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SMALL STATE'S CAPTURED SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS A CONSEQUENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESS AND POLITICAL POPULISM: WESTERN BALKANS CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: *The purpose of this paper is to analyze to role of institutional and political frameworks, as a variable in the ongoing process of securing sustainable development. Authors thesis would rely on the explanation that the sustainable development is directly conditioned of the political and institutional frameworks in the case of small states with extremely limited political, economic, military and natural resources. Thus, the research question would be: What are the available instruments to small states in the process of securing development and sustainability?*

Methods: *In the methodological context the topic was chosen based on its topicality and because it contributes to the raising the discussion about the role of small states in the chapter of international relations where the sustainable development agenda is almost at the top. The goal is also to acquire new scientific knowledge, particularly in the context of determining the room for maneuver of small states in their foreign policy actions in the context of contributors to the already mentioned agenda. The authors will use basic analytical methods, such as content analysis of literature and documents and abstraction, to highlight the important characteristics that determine the foreign policy actions of small. Among analytical methods, specialization will also be used to pay special attention to the correlation between the sustainable development agenda and the foreign policy behavior of small states. When it comes to synthetic basic methods, concretization will be used to analyze the empirical example of the Western Balkans. On the other hand, induction will be applied in the conclusion section to establish a broader contemporary understanding about the small states in contemporary international relations based on the empirical example.*

Results: *Based on the available data, results and effectiveness of foreign policy activities, including internal political and institutional flows within the states of the so-called Western Balkans region used as an empirical example, results will provide explanation why the sustainable development agenda is "captured" from the perspective of their institutional and political dysfunctionality.*

Discussion: *From the theoretical perspective, authors will use the understanding of institutionalism in order to confront it to neoclassical thesis about the individual role in the*

decision-making process, that is quite important for understanding internal flows of small states, as well as foreign policy positioning, bearing in mind the fact that sustainable development represents a process composed of internal policies and foreign policy activism.

Keywords: small states, sustainable development, institutions, weakness, policy, populism

1. Introduction

Correlation between small states and sustainable development goals, as a topic de facto represents significant contribution to the international relations scholars. Why? Because it, as a such, opens double discussion paths: first, about the necessity for redefining the role of small states in the current chapter of international relations; second, to provide more clearer explanation about the characteristics of small states, thus categorizing them on small and relevant ones and those one, on the other side, with weak institutional infrastructure and political unpredictability.

In the second type of small states, authors have found the relevance for research the mentioned topic from two angles: domestic institutional framework as a pre-condition and foreign policy effectiveness as an instrument in securing sustainable development agenda on individual and global level. From such twofold perspective the research question would be following: do small states with vulnerable institutional infrastructure and weak political framework are able to perform effective national foreign policy, thus to contribute to sustainable development agenda and secure also it owns sustainability?

The objective of the paper is to explain the correlation between the performances of domestic institutional framework and political stability vis-a-vis the foreign policy activism of small states, as a core national resource in foreign policy positioning from the perspective of limited material or quantitative resources. The leading hypothesis would be that small states with weak institutional and political framework are unable to lead effective foreign policy activism, thus to reach foreign policy goals which, as a consequence endangers the national interests and captures the sustainability process.

From a theoretical perspective, the significance of the paper lies in the authors steps toward new understanding of small states in the current chapter of international relations, thus emphasizing the national qualitative resources as a variable in the foreign policy positioning. While, from the perspective of impact, the paper relevance lies in requests for concretization and deduction the general *Sustainable development agenda* in order to provide basis for sustainability strategies in accordance with authentic differences between subjects of international system.

2. Literature Review

If we analyze the Sustainable Development Goals from the perspective of goal number 16, we will find out that the sustainability is much more than an issue related exclusively on the quantitative variables. Although the public and media discourse in the context of sustainability is focused to measurable and qualitative characteristics, such as energy management, water exploitation, natural resources approach, migration issue, the labor market, factually there are numerous of quantitative conditions that should be met in the process of realistic, comprehensive and substantive sustainability. Goal number 16 titled "*Peace, justice and strong institutions*" represents not just destination that should be reached in the process of sustainability, but, in the context of this paper, it opens a "vertical", in-depth debate about the qualitative conditions or goals that should be met in the whole process. In, fact, there is a contradictory in the mentioned goal. Does it should be goal or it should be a kind of pre-condition for reaching other defined goals? Or it should be a priority goal, before

the process of processing other declared goals? Why authors are raising these questions? Because of the constatation placed within the goal number 16 which says that "corruption, bribery, theft and tax evasion cost developing countries 1,26 trillion dollars per year" (Goal 16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions, 2025). Further, referred data about the corruption is followed by concretization of followed concrete goals listed in the overall number 16 goal:

- “Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.
- Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms.
- Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.
- Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.
- Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime.
- Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development” (Goal 16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions, 2025).

Authors of the number 16 goal have touched the issue of institutional efficiency and effectiveness in the so-called developing countries, but still there is a lack of explanation about the aspects of responsibility, respectively to whom depends the process of establishing strong institutional framework, while, from the other side, what are concrete characteristics of mentioned developing countries. Identifying the responsible actors should be a kind of basis for further understanding and explanation the defined issue. Because, institutions, composed of personnel solutions, cannot reform by themselves, isolated of personal dimension. From the other side, precisising and explanation the frame of "developing countries" provides basis for concrete actions on the ground to the sustainable development. For example, do the developing countries are challenged by material and qualitative risks which are mostly in the domain of economy and resources or those are also countries with qualitative domestic risks and threats, mostly institutionally and politically framed?

Aiming to comprehensive understanding the concept of sustainability from the perspective of small and weak states, using the domestic institutional and political flows in foreign policy positioning as a dependent variable, authors further will use the European Commission Annual Reports as an empirical example in the process of providing comprehensive threefold explanation: about the qualitative preconditions on the sustainability agenda, about the characteristics of small and weak states, about the factual relationship between foreign policy positioning from one side, and national/state interests in the context of sustainability, from the other side. Additionally, authors will analyze the national documents or strategies related to sustainable development in the context of their concrete measures related to internal and domestic critical challenges, risks and threats, including the proposed mechanisms for management and resolving. Basing the study on two pillars, concretely on the EU reports as an issue directly related to strategic foreign policy positioning and on the internal SDG strategies and documents, authors are providing comprehensive mosaic about the sustainability on the empirical examples of Western Balkans entities, listed in the group of developing countries.

2.1.EU reports

Following the methodological approach of concretization, the authors are using EU Commission Annual Reports about the so-called Western Balkans Six as a tool in the process of data analysis for two reasons: aiming the concretization and linkage between foreign policy positioning and sustainability, from one side; second, aiming to understanding the

causal relationship between internal (domestic) flows and the effectiveness in achieving defined foreign policy goals. Explanation between the dependence of sustainability on the foreign policy positioning lies in the understanding the national/state interests which are framed following the next thesis: preservation of national/state interests means sustainability. In practice it means that preservation the national/state interests contributes to securing the existence of the political entity composed of territory, effective government and integrated society. In such context, remembering that foreign policy goals are defined on the basis of national/state interests and at the same time serving as a certain goals in the continuous and permanent process of national/state interests preservation, we are by logic reaching the explanation that effective foreign policy activism leads to sustainability and contrary, lack of success in the foreign policy field, endangers simultaneously the foreign policy effectiveness, as well as overall state sustainability. Following the previous thesis, the analysis of EU Commission reports significantly contributes in the process of twofold explanation: the interdependence of foreign policy positioning and sustainability; second, the opportunities and consequences which internal/domestic flows have on the foreign policy positioning. Defined criteria analyzed in the EU Commission annual reports are on practical level proving the thesis about the dependence of foreign policy positioning, thus reaching foreign policy goals, by the internal/domestic challenges, risks and threats. Based on it, authors have justified the decision of usage the mentioned reports in the methodologic process of data analysis. Focused would be to the qualitative criteria such as rule of law, corruption phenomena, political and media and market regulations in order to assess structural (systematic, institutional, political) preparedness, respectively basis in the process of achieving proclaimed foreign policy goals which should on long-term basis contribute to sustainable development and sustainability.

Western Balkans actors are chosen empirical examples because of the fact that EU integrations are common regional determinant of all six states and political entities within the region. EU membership is placed on the postulate of strategic foreign policy goal for each of the political actor, while, from the other side, taking into account the level of multisectoral cooperation between EU and the regional actors, there is a justified explanation why the sustainability of these entities is strictly dependent of their foreign policy positioning. Second, because all of the actors (Belgrade, Skopje, Podgorica, Tirana, Sarajevo and Pristine) are categorized in the group of developing countries, so the authors got the opportunity to create a quite stable distinction between the concept of small states from one side, and the small states which are at the same time weak, in the systematic (institutional) proportions. Concretely, based on the data analysis of EU Annual Reports 2025, all Western Balkans Six are facing pervasive internal/domestic challenges:

	<u>Belgrade (European Commission/Serbia, 2025)</u>	<u>Skopje (European Commission/North Macedonia, 2025)</u>	<u>Podgorica (European Commission/Montenegro, 2025)</u>	<u>Sarajevo (European Commission/Bosnia and Hercegovina, 2025)</u>	<u>Tirana (European Commission/Albania, 2025)</u>	<u>Pristina (European Commission/Kosovo*, 2025)</u>
Criteria						
Rule of Law	The independence and impartiality of the judiciary needs to be improved, both in the higher level courts and in the courts of first instance	The quality of justice needs to be improved; The efficiency of the justice system further declined	Montenegro must continue strengthening the effective accountability of the judiciary by fully implementing the improved legal framework adopted in 2024. Montenegro has yet to address the outstanding recommendations on strengthening the legal framework for disciplinary and ethical standards	Bosnia and Herzegovina is between an early stage of preparation and having some level of preparation and no progress was made on the functioning of the judiciary (Opinion key priority 6), including on addressing the findings of the expert report on rule of law issues (the ‘Priebe Report’)	The quality of justice needs to be improved. Measures are still needed to address the previously reported issues, including (i) the quality of initial and continuous training; (ii) the consistency of case law; (iii) the high number of judicial vacancies and insufficient amount of court staff; (iv) the lack of a modern integrated electronic case management system in courts and prosecution offices; (v) the quality, consistency and timely publication of judgments; (vi) the quality of court infrastructure; and (vii) reliability of statistical data.	The quality of justice needs to be further improved. The few high-profile cases on corruption and organised crime which were finalised during the reporting period, including former EULEX cases, mostly ended in acquittals or low sentencing; There are systemic challenges regarding the handling of serious crime and gender-based violence cases, notably linked to inefficient prosecution, deficient indictments and judgments, and inconsistency in sentencing practices
Corruption	The fight against corruption track record should be improved for both high-level and non-highlevel cases. Significant challenges persist, particularly in addressing high level cases. The number of final convictions in corruption cases high-level in 2024 decreased compared to previous years	Weak judicial transparency and prosecutorial performance continue to hinder the effectiveness and integrity of proceedings in high-level corruption cases	Montenegro is moderately prepared in the fight against corruption; Further efforts are needed to ensure full enforcement and alignment with several outstanding GRECO, Venice Commission and European Commission recommendations	The poor functioning of the judicial system continued to undermine citizens’ rights and the fight against corruption.	Corruption remained widespread across vulnerable sectors, affecting both the public and private spheres. The institutional framework for prevention of corruption continued to have a limited impact and coordination with law enforcement remained weak. Shortcomings regarding transparency	Despite the pronounced political commitment to enhance anti-corruption measures, there is no coherent approach to it. To effectively fight corruption at all levels, Kosovo needs to make better use of existing anti-corruption legislation, including the Law on extended powers of confiscation

					and effectiveness of asset declaration checks still need to be addressed	
Political and Media environment	The incident and the aftermath have further deepened the polarisation in Serbian society; Parliament's effectiveness and oversight function remain hampered by the low frequency of sessions and the lack of genuine political debate; There was backsliding during the reporting period as the environment for journalists, media professionals and outlets seriously worsened	The enabling environment for the media's free, independent and professional operation needs to be improved; Political polarisation in Parliament persisted, delaying the adoption of important reforms and several long-overdue appointments	Social polarisation continued during the reporting period; Montenegro and its democratic institutions remain fragile and vulnerable to political crisis and potential institutional blockages; Although public authorities widely condemned acts of violence against journalists, instances of strong verbal attacks on the media and civil society representatives by public officials and political parties, including senior figures from the security and defense sector, have continued	The general framework for elections requires substantial reforms. Constitutional reforms are needed to ensure political equality and non-discrimination for all citizens. Electoral integrity needs to be improved, in line with recommendations of international bodies. Political parties should respect the independence of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC); No progress was achieved during the reporting period, including in guaranteeing freedom of expression and of the media, and the protection of journalists. Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to experience deep stagnation in media freedom, with worrying signs of deterioration. The financial sustainability of public broadcasters is ever more in danger. A countrywide network was set up to monitor cases of violence against	Political polarisation, lack of genuine political dialogue and clashes between the ruling majority and parts of the opposition continued to affect Parliament's activity, while public consultation processes remained limited. Parliament is also hampered by limited oversight over the executive, while the politicisation of parliamentary appointments to top positions in constitutional bodies or independent institutions established by law remains a serious issue; The situation remains largely unchanged, with media independence and pluralism continuing to be affected by the overlap of business and political interests, the lack of transparency of financing sources, the high concentration of media ownership, intimidation and precarious working conditions for journalists	Disagreements, polarisation and lack of cooperation between political parties prevented significant progress on EU-related reforms; Polarising language against opponents continued to be used in political debates; The media environment remained polarised, with some outlets accused of partisan bias and the IMC failing to act on media violations during the campaign due to a lack of decision making quorum

				journalists.		
Market regulations	The state has significantly intervened in the product markets. The government announced in August 2025 a major new intervention into the domestic trade of many basic goods, taking effect abruptly on 1 September 2025 for the following 6 months, with no meaningful prior consultation with stakeholders	The existence of a functioning market economy is endangered due to fact that government did not progress on key reforms	Montenegro has made some progress and is between a moderate and a good level of preparation in developing a functioning market economy. Economic growth slowed down amid weaker tourism exports in 2024 and the first half of 2025	Bosnia and Herzegovina is at an early stage of preparation – and there was no progress during the reporting period – in establishing a functioning market economy. Economic activity remained resilient despite a deteriorating political situation, with GDP growth slowing down to 2.6% in 2024, and to about 1.7% in the first half of 2025	The business environment also remains affected by weaknesses in the rule of law, informality and limited access to finance for SMEs, particularly farmers. Bureaucracy and lengthy licensing procedures, combined with problems of consistency in case law, create burdens for businesses	Large infrastructure gaps limit Kosovo's full economic potential and output; Despite recent efforts to diversify the energy supply and increase efficiency, the energy sector remains a key obstacle to economic growth; The private sector is dominated by small firms which still facing difficult access to finance
Overall: All Western Balkans Six from the perspective of European Commission Annual Reports are facing with prominent and pervasive domestic structural challenges, risks and threats which are burdening the process of effective foreign policy positioning, thus reaching the defined foreign policy goals. Selected structural challengers, risks and threats in the table represent a kind of mosaic for understanding the domestic/internal obstacles that case study actors are facing both, in the context of foreign policy effectiveness, as well as in the context of sustainability. Concretely, from institutional and political perspective, both, rational foreign policy activism and sustainable development are "captured" as a consequence of the lack of will and reliable mechanisms for managing presented disputes.						

2.2.National SDG documents and strategies within Western Balkans framework

Belgrade: In the document "Serbia and Agenda 2030 Mapping the national strategic framework in the context of sustainable development goals" there is a chapter related to the number 16 Sustainable development goal focused to public service institutions building and legal system which will allow stable environment released from corruption and violence, in which citizens could enjoy their own personal and political rights (Vlada Republike Srbije/Republički sekretarijat za javne politike, 2024, str. 47). In the previously mentioned national document from the page 47 to the page 54 there are listed numerous of formal and statistical data and documents related to the number 16 Sustainable development goal. Concretely what officials of Belgrade have adopted in the process of realization on the legislative level, what have been done on the statistical level from the institutional perspective and how much this political subject is engaged on international level in the process of contribution. But there is an evident discrepance between the mentioned document and European Commission Annual Report. There are no doubts that Belgrade have done a lot on legislative level, based on the data of the used national document. But there are also no doubts that Belgrade has done very little in practice, based on the data of the analyzed EU Report. Both documents serve as a basis for understanding the essence of the issue of small and weak states in the context of sustainable development and sustainability. Concretely, massive bureaucracy and legislative framework are creating picture of declarative functionality. However, the results of foreign policy activism and the risks, challenges and threats within the domestic institutional and political framework are testifying contradictory trend, respectively, that legislative preparedness is not followed by the executive effectiveness.

Skopje: In the context of Skopje, there is an online platform titled "National development strategy" in which the rule of law is placed through the prism "Governing in the citizens function". In the context of judiciary, this so-called strategic platform has put the focused to the following domestic challenges: disrupted trust in the judiciary and high dependence on the executive branch; shortage of staff in courts and public prosecutors' offices; insufficiently digitized, transparent and accountable judiciary; insufficiently inclusive and gender-balanced judiciary. In the range fighting corruption there are following challenges: insufficient fight against corruption (lack of capacity, finances for the Public Prosecutor's Office to prosecute organized crime and corruption and lack of focused policies to prevent corruption); inadequate system of sanctions for violations of rules for preventing corruption and conflict of interest and failure to implement confiscation of assets and seizure of objects originating from criminal acts or whose origin cannot be proven. In the context of public administration focus has been put to limited progress in public administration reform; weak models and weak approaches to governance; freedom of expression is making limited progress: problems in coordination at local/regional level and at national level; insufficient digitalization of public services (Национална развојна стратагија, 2025). Quite similar assessment as those one in the European Commission Annual Report related to domestic institutional and political challenges, risks and threats. But there is a lack of strategic compass about the direction, as well as eligible instruments and mechanisms in the process of facing and managing listed domestic issues.

Podgorica: "National strategy for sustainable development to 2030" states that "good governance, as well as the effective fight against corruption and organized crime, remain challenges despite the efforts made in the previous period. In conditions of rapid changes in the legal framework and harmonization with the Acquis Communautaire, which entail a series of sensitive transformations, insufficient trust in the institutions of the system and the functioning of the rule of law prevents social cohesion, which is necessary for the

sustainability of the system. The perception that party structures influence the state apparatus further complicates the building of social consensus regarding strategic directions of development. From all of the above, the conclusion is that strengthening institutions, and thus trust in them, should be one of the basic strategic goals of sustainable development" (Crna Gora/Ministarstvo održivog razvoja i turizma, 2016, str. 53). This political entity, similar as in the case of Skopje, puts the focus on the serious institutional challenges which are additionally threatened by the current political framework. In comparison to Belgrade and Skopje, it is valuable to note that Podgorica in its national strategic document puts emphasis on the strengthening the institutions as a goal, placed on the level of strategic sustainable development goal.

Sarajevo: The SDGs framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina was adopted in December 2020 (The SDGS framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020). In the referred strategic document Sarajevo officials have stated that efficient, open, inclusive and accountable public sector, plus rule of law, security and fundamental rights, plus resilience to disasters, could contribute to good governance and public sector management¹. In the context of applicable measures in the document is mentioned "depoliticization and professionalization of the administration", as well as the "enhance fight against corruption, which remains to be one of the most serious problems in the country" (The SDGS framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020 str. 20 and 21). Analyzed document has also shown the institutional and political obstacles and barriers on the Sustainable Development path, as an important determinant of the whole process, but the document lacks to provide concrete measures in the form of steps which will lead to resolution of the domestic issues, thus fostering the path to the SDGs.

Pristina: In the context of the Pristina's "National Development Strategy (NDS) 2030" it is quite interesting to note that, as it is stated, "strategy aims to align with the EU accession agenda and integrated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into its objectives. Further, it is based on four key pillars "Rapid and sustainable economic development", "Human development", "Good governance", including the issue of "Security and rule of law" in which focuses are on "strengthening the rule of law, which is a critical component for the country's development and EU integration" (National Development Strategy and Plan 2030, 2023). In the context of goals, which is significantly important for this study, EU integration is placed as a first goal, stating that "the strategy is designed to help Kosovo meet the criteria for EU membership" (National Development Strategy and Plan 2030, 2023). Pristina's authorities have made direct linkage between foreign policy positioning and achieving the foreign policy goals and the sustainable development and sustainability as a final goal of each of the political entity. Thus, through the empirical example of the strategic document on the case of Pristina, authors have in practice proven the realistic relationship between the issue of sustainability and the foreign policy activism from the domestic (institutional) perspective, because in Pristina's strategy, in the field of "Key pillars of the NDS 2030", the issues of rule of law and security are directly positioned as a determinators of development and EU integration.

Tirana: In the case of Tirana, on strategic plan there is even clearer connection between sustainability from one side, and the foreign policy positioning, from another, taking into account the fact that the national document which deals with aforementioned segments is titled "National Strategy for Development and European Integration 2022-2030". In the content of the analyzing document of Albania, European integration is positioned as a primary goal which is followed by the needs such as reforming the justice system,

¹In the referred strategic document Sarajevo officials have stated that efficient, open, inclusive and accountable public sector, plus rule of law, security and fundamental rights, plus resilience to disasters, could contribute to good governance and public sector management.

strengthening human rights, securing and protecting property rights, strengthening legislative and electoral processes, as well as foreign policy (National Strategy for Development and European Integration 2022-2030, 2023). Further, in the document it is clearly stated that "National Strategy for Development and European Integration 2030 is the main strategic document that gives directions and defines the priorities of the sustainable economic and social development of the country on the way to its full membership in the European Union, including the connection with the Sustainable Development Objectives in function of achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda by defining the vision for the development of democracy, social and economic development of the country during the period 2021-2030" (National Strategy for Development and European Integration 2022-2030, 2023, str. 2). Tirana in comparison to other Western Balkans actors, has had even more explicitly pointed out the linkage between the foreign policy goals and SDGs, which additionally strengthens the authors thesis about the relationship between foreign policy effectiveness and sustainability issue on national level, precisely on the small and weak states case study.

Overall: Each of the six national documents or strategies related to sustainable development are directly or indirectly connected to European integration process, respectively to the foreign policy positioning. Authorities in Tirana and Pristina have even made concrete and precise linkage between the EU integration criteria and the reaching process of SDGs. In that context, authors have explained the rationale for paralel data analysis process of the EU Commission Annual Reports and SDGs national strategic documents of the case study entities. The linkage between the internal (institutional and political) preparedness and foreign policy activism is more than clear in practise. At the same time, the cause and effect relationship between foreign policy activism and its effectiveness from one side, and the issue of sustainability of another, is proven.

2.3. Gap in Knowledge: Identify gaps in the existing literature that the current study aims to address

Authors have used to opportunity to explain the connection between foreign policy positioning from one side and the issue of sustainability, from another, on the case of small states with limited material and qualitative capacities, but also weak states with limited institutional, political and personal strategic approach. The linkage between foreign policy positioning and the sustainability phenomena from one side explains the necessity of strong, reliable and persistent domestic institutional framework, as a basis for foreign policy success in the context of lack of material resources. From the other side, it explains the contribution of domestic institutional and political system in the process of defined foreign policy positioning, as an only and irreplaceable qualitative resource in the general process of securing sustainability. Authors research was not focused to identifying the gaps in the existing literature, bearing in mind the spectrum of different foreign policy approaches and explanations about the small states, but to provide contribution in the future scientific research, putting emphasis on the correlation between foreign policy activism and sustainability issues, as a "door" for further debates. From the other side, to provide clearer picture about the distinction between the small states from one side, and those one small but institutionally weak, from another, using the institutional and political framework as a qualitative resource, thus variable in the foreign policy positioning and securing sustainability.

3. Discussion

Authors have based the discussion on theoretical grounds, bearing in mind the internal challenges, risks and threats that small and weak states are facing, such as the empirical example political entities in this study. Through the prism of neoclassical realism, thus

through the neoclassical realism explanation about the influence domestic/internal flows in understanding the foreign policy positioning of certain subject in international system, authors will deepen the discussion on two linked levels: the foreign policy effective positioning, from one side, and sustainability, from another. Miriam Fendius Elman believes that small states foreign policy provides a unique opportunity for those scholars who insist that domestic politics matters in explaining international and foreign-policy outcomes. Further, he says that "weak state foreign policy presents crucial test for domestic level theory" (Elman, 1995, str. 172). But he also emphasizes that "the received wisdom in the field is that domestic determinants will be less salient when studying small state behavior because external constraints are more severe and the international situation is more compelling" (Elman, 1995, str. 172). However, Steinsson (2017) and Wivel (2013) rely on neoclassical realist approaches to show that domestic politics is still an important element in the foreign policies of small states (Thorhallsson, 2018, str. 24). Thorhallsson explains that "neoclassical realism posits that states seek to defend their long-term security interests but that the pursuit of security interests will be distorted in the short-term by miscalculations by leaders and domestic politics" (Thorhallsson, 2018, str. 24). Oppositely to neoclassical realists, but in line with Miriam Fendius Elman positions, Michael Handel declares that "domestic determinants of foreign policy are less salient in weak states, so the international system leaves them less room for choice in the decision-making process" (Handel, 2006, str. 149). But, in the context of presented data analysis of the empirical examples, concretely through the prism of foreign policy strategic goals of Western Balkans actors from one side, and EU Commission Annual Reports, from another, there is an explicit linkage between foreign policy positioning of small states and their domestic/internal (institutional and political) flows. We could refer that the Miriam Fendius Elman and Michael Handel positions are correct if we analyze from the perspective of EU membership criteria. In that context foreign policy positioning of Western Balkans actors depends of fulfilling the "internationally" (European) imposed preconditions. But, if we analyze the foreign policy positioning from the perspective of the internally placed strategic foreign policy goals of Western Balkans actors, defined on the national interest's basis and agreed on the political and social level, then we could not claim that foreign policy positioning of small and weak states is exclusively dependent of international flows. There is the rationale in the explanation given by Miriam Fendius Elman and Michael Handel and the purpose of this study is not to deny in its entirety. But, to provide wider explanation in which also finds the applicability of neoclassical realism approach about the domestic/internal determinants in the foreign policy positioning, using the negative example of Western Balkans actors. By proving the linkage between foreign policy positioning and the issue of sustainability on the pragmatism example of Western Balkans actors, through the data analysis of EU Commission Annual Reports and national documents related to SDGs, authors have confirmed the thesis that the constant of foreign policy strategies of small and weak states is the issue of existence, in this study through the concept of sustainability. From the other side, authors have fostered the already ongoing debate between IR scholars about the determinants of foreign policy behavior of small and weak states, thus once again opening the prism of internal factors in the process of realization of foreign policy goals. Concretely, this study contributes in horizontal and vertical in the future research activities within the IR scholar's framework, thus deepening the debate about the foreign policy capacities of small states and creating basis for analysis the effectiveness of foreign policy positioning through the SDGs prism.

4. Conclusion

The article has justified its purpose through proving and explanation the relationship between internal (domestic) institutional effectiveness, foreign policy activism and realization of foreign policy goals and the sustainable development goals and sustainability from the perspective of national interests. On the case study of small and weak states authors have explained the challenges, risks and threats that the process of realization of SDGs bring to the states which are placed as empirical examples in the context of their overall sustainability. In that context, authors have made a contribution in the understanding of small and weak states in the current chapter of international relations from the perspective of their positioning, thus providing an explanation on the question what determines their foreign policy positioning. On the other hand, authors have deepened the theoretical debate on the foreign policy' positioning between subjects of international system, thus challenges traditional concepts and giving a relevance to internal (domestic) variables in the foreign policy activism.

In fact, this study provides threefold contribution: understanding about the issue of sustainability and the national interests, thus explaining the sustainability is not a new concept, but issue extremely linked to the preservation of national interests; about the variables of foreign policy effectiveness of small states with the focus on internal (domestic) variables; about the personal (political) dimension in the decision-making process in the field of foreign policy versus institutional infrastructure and the consequences of the "party" or political patronage above institutional system.

Finally, this study provides an alternative perspective about the small states in contemporary international relations which is not based exclusively on the quantitative and material resources, but on the qualitative mechanisms and skills which could be understood through the SDGs perspective. Thus this study opens further theoretical debate, especially in the context of small and weak states, looking for the comprehensive explanation how to release captured institutional framework from the political and personal decision-making process, thus making it able to serve to SDGs, which is, literally, to the process of preserving national interests.

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