

Small states in the region: from intuitive towards smart diplomacy

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SMALL STATES IN THE REGION: FROM INTUITIVE TOWARDS “SMART” DIPLOMACY

Vesko Garčević

Small States – “Lump of Weakness”?

From a legal point of view all sovereign states, great or small, are equal before the law. From a political stance however, they are far from being equal. The Berlin Congress (June-July 1878) is seen as one of the great milestones in Montenegrin state history. By revising the Treaty of San Stefano (March 1878), the big powers of Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Russia and the Ottoman Empire granted independence to Montenegro, Serbia and Romania. The Principality of Montenegro sent two representatives to Berlin, but they were not able to participate in the event.¹ The Congress reconfirmed that neither Montenegro, nor any other Balkan state at the time, could independently decide its future. Many changes that were introduced in Berlin were imposed on the regional actors.² The attitude of the great powers towards Montenegro, as one of the winning states in World War I, was also manifested during the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919. France opposed the invitation to the Montenegrin delegation and argued for recognition of the Podgorica Assembly.³

Deliberations in close circles among big powers have been a regular occurrence in global affairs. The composition of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the vested rights of the permanent members reinforces that stance. Isn't the history of international politics therefore the history of great powers? Following the same logic, one may conclude that “the strong would do as they could, and the weak would suffer what they must” (*Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War*).

Small states are often defined as a “lump of weakness,” which does not recognize their ability to exercise power, even if limited to specific issues, geographies, or relationships.

In the months preceding the referendum for inde-

1 Zivko Andrijasevic: *Montenegrin History*, Pobjeda, 2006.

2 Ibid I.

3 Ibid I.



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pendence in 2006, practitioners (particularly representatives of EU member states) and scholars alike, held the position that Montenegrin independence would not be an economically and politically viable project. This opinion comes from the deeply instilled view that equates smallness with weakness. It is common to believe that small states are vulnerable because of 1) their limited territory, natural and human resources; 2) their modest administrative capacity (the management of the state's policy operations and the stability of its decision-making); 3) and their high economic vulnerability. However, the lack of administrative cohesion and social stability that provide the conditions for long-term stable economic growth is not a function of size.⁴ How have things changed since the time of congress diplomacy was a dominant feature of European diplomacy in the 19th century?

Multilateralism Paved the Way for Small States – Our Region Made Some Success

With the creation of global or regional international organizations (IOs), small states have been empowered more than ever. The small and middle powers⁵ leaders realize that although they

4 Vaughan A. Lewis: *Studying Small States over the Twentieth into the Twenty-first Centuries; The Diplomacy of Small States: Between Vulnerability and Resilience* (Foreword); Palgrave Macmillan 2009, 2013.

5 Carsten Holbraad: *Middle Power in International Politics*, Palgrave Mcmillan, UK 1984.

may be able to do little together, they can do virtually nothing separately.⁶ Robert Rothstein therefore contends that “the status and prestige of small powers has risen, while their relative strength in the traditional elements of power has actually declined”.⁷

Liechtenstein, San Marino and Monaco can be used as examples. In 1920, Liechtenstein’s application for membership in the League of Nations was rejected because it had “chosen to depute to others some of the attributes of sovereignty” and had no army.⁸ Decades later, in 1990, Liechtenstein became the smallest UN Member, when there was a turn towards acceptance of micro-state claims to equal sovereignty within international society.⁹ San Marino joined the global organization in 1992, and Monaco followed in 1993.

A majority of states in today’s world are small states. More than 100 out of 193 UN members are small nations. Participation in the work of IOs may increase the administrative competence of smaller states. They can rely on the institutional knowledge of IOs, their expertise, information sharing and regulatory, normative mechanisms. The secretariats of IOs not only provide practical benefits to small states in the form of information, they can also serve as an avenue of influence.¹⁰

From 1991 to 2010, 25 states with a population of less than 5 million were elected to the UN Se-

curity Council (UNSC),¹¹ Bosnia and Herzegovina being one of them. It was also a non-permanent member of the UN in 2010 and 2011, a role that Albania is currently serving.¹² But, it was St. Vincent and Grenadines that broke the record as the smallest nation ever in UN history to be elected as a UNSC non-permanent member.¹³

More prominent roles for small states should not be limited only to the UN system, as regional organizations offer more opportunities to small states to occupy a leading role. The Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) is currently held by Slovenia. Likewise, the chairmanship of the Arctic Council is in the hands of Iceland, while Montenegro assumed the Presidency of the Central European Initiative in January 2021.

When Albania took over chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) during a challenging 2020, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama remarked that this role highlighted Albania’s significant transformation from a communist regime, which opposed the Helsinki spirit to a country that leads the same organization.¹⁴

These examples prove that small states, including countries from the region, can successfully coordinate complex systems such as the EU or the OSCE.

New multilateralism is a great opportunity for less powerful actors. In more restrictive environments, they have fewer foreign policy options and less successful outcomes. Such states aspire to join IOs in order to receive official approval and international recognition of their independ-

KEY TAKEAWAY

Small states, including those in the region of Southeast Europe, can successfully collaborate with complex systems such as the EU or the OSCE. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania were/are non-permanent members of the UN Security Council. Montenegro’s diplomatic achievements since its independence have exceeded expectations, yet their success is often the result of intuitive rather than well-planned diplomatic activities. Multilateralism opens avenues for small states in the global arena, which in order to play a relatively significant role, must develop “clever” diplomacy distinct from either “big” diplomacy with a heavy infrastructure, or “small” diplomacy, which may not have much of an infrastructure at all.

6 Robert O. Keohane: *Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics*, *International Organization*, 1969, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring, 1969), pp. 291–310; University of Wisconsin Press, MIT Press and Cambridge University Press.

7 Rothstein, Robert L.: *Alliances and Small Powers*, New York/London: Columbia University Press, 1968.

8 Michael M. Gunter: *Liechtenstein and the League of Nations: A Precedent for the UN’s Ministate Problem?*, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (Jul., 1974), pp. 496–501.

9 Los Angeles Times: *Principality of Liechtenstein becomes 160th, and the smallest, member of UN*, September 20, 1990.

10 Paul Novosad and Eric Werker: *Who runs the international system? Nationality and leadership in the United Nations Secretariat*, *The Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2019.

11 Baldur Thorhallsson: *Small States in the UN Security Council: Means of Influence?*, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 7, pp. 135–160, (2012).

12 The Dag Hammarskjöld Library, *Security Council Membership*, <https://research.un.org/en/unmembers/scmembers>.

13 *St. Vincent and the Grenadines breaks a record, as smallest ever Security Council seat holder*, UN News, June 7, 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1040071>.

14 OSCE Chairmanship, OSCE Main Page, January 1, 2020, <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/443215>.

ence and sovereignty.¹⁵ IOs and consensus based organizations like NATO or the OSCE in particular, appeal to small countries for at least three main reasons: 1) their formal equality; 2) the potential security of membership; and 3) the possible capacity of the organizations to restrain Great Powers.¹⁶

Greece's veto on North Macedonia's NATO membership at the NATO Summit in Bucharest 2008, despite US support of Macedonia, shows how a consensus-based organization (NATO in this case) can empower a relatively small nation.

Towards "Clever" Diplomacy

Multilateralism opens avenues for Lilliputians in the global arena, but to be able to play a relatively significant role, small states must develop "clever" diplomacy as distinct from either "big" diplomacy, with a heavy infrastructure, or "small" diplomacy, which may not have much infrastructure at all.¹⁷ Although small states are unable to field a large and diverse diplomatic force, which limits the skills and human resources that can be put into forming foreign policies and taking part in negotiations,¹⁸ they should nurture a functional and "focused" diplomacy. They should be ready to embrace a creative approach while avoiding the politicization of its diplomatic service. As we can learn from the regional experience, the politicization of diplomacy makes it dysfunctional, undermining its capacity to carry out complex diplomatic activities.

In practical terms, small countries from the region may consider the creation of "virtual/digital embassies" with "roving diplomats" that occasionally travel to states in which they "are posted". This may include outsourcing some activities to foreign or domestic experts and closer cooperation with international non-state actors that may be supportive of their agendas. Several influential think tanks and specialized non-governmental agencies from the US and Europe have given their unwavering support for Montenegro's inclusion in NATO. This support was not only helpful, but I would say necessary for Pod-

gorica to keep its membership bid alive despite waning enthusiasm towards enlargement.

In more strategic terms, clever diplomacy emphasizes individual distinctiveness and not only group inconspicuousness. Prioritizing efforts and focusing on policy sectors of great importance and/or where direct benefits can most likely be gained is an essential element. Needless to say, countries should first conceptualize how they may adjust to an ever-changing global system, define their regional and global interests, develop niche capabilities¹⁹ and/or comparative advantage, and ultimately outline a comprehensive strategy of how to translate it into creative diplomacy.

Montenegrin Diplomatic Success and "Intuitive" Diplomacy

Montenegro's diplomatic achievements since its independence have exceeded expectations, but its diplomacy is often intuitive,²⁰ rather than meticulously crafted. The strategic priority – the full integration of Euro-Atlantic structures – was defined at an early stage,²¹ which made the country's foreign policy look coherent. Montenegro acknowledged that a proactive regional agenda, involvement in regional initiatives, and its membership in other IOs will reaffirm its international recognition. Not only was its participation in the International Security Assistance Force Mission and the Resolute Support Mission seen as the way to show the country's solidarity with NATO members, but it also increased the country's outreach and allowed Podgorica to participate in the decision-making process reserved only for contributing states.

Yet, Montenegro has never drafted a comprehensive strategy about how to implement its strategic priorities or how to make the country's niche capabilities known to its foreign partners. For example, while it was obvious why NATO membership was essential for Montenegro (and the region as a whole), the country had not developed a convincing argument about its importance to the alliance. Montenegro was seen by

¹⁵ Ibid: IX.

¹⁶ Ibid: VI.

¹⁷ Alan K. Henrikson: *Ten types of small state diplomacy*.

¹⁸ Sverrir Steinsson and Baldur Thorhallsson: *Small State Foreign Policy*, The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, 2017 Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ For more: Alan K. Henrikson: *Ten types of small state diplomacy*.

²⁰ Intuitive diplomacy relies on a small number of experienced and knowledgeable individuals, their skills and initiative. While flexible in its nature, it is mostly responsive, short-term oriented, and often opportunistic.

²¹ Gordana Djurovic: *Montenegro's Strategic Priorities on the Path of Euro-Atlantic Integration*, The Partnership for Peace Consortium, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2009.

many members as an actor needing help rather than a partner with particular capabilities that the alliance needs.

The question of whether Montenegro (or any other small state) today has a better opportunity to control its future compared to the time when it was deemed too inconsequential to be included in the Berlin Congress deliberations is superfluous. While small states are certainly disadvantaged in the international system, they have never had more mechanisms at hand to improve

their standing in global affairs. Intuitive diplomacy can bring short-term success, but it can't guarantee lasting importance. Membership to IOs put small countries into the limelight, as it was the case with Bosnia and Herzegovina at the UNSC. The lack of strategy and incompetent diplomacy make a small state look passive and without ideas. If the countries of our region want to keep up with new trends, they have to create modern, professional, cost-effective, non-orthodox diplomacies. Sadly, none of them has embarked on a fundamental reform of its services.

INTERVIEW WITH VESNA PUSIĆ

FES: *How would you describe the state of diplomacy in the Western Balkans at the moment?*

VP: At the moment there is no diplomacy in the region. There is a number of reasons for that and I will mention here a few of them:

For years and even decades, the focus of diplomacy in all Western Balkan (WB) countries has been accession to the EU, and for some also to NATO. Up until this point, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania have joined NATO. Of the remaining three, only Kosovo aspires unequivocally to NATO membership but at the moment is still facing more existential, fundamental issues regarding its full international recognition, UN membership, and basic security. Serbia doesn't want to join NATO, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is torn between two opposing positions. As for the EU, the main objective for all of the WB countries – accession, seems to be disappearing into a distant future. So in some way, regional diplomacy has lost its cause and focus.

Another reason is that in the WB, for all practical purposes, the prime ministers or presidents have taken the role of foreign ministers. Although that might seem like giving foreign policy more prominence, it has actually eliminated all the back channels, personal below-the-radar relations, preliminary negotiations, exploratory meetings and all the other usual tools of diplomacy.

Lastly, the EU and other foreign actors are dealing with the WB countries almost exclusively on the



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ambassadorial level, meaning that the communication mostly runs between foreign ambassadors and Prime Ministers and Presidents of the WB countries. That results in local politicians mostly posturing, rather than getting involved in finding diplomatic solutions.

FES: *At the time you were Minister of Foreign Affairs, what were the greatest challenges for regional diplomacy and how did you cope with them?*

VP: During my tenure as Foreign Minister there were six key issues on the regional diplomatic agenda:

- Countries joining the EU (Croatia), or getting candidate status and starting negotiations, or, in the case of BiH, being allowed to submit the request for candidacy;