

Concluding Remarks: Achievements, Challenges, and Opportunities of Small State Research

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1 On the development of small state research

Despite the proliferation of many empirical studies on small states in the last two decades or so, as a group of cases small states clearly remain under-researched (Veenendaal and Corbett 2014). There are various reasons underpinning small states' marginal position in comparative political science research, among which their limited role in world politics, the fact that they are often not considered to be "real" states, and the lack of (quantitative) data. This latter barrier entails that the smallest countries in the world are often not included in allegedly global analyses of democracy and democratization, such as Arend Lijphart's *Patterns of Democracy* (1999), Samuel Huntington's *The Third Wave* (1991), and Tatu Vanhanen's *Prospects of Democracy* (1997). Furthermore, the lack of data also results in the exclusion of small states from aggregated indices of democracy, and at the moment the *Freedom House* dataset (2014) is the only index that also incorporates the smallest UN member states in the world. As a result, large-N comparative studies that include small states almost always (and necessarily) rely exclusively on *Freedom House* data. The lack of possibilities for triangulation with other indices creates a risk insofar as any distortions or errors in the *Freedom House* dataset are tolerated by researchers, potentially resulting in erroneous conclusions and research findings.¹

Contemporary studies on small states can broadly be divided into three categories. In the first place, largely fueled by the decolonization of many small island nations in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, especially in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s many theoretical publications emerged on politics, economics, and international relations of small states, primarily using a developmental perspective (Benedict 1967; Bertram and Watters 1985; Clarke and Payne 1987; Dommen and Hein 1985; East 1973; Harden 1985). Although most of these studies highlighted the vulnerability and fragility of small states, others (Dahl and Tufte 1973; Katzenstein 1985) also listed a number of potential advantages of smallness. In

¹ See e.g. Wolf (2015), who shows that the assessment of Freedom House regarding the democratic quality of Liechtenstein's political system is not convincing, and does not even live up to the methodological standards of the organization.

subsequent decades, it actually appeared that most of the (pessimistic) theoretical presumptions about small states did not materialize empirically, as many small countries actually turned out to outperform larger ones with respect to economic development, international security, and democratic performance. Purely theoretical studies on small states are less common nowadays, perhaps due to the improved opportunities for empirical research. In the second place, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s a quite sizable number of quantitative studies on small states emerged, in which the statistical correlation between a small population size and highly democratic scores in the *Freedom House* index was emphasized in particular (Anckar 2002; Congdon Fors 2014; Diamond and Tsalik 1999; Ott 2000; Srebrnik 2004). Whereas such studies correctly draw attention to the fact that small states around the world are strongly inclined to have democratic political systems, in the absence of research or information about the practical, everyday functioning of small state political systems, they generally struggle to find explanations for this pattern. While a multitude of variables have been listed as potential causes for successful democratic development in small states, ranging from the effects of colonial history to the more sociological consequences of smallness (cf. Geser 1991, 1993), due to the lack of other data on small states these hypotheses are often not empirically tested.

In the third place, many small states have been analyzed as case studies, or as part of a regional (area studies) research orientation. World regions like the Caribbean, Europe, and the Pacific contain many small (island) states, and this allows researchers to analyze the small states in these regions as part of regionally comparative investigations (cf. Eccardt 2005; Emmanuel 1983; Ghai 1988; Hoffmann, in this volume; Larmour 1994; Levine 2009; Peters 1992; Ryan 1999). Although such studies for obvious reasons contain detailed and highly informative perspectives on politics and democracy in the small states under investigation, the absence of comparisons with small states in other world regions entails that the political patterns and dynamics observed are often (and usually) treated as idiosyncrasies of the region or case(s) under scrutiny. If for instance a regional study of politics in Caribbean island nations results in the observation of many common phenomena across cases, such commonalities are probably interpreted as typical Caribbean political features, and not as factors that might relate to the small size of these cases.

2 Some insights of this book regarding small states

In the introductory chapter of this volume, several theoretical assumptions regarding law and politics in small states were outlined. Do the findings of this book support or contradict these presumptions? As to the polity dimension, small state theory assumes that small countries are likely to outsource the production of costly public goods and organizations, but tend to accept diseconomies of scale with regard to the core institutions of their political systems (Gantner and Eibl 1999, p. 80). Liechtenstein's membership in the European Economic Area (EEA) discussed by Frommelt (in this volume) led to a significant increase in administrative staff, but most key actors of the microstate believe that the advantages of the EEA membership far outweigh the disadvantages. Förster (in this volume) shows that Bahrain and Qatar, two autocratic and rich small states, generally do not care much about diseconomies of scale and deliberately maintain oversized administrative institutions. According to another assumption, small states are prone to adopt or copy institutions of larger countries (Wolf 2013, p. 19). Hoffmann (in this volume) points out that the political systems of the small Caribbean island states are significantly shaped by their respective colonial heritage. In similar fashion, Malta's parliamentary system is also influenced by its colonial past (Niikawa and Corcaci, in this volume).

Small state theory asserts that small countries are likely to preserve unusual and deviant institutions which are important for their national identity (Geser 1992, p. 635). Büsser (in this volume) shows that it is commonly accepted in Liechtenstein that the Prince occasionally shapes public debates. The chapter by Niikawa and Corcaci (in this volume) implies that the virtually permanent grand coalition in Liechtenstein is a rare phenomenon even among very small states. Schiess Rütimann (in this volume) critically analyzes the unusual substitute rules for the Prince, government, and members of parliament in Liechtenstein, which have a rather undisputed tradition. Dregger (in this volume) describes and explains remarkable rules and singular institutions in the constitutions of three North American small states in the 17th and 18th century. Veenendaal (in this volume) argues, inter alia, that monarchical structures may be beneficial for the political identity of small countries. Förster (in this volume) stresses that patterns of traditional governance are important for the legitimacy and stability of the undemocratic small states Bahrain and Qatar.

As to the politics dimension, small state theory assumes that "smaller democracies provide more opportunity for citizens to participate effectively in decisions" (Dahl and Tufte 1973, p. 13). The unique substitute rules for ministers and members of parliament in Liechtenstein

enable a considerable number of people to occasionally participate in high-level political decision-making (Schiess Rütimann, in this volume). Daase (in this volume) shows that the political elites of new de facto small states in Eastern Europe instrumentalize elements of direct democracy for their purposes. According to another assumption, voluntary or part-time positions are typical even for several key positions in small states (Waschkuhn 1990, p. 140). In this regard, Bussjäger (in this volume) describes the crucial role of part-time constitutional judges in Liechtenstein. Schiess Rütimann (in this volume) explains how the government and parliament of the principality creatively cope with limited human resources.

Geser (1991, p. 118) and other small state theorists have argued that small countries tend to consensual politics. Frommelt (in this volume) highlights the strong elite consensus regarding Liechtenstein's EEA membership. Wolf (in this volume) shows that while the government of Liechtenstein generally dominates politics in the Alpine microstate, decision-making in the principality's parliament is mainly consensual. However, we may conclude from the case study on Malta by Niikawa and Corcaci (in this volume) that a strong confrontative political culture and/or a competitive parliamentary system inherited from the colonial past may prevail over the tendency of small states to consensual politics. Förster (in this volume) points out that consensus among the monarchical family or ruling elite is crucial for government stability in Bahrain and Qatar.

As to the policy dimension, an assumption exists that small states are likely to outsource the production of certain public goods (Gantner and Eibl 1999). The new de facto small states in Eastern Europe analyzed by Daase (in this volume) strongly depend on financial, political, military, and other resources provided by the Russian Federation, the most powerful country in the region. Förster (in this volume) describes how certain functions, jobs and positions are "internally outsourced" to foreigners in Bahrain and Qatar. Furthermore, small state theory assumes that small countries are prone to be "policy-takers" that adopt many foreign legal norms (Wolf 2013, p. 24). Frommelt (in this volume) explains that Liechtenstein has to implement many EU legal acts because of its EEA membership, a process that significantly impacts on the microstate's legal system. Bussjäger (in this volume) shows that Liechtenstein's constitutional law and in particular the judgments of the principality's constitutional court are strongly influenced by Austrian and Swiss norms, courts, and judges. According to Geser (1992, p. 652) and other small state researchers, small countries mostly benefit from the growing importance of international law and intergovernmental institutions. Against this background, Hoffmann (in this volume) states that the growing number of international organizations enables many small Caribbean island states to pick and choose, i.e.

to deliberately pursue separate foreign and trade policies. Due to the European integration process, Liechtenstein managed to somewhat emancipate itself from its dependence on Switzerland. Via its EEA membership, the principality now pursues more autonomous economic and foreign policies (see Frommelt, in this volume).

3 Challenges, opportunities and avenues for further research

Whereas each of the approaches to the analysis of small states mentioned in section 1 contains both opportunities and drawbacks, it appears that much can be gained from integrating these strands of research. Most significantly, this could be the case if large-N quantitative studies complement their findings with observations made in the impressive area studies literature. Particularly in small states, where higher levels of social intimacy exist and politics is likely to be more personal and informal, a discrepancy may exist between the reality on paper and the reality on the ground, thereby highlighting the importance of also incorporating views on the practical functioning of politics in these settings. This remark applies perhaps most clearly to constitutional and legal studies. While small states often adopt legal regulations of larger neighboring states (cf. Bussjäger, in this volume), the smallness entails that the practical functioning of such rules may be markedly different, and that regulations are often adapted to better suit the small-scale context. Such discrepancies can only be captured by adopting an approach that combines formal and informal perspectives. Indeed, in cases in which a lack of data basically obstructs empirical investigation, much might be gained from adopting an interpretive approach in which attention is paid to the perspectives of political elites and citizens, for example on the basis of elite interviews (Corbett 2013).

As cases for comparative investigation, small states have a myriad of benefits for political scientists. The dearth of academic publications on these countries entails a greater likelihood of original, innovative, or unanticipated findings. Furthermore, the lack of attention means that external researchers are often warmly welcomed, and that research findings are likely to have a greater societal impact in the small state(s) under investigation. For political scientists, the small dimensions and the greater social intimacy often mean that even the most high-ranking politicians and officials can be approached for interviews. Finally, although small states themselves are often dismissed as insignificant, analyses of small state politics can have essential implications for other, broader academic debates. To name but one example, the political experience of small states is evidently of paramount importance to larger states that

are currently embarking on processes of decentralization and devolution, and the creation of smaller administrative units (Diamond and Tsalik 1999; Veenendaal and Corbett 2014). Although many small states do not have vibrant academic communities or high-ranking universities, it would be very unwise for small state researchers to ignore the representatives of local knowledge. Not only would this be impolite, it also means that much valuable local information and knowledge is lost, resulting in incomplete analyses. Perhaps more than in larger states, the lack of scholarly attention for small states means that there often exists a yearning for more cooperation with external researchers, and access to their scholarly communities and networks. In this regard, a particular difficulty is that many non-anglophone small states (like the European microstates or the African Lusophone island nations of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe) have often been analyzed extensively by local researchers, who publish about them in their own languages. Since publications written in Catalan, German, Italian, and Portuguese are often simply not noticed or inaccessible to Anglophone researchers, they risk to be overlooked.² It is very important that this language gap, which often results in the proliferation of separated academic communities, is bridged by initiatives from both sides. Increased academic cooperation between local and external researchers would be an excellent way to achieve this.³

As the average size of states around the world continues to decline (cf. Daase, in this volume; Lake and O'Mahony 2004), research on small states remains strongly relevant, and is likely to become even more relevant in the future. In the international arena, small states are assuming a more and more prominent role, either on their own or in the form of concerted efforts. Organizations like CARICOM, the ACP Group, and AOSIS (cf. Hoffmann, in this volume),⁴ in which small states constitute a majority of members, play a key role in international debates on climate change, global trade, and international development. Although most small states are vulnerable and often in multiple ways dependent on larger countries, as full-fledged members of the international system as well as a myriad of international organizations, they

² For example, two of the most important German-speaking small state researchers of the 1990s are hardly noticed by internationally-oriented small state authors, probably because they mostly published in German: Hans Geser, who extensively published on socio-political aspects of small states (Geser 1992) and sociological small state theory (Geser 1991, 1993), as well as Arno Waschkuhn, who worked on politics in small states (Waschkuhn 1990) and wrote the most comprehensive book on the political system of Liechtenstein (Waschkuhn 1994).

³ This bilingual and interdisciplinary volume can be seen as such a project of academic cooperation. For another recent initiative to bridge lingual and methodological divides in small state research, see the complementary contributions on the monarchy in Liechtenstein by Veenendaal (2015) and Wolf (2015) in the Swiss Political Science Review.

⁴ CARICOM = Caribbean Community, ACP Group = African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, and AOSIS = Alliance Of Small Island States.

deserve the attention of international relations scholars. From a comparative perspective, while the political systems of small states may be diminutive in comparison to those of larger states, many small states contain political institutions that are unique and cannot be observed elsewhere (Geser 1992, p. 635). In comparative politics, each case, no matter how small, can yield new analytical insights or innovative research findings. As understudied cases, this rule of thumb is particularly accurate for the many small states in the world today.

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