, protecting Kosovo's cultural and religious heritage and economic issues, and securing minority rights. Ahtisaari's comprehensive proposal for Kosovo's status proposed a limited independence with international oversight of democratic governance and minority rights. The Ahtisaari plan also called for the establishment of a new International Civilian Office (ICO) to monitor Kosovo's compliance with its obligations, the establishment of a European Union rule of law mission (EULEX) to focus on law enforcement and the justice system, and NATO to provide a

safe and secure environment. Serbia rejected the plan, while Kosovo accepted it.

Ahtisaari's solution plan granted Kosovo supervised independence and authority over its domestic and foreign policy. According to the proposal, Kosovo has the right to negotiate and conclude international agreements and the right to seek membership in international organizations. International actors recognized the Ahtisaari plan, but it remained a proposal in the negotiation process and was not implemented. Depending on Russia's veto, Serbia has stipulated that the UN Security Council must approve any decision regarding Kosovo. During negotiations on Kosovo's status in the 2000s, Serbia's uncompromising stance helped Kosovo garner international support for claiming independence.

Kosovo declared independence on 17 February 2008. In its declaration of independence, Kosovo committed to fulfilling its obligations under the Ahtisaari Plan, embracing multi-ethnicity as a fundamental principle of good governance, and welcoming a period of international control. Serbia strongly reacted to Kosovo's declaration of independence and appealed to the International Court of Justice. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) legitimized Kosovo's declaration of independence with its advisory opinion on 22 July 2010. Kosovo's IMF and World Bank membership occurred after the ICJ's decision.

Serbia did not agree to high-level talks with Kosovo until 2011, when the EU-facilitated negotiations began. Despite his nationalist and conservative stance, Tomislav Nikolic, elected President of Serbia in the 2012 elections, continued the normalization talks with Kosovo due to his pledge to continue the previous government's EU membership goal. The Brussels Agreement was signed on 19 April 2013 following negotiations led by EU representative Catherine Ashton. The agreement resulted from an eight-month series of talks that began in September 2012 in New York between Hashim Thaçi and Tomislav Nikolic and continued between Thaçi and Serbian President Ivica Dačić. The Brussels Agreement includes establishing a Serbian municipal community, unifying the police under a single roof, addressing legal and customs systems issues, and committing both parties not to hinder each other's EU membership processes. After the Brussels Agreement, Kosovo began negotiations for an Association Agreement with the EU, while Serbia received candidate status from the EU Council. EU signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with Kosovo in 2015. EU-facilitated talks continued in 2015 and 2018 to normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo, which until now have not produced fruitful results except talks leading to an economic normalization agreement in 2020. Tensions escalated again from 2021 onwards when Serbs displayed secessional moves and boycotted local elections, and Kosovo sought to install Albanian mayors in the north.

6. Power of the State

The International Steering Group held its last meeting on 10 September 2012 and concluded its monitoring. Thus, the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo became the sole basis of the country's legal framework. Kosovo's political system began well before 2008, with governments in exile, and institutionalizing and strengthening state institutions has been ongoing since independence.

A system of checks and balances governs Kosovo. The Constitution emphasizes that the state is independent, sovereign, democratic, unitary, and indivisible. The President of Kosovo is elected by the parliament for a five-year term by a two-thirds majority of the deputies in the first two rounds or by a majority vote in the third round. The Parliament of Kosovo, established in 2001 by the UN initiative, consists of 120 deputies [1] who have been elected for four years. The parliament elects the speaker and his/her deputies by a majority vote.

[1] Ten of the seats in the parliament are allocated to Serbian, four to Roman, Ashkali, and Egyptian, three to Bosnian, Montenegrin, and Croatian, two to Turkish, and one to the Gorani minorities.

Appointed by the President, the prime minister heads the Council of Ministers. The government formed by the prime minister must receive a vote of confidence from the parliament. At least one Serbian minister and one minister from other minorities must be in the government. In addition, at least two Deputy Ministers must be Serbian and two from other minorities. Municipalities are the basic units of local government, established according to the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The country consists of seven districts and 38 municipalities. [2]

Kosovo's security institutions are developing. The highest security institution in Kosovo is the National Security Council, chaired by the Prime Minister. The President can also request a meeting with this council. The country's internal security is the responsibility of the police, which was established in 1999. The police is structured by ethnic diversity. The Intelligence Agency is responsible for investigating incidents that may threaten security. The Security Forces, which will later become the Kosovo Army, were established in 2009 as a light infantry force.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kosovo (MFA) was established by Law No. 03/L-044 on 13 March 2008. Since its establishment, the Ministry's most important foreign policy goal has been to ensure recognition of Kosovo by additional countries. The Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs aims to provide effective diplomatic and consular services in places where Kosovo has a large diaspora. Since small states cannot have an embassy in every country due to its human capital and financial resources, Kosovo had to locate its embassies wisely, use non-resident accreditation, or entrust consular interests to honorary individuals or friendly countries.

The state-building process and the strength of the state should also be considered when explaining Kosovo's foreign policy. Creating a safe and secure environment and developing Kosovo's political, economic, and social structures are strongly interrelated. So, the state apparatus must institutionalize and strengthen to ensure a safe and secure environment. Since many countries recognize Kosovo based on its determination to build a multiethnic and democratic state, Kosovo needs to maintain this image to improve its international status. However, from a neoclassical realist perspective, state-society relations and economic and social development do not significantly change the small state's foreign policy since those variables cannot change the balance of power. So, the attitude and skills of the political elite are the most critical intervening variable.

7. Political Elite, Parties, and Strategic Culture

The destruction and suffering caused by the war and the emergence of the new political elite have created a strategic culture that glorifies heroism and violence. This strategic culture, which develops an attitude far from compromise, regenerates itself through radical narratives, the education system, symbols such as the KLA monuments, etc. This discourse, often suppressed by international institutions, sometimes appears in domestic politics and may favor a zero-sum game instead of seeking compromise.

Parallel provincial structures and shadow governments in exile were the first forms of governmental organizations during Serbian rule. The formation of Kosovo political parties and the transition to multi-party politics occurred after 1999. Although the movement for Kosovo's independence started peacefully under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova, over the years, the nationalist stand of the Kosovo Liberation Army (Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës-UÇK) and its supporters came to dominate the political landscape. Following the NATO intervention that ended the armed conflict, the KLA supporters entered politics during the transition period, turning their dispute with Ibrahim Rugova's party (LDK) into a political struggle. The first attempt to establish

[2] UNMIK determined Kosovo's administrative division in 2000. The number of municipalities, which was 30 in 2000, was increased to 38 by law (03/L-041) adopted in 2008.

a local government in Kosovo was the regional elections held on 28 October 2000. Ibrahim Rugova, elected President in the process managed by the OSCE, continued in this position until he died in 2006.

The prominent Albanian parties in Kosovo are PDK, LDK, VV, AKR, NISMA and AAK. Since the Constitution guarantees the number of seats allocated to minorities, political divisions are based on alliances or competition between main Albanian parties. Several small parties complement the main parties to form coalitions and alliances (Zejnullahi, 2016). The PDK, which first participated in the 2000 elections, is a center-right and nationalist party founded by politicians from the Kosovo People's Movement (LPK) in the early 1980s and the UÇK. The party, which carried the banner of Albanian nationalism since the influential figures in its establishment had UÇK and LPK origins, achieved successful results, especially between 2004 and 2010 (Briscoe & Price, 2011). Bajram Rxhepi and Hashim Thaçi have been the party's key figures. The party pursued policies towards the recognition of Kosovo's independence, the transition to a liberal economy, and the country's upgrading to European standards. The fact that Hashim Thaçi served as Prime Minister for six years (2008-2014) and President for four years (2016-2020) shows that the PDK is an established party in Kosovo. The party has been criticized by opposition parties, especially by Vetëvendosje, for not being transparent as the leading actor in the dialogue process with Serbia and for economic problems, corruption, and nepotism during its time in power. Due to this criticism, Jakup Krasniqi and Fatmir Limaj, who were in opposition within the party, left and founded the NISMA party in 2014, which reduced PDK's votes. Two prominent figures opposed to Thaçi criticized the PDK for its insufficient support during the trials at the international criminal court and for the lack of democracy within the party.

Founded by Ibrahim Rugova in 1989, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) embraced Rugova's intellectual, peaceful, and conciliatory approach to Kosovo's struggle for independence. The party played a crucial role in the resistance of the Kosovar people. The legitimacy and support the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK) gained during the armed struggle for independence allowed the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) to emerge as a rival party, declining the LDK's public support. Despite this decline, the LDK achieved successful results until the 2006 elections, bolstered by Rugova's popularity and international backing. However, the party fell to second place in the 2007 elections. When Isa Mustafa, who gained prominence as the mayor of Pristina in 2009, became the party leader in 2010, the LDK shifted its policy to adopt a more conservative emphasis while maintaining its liberal-conservative stance. The party remained centrist during the Rugova period, shifting to center-right during the Isa Mustafa era, which later resulted in a crisis of identity.

AAK was founded in 2001 by KLA member Ramush Haradinaj. Haradinaj joined the coalition with LDK in 2004 and was elected Prime Minister but resigned in 2005 due to his trial at the International Criminal Court. Haradinaj received acquittal in 2008. His trial resumed in 2010, and he could only return to his country in 2012. He later became prime minister again after the 2016 elections. AAK, which has a center-right stance and advocates economic liberalization, splits the PDK's votes by pursuing conservative and nationalist policies.

Founded in 2006 by businessperson Behgjet Pacolli as a right-wing party advocating a liberal economy, the AKR participated in the 2007 elections for the first time. Focusing on economic development, the party defines itself along nationalist lines. The AKR came to power in 2011 through an alliance with the PDK. In 2011, Pacolli tried to be elected President and remained in the presidency for 37 days after a controversial election. The party's success rate in elections has significantly declined since 2014.

Founded by activist politician Albin Kurti, Vetëvendosje has strongly opposed international control and advocated for an "organic relationship" between Albanians in the region. Initially, a marginal group pursuing a nationalist agenda through street protests, Vetëvendosje has gradually become a broader political movement that expresses popular discontent (Feta, 2017). The party has become an influential actor on the nationalist side of the political spectrum,

presenting itself as an alternative to the established political elite. Levizia Vetëvendosje (VV) emerged as a movement recognized for its actions promoting self-determination in 2004 and was officially established in 2005. Drawing its character from Albin Kurti's political activism, VV came to the fore with its discourse on Albanian national identity. The party responded most strongly to the negotiation process with Serbia and opposed the PDK more than others. VV has recently emerged as the country's leading political force in parliamentary elections, although it remains in second place in municipal elections.

7.1. Leaders

Parties in Kosovo lack any distinctive ideology because, as in any post-conflict state, the political elite, whose legitimacy increased during the war, has been established under UNMIK's tutelage (Krasniqi, 2016). The political spectrum consists of nationalist and more nationalist parties. Competing parties have little ideological differences, and partisanship is defined considering political fault lines. Essential political agenda items include negotiations for normalizing relations with Serbia, integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions, international recognition and integration with the global economy, and improving the state's institutional functionality. The electoral system causes political fragmentation and impedes broad political consensus and coherence. Political impasses caused many early elections.

In Kosovo, political movements are driven by their leaders' charisma and patronage networks. Personalities shape politics rather than traditional left-right cleavage or partisan allegiances. According to Tziarras (2019), when external threats and opportunities are not clear enough, foreign policy can be influenced by the interests of leaders and strategic culture. Kosovo's political parties and leaders' attitudes depend on their nationalist stance and characteristics that bear traces of the past. For example, Albin Kurti's Ultranationalist and Self-Determination views and his transformational leadership influence the party's attitude toward negotiations with Serbia or relations with international partners after 2021.

8. Conclusions

Kosovo falls within the boundaries of all quantitative and qualitative criteria used in the literature to determine a small state. Since its independence, Kosovo has been using the behavioral patterns attributed to the small states. Kosovo does not have a fully operational army, and its options for external support are limited to some countries, primarily the US and Turkey. The lack of recognition from the EU, NATO, and the UN, as well as its current status under international tutelage, pose significant obstacles for Kosovo in this regard. Kosovo cannot reach its foreign policy goals without support from powerful states since as of 2022, Serbia's defense spending is approximately 14 times more than Kosovo's (SIPRI, 2023). Considering the international restrictions on it, it does not seem possible for Kosovo to achieve a balance of power on its own.

It is certain that the management style of Kosovo leaders, whether they are more autocratic, democratic, or populist, has positive or negative effects on their legitimacy in the eyes of society and on the trust of citizens in state institutions. Of course, the leaders' efforts to increase interethnic reconciliation and dialogue will ensure their acceptance in the international arena. However, the issue that will affect foreign policy is the leader's ideas on key issues and his ability to make his ideas accepted by the domestic and foreign political elite. While being small limits the preferences, the leadership style affects current foreign policy.

The emergence of the political elite as a product of an armed struggle for independence has led to a political culture in which violence is glorified as part of the national narrative. Traces of this tendency can be seen in the education system, the media, and the public statements of political figures. In general, the political discourse is far from compromise, which paves the way for hasty and unilateral actions. Since the current administrative structure in Kosovo was created under international supervision, nationalist discourse is likely to increase political intolerance towards minority communities in the future.

Kosovo's leadership displays foreign policy behaviors attributable to small states. The most apparent small-state behavior attributable to Kosovo is its attempts to gain more recognition from powerful states and increase its status. The precondition for a small state to increase its international status is to be recognized. Being part of international and regional organizations is particularly important. Kosovo is trying to use international regimes, laws, and norms to increase its importance and political influence, and gain economic benefits. Although Kosovo has yet to achieve its UN and EU membership goals, it has become a member of important international organizations such as the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Bar Association, and the International Road Transport Association.

Kosovo's ability to achieve its goals in foreign policy to a greater extent depends on the support of international partners and its diplomatic skills. So, Kosovo tends to cooperate with powerful states, especially the United States, for protection and resource provision (Marleku, 2012). Whether the political elite considers Serbia a security risk or a threat indicates if Kosovo is hedging or balancing against Serbia. Kosovo has used a mixed hedging strategy against Serbia, especially before the Brussels accord, which included diplomatic engagement alongside balancing and deterring through force development and collective security arrangements. While aiming to secure the EU membership goal in the dialogue and normalization process with Serbia, Kosovo has also tried to build up its army and set goal to become part of the NATO alliance.

Kosovo needs to increase the number of states recognizing its independence and to have the UN accept its status. Serbia and Kosovo's shared goal of EU membership strongly motivates them to normalize relations and enhance regional stability. The political fragility resulting from the separatist tendencies of the Serbs in Mitrovica still needs to be resolved. The Kosovo Serbs' objections to establishing borders and customs, using Kosovo plates and driving licenses, establishing parallel structures by the Serbs, and boycotting local elections may increase political tension. However, one should expect that if one side achieves membership first, it will block the other's accession.

One of Kosovo's most important foreign policy goals is to become a member of NATO. The support and contribution of NATO for Kosovo in gaining its independence and keeping it safe is undeniable. According to UNSCR 1244, KFOR guarantees the continuation of peace and security in Kosovo. In addition to accumulating Kosovo's institutional and administrative capacity, the EU also creates the opportunity to obtain financial contributions from the EU within the scope of the Partnership Agreement and EU Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). However, members of these organizations which do not recognize Kosovo are a critical obstacle to overcome for the membership goal.

Even if Serbia recognizes Kosovo in the future, the UN membership process will not start unless the objections of the permanent members of the UN Security Council are addressed. The fact that some EU member states still need to recognize Kosovo poses a significant obstacle for the membership. Although it is not a member of the UN or the EU, Kosovo, as a small state, should be expected to promote its international integration and turn to alternative channels to increase its status. Therefore, Kosovo needs to get into arrangements such as the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), where it can take advantage of this organization without being a member of the EU.

Kosovo is hedging against Serbia, while Serbia is hedging between the EU and Russia. Small states, when faced with increased uncertainty and risks, tend to resort to hedging behavior in foreign policy. Kosovo's hedging against Serbia is a mix strategy that incorporates dialogue and deterrence. However, the political culture does not allow room for compromise and therefore acts to limit the use of this strategy. Likely political tensions with Serbia and local minorities would jeopardize Kosovo's efforts to gain international recognition and to secure more external support it needs for this purpose. Consequently, unilateral actions that escalate political tension would not be in Kosovo's best interest. So, Kosovo's sponsors' willingness to support is also interlinked with Serbia's inclination towards Russia. Therefore, exaggerating Serbia's tilt toward Russia to a

certain extent may not be in Kosovo's interest.

Additionally, Kosovo should reassess its foreign support strategy. It has become overly reliant on the United States, highlighting the need for diversifying its external support. Kosovo should hedge against the imminent risks and the costs of its alliance preferences. Being dependent too much on some states will reduce its flexibility for contingencies. Besides, this dependency may force Kosovo to accept an unfavorable solution. To hedge against an adverse situation, Kosovo needs to make new, powerful friends by taking advantage of the different approaches of the US's allies toward Kosovo.

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