Research article **Open Access**

Hajdi Xhixha[1,*], Kristaq Xharo[2]

Small-state strategic resilience in NATO's southeastern flank: A conceptual and comparative analysis of Albania and Kosovo

DOI 10.2478/jms-2026-0001
Received: December 09, 2025; Accepted: August 19, 2026

Abstract: Hybrid threats, cyberattacks and geopolitical interference are increasingly challenging NATO's southeastern flank. Despite this, resilience research tends to focus more on the alliance's northern and eastern areas. The Western Balkans, which are highly vulnerable to hybrid pressure and strategically located along the Mediterranean–Central Europe corridor, often receive insufficient attention. This article introduces an integrated framework that combines Deterrence Theory, Resilience Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to demonstrate how small countries such as Albania and Kosovo strengthen NATO's resilience, even with limited military capabilities. By comparing governance, cyber resilience and strategic position, it highlights how these countries serve as resilience boosters within NATO's southeastern region. The study identifies a notable gap in current research. It emphasises that understanding how small states in the Western Balkans build resilience is crucial to improving NATO's deterrence and combating hybrid threats. It ends with a conceptual model of small-state strategic resilience that can be applied both locally and across the broader alliance.

Keywords: NATO resilience, Albania, Kosovo, small-state security, RSCT, strategic resilience

1 Introduction

The security situation in the Euro-Atlantic region is becoming more complex due to hybrid threats, aggressive actions by hostile states and non-state actors that exploit vulnerabilities across political, economic, informational and cyber domains (Morris et al. 2019). These hybrid operations often blur the line between peace and war, making it harder to identify aggressors and undermining traditional methods of deterrence (Galeotti 2015; Renz and Smith 2016). Because of this, NATO's focus on forward defence and military strength alone no longer suffices in a world where cyberattacks, energy pressures and information warfare are common (Polyakova and Fried 2019; NATO 2023). Instead, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has prioritised resilience, strengthening societies, maintaining governance and protecting critical infrastructure (NATO 2021a & NATO 2021b). Still, research on resilience tends to be concentrated in northern and eastern Europe, with less attention given to Wester Balkans (Bressan 2019). Despite facing ongoing hybrid threats and sitting along a crucial transit route linking the Adriatic, Aegean and Central Europe, this region remains somewhat overlooked (European Parliamentary Research Service (2025)). The Western Balkans is a region facing significant security challenges, with unresolved disputes, ethnic divisions, weak institutions and confusing geopolitical influences (Bieber 2018; Vuković 2021). These issues make it vulnerable to cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and harmful political or economic meddling (Cvijić 2017). For example, Albania experienced a cyberattack in 2022 linked to Iranian actors, revealing how even small states can be digitally exposed (Microsoft Threat Intelligence Centre 2023 updated). Kosovo remains a hotspot for information operations backed by Serbian and Russian interests (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019). Despite their limited military strength, both countries are strategically important for NATO because of their geography. Albania offers key ports and air routes along the Adriatic, while Kosovo's central location is crucial for mobility and quick response during crises (Bechev 2019; European Parliamentary Research Service 2025). Essentially, they are vital to NATO because they can serve as hubs for strengthening, helping NATO withstand and adapt to complex hybrid threats.

***Corresponding author: Hajdi Xhixha,** Faculty of Political Science and Security Studies, University for Business and Technology, Kalabria, Prishtina 10000, Kosovo, E-mail: Hajdi.xhixha@ ubt-uni.net
Kristaq Xharo, Department of Social Science for International Relations, European University of Tirana (UET), Tirana, Albania

Open Access. © 2026 Xhixha and Xharo, published by National Defence University, Finland. BY-NC-ND This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 License.

This article highlights the important yet often overlooked roles that Albania and Kosovo play in NATO's efforts to build resilience. Their significance is not just about traditional military strength but also it involves their governance, cyber networks and strategic location. Strengthening resilience in these countries helps NATO improve deterrence, safeguard key mobility routes and reduce hybrid threats along its southeastern border (Bērziņš 2020). However, despite their growing importance, little research examines how these Western Balkan states fit into NATO's resilience plans and direct comparisons between Albania and Kosovo are almost absent.

To fill this gap, the article presents a conceptual framework that combines Deterrence Theory, Resilience Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Deterrence Theory sheds light on the limitations of traditional military strategies in hybrid warfare scenarios (Snyder 1961; Schelling 1966). Resilience Theory explains how systems can sustain essential functions in the face of disruptions (Holling 1973). Meanwhile, RSCT emphasises regional interdependence, illustrating how instability in the Western Balkans creates spillover effects that impact NATO's southeastern security (Buzan and Waever 2003).

The article discusses a combined small-state strategic resilience approach, highlighting Albania's role through political, infrastructure and NATO involvement (NATO 2023). Kosovo, not a NATO member, supports regional stability by working with Kosovo Force (KFOR), confronting hybrid threats and developing a comprehensive security strategy (Vuković 2021). The article makes three contributions: Conceptual – It introduces the Small-State Strategic Resilience Framework (SSSRF), integrating Resilience, Deterrence and Regional Security theories, emphasising governance, cyber, infrastructure and regional stability over military power. Regional – It fills a research gap by focusing on the Western Balkans, a less-studied area than NATO's north and east, despite hybrid threats. Comparative – It compares Albania and Kosovo as resilience assets on NATO's southeastern flank, showing how a member and a non-member support alliance stability with different strategies.

2 Literature review

The growing body of research on hybrid threats, resilience and regional security highlights significant changes in modern conflicts, but coverage across Europe remains uneven (Bressan 2019). While much attention is given to NATO's northern and eastern borders, the Western Balkans receive far less focus, despite being especially vulnerable to hybrid pressures. The literature on hybrid threats describes contemporary conflicts (Hoffman 2007; Freedman 2017) as taking place in a 'grey zone', where actors exploit ambiguity and avoid crossing the line into open warfare. Researchers such as Mazarr (2015), Galeotti (2015) and Chivvis (2017) explain how hybrid campaigns combine cyberattacks, disinformation, political meddling and covert influence to weaken institutions while making attribution difficult. These operations target societal divisions and institutional weaknesses (Blažič 2021), undermining traditional deterrence by operating below escalation thresholds and attacking areas such as public trust, governance and digital infrastructure, spaces that classical strategies cannot fully protect.

Cyber operations are a key part of hybrid warfare. Rid (2013) and Maurer (2018) point out that covert intrusions can give an unfair advantage over vital infrastructure, with Estonia's 2007 cyberattack showing that even small, advanced nations can be knocked offline (Ottis 2008). The fight over information has become just as important: Pomerantsev (2019) explains how governments and other groups use stories and manipulate online spaces as weapons, while Russia's influence efforts across Europe are widely recognised (Polyakova and Fried 2019). China also uses economic pressure and strategic messaging to steer political decisions (Repnikova 2017; Aydin 2025). Although often overlooked compared to the Baltics, the Western Balkans has become a lively space for hybrid rivalry. Experts such as Bieber (2018) point out that lingering disputes, ethnic divisions, fragile institutions and foreign meddling make the region vulnerable to covert operations. Russia taps into cultural and political ties associated with Serbian nationalism (Wojcieszak et al. 2023); China leverages influence through infrastructure projects (Metushaj 2015); Turkey and Gulf countries promote soft power through religious and cultural outreach (Mandaci and Rusi 2018; Dema 2023). Albania's 2022 cyberattack, linked to Iranian actors, shows how even small, digitally connected countries can fall prey to sophisticated intrusions (Deibert 2013), while Kosovo constantly faces disinformation campaigns from Serbian and Russian sources aimed at undermining its legitimacy.

As hybrid threats have grown more complex, NATO's approach to security has also evolved. Traditional deterrence strategies no longer sufficed to address covert activities below the threshold of open conflict, leading NATO to prioritise resilience after 2014. The alliance defines resilience as the capacity to prepare for, withstand and recover from shocks while continuing essential functions (NATO 2021a & NATO 2021b). Experts like Fjäder (2014) highlight that building resilience requires a whole-of-society effort,

involving governance, infrastructure, cyber defences and communication networks. Recent research points to a 'deterrence–resilience nexus', emphasising that effective defence depends both on military deterrence and societal resilience (Bueger and Liebetrau 2021). However, much of this work focuses on northern and eastern Europe, leaving the Western Balkans somewhat on the sidelines academically (Cederberg et al. 2017; Szymański 2020).

Small-state security studies offer an important background. Traditional views see small countries as reliant on others for security (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006; Simpson 2006), but newer research highlights their diplomatic efforts, specialised skills and strategic locations (Bailes et al. 2016). In NATO, small states are increasingly contributing through cyber expertise, intelligence work and hosting key infrastructure. Resilience ties into these changes, emphasising governance, digital tools and crisis management rather than military strength alone. Wivel (2021) describes resilience as a kind of 'small-state grand strategy', although challenges such as limited cyber capabilities and weak institutions persist (Kmezić 2020).

RSCT further illuminates the Western Balkan context. Buzan and Waever (2003) argue that security is regionally interdependent, with threats easily spilling across borders. The Western Balkans exemplify this dynamic: unresolved disputes, ethnic linkages, external power penetration and institutional fragility create a highly interconnected security environment (Bieber 2018). Hybrid threats exploit these ties; political crises in Bosnia affect Kosovo (Wojcieszak et al. 2023); cyber vulnerabilities in Albania can disrupt regional systems; and disinformation spreads across borders with ease. RSCT underscores the regional significance of resilience in Albania and Kosovo. Both countries receive limited attention in resilience research. Most studies focus on Albania's democratisation, NATO relations and energy security (Metushaj 2015; Abazi 2021), as well as Kosovo's state-building and regional politics (Capussela 2015; Vuković 2021). Their roles as resilience actors, particularly in NATO's southeastern region and in the context of hybrid threats, are rarely explored. A comparative analysis between the two countries is nearly absent, despite their strategic and geographic similarities. The literature reveals gaps: it overlooks geographic differences in hybrid threats; there is no unified framework for small states and NATO resilience; Albania and Kosovo are often disregarded despite their significance; and there is limited integration of deterrence, resilience and RSCT theories. Few comparative studies exist. Addressing these gaps requires developing a framework that incorporates Albania and Kosovo into NATO's resilience efforts. This article introduces a model of small-state strategic resilience and compares its application in both countries.

3 Theoretical framework

This study uses Resilience Theory, with insights from Deterrence and RSCT, to explore how Albania and Kosovo support NATO's southeastern flank. It argues that small states boost alliance resilience through governance, cyber readiness, strategic positioning and regional stability, not just military power. These dimensions are synthesised in the SSSRF, which provides the analytical structure for comparing Albania and Kosovo (Whetten 1989). Resilience Theory originated from ecological studies (Holling 1973) and is now vital in security for its ability to help systems absorb shocks, maintain functions and recover from disruptions (Manyena 2006). With hybrid threats, cyberattacks, disinformation and economic pressures operating at levels below traditional conflict, deterrence alone is inadequate (Fjäder 2014; Fitzgerald and Brantly 2017). NATO sees resilience as essential to collective defence, focusing on seven areas: government continuity, energy security, managing uncontrolled movement, food and water security, protecting civilians, civil communications and transport systems (NATO 2021a & NATO 2021b). These emphasise military readiness, governance, infrastructure, cyber defence and societal cohesion.

Small states view resilience as a strategic way to enhance alliance security without military power, which they lack (Solik et al. 2022). The Hybrid CoE's Centre for Operational Research and Education (CORE) model defines resilience as Coordination, Organisation and Response Effectiveness against hybrid threats, emphasising societal effort, institutional coordination and adaptability (Hybrid CoE 2023). While Resilience Theory is primary, Deterrence Theory and RSCT provide context. Deterrence depends on attribution, credible threats and clear conflict thresholds (Snyder 1961; Schelling 1966), but hybrid threats with ambiguity challenge these (Sliwa 2022). Small states face deterrence limitations and lack punitive power, so resilience is vital. RSCT by Buzan and Waever (2003) shows how security in the Western Balkans is interconnected. Instability in one country causes spillovers; crises in Bosnia affect Kosovo; cyber issues in Albania disrupt the region; disinformation spreads across networks. RSCT explains why resilience in Albania and Kosovo is a regional priority for the alliance.

Understanding how small states influence alliance stability (Simpson 2006) becomes clearer when we see how these theories connect. Deterrence reveals its

structural limits, while resilience shows its capacity to adapt without relying solely on military strength. RSCT illustrates how progress in either area can ripple across the region. Together, these ideas affirm that small states can shape regional stability by leveraging their resilience. Building on this, the study applies the SSSRF, created by Briguglio (2014), to assess vulnerability and resilience in small states, now including alliance elements. The SSSRF combines three traditions: Resilience Theory, which explains how Albania and Kosovo sustain themselves against hybrid shocks through institutional strength; Deterrence Theory, emphasising the need for resilience and the limitations of traditional deterrence inhybrid contexts (NATO 2021a & NATO 2021b; Sliwa 2022); and RSCT, demonstrating the regional importance of resilience by illustrating how instability spreads across borders. The framework views resilience as strategic and multidimensional, based on governance, digital security, geopolitical status and regional stability. It indicates small states with robust institutions and infrastructure can serve as 'resilience boosters' within alliances. Albania and Kosovo, as active NATO partners, excel at managing hybrid threats, maintaining essential functions and preventing spillovers, thus making them valuable allies.

4 Methodology

This section covers the study's methodology in four parts: rationale for hybrid threats research; source selection and data collection; comparison of Albania and Kosovo; and limitations. While conceptual research cannot test hypotheses or causality, it synthesises evidence and develops models for future work. It is suitable when empirical data is incomplete, classified, or scattered, as is often the case when analysing hybrid threats in the Western Balkans. According to Jaakkola (2020), these methods sharpen analysis, unify fragmented research and develop new theories when data are hard to access. Since hybrid operations are covert and information scarce, traditional methods fall short. A conceptual approach helps assemble sources into a clear model of how small states support the alliance's resilience.

The study compiles sources, such as academic papers, official documents and security reports, and reviews articles from databases including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR and Google Scholar. It covers hybrid threats, resilience, NATO security, small-state strategies and Western Balkans geopolitics, prioritising influential security and regional journals. Policy documents from NATO, the EU and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) were included, especially NATO (2016)'s post-2016 strategic plans on resilience. Cybersecurity reports from RAND Corporation (RAND), Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Microsoft Threat Intelligence and Mandiant highlight hybrid threats, such as the 2022 cyberattacks on Albania and information campaigns in Kosovo. Regional insights from Kosovo Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (ACSS) and Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) provide details on institutional weaknesses and politics. Over 50 sources were reviewed, with 30 selected for relevance and quality.

Although conceptual rather than empirical, the study employs a structured comparative logic to examine Albania and Kosovo. Comparative analysis is a recognised qualitative method for identifying patterns and divergences across similar cases (George and Bennett 2005). Albania and Kosovo are natural comparators: both are small states in the same regional security complex, exposed to hybrid threats and situated along strategic corridors linked to NATO's southeastern flank. Their key differences, primarily Albania's NATO membership versus Kosovo's non-member status, clarify how institutional alignment, infrastructure and threat exposure shape resilience (Zaum 2007). Each case is analysed through the exact conceptual dimensions generated by the theoretical framework. The approach adopts established research practices (Torraco 2005; Jaakkola 2020), including defining key concepts (resilience, hybrid threat, small-state security, SSSRF), applying consistent criteria via the SSSRF indicator matrix across case studies, triangulating evidence from academic, institutional (NATO, EU, OSCE) and security reports (Microsoft Threat Intelligence, Mandiant, KCSS) and acknowledging limitations such as lack of classified data and covert operation documentation to provide a multidimensional resilience view. Limitations include the inability of conceptual research to test hypotheses or measure causality, the complexity of documenting hybrid operations due to deniability and classification, and the variability of resilience over time and sectors. Nonetheless, these constraints emphasise the importance of conceptual work. The study constructs an interdisciplinary theoretical model, creating a foundation for future empirical testing.

5 Conceptual analysis of Albania and Kosovo as small-state resilience actors

This section applies the SSSRF to Albania and Kosovo, analysing their contributions to resilience in governance,

digital skills, geopolitical positioning and regional stabilisation. It examines each country's strengths and challenges, noting that both face hybrid threats and have limited military capabilities. Their efforts to build resilience, support from Euro-Atlantic partners and the structure of the Western Balkan Regional Security Complex drive their contributions, as outlined by Buzan and Waever (2003). Both states operate in a contested geopolitical environment, influenced by hybrid pressures from actors like Russia and Iran (Bieber 2018). However, their paths to joining Euro-Atlantic structures lead to different resilience profiles. Albania's NATO membership places it directly within collective defence systems and under Article 3 resilience commitments (NATO 2021a & NATO 2021b). Kosovo, while not a NATO member, is still connected to Euro-Atlantic security through KFOR and close cooperation with Western allies (Vuković 2021). These different institutional setups determine how each country supports regional stability and the strength of their alliances.

Albania's institutional growth is demonstrated by its NATO membership since 2009, which requires resilience commitments (NATO 2021a & NATO 2021b), and by EU negotiations, which have also driven judicial and anti-corruption reforms (Elbasani and Šabić 2018). Additionally, its response to the 2022 cyberattack (Pavel 2024), by maintaining government operations and seeking aid, showcases resilience (Fjäder 2014; Microsoft Threat Intelligence Centre 2023 updated). This suggests that aligning with Euro-Atlantic structures enhances resilience, even amid complex cyber threats. Kosovo's institutions, on the other hand, remain more vulnerable because of its disputed status and tensions with Serbia (Vuković 2021). Despite this, Kosovo has established systems to keep functioning under pressure from hybrid threats. The country is often targeted by disinformation campaigns from Serbia and Russia (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019; Jakšić & Marjanović 2024). However, its people tend to resist these efforts strongly, thanks to their trust in Western institutions and a shared memory of past conflicts (Visoka 2017). This resilience reflects what Manyena (2006) calls 'societal resilience', showing how communities withstand and adapt to ongoing challenges.

In the digital world, Albania's rapid move to digitalisation boosted efficiency but also created new vulnerabilities, as evidenced by a complex cyberattack in 2022 (Microsoft Threat Intelligence Centre 2023 updated). Because there were few existing protocols and backups, as noted by Maurer (2018) and Rid (2013), the country's system was more exposed. Since then, Albania has taken steps to improve its defences, such as strengthening the national Computer Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT), creating sector-specific cyber norms and working closely with the U.S. and Europe (NATO 2023), demonstrating its ability to adapt and recover. In contrast, Kosovo's lower level of digitalisation means it is less at risk of large-scale cyberattacks but more vulnerable to online misinformation (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019). This aligns with broader hybrid tactics discussed by Nissen (2015) and Pomerantsev (2019). Kosovo's strength lies in civil society efforts to combat disinformation, media literacy projects and partnerships with Western allies (Kosovo Centre for Security Studies 2021), reflecting Polyakova and Fried's (2019) focus on raising public awareness. From a geopolitical perspective, both countries are important for NATO, supporting the idea that small states can influence key transit routes (Cavelty et al. 2015). Albania's Adriatic coast offers essential naval, air and logistical access points, strengthening the country's resilience and helping NATO maintain alternative regional pathways.

Kosovo's central location in the Western Balkans makes it a key player in regional transport and military movement. The presence of KFOR helps ensure that land routes connecting the Adriatic with North Macedonia, Serbia and the Aegean remain reliable (Vuković 2021). As RSCT notes, instability in Kosovo can have a disproportionate impact on the security of the wider region (Buzan and Waever 2003). Because of this, Kosovo's political and social stability is vital for preventing major crises (Trbojevic 2024). Its geographic position means that maintaining domestic stability is not just important for Kosovo but also a strategic priority for NATO and EU operations. The fourth dimension, regional stabilising functions, builds on RSCT's focus on interdependence. When Albania and Kosovo are secure, this helps reduce the broader regional effects of hybrid pressures. Albania's cooperation with NATO fosters stable diplomacy and strong backing for KFOR, thereby reducing opportunities for outside actors to exploit regional divides (Bechev 2019). Meanwhile, Kosovo's stability lessens the chance of escalation in this highly sensitive geopolitical hotspot, limiting Russian opportunism and Serbian destabilisation efforts (Bieber 2018; Vuković 2021). As Pavlićević (2019) points out, the Balkans remain contested by external powers, making resilience in key countries a crucial safeguard against outside influence.

Albania and Kosovo play distinct but complementary roles in resilience within the SSSRF model. Albania maintains stability, adapts to cyber threats and strengthens its infrastructure, while Kosovo enhances societal resilience to disinformation, collaborates with KFOR and holds a key geopolitical role. These roles support NATO allies in

Croatia, North Macedonia, Romania, Greece and Turkey through defence, air policing, naval presence and countering hybrid threats such as cyber and disinformation. Wivel (2021) highlights the influence of small states on security primarily through resilience rather than deterrence, especially against hybrid threats, where military response is limited.

The analysis shows small-state resilience benefits NATO more at the alliance level, aligning with NATO's view of resilience as vital for collective defence (NATO 2021a & NATO 2021b). Resilience among non-member partners such as Kosovo strengthens NATO in hybrid-threat environments, where ambiguity and deniability are common, echoing Bueger and Liebetrau's (2021) ideas on deterrence and resilience. Albania and Kosovo actively contribute to NATO's southeastern resilience by effectively handling hybrid threats, maintaining operational capabilities and preventing spillover, making their small size a strategic advantage. The findings support the SSSRF's view that small states with strong governance, digital resilience and strategic infrastructure can enhance alliance resilience.

The findings reveal that Albania and Kosovo each have their own unique yet complementary ways of demonstrating small-state strategic resilience. This supports the idea that traditional deterrence models do not fully capture security dynamics in environments filled with hybrid threats. Classic deterrence relies on rational actors, clear attribution of blame and credible capabilities for punishment (Snyder 1961; Schelling 1966). In contrast, hybrid threats intentionally avoid these conditions through tactics such as ambiguity, deniability and activities that remain just below the detection threshold (Galeotti 2015; Renz and Smith 2016). The cyberattacks against Albania and the disinformation campaigns targeting Kosovo show how hybrid actors operate beyond the scope of traditional deterrence. These examples confirm the arguments of Rid (2013) and Maurer (2018), who highlight that hybrid threats weaken deterrence by blurring responsibility and targeting civilian vulnerabilities.

In this context, Resilience Theory offers a more relatable framework for understanding the security behaviour of Albania and Kosovo. Resilience emphasises a country's ability to absorb shocks, adapt to changing threats and bounce back under pressure (Holling 1973; Manyena 2006). Albania's efforts following the 2022 cyberattacks, such as seeking international cyber assistance and strengthening its national Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) structures, illustrate this approach and support the idea that resilience has become key to security in hybrid-threat situations (Fjäder 2014; Fitzgerald and Brantly 2017). Likewise, Kosovo's strategies to fight against information manipulation show signs of social and political resilience, as discussed in studies of hybrid information ecosystems (Nissen 2015; Pomerantsev 2019). These examples support point that resilience complements traditional deterrence and, for small states, it might even be more important than conventional military power as the primary basis of security.

Albania and Kosovo's resilience aligns with NATO's seven criteria, with Albania supporting Requirement 1 and infrastructure development advancing Requirement 7 (Bechev 2019; European Parliamentary Research Service 2025). Kosovo's efforts to combat disinformation and to work with KFOR address Requirements 4 and 5 (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019; Vuković 2021). Neither fully meets all criteria; Albania struggles with energy security (Requirement 2), and Kosovo's disputed status affects civil communications (Requirement 6). Despite these issues, their resilience shows progress, strengthening NATO. This study emphasises resilience's strategic value for NATO, highlighting how Albania's infrastructure and Kosovo's stability bolster the alliance's capacity and regional

Tab. 1: SSSRF indicator matrix

Dimensions	Description	Measuring indicators	Albania	Kosova
Governance and institutional resilience	The functioning of the state and coordination in crisis	Institutional stability, coordinating capacity, public trust	Institutional reform; adaptive response after 2022	Social resilience; institutional challenge
Digital and cyber resilience	Protection of critical infrastructure, recovery	CSIRT capacity, redundancy, counter-disinformation	High exposure, deep reforms	Exposure to disinformation; limited infrastructure
Geopolitical and infrastructural positioning	Strategic value and mobility corridors	Door, airbase, military road	Key points in the Adriatic	Land Centre for Regional Roads and KFOR
Regional stabilisation functions	Reducing the risk of spillover and crises	Coordination with NATO/ KFOR; predictable behaviour	Pro-NATO stabilising factor	Hottest peak; critical regional stability

Source: Authors' table based on theory and results of their analysis.
SSSRF, Small-State Strategic Resilience Framework.

security, functioning as a public good per NATO's 2021–2022 strategic concepts.

The findings also reaffirm the usefulness of the RSCT. As Buzan and Waever (2003) point out, security in regions like the Western Balkans is deeply interconnected, with instability in one country often affecting others. Albania's cyber weaknesses and Kosovo's political tensions influence neighbouring countries such as Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This aligns with broader research showing that hybrid actors exploit cross-border divisions, ethnic bonds and infrastructural vulnerabilities (Bieber 2018). The results indicate that resilience in Albania and Kosovo helps reduce these spillovers, contributing to greater stability within the larger Western Balkan security complex. This not only supports RSCT's main idea but also extends it by highlighting that resilience, rather than military strength, is a crucial stabilising factor in regions facing hybrid threats. Additionally, this analysis questions longstanding assumptions in small-state security studies. Traditionally, experts have considered small countries as security consumers that depend on alliances (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006). However, recent research suggests they can also be reliable diplomatic partners with distinct advantages (Bailes et al. 2016). The cases of Albania and Kosovo exemplify a broader shift: small states can contribute significantly through resilience. This strategic trait helps mitigate hybrid threats, enhance alliances and foster regional stability. It also supports Wivel's (2021) concept that resilience could function as a 'small-state grand strategy', enabling these nations to compensate for military limitations via innovative governance and dependable infrastructure.

Many studies assume that resilience is stongest in highly institutionalised (Kundu 2023), advanced countries such as Estonia and Finland. However, Albania and Kosovo show resilience can also come from political alignment, social cohesion, rapid adaptation and external security group membership. Kosovo's resilience partly relies on public trust in NATO/KFOR and scepticism of hostile narratives, aligning with Pomerantsev's (2019) focus on societal awareness in fighting misinformation. Albania's experience supports Maurer's (2018) idea that cyber shocks can prompt modernisation. These examples suggest that hybrid-threat resilience models may be too narrow and need a broader approach. Deterrence Theory and RSCT support this by explaining the strategic importance of resilience. Deterrence Theory highlights the limitations of military-only approaches in hybrid environments characterised by difficult attribution and ambiguous thresholds (Galeotti 2015; Veebel and Ploom 2018). RSCT indicates regional importance of resilience in Albania and Kosovo, where instability crosses borders, making domestic resilience a public good for Western Balkan security (Buzan and Waever 2003). These frameworks support the SSSRF's argument that small states bolster alliance resilience through governance, digital infrastructure and regional stability, not just military deterrence.

The analysis shows resilience in Albania and Kosovo depends on their relationships, not just internal strength. Albania's NATO membership boosts resilience through better interoperability and cyber defence (NATO 2023). Kosovo's cooperation with KFOR and adherence to Euro-Atlantic norms help maintain stability despite partial international recognition. This aligns with Bechev (2019)'s view that external actors and institutions influence security in the Western Balkans. Resilience partly comes from their ties to Euro-Atlantic security frameworks. The findings support the idea that small states can be key strategic resilience multipliers within alliances such as NATO by developing capabilities to protect alliance functions, address hybrid threats and ensure regional stability. Albania and Kosovo show resilience as strategic resources, regional stabilisers and alliance assets. The SSSRF model advances understanding by illustrating resilience across governance, technology, infrastructure and geopolitics and how these interconnect in the face of hybrid threats.

6 Conclusion and policy recommendations

This concluding section synthesises the study's main findings, discusses their broader implications for NATO's resilience strategy and offers policy recommendations to enhance small-state resilience in the Western Balkans. It is organised into four parts: first, it summarises the empirical findings on Albania's and Kosovo's contributions to resilience; second, it discusses the implications for NATO resilience policy; third, it presents specific policy recommendations; and fourth, it acknowledges limitations and suggests directions for future research. Using the SSSRF, it is clear that both countries support alliance stability not primarily through conventional military strength but through their diverse resilience capabilities. These include governance systems, cyber and information security, infrastructure and mobility, and regional dynamics influenced by the Western Balkan security complex.

The evidence shows that Albania's resilience efforts are rooted in its strong ties with NATO, its developing

cyber capabilities and its strategic infrastructure along the Adriatic coast. These elements work together to improve operational freedom and strengthen the alliance's southeastern flank. Kosovo, although more fragile internally and not officially part of NATO, still contributes to resilience through its societal resistance to harmful influences, its cooperation with KFOR and its central location in a region prone to tensions. Collectively, these two countries play complementary roles: Albania serves as a stable infrastructural and institutional hub, while Kosovo acts as a key stabilising point in a geopolitically sensitive area.

The findings have implications that go beyond Albania and Kosovo. They highlight that resilience, viewed as adaptive, layered and embedded within society, should be seen as a strategic resource in international security, especially for alliances facing hybrid threats. These results support scholarly views that deterrence alone is insufficient to address today's challenges (Snyder 1961; Rid 2013; Galeotti 2015) and align with NATO's move towards a combined approach of deterrence and resilience (NATO 2021a & NATO 2021b). Significantly, they also expand our understanding of RSCT by showing how resilience, rather than insecurity, can spread through regional networks and influence alliance stability.

Although this study is primarily conceptual, it lays the groundwork for future empirical research. Such research could explore resilience-building pathways, assess cyber and governance capabilities and analyse how hybrid operations take shape in the Western Balkans. Additionally, future studies might examine how small states such as Montenegro or North Macedonia fit within the SSSRF framework and whether resilience in the Western Balkans can become a key part of NATO's southeastern strategy.

Policy recommendations based on this analysis highlight the importance of NATO expanding its resilience efforts in the Western Balkans. They include formalising cooperation with Kosovo in cyber and information security, improving regional early-warning systems and investing in the protection of key mobility routes across Albania. Both Albania and Kosovo should also focus on building their own cyber workforces, enhancing redundancy in critical infrastructure and working more closely with regional partners facing similar threats. These steps would boost each country's readiness and advance NATO's primary goal of strengthening collective resilience amidst a challenging and contested security landscape.

In summary, Albania and Kosovo show that small countries, when wisely positioned and well organised, can bolster resilience within complex security alliances. Their roles highlight an important but often overlooked aspect of NATO's southeastern defence, where resilience, rather than just deterrence, is key to keeping stability and countering hybrid threats. The SSSRF model introduced here offers a fresh perspective on these issues and paves the way for future research into how small states can strategically build resilience against hybrid challenges.

7 Limitations and future research

While this study offers a thorough conceptual look at small-state resilience along NATO's southeastern flank, there are some limitations to consider. Much of the analysis is based on secondary sources, policy papers and technical reports, which means it lacks access to real-time or classified information on hybrid threat activities. This limits our ability to fully explore the details of cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and institutional responses. Going forward, including interviews with field experts, using government data or collaborating with cybersecurity agencies (Cavelty 2012) could help verify and deepen the findings.

Second, the SSSRF framework, while theoretically grounded, remains a conceptual model. Its dimensions and indicators have not yet been operationalised into measurable variables. Without empirical testing, the relative weight or interactions among resilience dimensions cannot be quantified. Operationalising the framework through quantitative indices or qualitative case studies represents an essential next step.

Third, the study examines only Albania and Kosovo. While these countries are among the most affected by hybrid threats in the area, the Western Balkans is a highly connected security region. Not including Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina narrows the regional perspective. Adding these countries would strengthen the analysis of RSCT dynamics within the SSSRF model.

Finally, hybrid threats change quickly. Many of the mechanisms we looked at – such as cyber tools, influence networks and geopolitical strategies – shift faster than academic research can keep up. So, the insights here are based on current patterns, but they should be updated as hybrid tactics and regional situations develop.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a solid foundation for future research, offering a clear conceptual path to understanding and measuring small-state resilience within NATO's southeastern flank.

Author's biography

Hajdi Xhixha is the Dean of Political Science & Security Studies Faculty, at University for Business and Technology in Prishtina, Kosovo. Her research focuses on security and defence issues.

Kristaq Xharo is a professor of International Relations and Security Studies at the European University of Tirana, in Tirana, Albania. His research focuses on security and defence issues.

References

Abazi, E. (2021). Geopolitics in the Western Balkans: linkages, leverages and gatekeepers, Academicus International Scientific. *Journal, Entrepreneurship Training Centre Albania*, issue 24, pages 85-108, July. https://www.academicus.edu.al/public/nr24/Academicus-MMXXI-24-085-108.pdf

Aydın, F. (2025). *China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Balkans: Regional Economic and Political Impacts*. BSF Research Paper, IDEFE. Available at https://balkanfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/BSF-Research-Paper-01.pdf

Bailes, A. J. K., & Thayer, B. A. Thorhallsson, B. (2016). Alliance Theory and Small State Alliance "Shelter": The Complexities of Small State Alliance Behavior. *Third World Thematics*, *1*(1), 9. https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2016.1189806

Bechev, D. (2019). *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*. New Haven, Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2020.1707982

Bērziņš, J. (2020). *Deterrence and Hybrid Threats: Proposing a More Strategic Approach* (Hybrid CoE Paper No. 2). European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. Available at https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-paper-2-deterrence-proposing-a-more-strategic-approach-to-countering-hybrid-threats/

Bieber, F. (2018). Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics, 34*(3), pp. 337-354. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2018.1490272. doi: 10.1080/21599165.2018.1490272

Bieber, F., & Tzifakis, N. (2019). *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*. London, Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/The-Western-Balkans-in-the- World-Linkages-and-Relations-with-Non-Western-Countries/ Bieber-Tzifakis/p/book/9781032240909

Blažič, B. J. (2021). The cybersecurity labour shortage in Europe: Moving to a new concept for education and training. *Technology in Society, 67*, p. 101769. doi: 10.1016/j.techsoc.2021.101769

Bressan, M. (2019). NATO's challenges in the South Flank. *L'Europe en Formation, 389*(2), pp. 33-48. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338640127_NATO's_Challenges_in_the_South_Flank. doi: 10.3917/e.eufor.389.0033

Briguglio, L. (2014). A vulnerability and resilience framework for small states. *Economics, Political Science*. https://doi.org/10.14217/9781848599185-5-EN

Bueger, C., & Liebetrau, T. (2021). Security communities, deterrence, and resilience. *International Affairs, 97*(3), pp. 663-681. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350469862_Protecting_hidden_infrastructure_The_security_politics_of_the_global_submarine_data_cable_network

Buzan, B., & Waever, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. https:// www.cambridge.org/core/books/regions-and-powers/9E0B-611D4C01CECD704651B273646E1D

Capussela, A. (2015). *State-Building in Kosovo: Democracy, Corruption, and the EU in the Balkans*. London, I.B. Tauris. https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2015-630314?urlappend=%3Futm_source%3Dresearchgate.net%26utm_medium%3Darticle

Cavelty, M. D. (2012). Cybersecurity. In: Collins, A. (ed.), *Contemporary Security Studies*. Oxford University Press. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2055122

Cavelty D., Kaufmann M., M., & Søby Kristensen, K. (2015). Resilience and (in)security: Practices, subjects, temporalities. *Security Dialogue*, *46*, 14 - 3. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614559637

Cederberg, A., Mustonen, J., & Eronen, P. (2017). *The Baltic States and Hybrid Warfare* (Hybrid CoE Working Paper No. 1). European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. Available at https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-working-paper-1-regional-cooperation-to-support-national-hybrid-defence-efforts/

Chivvis, C. (2017). *Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare"* (Testimony). RAND Corporation. Available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT468.html

Cvijić, S. (2017). EU is ready to trade democracy for stability in the Western Balkans. *European Western Balkans, date 05/04/2017*. https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/04/05/srdan-cvijic-eu-is-ready-to-trade-democracy-for-stability-in-the-western-balkans/

Deibert, R. (2013). *Black Code: Inside the Battle for Cyberspace*. Toronto, Signal. https://archive.org/details/blackcodeinsideb0000deib

Dema, V. (2023). Turkey's soft power policy towards the Balkans. *Science International Journal, 2*(2), pp. 49-53. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371519466_turkey's_soft_power_policy_towards_the_balkans. doi: 10.35120/sciencej020249d

Elbasani, A., & Šabić, S. Š (2018). Rule of law, corruption and democratic accountability in the course of EU enlargement. *Journal of European Public Policy, 25*(9), pp. 1317-1335. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3308095. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.3308095

European Parliamentary Research Service. (2025). *Military Mobility*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/775860/EPRS_BRI(2025)775860_EN.pdf

Fjäder, C. (2014). The nation-state, national security and resilience in the age of globalisation. *Resilience: International Policies, Practices, and Discourses, 2*(2), pp. 114-129. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21693293.2014.914771. doi: 10.1080/21693293.2014.914771

Freedman, L. (2017). *The Future of War*. London, Penguin. https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/192090/the-future-of-war-by-lawrence-freedman/9780141975603

Fitzgerald, C. W., & Brantly, A. F. (2017). Subverting Reality: The Role of Propaganda in 21st Century Intelligence. *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, *30*(2), 215-240. https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2017.1263528

Galeotti, M. (2015). Hybrid war and little green men: How does it work and how does it function? CSS ETH Zurih, 01/05/2015 https://isnblog.ethz.ch/uncategorized/hybrid-war-and-little-green-men-how-it-works-and-how-it-doesnt

George, A., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, MIT Press. https://indiachinainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Comparative-Methods-Ch8-George-Bennett-2005.pdf

Hartwell, L. (2021). *The Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue: Ripe for Resolution?* Washington. Centre for European Policy Analysis. https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CEPA-Serbia-Kosovo-5.10.21-V2.pdf

Hoffman, F. (2007). *Conflict in the 21st Century: Rise of Hybrid Warfare*. Arlington, Potomac Institute. https://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf

Holling, C. S. (1973). Resilience and the stability of ecological systems. *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics, 4*(1), pp. 1-23. https://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/26/1/RP-73-003.pdf. doi: 10.1146/annurev.es.04.110173.000245

Hybrid CoE. (2023). *CORE Model: Coordination, Organisation, and Response Effectiveness in Countering Hybrid Threats*. European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. Available at https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/JRC129019_02.pdf

Jaakkola, E. (2020). Designing conceptual articles: Four approaches. *Academy of Marketing Science Review, 10*(1–2), pp. 18-26. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339811930_Designing_conceptual_articles_four_approaches. doi: 10.1007/s13162-020-00161-0

Jakšić, T., & Marjanović, M. (2024). Local media reporting and influence on political communication in the North of Kosovo and Metohija. *CM: Communication and Media, 19*(55), pp. 25-43. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388579666_Local_media_reporting_and_influence_on_political_communication_in_the_North_of_Kosovo_and_Metohija. doi: 10.5937/cm19-50162

Kmezić, M. (2020). Rule of law and democracy in the Western Balkans: Addressing the gap between policies and practice. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *20*(1), 183-198. https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1706257

Kosovo Centre for Security Studies. (2021). *Disinformation Monitoring Report*. Available at https://qkss.org/en/lajmi/raport-i-ri-mbi-lidhjen-mes-dezinformimit-dhe-radikalizimit-etno-politik-ne-kosove

Kundu, N. (2003). The Baltic states' search for security. *Strategic Analysis, 27*(4), pp. 463-488. doi: 10.1080/09700160308450100

Liebetrau, T., & Bueger, C. (2021). Protecting hidden infrastructure: The security politics of the global submarine data cable network. *Contemporary Security Policy,* 1. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2021.1907129

Mandacı, N., & Rusi Karacalarlı, E. (2018). Gulf region and western balkans: a current history of interregional relations. *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, *19*(3), 491-514. https://doi.org/10.16953/deusosbil.288136

Manyena, S. B. (2006). *The concept of resilience revisited*. Oxford, *Disasters*, *30*(4), pp. 434-450. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0361-3666.2006.00331.x

Maurer, T. (2018). *Cyber Mercenaries*. Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/us/universitypress/subjects/law/criminal-law/cyber-mercenaries-state-hackers-and-power?-format=PB

Mazarr, M. J. (2015). *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*, US Army War College Press, Pensylvania, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/428

Metushaj, M. (2015). Geopolitics of Albania in the Balkans after NATO membership. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 4*(3), pp. 400-402. https://ideas.repec.org/a/bjz/ajisjr/1375.html. doi: 10.5901/ajis.2015.v4n3s1p400

Microsoft Threat Intelligence Centre. (2023 updated). *Microsoft investigates Iranian attacks against the Albanian government*. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/security/blog/2022/09/08/microsoft-investigates-iranian-attacks-against-the-albanian-government/

Morris, L. J., Mazarr, M. J., Hornung, J. W., Pezard, S., Binnendijk, A., & Kepe, M. (2019). *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Grey Zone*. RAND Corporation. Available at https://euhybnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Framework-for-Cross-Domain-Strategies-against-Hybrid-Threats.pd

NATO. (2016). *Warsaw Summit Communiqué*. Available at https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2016/07/09/warsaw-summit-communique

NATO. (2021a). *Resilience and Civil Preparedness: Article 3 and the Seven Baseline Requirements*. Available at https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/resilience-civil-preparedness-and-article-3

NATO. (2021b). *Resilience Fact Sheet*. Available at https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2021/06/14/strengthened-resilience-commitment

NATO. (2023). *Strategic Concept 2022*. Available at https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/strategic-concepts/nato-2022-strategic-concept

Nissen, T. E. (2015). *The weaponization of social media: Characteristics of contemporary conflicts*. Royal Danish Defence College, https://research.fak.dk/esploro/outputs/book/TheWeaponizationOfSocialMedia-CharacteristicsofContemporaryConflicts/991815694803741

Ottis, R. (2008). Analysis of the 2007 Cyber Attacks Against Estonia from the Information Warfare Perspective. *Political Science, Computer Science*. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/

Analysis-of-the-2007-Cyber-Attacks-Against-Estonia-Ottis/b63d7ca0eb68bb24e9b9abc5fab8b828e1f5ddcb

Pavel, T. (2024). The Iranian Cyberattacks in Albania: Actors, Tactics, Targets. Political Science, Computer Science *dot.pl*. https://doi.org/10.60097/dotpl%2F196772

Pavlićević, D. (2019). Structural power and the China-EU-Western Balkans triangular relations. *Asia Europe Journal, 17*(4), pp. 453-468. https://ideas.repec.org/a/kap/asiaeu/v17y2019i4d10.1007_s10308-019-00566-y.html. doi: 10.1007/s10308-019-00566-y

Polyakova, A., & Fried, D. (2019). *Democratic Offence Against Disinformation*. Centre for European Policy Analysis. Available at https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/democratic-offense-against-disinformation/

Pomerantsev, P. (2019). *This is Not Propaganda*. Faber & Faber, London.

Renz, B., & Smith, H. (2016). *Russia and Hybrid warfare - going beyond the label*. (Aleksanteri Papers; No. 1/2016). Kikimora Publications. http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/english/publications/presentations/papers/ap_1_2016.pdf

Repnikova, M. (2017). *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power under Authoritarianism*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. https://indiachinainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Repnikova-Book-Chapters-1-4.pdf

Rid, T. (2012). Cyber War Will Not Take Place. *Journal of Strategic Studies*. *35*(1), pp. 5-32. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.608939

Schelling, T. (1966). *Arms and Influence*. New Haven, Yale University Press. https://books.google.al/books?id=EA7UDwAAQBAJ&printsec-=frontcover&source=gbs_ViewAPI&hl=en&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

Simpson, A. (2006). Small states in world politics. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 19*(4), p. 649. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275175117_Small_States_in_World_Politics. doi: 10.1080/09557570601003379

Sliwa, Z. (2022). *Turning Strategy into Praxis: Lessons in Hybrid Threat Deterrence*. European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. Available at https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/turning-strategy-into-praxis-lessons-in-hybrid-threat-deterrence/

Snyder, G. (1961). *Deterrence and Defense*. Princeton, Princeton University Press. https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9781400877164_ A26069384/preview-9781400877164_A26069384.pdf

Solik, M., Graf, J., & Baar, V. (2022). Hybrid threats in the Western Balkans: A case study of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, *22*(1), pp. 5-23. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361053909_Hybrid_Threats_in_the_Western_Balkans_A_Case_Study_of_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina

Szymański, P. (2020). *Towards Greater Resilience: NATO and the EU on Hybrid Threats* (OSW Commentary No. 328). Centre for Eastern Studies. Available at https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2020-04-24/towards-greater-resilience-nato-and-eu-hybrid-threats

Thorhallsson, B., & Wivel, A. (2006). Small states in the European Union: What do we know and what would we like to know? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 19*(4), pp. 651-668. doi: 10.1080/09557570601003502

Torraco, R. J. (2005). Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples. *Human Resource Development Review*, *4*(3), 356-367. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484305278283

Trbojević, M., Jovanović, D., & Đurđević, D. (2024). Security policies and sustainable development in the Western Balkan region beyond 2022: Current status, challenges, and prospects. *Energy, Sustainability and Society, 14*(1), p. 55. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s13705-024-00486-9. doi: 10.1186/s13705-024-00486-9

Veebel, V., & Ploom, I. (2018). The deterrence credibility of NATO and the readiness of the Baltic states to employ the deterrence instruments. *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review, 16*(1), pp. 171-200. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330315297_The_Deterrence_Credibility_of_NATO_and_the_Readiness_of_the_Baltic_States_to_Employ_the_Deterrence_Instruments. doi: 10.2478/lasr-2018-0007

Visoka G. (2017). *Shaping Peace in Kosovo: The Politics of Peacebuilding and Statehood*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-51001-9

Vuković, Đ. (2021). Conflict of a Memory Culture in the Western Balkans. *Sted Journal*. https://doi.org/10.7251/STED2101057V

Whetten, D. (1989). What constitutes a theoretical contribution? *Academy of Management Review, 14*(4), pp. 490-495. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234022029_What_Constitutes_A_Theoretical_Contribution. doi: 10.2307/258554

Wivel, A. (2021). The Grand Strategies of Small States. *The Oxford Handbook of Grand, Oxford*. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb%2F9780198840299.013.32

Wojcieszak, M., Menchen-Trevino, E., Clemm von Hohenberg, B., de Leeuw, S., Gonçalves, J., Davidson, S., et al. (2023). Non-news websites expose people to more political content than news websites: Evidence from browsing data in three countries. *Political Communication, 41*(1), pp. 129-151. doi: 10.1080/10584609.2023.2238641

Zaum, D. (2007). The Sovereignty Paradox: The Norms and Politics of International Statebuilding; (online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 May 2007), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199207435.001.0001, accessed 1 Sept. 2026.