

# Autonomy or integration? Small-state responses to a changing European security landscape

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## ABSTRACT

In this special issue, we examine whether there is a pattern in how small European states, inside and outside of the European Union (EU), adapt and adjust to EU foreign and security policy. We assess selected European small states' room for manoeuvre within these fields, and within EU institutional structures more broadly, as part of everyday diplomatic interactions in Brussels and in the context of the rotating EU presidency. As the European integration process enters a new phase, possibly marked by a trend of more differentiated integration and flexibility of individual attachments, small states will continue to face the choice between formal autonomy and integration, and between de facto hesitance and adaptability. With Brexit, the remaining large states may become more influential, but small states will collectively have a majority of the votes and total population. Perhaps the coming era of European integration will become the era of small states.

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## Introduction

The international political landscape is changing rapidly – and with it, the shape and the future of the European Union (EU). After 60 years of snowballing horizontal and vertical integration, with member states moving steadily towards “an ever-closer union”, the EU now finds itself at a crossroads. The EU's second largest economy, Britain, is preparing to make its exit. In the shadows of the Brexit debate, the remaining 27 members are searching for effective responses to pressing and long-term challenges, including economic decline, migration, terrorism and a more unstable neighbourhood – east and south of the EU's borders. At the same time, shifting great-power dynamics – a more inward-looking USA, a rising China and a more assertive Russia – are changing the political landscape in which the EU operates.

Today more than ever, European states are faced with the choice between seeking closer adaptation to or greater autonomy from the processes of European integration and the EU institutional structures. The perception of European integration as a stabilizing force for the continent is under pressure: boosted by the British referendum result, critical voices across Europe are calling for a re-transfer of decision-making powers from Brussels to

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national parliaments. They are questioning whether integration has gone too far too quickly, and whether the EU has satisfactory answers to today's complex challenges. Meanwhile, EU leaders and integration-friendly heads of states are making the case for further integration, even if this might eventually lead to "a multi-speed Europe".<sup>1</sup>

We hold that the choice between autonomy and integration vis-à-vis the EU is important for all European states, but perhaps particularly pressing for the smaller ones. While integration has traditionally been perceived as a threat to small states' national identity, their sense of stability and security is at the same time largely dependent on their involvement in the post-Second World War institutional framework with the EU at its core. Now that the EU is under pressure and in process of change, how are various small states responding? Is the general trend that they are taking a step back from the integration process and seeking more (formal) autonomy in policy-making? Or are they rather aligning themselves more closely with EU policy, responding to a more uncertain political environment by becoming more loyal to the integration project? In this special issue, we examine whether there is a pattern in how small European states, inside and outside of the EU, adapt and adjust to EU External Action and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) at a time when established European security structures have come under pressure.

But what is a "small state" in this context? In broad terms, "small states" might be seen simply as a residual category made up of all those states that for some reason do not qualify as "large", yet do not fit the bill as "micro" (Neumann & Gstöhl, 2006, p. 8). Usually, smallness is diagnosed on the basis of material resources, often also in terms of political clout or status, and in combination with a sense of "common perception". A state may be deemed "small" within a given group of states based on its relative territorial size or population, the economic or military resources at its disposal, or the number of votes or seats it holds in given international institutions (Keating, 2015; Panke, 2010). Categorization will often rely on a combination of criteria, and a clear-cut analytical definition does not exist. A state may be small on the global scale, but a leader in regional or sub-regional fora; it may be small in terms of overall military capacity, but a frontrunner as regards development aid – and so on. Moreover, small size does not necessarily correlate with small *power*. In some policy areas, small states may be more "potent" than larger ones as regards playing a role; they may have greater room for manoeuvre because their foreign policy objectives are fewer and more straightforward, and because there is less organizational tension in their decision-making systems (Egeland, 1988). As Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006) rightly observes, there is an important distinction to be made between possession of power and the exercise of influence. At certain times in history and in certain policy areas, small states may well be able to "punch above" their relative weight on the international political arena. In short, depending on the issue at stake, individual small states may have different power repertoires at their disposal (Goddard & Nexon, 2016).

The scholarly literature on small states is empirically rich – but, nearly 60 years after the publication of Fox's pioneering *The power of small states* (1959/2006), it continues to be criticized for the lack of a clear-cut definition. Steinmetz and Wivel (2010) also observe that, in addition to the difficulties in identifying a general analytical definition, there is no shared understanding of how the foreign policies of small states are comparatively more similar, or how small states may influence international relations in similar ways. The lack of cumulative scholarship is also notable (Steinmetz & Wivel, 2010, p. 4).

Against this backdrop, Long (2017) suggests that it is time to do away with the analytical category of “small states” altogether, and concentrate instead on how asymmetric relationships between more and less powerful states are organized and play out in specific settings. Smallness is relational, so what is needed is an analytical framework that can reflect “the dynamics of power differentials among multiple actors” (Long, 2017, p. 146).

In this special issue, we assume a pragmatic middle position: while agreeing that state size must be understood against the backdrop of contextual and social factors, and in relative terms as well as relationally, we find it premature to discard “small states” as an analytical category altogether. We define small states here by combining two criteria: population size and self-representation. First, for the EU member states, population size *is* a factor, it has until recently determined the distribution of votes in the EU Council, and it still determines the distribution of seats in the European Parliament.<sup>2</sup> If we apply a small/large dichotomy, omitting the categories “medium-sized” and “micro” states, we would hold that a distinct line can be drawn between the six largest EU states (France, Germany, Italy, Britain, Spain and Poland) and the remaining member states, both in terms of population size and voting share in the EU institutions. The linkage between population size and voting share is of course less applicable to non-member states; however, we suggest that for outsiders with a similar-sized population as the smaller member states, a parallel linkage can be made between population size and diplomatic resources. For instance, for both Norway and Iceland, their diplomatic mission to the EU is the largest of all their diplomatic missions in the world, yet these missions are considerably smaller than that of a large state such as Russia. Second, we argue that what sets small states apart from large ones is mainly their self-representation as small states and in prolongation, as Katzenstein (2003) suggests, their own stated perception of being vulnerable to changes in their security environment. In everyday political discourse, small states tend to link their security situation and chosen policy path precisely to their relative smallness. Indeed, we would claim that this observation rings true for all the small states examined in this special issue.

When faced with the choice between closer adaptation to the EU or greater (formal) autonomy, smaller European states can be expected to have a more limited bandwidth of policy options available to them than their larger neighbours. While some, such as the three Scandinavian states, may be publicly concerned about their *formal* autonomy, they are likely to be more flexible and pragmatic in their *de facto*, everyday interaction with the EU.<sup>3</sup>

Focusing specifically on the field of EU foreign and security policy, in this issue, we assess the foreign policy choices of eight European small states in relation to the EU in key policy areas under the EU External Action, such as the CFSP and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and sanctions policy. We also examine small states’ room for manoeuvre within EU institutional structures more broadly, as part of everyday diplomatic interactions in Brussels and in the context of the rotating EU presidency. In selecting case studies and in inviting contributors, we have sought to include small states in different parts of Europe, long-term and more recent EU member states, as well as candidate countries and, finally, non-EU members in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). These criteria resulted in a selection of five insiders – Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Sweden – and a selection of outsiders – Iceland, Norway and, as a group, the smaller

candidate countries. While other countries could also have been added in our study, we believe our selection is representative for the assorted group of small states in Europe. The Benelux countries were the three original small member states, and they are all located in central Europe. Sweden, located in Northern Europe, joined in 1995, whereas Slovakia, in Central/Eastern Europe, joined in the thus far largest single expansion of the EU, in 2004. The non-member states discussed here are, firstly, the current candidate countries located in the South East and, secondly, the two EFTA/EEA countries Iceland and Norway, which are closely associated states in Northern Europe.

In the remainder of this introduction, we present our analytical framework, focusing on how the scholarly literature depicts states' balancing acts between institutional autonomy and integration, and the specific challenges facing small states in this respect. We conclude by presenting the individual articles in this issue.

### **Autonomy, integration, interdependence**

The relationship and power balance between the EU institutions and member states stands at the heart of the scholarly literature on European integration. Key questions have concerned how the integration process is driven forward and by whom; who and what shapes the nature and speed of the integration process; and how everyday cooperation unfolds at the EU level. Major theories of European integration – neo-functionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism and neo-institutionalism – all offer specific explanations as to why states end up opting in or out of the EU, seeking to preserve their formal autonomy or pursuing further integration. Neo-functionalists have been criticized for failing to account for the strength of the nation state, and for depicting the integration process as a linear one (Moravcsik, 1993, 1998); liberal intergovernmentalists, for failing to account for differentiated integration by relying “on a preconceived view of how sovereignty is managed” (Adler-Nissen, 2014, p. 37). And institutionalist scholars have argued that the EU level is weak, with unclear decision-making authority, inefficient negotiations and too many diverse interests. According to Scharpf (1994, 1996), this leaves member states with two options: improve the policy-making capacities of the EU to avoid deadlocks and veto-points (positive integration) – or seek to defend or win back some of their own problem-solving capacities (negative integration).

A key question becomes: when will states opt for more (formal) autonomy, for instance by seeking opt outs from EU legislation, and when will they seek more integration? Back in 1970, Albert Hirschman argued that deterioration in the performance of any organization is likely to be met with one of two alternative responses from its members: they will either exit the organization altogether, or find ways to “express their dissatisfaction directly”, whether to the leadership or through a more “general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 4). The choice between these two alternative routes, which Hirschman famously termed the “exit” and the “voice” option, will depend on the members' loyalty to the organization. High loyalty will make exit less likely, and “give more scope to voice”. The decisive point, in Hirschman's view, is whether individual members are “willing to trade off the certainty of exit against the uncertainties of [organizational] improvement”, along with how they assess their own ability to influence the organization (Hirschman, 1970, p. 77). Key contributions to the scholarly literature on the dynamics between the EU and its member states deal precisely

with this choice between exit and voice, and with the question of when organizational loyalty kicks in and where it stops (e.g. Adler-Nissen, 2014; Moravcsik, 1993).

In today's European political architecture, autonomy/integration is not a choice between mutually exclusive options. The growing interdependence among European countries, and the various types of association with the EU, makes it more correct to speak of degrees: of loyalty, of autonomy, of integration. While the concept of autonomy is here understood as a certain (formalized) right to self-government, its operationalization will vary. European integration has led to a decrease in formal autonomy, in EU member states and in closely associated non-member states. However, autonomy is not only a matter of formal rules, rights and obligations: it also includes resources, power repertoires and thus the de facto capacity to act. A general assumption would be that having a broader set of capabilities increases the policy options of the nation state for action within or outside of the EU. Such capabilities can involve the control of strategic territories and resources, economic resources and financial assets, political resources such as status and reputation, as well as administrative resources, knowledge and expertise. "Capacity" also covers organizational capabilities – the ability to sequence and combine different forms of capabilities to achieve specific policy goals (March & Olsen, 1995; Rieker, 2009, 2013). This means that even in areas where a member or an associated non-member has the right to choose an independent policy, the question is if it has the political willingness, resources and capabilities to do so.

By "integration", we mean the degree of interconnectedness, density in contact, shared rules, institutions and resources, as well as the extent of trust and shared values. Integration is not merely the existence of formal legal rules and membership. For instance, in 2012, a government-appointed review report on Norway's agreements with the EU concluded that non-member Norway was as deeply integrated in the EU as many EU member states (NOU, 2012). A "highly integrated" system is one with strong interconnectedness, dense contacts, shared rules, institutions and resources, and some common goals and understandings (March, 2008). It follows that the integration of one unit (e.g. a country or a policy field) with one system (e.g. the EU) implies disintegration with another system, and vice versa. However, it is also possible for one country to have different levels of integration in different policy areas.

As we have shown here, integration and autonomy may mean many different things. This emphasises our point that the integration–autonomy–dilemma is far more complex than just membership–non-membership distinction. As we shall see, this complexity is also particularly important for small states, which are often drawn between, on the one hand, the eagerness to preserve their national identity and avoid being dominated and, on the other hand, the need to seek protection through participation in international networks and institutions.

### **Small states and the balance between autonomy and integration**

The European integration project has always been characterized by the power struggle between those pushing for further integration, and those sceptical of or opposed to transferring national sovereignty to the EU institutions. While all EU members and associated ones must seek to strike a balance between autonomy and integration, research indicates



that small states in general have a stronger preference for international cooperation and the institutionalization of both European and global politics than larger states (see e.g. Ingebritsen, Neumann, Gstöhl, & Beyer, 2006; Thorhallsson, 2000). The idea is that small states are less able to control their own environment, and thus more likely to present it as being in their interest to enter formal alliances and institutional cooperation to reduce uncertainty, ensure predictability and strengthen the international institutions through which they mediate their interests. This is why it is unlikely that we will see an imminent change in the formal status of any of the small states discussed here, in terms of membership or close association – even if for instance the Nordic countries have often been portrayed as “footdraggers” in the integration process.

While all European states must be expected to balance concerns about autonomy and integration in their relations with the EU, our assumption is that small states operate differently from larger ones in this respect. As small states are generally expected to benefit more than large states from the stability, order and opportunities for influence provided by institutional structures, they also tend to be warier about changes in these structures. While a larger EU member state like Britain may believe that it can fall back on its legacy as an imperial power, global player and special ally of the United States, smaller member states are likely to be more cautious. In the current EU-28, six member states have more than half of the votes in the European Council and more than half of the seats in the European Parliament. All six have populations of more than 35 million people. The states we examine in this special issue all have significantly smaller populations, although there is obviously a vast difference between the Netherlands (17 million) on the upper side of the spectrum and Iceland on the lower (300,000). Still, we would claim that what matters most to states’ balancing act between autonomy and adaptation today is, as Katzenstein convincingly argues, their “*perception of vulnerability, economic and otherwise*” (2003, p. 11, emphasis added). This perceived vulnerability must be expected to impact on the foreign policy choices these states make, as well as on their interaction with other states on the international arena more broadly. In political debates, vulnerability is often linked precisely to the issue of smallness. Perhaps small states must be “smart” in order to maximize influence (Arter, 2000; Joenniemi, 1998; Wivel, 2005) – but what does this smartness entail? And how does it impact on the choice between autonomy and integration? According to Joenniemi (1998), a small state may have influence and thus opt for integration if it can have an innovative initiative that gets support in the EU, if it can present itself as an “honest broker” above the clash of competing great powers and if it can engage in a network-building process. However, influence might not be the only driver for integration: reducing uncertainty might be equally important. As the case of Norway has shown repeatedly, real autonomy has proven less important than perceived autonomy (NOU, 2012), and explains why Norway continues to be a highly integrated non-EU member, and one of the fastest EEA states when it comes to complying with EU law despite a prevailing resistance in the majority of the population against formal membership (EFTA Surveillance Authority, 2017).

### **Contributions to this special issue**

As noted, there exists a relatively extensive academic literature on the policy choices and practices of small states, in international relations in general as well as in a European and

EU institutional setting. The articles presented in this issue draw on insights from this literature, as well as on theory-oriented work on how states operate, politically and diplomatically, inside and outside of institutional structures more generally. We set out from the basic working assumption that the balance which small states seek to strike between autonomy and integration varies with time, and across policy fields, issue-areas and institutional settings – in turn necessitating a comparative and sectoral approach. All articles in this issue examine small state autonomy and integration in relation to the EU, across foreign, security and defence issues. While this is an area where the integration process has as yet been less deep than elsewhere, and all states have the possibility of conducting independent policy, it is of interest to investigate the extent to which they actually do so. That may tell us something about the power of the integration process also in areas with less formal rules and regulations. For instance, we are interested in investigating how and to what extent smaller member states (newer and older ones) adapt to policy positions in this area. Since member states' *de facto* willingness and ability to adapt to EU legislation do not necessarily depend on formal membership, we see it as important to also examine how current candidate countries and associated non-members like Iceland and Norway balance their formal independence with adaptation to EU positions and policy on given matters. Our aim is in other words to offer theoretically informed and up-to-date comparative analyses of how small EU insiders *and* outsiders are responding to current developments in the fields of foreign policy, security and defence.

In the first article in this issue, Steven Blockmans examines how three long-term small member states in the EU – the BENELUX countries – have balanced between autonomy and integration in the policy field of CFSP. As small states with a cosmopolitan outlook, these three have arguably had a natural interest in good neighbourly relations and in cooperating with bigger EU members to be able to punch above their individual weights in Europe and globally. But what have been their key areas of strategic, (geo-)political and economic interest, and how have these interests evolved over time? How have these countries sought to influence the structures and procedures for EU External Action? How have they shaped EU foreign and security policies, and in which alliances with other member states? Conversely, how has EU External Action changed the outlook and *modus operandi* of the BENELUX countries? These questions are discussed in Blockmans' contribution.

In the second article, Elsa Hedling and Douglas Brommesson discuss Sweden's approach to a specific part of EU External Action: the Eastern Partnership (EaP). According to Hedling and Brommesson, Sweden's EU entry in 1995 marked a substantial shift in Swedish foreign security policy, and introduced new challenges of post-neutrality to this previously reluctant European nation. Despite initial caution, Sweden has not held back from pursuing a more "activist" foreign policy within the EU. Hedling and Brommesson show how Swedish leadership as regards the EaP can be understood as an opportunity for maximizing influence in an area of high relevance to Sweden's security concerns and domestically a widely supported policy. Sweden's engagement with the EaP can be seen as a critical case of small state balancing between different foreign policy roles under changing security conditions.

The third article takes us eastwards. Jozef Bátora examines how a relatively new small EU member, Slovakia, used its first presidency (2016) to influence the EU's foreign policy agenda. Following the Treaty of Lisbon, the scope and functions of the rotating EU

presidency have changed. The institutional setting includes new responsibilities for the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in chairing the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) as well as for the European External Action Service (EEAS) in chairing most of the Council working groups that prepare the meetings for the FAC. As Vanhoonacker and Pomorska (2013) have found, the EEAS enjoys significant leeway in setting the agenda in these working groups. But what are the scope and possibilities for a small member state holding the EU presidency to influence decision-making in EU foreign policy? Focusing on the Slovak EU presidency, Bátora examines the institutional adaptations in the Slovak foreign affairs apparatus, and the Slovak influence on agenda setting in EU foreign policy under the presidency.

The fourth article, written by Christophe Hillion, brings us to the future EU members, the candidate countries. Apart from Turkey, most of the states in question are small, and as such they could be seen as constituting a specific category of non-EU associated states. As candidates, these countries are expected to adapt their domestic foreign policy to the relevant EU acquis, as a prerequisite for full membership. Indeed, the EU's CFSP has become a more significant element of the accession conditionality since the countries of the Western Balkans started negotiations. While this greater prominence has not automatically meant submissive foreign policy on the part of the candidates, as recently illustrated by Serbia's position towards EU sanctions against Russia, the fact remains: far-reaching adaptation is ultimately required to meet the goal of EU membership. Hillion's chapter compares pre-accession conditions with the main membership obligations deriving from EU law in the area of CFSP, with a view to determining whether candidate states might eventually acquire more autonomy once inside the EU as full members.

The final cluster of articles deals with states that are non-EU members by choice: the two EFTA members, Norway and Iceland. Kristin Haugevik explores how Norway relies on bilateral partnerships with selected EU insiders in order to make its views known in Brussels. While Norway is formally a non-member, it is in many respects as integrated into the EU as many member states – but without a seat at the decision-making table. After Norwegian voters' second rejection of membership in a 1994 referendum, the country's prime minister observed that Norway from now on would have to use "the back door" to reach EU policy-makers. Haugevik argues that successive Oslo governments have used bilateral partnerships as a means of raising awareness in Brussels as to Norwegian views, combining long-term special partnerships with selected EU states with a temporary strengthening of relations with states holding the EU presidency – "rotating bilateralism".

The subsequent article, by Pernille Rieker, examines how Norway relates to EU foreign policy, especially in areas where Norway does not have formal agreements with the EU. Beyond the EEA Agreement, Norway is part of Schengen and has signed agreements with the EU in the area of CSDP. It also tends to sign up to most of the EU's declarations on foreign policy. One area where Norway is not participating is the ENP, leaving Norway free to choose a different approach from the EU in its bilateral relations with these countries. Rieker investigates how Norway handles its "outsidership" when formulating its policies towards the EaP countries that have signed association agreements with the EU (currently Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova). Are there major differences compared to how member states operate – due, for instance, to different



security policy interests? Or does Norway choose to align itself to the policies of the EU also in this area?

In the final article in this collection, Baldur Thorhallsson and Pétur Gunnarsson put the focus on Iceland, and the Icelandic government's considerations about withdrawing support for the US/EU-led sanctions against Russia over Ukraine in 2015. After considerable internal debate, the government decided to uphold the sanctions, but settled on a policy of not taking part in EU declarations about the sanctions. This was an interesting move, given Iceland's traditional positioning between the two current centres of gravity in world politics: the EU and the USA. Thorhallsson and Gunnarsson discuss what this case can tell us about the room for manoeuvre available to Iceland's policy-makers in the formulation and enactment of foreign policy, and Iceland's foreign policy bonds with the USA and the EU.

Collectively, the articles in this issue suggest that small European states contend with their relative smallness on the EU institutional arena in different ways. Some small states, like the Benelux countries, have traditionally been more pro-integration although, as Blockmans notes, Belgium and Luxembourg currently have a more integrationist position than the Netherlands, where Eurosceptic voices have been more visible in recent years. Other European small states, like Norway and Iceland, have opted for formal autonomy over integration, but in practice often align themselves closely with EU foreign policy positions anyway. Unsurprisingly, small states tend to approach political processes selectively, and prioritize those policy areas where they have an obvious interest in contributing or influencing the outcome. For instance, Hedling and Brommesson note how, through its EaP leadership, Sweden has grasped an opportunity to maximize its influence in a prioritized policy area. As the European integration process enters a new phase, possibly marked by a trend of more differentiated integration and flexibility of individual attachments, small states will continue to face the choice between formal autonomy and integration, and between *de facto* hesitance and adaptability. With Britain out of the EU, the remaining large states may become more influential, but small states will collectively have a majority of the votes and total population. Perhaps the coming era of European integration will be the era of small states?

## Notes

1. The EU White Paper on the future of Europe, released ahead of the EU's 60-year anniversary in March 2017, identifies "those who want more do more" as one of five possible future scenarios for the EU (European Commission, 2017).
2. Until 31 March 2017, Germany, Britain, France and Italy had 29 votes each in the Council; Spain and Poland, 27 each. In the European Parliament, Germany has 96 seats, France 75, Italy and Britain 73 each, Spain 54 and Poland 51.
3. In the most recent "Internal market scoreboard" (July 2017), comparing transposition deficits between the 31 European Economic Area (EEA) Member States, Denmark, Norway and Sweden are all in the second half of the scale.

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