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**On small states in the European Union to the Scottish Parliament's European and  
External Relations Committee**

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**Challenges and opportunities for small European states**

A small state can be defined as the weak part in an asymmetric relationship. Power asymmetry may be related to military, economic or other factors and is typically a combination of a number of these.

Traditionally, small states in Europe faced a '*survival-problem*': How do we maximize the chance of survival in an international setting dominated by great power politics and the competition over scarce goods related to territory and natural resources? Today, small states in Europe face an '*influence problem*': how do we maximize influence in an international setting, which is Europeanized, globalized and institutionalized and where political, cultural, diplomatic and technical expertise are increasingly important for success?

In tackling this problem, small states face a dilemma between autonomy and influence: They seek to enhance predictability and influence through institutionalization but at the same time institutionalization typically reduces political autonomy. European integration aggravates this dilemma by increasing the potential cost and benefits of institutionalisation. Costs and benefits tend to increase as the process becomes still more binding and encompasses ever more issue areas. A state facing this 'integration dilemma' either surrenders autonomy and risks entrapment in a process leading to still more dependency or preserves autonomy and thereby runs the risk of abandonment, i.e. forgoing the chance of influence over other states and other gains stemming from integration. All member states experience an integration dilemma, but the integration dilemma of small member states is more severe than that of the bigger members. If big member states perceive new initiatives as contradictory to their national interest they may successfully halt or even jeopardise the integration process or parts of it by obstructing it or refusing to take part.

**Small state strategies in the European Union**

Small states are rarely in a position to pursue strategies based on dominance.

Traditional small state strategies include:

- *Hiding*: staying out of trouble by staying out of sight (neutrality, non-alignment)
- *Binding*: preventing trouble from occurring by creating and strengthening the governance of international affairs by international rules and institutions (EU)

- *Seeking shelter*: protection against financial turmoil, security threats (NATO, EU)

These strategies are not obsolete, but they have lost importance as a consequence of:

- Globalization
- Institutionalization
- Europeanization

Therefore, if small states are to maximize their influence, they will benefit from learning from the strategic experience of small states in the European Union, where states have decades of experience from tackling the challenges from the kind of sovereignty-challenging close cooperation, which is now increasingly the order of the day in international affairs in multiple settings in Europe and elsewhere. These experiences are sometimes summarized as a so-called 'smart state strategy'. A smart state strategy has three fundamental aspects:

- 1) *The first aspect concerns the political substance of the strategy.* The political substance of the strategy must present (part of) the solution to a problem recognised by all or most of the relevant political actors. Small member states do not have sufficient resources and political clout to pursue a political agenda, which is radically different from the major actors let alone in opposition to them. Thus, political initiatives from small states should avoid being in conflict with existing initiatives of the organization in question or political proposals from agenda-setting great powers. Ideally, they should be presented as specific contributions to a general development, not as a change of policy or an attempt to slow it down.
- 2) *The second aspect concerns the form of the strategy.* Small states do not have sufficient resources to pursue a broad political agenda with many different goals. Therefore, they must focus their resources and signal their willingness to negotiate and compromise on issues that are not deemed to be of vital importance. Small states need to choose issues, where influence is a real possibility, and for them this most often means sticking to 'low politics', i.e. economic, cultural and climate issues, rather than high politics, i.e. military security.
- 3) *The third aspect concerns the role of the small state itself.* In order to maximise its own influence the small state must aim to position itself as an 'honest broker' acting independently of any of the big EU member states' interests. Thus, the small state needs to work within the dominant discourse of the Union and at the same time avoid being identified too closely with any particular actor's interests. In addition, for the small state to succeed as an honest broker it needs to allocate sufficient resources to play an active role on the European stage and to focus on issues where it has a comparative advantage, i.e. particular technical or administrative capabilities. Also, initiatives need to be focused on the long-term and well prepared.

Weakness facilitates a role as an honest broker focused on compromise. Whereas big EU member states have interests in most policy areas and are generally expected to take advantage of their powerful positions to advance their own national interests, small states are sometimes seen as more efficient as mediators, because they are too weak to pursue their own interests without taking into account the position of others. Thus, using a smart state strategy, small states may use their lack of power to gain influence over selected issues, because it enables them to be viewed by competing great powers as 'honest brokers' able to promote the general interest of the Union.

In essence, *traditional small state strategies accept the weakness of small states as the point of departure for strategies aiming at 'damage control'*, i.e. limiting the negative consequences of the lack of traditional power resources either by preserving autonomy (through hiding) or limiting the actions of the great powers (through binding).

*In contrast, a smart state strategy uses the weakness of small states as a resource for influence.* The weakness of small states means that they are not viewed as rivals by the great powers and therefore might be allowed more freedom of action when launching policy initiatives, building coalitions and acting as mediators.

Opportunities for pursuing smart strategies are likely to vary with domestic scope conditions as well as the institutional characteristics of the external environment:

- *Formal institutions and rules* (membership, votes, procedures)
- *Norms* (political consensus or fragmentation/conflict, great power 'concerts'/cooperation)
- *Stakeholders* (states, organizations, companies)

Depending on these factors a smart state strategy may combine lobbying, mediation and norm-entrepreneurship:

#### *The state as a lobbyist*

Just as corporate actors can utilize their expert knowledge, so can states. States may utilize their knowledge of a specific issue area or domestic interest groups and public opinion. Lobbyists potentially hold three types of knowledge, which they can use to obtain access to international institutions in the decision-making process: expert knowledge, knowledge of the encompassing organizational interest, and knowledge of the encompassing domestic interest. Different resources will be in demand in different institutional settings. If expert knowledge is to be translated into influence, it must be delivered at the right time. A proposal becomes increasingly difficult to change once drafted. Expert knowledge must therefore be combined with knowledge of the organizational agenda and timing.

#### *The state as self-interested mediator*

Paradoxically, small states may use their lack of power to gain influence over selected issues as competing great powers are likely to view them as 'honest brokers', able to promote the general interest of the organization. Small states are unable to go-it-alone on most issues and equally incapable of coercing other member states into accepting some

policy options rather than others. Thus, negotiations in order to establish consensus are most often the best bet for small states pursuing their national interests.

*The state as norm entrepreneur*

Norm entrepreneurs successfully convince others of their own normative convictions, thereby creating an ideational basis for changing the institutional environment and/or specific policies. Promoting norms does not necessitate the 'hard' power resources of great powers (a high GDP or military strength). This strategy offers a particular means with which to gain influence by singling out specific policy areas or issues. Small states can achieve this by using two measures: by playing into dominant discourses and by becoming the benchmark in particular policy areas. In practice, small states must identify the most important actors within each policy area and the distance between their own norms and the norms advocated by the agenda-setter(s). Those able to do so may successfully promote their own interests and values within these broader discourses. A small state may also pursue norm entrepreneurship through benchmarking. Being a norm entrepreneur involves identifying the 'right' or 'desirable' behaviour.

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**This written statement is based on:**

Lee Miles and Anders Wivel (eds) (2014) *Denmark and the European Union*, London: Routledge.

Caroline Grøn and Anders Wivel (2011) 'Maximizing Influence in the European Union after the Lisbon Treaty: From Small State Policy to Smart State Strategy', *Journal of European Integration* 33(5): 523-539.

Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel (eds) (2010) *Small States in Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Anders Wivel (2005) 'The Security Challenge of Small EU Member States: Interests, Identity and the Development of the EU as a Security Actor', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 43(2): 393-412.