

# 11 Conclusion

## Size is not everything

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### 11.1 Introduction

The European Union has been experiencing a series of crises with the COVID-19 pandemic (Beaussier and Cabane, 2020) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine being the last two (Mišík, 2022). The crises have succeeded so closely one after another that the whole period since 2008 was coined as a polycrisis (Zeitlin et al., 2019). Whether these crises originated outside the EU's borders (e.g. the economic or refugee crises) or within the Union (Brexit), they required an EU response that was complicated by the emergence of dividing lines between member countries that supported different approaches. Finding a common solution at the EU level (ideally in the form of a consensus) became a complex endeavour (Schimmelfennig, 2022). While there have been differences between member states in many areas – including economic (economic crisis: northern vs. southern) and geographical (refugee crisis: centre vs. southern periphery) – the emphasis was placed on the role of the biggest member states. For example, while the economic crisis impacted all member states, it was the largest countries that were considered to be the key stakeholders in solving the crisis (Fontan and Saurugger, 2019); while the refugee crisis put extra pressure on the countries at the south of the EU (including small members), it was the German decision not to enforce some of the provisions of the so-called Dublin Regulation that received most attention (Sanchez Salgado, 2022). While Brexit significantly impacted the dynamics between large and small member states by decreasing the former group, the discussions within the EU were centred around its impact on the biggest EU countries. Similarly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine presented a significant turning point for most – Hungary being the major exemption (Lamour, n.d.) – member states; several small EU members became leaders in per capita military and other support of Ukraine. Yet, it was the positions of the biggest countries that were considered to be crucial (Bosse, 2022). Smaller countries were usually only considered if they were 'problematic' or 'extreme' cases in the context of these crises.

However, following Brexit and the loss of one of the biggest member states (Brusenbauch Meislova, 2019), the relations between large and small EU members have changed as the share of small members has increased and so has their aggregated relative size. This does not mean that small states always manage to find a common ground and are able to push their positions vis-à-vis the big member states;

however, the recent developments in connection to adaptation of the EU's sanctions against Russia are showing the strength of a single EU member, independent of its size (i.e. Hungary; Kopper et al., 2023). Therefore, this edited volume studied the small states of the European Union and the challenges and opportunities that membership in the Union presents to them. While the first section of the book examined the strategies that small states employ to succeed in the current institutional settings and in the EU's decision-making process, the second section studied the impact of small states on various common EU policies. Individual contributions focused on policies that are connected to foreign and security policies of the EU – a domain traditionally considered to be dominated by larger states in which small members experience especially a large number of challenges.

### **11.2 Small states in the EU's institutions: How to compensate for numbers**

The first section of the book studied the strategies of small states with regard to key EU institutions, what obstacles they identified and how they tried to overcome them in their quest for influence. The aim was to complement the existing literature, which focuses predominantly on the Council of the European Union and the European Council. In light of the key role of the European Commission and the European Parliament in the policy-making process, and in particular in the areas at the heart of European integration, namely economic and regulatory policies, it is time for a broader perspective. The existing literature has mainly focused on the lower weight of small states in the Council of the European Union, the lesser credibility of the threat of using a veto and the small size of national administrations that limit expertise. However, it has also identified coalition building, prioritization and the adoption of the role of mediator as strategies to gain influence (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006; Panke, 2010). The aim of this section was to discuss to what extent these strategies work across the institutions.

In the second chapter, Hamřík looked at the European Commission, which plays a key role in initiating and monitoring EU policies. In the European Commission size matters somewhat less than in the European Parliament or the European Council: while the nationalities of civil servants do roughly reflect the population size of the individual member states, the Commission is well balanced at the highest level: it currently comprises one Commissioner from every member state. However, this does not mean that every state has equal access to influential portfolios. Högenauer studies small states in the European Parliament, the institution where smallness matters the most due to the degressively proportional representation of member states. Grumbinaite, Etzold and Boykanova study the Council of the European Union and intergovernmental relations in their respective chapters, i.e., an institution where majorities are defined both by the number of states and the percentage of population they represent.

Taken together, these chapters allow us to draw a certain number of conclusions about the strategies of small states and their perception of the challenges that affect the different institutions. In the case of the Commission, Hamřík argues that the main

challenge was first to ward off attempts to reduce the number of Commissioners to the point where not every member state would have a Commissioner in every Commission (i.e. a rotating Commission). The majority of small states opposed this move on grounds that it would undermine the legitimacy of the European Commission and the credibility of the claim that it represents the general interest of the European Union (cf. also Magnette and Nicolaidis, 2003; Böttner, 2018). While Commissioners have to swear an oath not to take instructions from governments (and other actors) and to act in the general interest, equal representation is seen as a way to ensure that the Commission is aware of the differential impact of policies on states. Also, for small states, this allows the Commission to counterbalance the Council of the European Union, where large states are perceived as dominant (Wivel, 2010). A second challenge was to ward off the redesign of the Commission into one where only some Commissioners would have voting powers. While the current Commission *de facto* operates with vice presidents who coordinate other Commissioners, every Commissioner retains their voting rights. Thus, small states have been successful in defending the principle of equal representation.

Size is a far more obvious challenge in the European Parliament, where the smallest member states each hold fewer than 1 per cent of the seats. While this is not unfair, as they also represent only 0.1–0.2 per cent of the population, it is an obvious challenge when it comes to the representation of country-specific interests. Also, while the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have organized themselves into party groups rather than national groups, to this date European elections are still broken down into state-sized elections. The MEPs themselves also express this sentiment in research interviews – that they represent not only the European citizens but also – and especially – their constituency (i.e. country). In addition, to the low weight of these MEPs in plenary votes, it is more difficult for small states to cover all parliamentary committees – and impossible for the smallest states. If we add to this the fact MEPs normally divide into national delegations within party groups – i.e. Luxembourgish MEPs in the EPP, Luxembourgish MEPs in the Greens, etc. – there are often just one to two MEPs and a correspondingly low number of assistants looking at EU policies from this national and party perspective. Interestingly, despite these challenges, there is virtually no literature on small states in the EP.

In the context of the Council, Grumbinaite finds that the small size of national administrations is indeed the biggest challenge for the successful organization of the rotating Council Presidency. Some of the smaller and less affluent member states struggle with the burden of having to coordinate all Council meetings at all levels with their limited staff. Etzold acknowledges the limited individual weight of small states in EU decision-making and looks at coalitions as a way to overcome this challenge. Staying in the context of the Council and European Council, Stefanova examines the Central and Eastern European member states that may feel isolated due to different policy preferences and their size. She also explores the use of the veto by small states as a means to force through their preferences. Going beyond the argument in the literature that a veto threat from small states is less credible, she argues that it could be seen as paradoxical, as – according to shelter theory – small states depend on integration for economic and security benefits.

In terms of strategies for overcoming the challenge of size, small states have used slightly different strategies depending on the institution in question. In the context of the European Commission, for example, Hamřík finds that the main difference in nomination strategies between small and large states is that small states tend to nominate considerably more women than large states – they are in fact twice as likely to propose a female Commissioner. It may not be immediately apparent why this might be a strategic move. However, we would argue that when you consider that the Commission was traditionally almost exclusively composed of men, that the European Parliament then put increasing pressure on the member states to nominate women and on the Commission president to ensure that they are not relegated to the least influential portfolios, small states can be said to have supplied a ‘rare commodity.’ By nominating a woman to the still male-dominated Commission, they increased their chances for a good portfolio compared to a male small state candidate. One only needs to remember the Juncker and Von der Leyen Commissions, where the Commission presidents called on member states to please nominate more women.

Hamřík also found that expertise played less of a role: as all member states traditionally nominate influential figures – usually prime ministers or ministers but at least parliamentarians – there is little room for small states to nominate even more prestigious figures. However, he finds that small states are somewhat more likely to renominate their Commissioners for a second term so that their Commissioners have a greater chance to accumulate experience within the Commission.

In the case of the European Parliament, Högenauer found that the main strategy of MEPs from the two smallest member states – Luxembourg and Malta – was to compensate for size to spread out and cover as much terrain as possible. Thus, each MEP is usually a member and substitute member in several committees, and the aim is to focus on the most important issues in each committee rather than all the issues in one committee. MEPs also often play a very active role in committees where they are only substitute members, e.g., as rapporteurs. At any rate, due to the small number of MEPs, they are under pressure to be able to cover all major issues for the media and in meetings with national stakeholders and the general public. Small-state MEPs are thus pushed towards a less specialized approach. Coalition building was seen as possible but tricky, as other national delegations often had to pursue their own ambitions in terms of posts and even the MEPs from the same country but different parties were divided by government-opposition dynamics.

In the context of the Council Presidency, Grumbinaite found that cooperation was indeed among the strategies that small states used to compensate for limited resources. They benefitted both from the Troika format and from support from the EU institutions with the organization of meetings. Etzold argues that coalitions with like-minded countries are an important instrument for small- and medium-sized European Union member states in order to increase their political weight in EU policy-making in the European Council and Council. Using Korteweg’s (2018) distinction of three types of coalitions within the EU: lead groups, ad hoc coalitions and alliances, Etzold comes to the conclusions that the Nordic and Baltic states do not, in fact, prefer alliances, despite the fact that institutionalized alliances are

praised as the highest form of coalition. Instead, these governments prefer flexible, issue-specific intergovernmental coalitions that are often established ad hoc and that can include other like-minded countries outside their geographical area. Thus, despite the existence of institutionalized groupings like the Benelux, the Nordic Council or the V4, Etzold comes to the conclusion that pragmatic cooperation plays a bigger role in day-to-day policy-making. Stefanova also examines the use of coalitions in conjunction with the use of vetoes in her chapter. However, she questions their effectiveness in the case of certain Central and Eastern European member states.

On the whole, in terms of influence, Hamřík argues that the role of Commission president is reserved almost exclusively to large states. The sole – but notable – exception is the three Luxembourgish presidents. Luxembourg may have benefited in that regard from the fact that it is a founding state and that it is culturally close to both Germany and France, as well as to the Benelux, which may make it a convenient compromise (cf. Harmsen and Högenauer, 2021). However, the representation of small and large states is nowadays balanced at the level of vice presidents, which suggests that small states are by no means marginalized inside the Commission.

In the case of the European Parliament, Högenauer found that the pressure on small-state MEPs to cover several committees may have beneficial side effects in terms of compensating for the disadvantage of the small size of their groups: MEPs from Malta and Luxembourg are disproportionately powerful according to rankings by Eumatrix (2023). One explanation could be the fact that MEPs from these two countries bring a high level of political experience or practical experience with EU affairs to the EP, but it is likely that their presence in several committees also helps them to build a base of supporters within the institution.

In the context of the Council, Grumbinaite deemed the Council Presidencies of small states as successful as those of large states. However, she also concluded that small states focusing on a limited number of key priorities were more likely to be successful than those trying to pursue a wide range of issues. Etzold also came to the conclusion that alliances of small states can be successful, especially when they are flexible and issue oriented and when small states can ally with a larger state. More institutionalized forms of cooperation, by contrast, are seen more as a means to exchange information and build networks than as a tool to increase policy influence. Stefanova's study of the use of vetoes by Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria in conjunction with coalitions comes to a more sceptical conclusion. She finds that in the three cases that she studied (the Multiannual Financial Framework, the accession of North Macedonia and the distribution of migrants), the vetoes failed to secure the interests of the member states that used them. The other member states usually found ways to resolve the vetoes with minor compromises and beyond that started to express a preference for majority voting over consensual decision-making wherever possible. Thus, the vetoes had the counterproductive effect of reducing the opportunities to use vetoes in the long term. In addition, the coalitions of blocking states tended to be fragile and to break apart relatively quickly. Thus, she confirms Etzold's finding that institutionalized alliances are not effective in everyday policy-making: she shows that the specific

preferences of the V4 diverge considerably in practice, despite being generally perceived as Eurosceptic, and this meant that the willingness of governments to support a blocking strategy that held minor benefits for them was limited.

### **11.3 Small states and their ability to shape EU policies**

The second section of the book investigated member states in connection to various EU policies – two connected to security and two linked to foreign policy. This section aimed at extending our knowledge about the role small member states play during the development of common EU policies. These chapters, however, focused on two main policy areas in which small EU member countries experience numerous challenges and are traditionally dominated by large members. The introduction identified two main research questions connected to this section: How do small members influence individual policies? How does the EU respond (or fail to respond) to the needs of small states? Here we first sketch the overall conclusions of individual chapters in this section and then offer answers to these two research questions.

In the first chapter of the section (seventh chapter in the book) Kavvadia studies with the help of historical institutionalism small states' economic diplomacy in the case of Luxembourg. She argues that one of the main reasons behind Luxembourg's wealth has been its ability to develop a successful economic model supported by economic diplomacy that has been promoting its political and economic priorities within the EU. In the eight chapter of the book, Foster and Mosser examined subregional multilateralism in connection to EU foreign policy and the place of small states in it. They argued that big member states were in the past in charge of the external dimension of EU's security policy which they managed within a multilateral framework. Contrary to this, the authors studied the involvement of small EU members in EU foreign policy via participation in 'minilateral' coalitions. They argued that 'minilateralism' helps small member states of the EU to overcome information asymmetries and increase their bargaining power within EU's decision-making process.

In the ninth chapter Dominici, Lewis and Steingass explored small member states' integration dilemma that concerns a trade-off between autonomy (independence) and security cooperation. Cooperation has the potential to significantly improve their security, however, international cooperation (like membership in an international organization) tends to be dominated by big countries with more resources and thus comes at the expense of their autonomy. The authors argued that EU membership attenuates this integration dilemma for small states by enabling them to introduce new initiatives into their existing strategies that help them to persuade the domestic audience about the necessity of these initiatives. However, not all small members experience this dilemma in the same way with geography playing an important role – the ones on the periphery (i.e. on the external borders of the EU) perceive this dilemma much more intensively. The chapter explored these issues on the case of the PESCO initiative and Frontex cooperation within the EU. In the last chapter of this volume, Gao examined the impact of small states on

the development of EU cybersecurity policy on the case of Estonia. This chapter argued – in line with argumentation presented in the previous contribution – that small states play only a marginal role in EU security and defence policy; however, the situation is different in non-traditional security areas, for example, in cybersecurity. Here expertise and knowledge are more important than traditional military resources (like the size of military) that are directly linked to size and physical capacities of a state. The chapter examined how Estonia, a small EU member state, has shaped EU cybersecurity policy. It claimed that the 2007 cyberattack on Estonia was a critical juncture that caused the country to focus on this issue. The expertise and knowledge gained in cybersecurity following this event enabled Estonia to actively pursue and shape this topic at the EU level.

Individual chapters contributed to the answer of the first research question asking how small members influence individual policies. Kavvadia (Chapter 7) argued that Luxembourg has changed its economic model and thus also objectives of its economic diplomacy three times following critical junctures that caused changes in global megatrends. While during the first phase coal and steel – the top priorities at the then ECSC level – were also country's priorities, during the second phase Luxembourg changed its priorities and started to focus on financial sector to align its own priorities at home to the development within the EU. During the third – current – phase Luxembourg has shifted its priorities towards knowledge-based economy (i.e. quaternary economic sector) to be able to influence the latest development within the EU and lead the changes in digitalization and innovation sector. Such ability of the country to change its priorities and build on the previous results enabled Luxembourg to increase its influence within the EU over time. Foster and Mosser (Chapter 8) claimed that small members learned to amplify their voice by joining (or leading) minilateral coalitions. These coalitions are usually informal and they help their members to accumulate social capital and develop reciprocal trust within the group. Minilateral groups can be inactive for a while and be waken up when needed by its members. However, the authors claimed that further research is needed in order to learn whether such coalitions lead to consensus building within decision-making process.

Dominici et al. in the ninth chapter argued in a rather opposite way when they claimed that small member states were in a different position when PESCO and the 2019 Frontex reform were discussed within the EU. These two security initiatives were backed by the big states and therefore small EU members did not have a lot of room for influencing the preparatory process and could – at best – react to the development shaped by big states. Small member states therefore gained only a little in the process, although they still showed the willingness to stay at the table. However, the EU still helped small members to attenuate integration dilemma but not by giving them a stronger role in the decision-making process but by helping them to sell reforms at the EU level to the national audience. While traditional security is, indeed, domain of the big EU member states, Gao argued in the last chapter, small states can have an important say in non-traditional security areas, like cybersecurity. This is caused by the fact that military capabilities, directly connected to the size of a country, are not that important in this area where expertise

and knowledge – achievable almost independently of size – are much more important. Therefore, Estonia, which built these capabilities following the 2007 cyber-attack, was able to shape EU cybersecurity strategy. The chapter argued that the timing was of an essence in this process – Estonia managed to utilize the window of opportunity that the cyberattack presented for the country to play a leading role in EU cybersecurity policy. The experience and expertise gained helped the country to gain a reputation as a forerunner that was utilized during the Estonian presidency of the Council of the EU to build coalitions and act as an honest broker in this area.

When it comes to the second research question of the second section of the book, individual chapters also offered positions on how the EU responds (or fails to respond) to the needs of small states. The overall answer is that small member states are rather active members and they are trying to actively shape the EU and its policies (see the previous discussion on the first research question of this section) so that their national priorities are as close to EU rules as possible and are not waiting for the EU to respond (or not) to their needs. Kavvadia (Chapter 7) claimed that Luxembourg underwent a learning process during which it changed its approach from catching up with other member states in the steel (and coal) sector to a leader in digitalization and innovation sector. The country thus did not rely on EU's help but developed own set of tools – especially economic diplomacy that helped it to shape EU and its policies according to its own preferences. Similarly, Foster and Mosser argued that small states were actively joining minilateral coalitions that helped them to influence the EU and its policies. For example, the Quadro Group (southern members of the EU) managed to keep the migration as the top issue within the Council and its members gained from this cooperation.

In the very last chapter Gao argued that small members can be active and successful member states also in security area; however, they have to focus on non-traditional security issues like cybersecurity. Here small states can utilize tools offered by the EU and its institutions (e.g. rotating presidency of the Council of the EU) to pursue their own goals and preferences at the EU level. However, not all chapters concluded that small EU members are able to be active policy shapers. Dominici et al. argued that when it comes to security policy-making, small states were not able to influence the decision-making process; on contrary, they changed their domestic policy to make it more in line with the EU level. Dominated by big members, security policy update (in form of PESCO and the 2019 Frontex) did not follow needs of small member states, especially those at the external borders of the EU.

## 11.4 Conclusion

To conclude, small states face different challenges in different institutions. They are relatively well represented in the European Commission and have been reasonably successful in obtaining relevant positions. They are in a weaker position in the Council, where they risk being outvoted and where vetoes annoy other states more than they hinder policy-making. And they are in a difficult position in the European Parliament, where the limited number of MEPs does not allow small states to cover



every policy area, but at the same time there is of course pressure to cover more than a handful of issues. In addition, the obtention of certain posts de facto requires MEPs to have the backing of a large national delegation, and small state MEPs would thus need to convince MEPs from other countries to back them rather than their own nationals.

The strategies thus also diverge across institutions, and the conclusions from the literature on the Council do not fit all institutions: prioritization of specific goals is seen to work well for Council Presidencies. Coalition building with other member states can be a very effective tool to increase the political weight of a state, but it only works if the state can find like-minded countries. It works less well when countries try to form static blocks (like the V4) and fail to consider the issue-specific interests of their partners.

In the context of the European Parliament, by contrast, coalition building with other groups is complicated by the ambitions of the members of those groups, and coalition building with MEPs from one's own country but a different party group is hampered by government-opposition dynamics. Thus, it can be useful and successful, but it is difficult to achieve. In addition, prioritization on key issues does not work, as that would result in the coverage of a very narrow range of issues. Instead, small-state MEPs are active in a large number of committees and thus less specialized. However, maybe as a result of this, they are deemed relatively influential within the EP. Having very experienced MEPs also helps them to navigate the complex distribution of posts and tasks.

Finally, while the Commission is a relatively well-balanced institution – at least as far as the College of Commissioners is concerned – getting the most prestigious job of Commission president is virtually impossible for all small states that are not Luxembourg. All other jobs are distributed more evenly. The use of experience/prestige of candidates is difficult as a strategy, as all states tend to send very senior politicians to the Commission. However, small states may have found a niche by proposing more female candidates at a time when they are needed to gender balance the Commission.

The chapters on the EU's foreign and security policies confirm these findings: small states can have influence in EU policy-making and can create situations where their needs are met. They are most likely to succeed when they build foreign policy coalitions, when they anticipate major economic developments and when they manage to acquire a high level of expertise in a policy area. However, the case studies also show that there is a risk of small states becoming policy-takers in cases where they cannot provide leadership in terms of ideas and expertise and/or fail to build political weight through significant coalitions.

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