
Small States in Europe and the Changing International Order

The present international system has been vulnerable since 24 February 2022 and is currently experiencing a transformation as countries scramble to adapt to the new environment that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought into being. The origins of this transformation go back to the immediate post-Cold War period, in which smaller European states tried to further their national interests by pursuing two strategies: national autonomy through a policy of neutrality or seeking to exercise a degree of influence by joining alliances and coalitions. Some of these states are already influential in various settings, while others remain fragile and feel threatened in various ways after the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

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In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine various security questions arose for the smaller European states, but with particular urgency among those that are dependent on or situated in close geographical proximity to Russia. Amid the great power competition for "spheres of influence", small states are often pawns and the possibility of being attacked is very real. For example, specifically the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – fear being invaded due to their proximity to Russia, even though they are all NATO members.

The ongoing war in Ukraine matters for small states, and the likelihood of their finding themselves in the same position as Ukraine has become a threat that they have to consider. For many small states this means reverting to "[defensive strategies rather than seeking to shape international agendas](#)". Small states see the war as the manifestation of Russia's attempt to return to the politics of great power "spheres of influence" that the post-Cold War international order was supposed to have thrown off forever. Within the spheres of influence, the autonomy of small states that fall within the orbits of great powers will be drastically reduced, although an alternative could be that smaller states will "[produce the dynamic leading to more neutrality as a counter-reaction to the new great power rivalry](#)". Essentially, that growing rivalry is

increasingly becoming the new reality that small states will have to confront and adapt to as best they can.

As a result of the new world order that is rapidly developing – one that is basically not advantageous to smaller states – this In Focus contribution explores one central question: *how do small states in Europe make strategic adjustments to increase their visibility and their room for manoeuvre amid this transformation?*

Smaller European states can be grouped in two ways: (1) member states of the European Union (EU), and (2) states at different stages of applying to join the EU.

Smaller states in the EU

It cannot be said that smaller states within the EU align automatically with the EU's foreign policy. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 some states such as Malta, Austria, Ireland, Finland and Sweden followed different forms of neutrality and military non-alignment both domestically and internationally. The Russian invasion elicited different responses from these states according to what they saw as their national interests. Finland and Sweden pursued NATO membership to resolve the complexity of their relations with Russia. But while Austria, Malta and Ireland supported EU

sanctions against Russia, they did not apply to join NATO and retained the position of strict military neutrality that they had adopted prior to the Russian invasion. Dissimilar to the case of the two Nordic states, in the Austrian case the choice not to seek NATO membership either before or after February 2022 stemmed from the country's geographical proximity to Russia and the perceived threat from that source. Generally it can be said that Austria's policy of neutrality keeps Austrians safely within their "comfort zone".

Smaller states outside the EU

The second category of small European includes those aspiring to join the EU. Western Balkan countries such as Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Serbia have different relations with the EU, and most of them are also members of NATO (except Kosovo, Serbia, and BiH). Serbia is the only country in the Western Balkan that follows military neutrality, it continues to have closer cooperation with Russia and, together with BiH, did not join the EU sanctions regime imposed after the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The other Western Balkan countries support EU sanctions against Russia.

We can also add Switzerland, Ukraine and Moldova to this category. Moldova, which proclaims itself to be neutral, does not have full control of its territory, and Russian troops are stationed in the breakaway region of Transnistria, which Moldova claims to be part of its territory. Its policy of neutrality is precarious. Switzerland joined EU sanctions against Russia, but also remains strictly militarily neutral. Nonetheless, within the Partnership for Peace, it seeks to extend its relations with NATO. Ukraine is currently seeking membership of both NATO and the EU, but both applications are unlikely to succeed if it fails to reach a peace agreement with Russia.

Which place for smaller states?

The post-Cold War international order has been seen as allowing smaller states to shape their own destinies and influence world politics. They have built an influential role through their ability to wield "normative power" by promoting ideational rather than material aspects of the international order. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has altered the security

architecture in Europe and, in general, has affected the whole international system by putting into question critical principles such as sovereignty. It has also created a fragile and vulnerable context in which especially the smaller states outside the EU and NATO orbit have to find their way.

Nonetheless, even with various constraints they face, it can be said that smaller states both within and outside the EU are fairly well positioned to shape and influence their own agendas. EU and NATO member states are protected by their membership of these two powerful bodies, in whose deliberations and decision-making they can actively participate. Equally, neutral states such as Austria and Switzerland can continue to promote their traditional foreign policy approaches such as mediation, conflict prevention, and the hosting of international conferences, and thus promote the resolution of conflicts and shape the agenda for a peaceful international order. They can thus continue to function according to their narrow definitions of legal neutrality by not joining military alliances.

Conclusion

The European security architecture has changed dramatically in the last few years since the end of the Cold War. Smaller states are constantly trying to adapt and find space to continue to be relevant and independent by promoting ideational factors as one of the most developed elements of their respective foreign policies. Recently, however, they have focused on increasing their spending on modernising their military forces. The logic of fear that pushes them to do so is felt more in countries that border Russia, such as the Baltic states and Moldova. While the former have greater security from their NATO membership, Moldova has continuously been exposed to a possible invasion from Russia. Additionally, the eruption of wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the continuation of fragility in this region, and the ongoing war at the gates of the EU create a very fragile and unfavourable environment for the security of smaller states in the Balkans region in particular.