Milan BRGLEZ*

AN ONTOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF SMALL STATES' AGENCY IN AN ILLIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

Abstract. *In the article, it is argued that an Illiberal International Order does not eliminate the agency of small states and instead reconfigures it through asymmetrical material, institutional, ideational and historical international (social) relations. The author reconstructs the genealogy of small-state studies and views Long's relational turn as a bridge from attribute-based definitions to conditioned agency, before extending that move via a (dialectical) critical realist framework. Foreign-policy and diplomatic practices mediate between asymmetrical international relations and internally constituted state capacities, reproducing or transforming the conditions of action. Small-state analysis should therefore ask how, under which conditions, and for whom security, influence, and transformation are produced.*
Keywords: *agency; (dialectical) critical realism; diplomacy; Illiberal International Order; practices; relational turn; small-state studies.*

INTRODUCTION

Small states have long been in an ambiguous position in International Relations (IR). Although they are ubiquitous in the empirical world of diplomacy, international institutions, security policy and global governance, they continue to be conceptually under-theorised or theoretically marginalised.[1] An enduring reason for this is the tendency to define them solely by way of attributes:

* Milan Brglez, PhD, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Centre of Diplomatic, Economic and Legal Studies, and Chair of International Relations, milan.brglez@fdv.uni-lj.si; ORCID: 0009-0002-8977-7969.
** Research article.
DOI: 10.51936/tip.63.3.437

[1] For classic and more recent approaches to small-state studies, see Fox (1959), Vital (1967; 1971), Keohane (1969; 1971), East (1973), Baehr (1975), Amstrup (1976), Handel (1981), Väyrynen (1983), Abt and Deutsch (1993), Hey (2003), Neumann and Gstöhl (2006), Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006), Veenendaal and Corbett (2015), Radoman (2018), Thorhallsson (2018) and Baldacchino and Wivel (2020). Beyer's (2006) annotated bibliography provides an earlier point of reference. The present article draws on an extended mapping of the literature rather than a systematic review.

population, territory, military capabilities, gross domestic product, or other measurable indicators of relative weakness. Such definitions offer useful descriptive shortcuts, yet also create arbitrary classifications and ontologically weak explanations. If 'smallness' is simply treated as a set of observable characteristics, the analysis quickly loses sight of the structured international contexts in which small states are embedded and in which they derive both their constraints and their opportunities for action.[2] This led earlier critiques of small-state studies (Brglez 2005, 17) to insist that there are no small states as agents (Latin: *agentes*) without the structured contexts which condition and partly shape them, and that any realistic diagnosis of their position needs a stronger ontological foundation than can be provided by 'as if' empiricism.[3]

This article re-examines that argument in the conditions of an increasingly Illiberal International Order (ILIO), noting that the designation "Liberal International Order" (LIO) is itself contested. Even institutionalist accounts acknowledge the US-led order's hierarchical and historically restricted reach (Ikenberry 2018, 9–12), while Jahn (2018, 43) and Parmar (2018, 151) located contradictions and exclusions within liberal internationalism and its imperial development, rather than viewing them as mere departures from liberal principles. Here, the ILIO denotes an uneven reconfiguration of commitments to institutional restraint, reciprocity, and universal rules, not the complete replacement of a previously uniform or consistently liberal order.[4] The argument neither equates the two normatively nor presumes a clean historical succession. Both shape small-state agency through historically specific asymmetries. Accordingly, the question is: how do the changing relations enable, constrain and redistribute capacities for action, instead of whether small states possess agency in the abstract.

A decisive step towards such a reformulation comes from the relational turn in recent literature on small states, notably that associated with Tom Long (2017, 144–49; 2022, 22–23). Rather than treating the small state as a fixed category, Long focuses on the dynamics of salient asymmetrical relationships. In this regard, small states are constituted to be weaker parties within asymmetrical

[2] In Slovenian, "*majhne države*" can describe characteristics or attributes, whereas "*male države*" denotes an analytical category or a role within the international community. In English, this distinction must be established contextually. It is relevant to the necessary dialogue between IR, Comparative Foreign Policy, and Comparative Politics within small-state studies.

[3] This article develops the metatheoretical argument of Brglez (2008), just as the earlier assessment (Brglez 2005) built on Brglez (2001; 2002). Following an initial contribution to the field (Brglez 1997), the 2005 paper largely evaluated the literature, whereas this article develops the metatheoretical foundations of small-state studies. The iterative character of this work is captured by the title of the collection *Žižek, Slavoj. 2011. Poskusiti znova – spodleteti bolje* [Try Again – Fail Better]. Edited by Peter Klepec. Translated by Simon Hajdini and Lidija Šumah. Cankarjeva založba.

[4] The distinction concerns the changing configurations of order, not the disappearance of capitalist relations or inherited hierarchies (Guzzini 2013; Jessop 2016; Lovec and Svetličič 2019; Hočevar et al. 2023). Nor does LIO/ILIO map directly onto international law-based and rules-based orders, whose vocabularies and institutional forms overlap (Brglez 2026, 94–95). Contemporary strategic texts and ordering projects (The White House 2025; United States Department of War 2026; Magid 2026) are materials for examining such reconfigurations, not self-sufficient evidence that a coherent new order has been established.

relationships. Their agency is conditioned by these relationships and broader international contexts, although not eliminated by them. This shift is crucial because it avoids both a reduction to material capabilities and overly voluntaristic notions of 'punching above one's weight'. It also helps explain why the same state might appear more or less capable, vulnerable or influential in different policy areas, within different institutional environments, and at different historical moments (cf. Lange and Svetličič 2024, 368–69). Long's framework remains primarily relational and middle-range, concentrated on the influence, strategies and foreign policy success of small states in particular circumstances.

The present article combines insights from the relational and practice turns[5] with critical realist and relational-sociological approaches (Patomäki and Wight 2000; Bhaskar 2016; Guzzini 2017; Dépelteau 2018; Selg and Ventsel 2020; Guzzini and Casas Klausen 2025). Its distinctive contribution is the analysis of small-state agency within real, emergent and stratified relations as opposed to treating such states as self-sufficient units with a fixed capacity for action. Emphasis is given to the way historically constituted asymmetries acquire causal efficacy and how diplomatic and foreign-policy practices mediate their reproduction or transformation.

The dialectical dimension directs attention to contradictions, absences, and unequal access to action. It also raises an explicitly axiological question: security, influence and transformation for whom? Without distinguishing the capacities of state institutions from those of the people and the groups they represent, analysis risks mistaking elite advantage for a general expansion of agency, or tactical success within asymmetry for a substantive reduction of domination.

The argument proceeds in five steps. First, the principal approaches to small states and their limitations are mapped. Second, Long's relational account of asymmetry and conditioned agency is reconstructed. Third, a relational-critical realist framework is developed. Fourth, the way practices and internal state selectivities mediate the reproduction or transformation of asymmetry is examined. Finally, the implications for small-state agency under 'illiberalisation' are considered. The central thesis is that this agency is historically structured, unevenly distributed and normatively contestable.

FROM SMALLNESS AS AN ATTRIBUTE TO SMALLNESS AS A RELATIONSHIP

The study of small states has not developed as a linear research programme and instead has been a fluid sequence of problems. Its genealogy ranges from classical attempts to define 'smallness', via realist and institutional explanations of vulnerability, adaptation and leverage, to more recent work on status, shelter,

[5] While Jackson and Nexon (1999, 291–95) and Go and Nexon (2025) are representative of the relational turn, the practice turn is even broader (Neumann 2002, 627–30; Adler and Pouliot 2011a; 2011b; Sending et al. 2015; Drieschova et al. 2022).

strategies, and graded agency. Literature reviews by Thorhallsson (2018) and Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) outline this trajectory well. The field has thus gone from an emphasis on lack of capacity and survival (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006, 17–23)[6] to opportunities for agency, strategic action and positioning, yet the question of what exactly 'smallness' means is still open.

One strand in this genealogy centred on definition and classification.[7] Vital (1967) and Keohane (1969) linked smallness to inequality and strategic dilemmas, whilst Baehr (1975) and Amstrup (1976) demonstrated how unstable and analytically limited this category remains. East (1973), Handel (1981) and Hey (2003) steered the issue to the study of foreign policy behaviour and systemic strategies. The field has thus been dogged by a persistent problem: whether 'smallness' refers to measurable capacity, diplomatic constraints, or a position within broader structures of dependency and recognition (Šabič and Brglez 2002).

A second strand has been security-centred and engaged with political-realist explanations (Pedi and Wivel 2024). In this framework, small states emerged as weaker actors encountering stronger incentives to adapt, coordinate, seek shelter, guard against risks, or exploit tensions between stronger powers. Elman's (1995) challenge to neorealism, Mouritzen's (1983; 1991; 1998) analyses of the strategies of the weak, and the later work on shelter and grand strategy (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006; Wivel and Ingebritsen 2019; Wivel 2021) are representative precisely because they preserve the reality of asymmetry while expanding the repertoire of responses available to small states.

A further strand has expanded the field to include institutions, diplomacy, and political economy. Katzenstein (1985; 2003) showed that small states are historically specific formations characterised by openness, embeddedness and domestic compensation, rather than just miniature great powers. Research into the European Union (EU) and multilateralism has since shown how administrative competence, coalition-building, agenda-setting, legalisation, and niche diplomacy can transform weakness into selective leverage.[8] 'Smallness' has thereby become visible not only as a vulnerability, but also as a position mediated via institutions, political capacities and domestic compensatory arrangements.

A particularly useful consolidation of this institutional-practice agenda appeared in the 2012 *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* thematic

[6] Knudsen (2002, 182) also highlighted three unrelated traditions in the small-state studies literature. The first deals with issues of self-determination, the second with the foreign policy options of neutrality or alliance, whilst the third comprises comparative literature on the foreign policy of small states and policymaking in small states. He proposed the study of the life cycles through which small states pass (i.e., state formation, survival, disappearance) as a unifying element (as we would see it today) of the traditional literature in small-state studies, a perspective also adopted by Maass (2017; 2020).

[7] We still frequently encounter this approach (e.g., Crowards 2002; Maass 2009; Sutton 2011; Baldacchino 2018).

[8] Representative samples can be found in Baillie (1998), Abbott and Snidal (2000), Bučar and Šterbenc (2002), Mouritzen and Wivel (2005), Neumann and Gstöhl (2006), Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006), Cooper and Shaw (2009), Sinclair (2010), Thorhallsson (2012), Šabič et al. (2016), Thorhallsson and Bailes (2016), Butler and Morris (2017), Arbeiter et al. (2019) and Fromm (2019).

section "Small States in International Negotiations". Panke (2012a, 313) connected resource asymmetries to the possibility of prioritising selected issues and redirecting scarce administrative capacity towards them. Her EU cases add an important qualification. The concentration of resources is only a precondition, whereas argumentative success depends on the fit between the type of claim, the nature of the issue and the prior beliefs of its addressees (Panke 2012b, 329). Deitelhoff and Wallbott (2012, 345) extended this logic to coalition-building, which can pool expertise and manpower but remains dependent on the institutional setting and the issue at stake. Jackson (2012, 367) pointed out a related mechanism in WTO compliance bargaining, where dispute-settlement procedures can generate bargaining leverage for a materially much weaker actor. As a whole, these studies reveal that institutionalisation mediates rather than cancels asymmetry – limited capacities become politically consequential through situated practices.

Another strand has stressed social recognition and relational positioning. Constructivist, status-oriented and practice-sensitive work has shown that smallness is also realised by way of recognition, legitimacy, role-playing, diplomatic practice and hierarchies of respect. Hence the importance of Browning (2006), Björkdahl (2008), de Carvalho and Neumann (2015), Sending et al. (2015) and Neumann's (2024, 59–60) later formulation of graded agency since they clearly demonstrate that small states do not enter international life from equal positions, even if formally they are equally sovereign.

This genealogy reveals a fundamental tension between descriptive convenience and conceptual adequacy. Much of the older literature addressed the problem through attributive definitions (e.g., Udovič and Svetličič 2007). Such endeavours clearly held practical appeal. They enabled comparative research designs, generated empirical datasets, and offered a seemingly neutral basis for identifying classes of states (Christmas-Møller 1983; Šabič 2002). At the same time, however, they produced recurring arbitrariness and often obscured prior theoretical assumptions about what counts in international politics. Precisely for this reason, an exclusively attribute-based approach risks producing ontologically weak results by treating as empirically given something which in fact is theoretically mediated and relationally constituted (Brglez 2008, 131–32).

The described problem becomes quite clear when one considers the prevailing theoretical traditions (Luša and Mijić 2012; Calleya 2016; Rickli and Almezaini 2017; Galal 2020; Timilsana 2024). In materialist approaches (Brglez 2008, 105–7), small states appear chiefly as weaker units situated within an external environment of asymmetrically distributed capabilities. In classical and structural realism (Brglez 2008, 128–30), they are generally defined by their relative weakness and the limited range of choices available to them in conditions of anarchy. Their position is shaped by security imperatives, proximity to more powerful forces, alliance dependence, the dynamics of balancing and alignment, and the broader distribution of material capabilities. Even where classical or neoclassical realism

offers a more historically nuanced interpretation of statecraft and prudence, or the English School situates states within a historically constituted international society, the small state typically enters the analysis as an actor with more room for accommodation than for initiative. This is exactly why political realism has been both indispensable and insufficient in small-state studies. While it captures something of the reality of asymmetry and constraints, it frequently reduces the politics of small states to adaptation within externally imposed hierarchies.

A similar problem arises with rationalist and institutionalist approaches (Brglez 2008, 132–34). Nevertheless, these approaches go beyond crude capacity metrics since they consider institutions, negotiating environments, issue-specific coalitions, and strategic adaptation. Small states can gain leverage if they act early, specialise, invest in administrative competence, build a reputation, and embed themselves in dense institutional environments. Such approaches are particularly productive in studies of the EU, international organisations, coalition-building, and multilateral diplomacy. They show that limited size does not automatically imply irrelevance, and that institutional contexts can redistribute influence in ways that cannot be reduced to raw power. However, their analytical framework often remains closer to strategic adaptation than a deeper reflection on 'smallness' itself. The small state continues to be taken for granted as a given actor with limited resources, operating within rules and incentives treated as external to its constitution.

Idealist and constructivist approaches (Brglez 2008, 134–37) broaden the picture even further by viewing 'smallness' not just as a material condition, but also as a socially mediated position. The focus moves to identity, recognition, status, role, legitimacy, communities of practice, and the ways in which international institutions and norms structure the opportunities available to smaller actors. Work along these lines has been crucial by revealing that small states cannot be understood solely through material inferiority. Their influence may depend on their legitimacy, credibility, normative entrepreneurship, institutional embeddedness, or skill in mobilising symbolic and ideational resources. These perspectives help to correct the reductionism of materialist explanations as they show that 'smallness' is not simply observed, but interpreted within international social relations. Yet, accounts centred on identity and shared meanings risk under-specifying the material and institutional relations via which recognition becomes consequential. The issue is not a uniform weakness of constructivism, but the explanatory limits of certain versions that leave deeper hierarchies insufficiently examined (Kurki and Sinclair 2010, 7–8, 18–20).

Different traditions often presuppose different objects of inquiry: survival in a hostile environment, bargaining within institutions, or the enactment of identities and roles in international society. The problem is not theoretical pluralism itself, but the transfer of an apparently unchanged category of the small state across ontologically distinct explanatory projects. Table 1 summarises these ideal-typical emphases rather than placing entire schools in mutually exclusive positions.

Accordingly, the key move today is not to abandon small-state studies but to reconceptualise 'smallness'. The central question should no longer be whether a specific fixed set of states meets a stable size threshold, or merely whether small states have agency despite structural constraints. A more productive question is how actors, conventionally defined as small, are constituted, enabled and constrained within structured and asymmetrical international contexts. This implies a shift from attributes to relations, from a static classification to a structured asymmetry, and from conceiving agency as residual capacity to understanding it as conditioned, mediated and unevenly distributed. Namely, the study of small states must move from smallness as an attribute to smallness as a relationship.

Table 1: ENTANGLEMENT OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY IN SMALL-STATE STUDIES

Epistemology / Ontology	Explanation / Materialism	Understanding / Idealism
Holism / Structure	The international system as external structures in anarchic (global, regional, bilateral) environments of balance of power and hegemony	The international community as collective rules and institutions within asymmetric (global, regional, bilateral) international (social) relations
Individualism / Agency	Units of the system – small states identified through measurable attributes and perceptions/cognitions, acting rationally on the basis of their own resources and capabilities	Subjects – small states as social constructs and roles/positions acting reasonably based on opportunities within international (social) relations

Source: Author's elaboration developed and updated from Hollis and Smith ([1990]1991, 5), Dunne (1995, 371), Adler (1997, 331), Wendt (1999, 29, 32) and Brglez (2008, 66; 2011, 553; 2021, 17; 2022, 26).

LONG AND THE RELATIONAL TURN IN SMALL-STATE STUDIES

Recent literature on small states has introduced numerous significant corrections to older approaches focused on vulnerability and attributes. Here, Long's work (2017, 144–49; 2022, 22–23) stands out by offering a particularly systematic reworking of the field around asymmetry and conditioned agency (Thorhallsson 2018; Baldacchino and Wivel 2020). The significance of Long's intervention lies not only in providing yet another definition of a small state, but above all in reframing the problem itself. Rather than asking which states count as small according to absolute thresholds, he asks how states come to be understood as small within salient asymmetrical relationships. This is a decisive shift because it moves the field away from the search for a stable essence of 'smallness' and directs it towards the dynamics of relationships whereby one actor is positioned as the weaker party. In so doing, it retains the intuitive view that small states

face recurring vulnerabilities, whilst avoiding the conceptual arbitrariness of attributive classifications.[9]

Long's relational shift is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it avoids reducing 'smallness' to a measurable size. While absolute indicators may still be useful for descriptive purposes, they no longer bear the central analytical burden. A state is not small in an abstract sense, but in relation to other actors and within specific contexts of asymmetry. This means the same actor may face different degrees and forms of 'smallness' in different relationships, issue areas, and institutional environments (Long 2022, 22–23; Wivel 2025, 27–28). Second, the shift towards asymmetry brings context to the fore without slipping into determinism. Long does not claim that relationships entirely determine what small states do. Nonetheless, he argues that they condition their scope for action. It is precisely this formulation that is crucial since it rejects both voluntarist narratives of heroic influence and fatalist narratives of inevitable subordination. Third, Long's approach makes influence analytically manageable. If action is conditioned by relations, then the study of small states' influence must examine not only the resources, but in addition the particular relational configurations via which these resources may (not) be transformed into effects.

This leads directly to Long's concept of conditioned agency (2022, 60–61). In contrast to perspectives which either assume agency as a generic attribute of sovereign states or deny weaker actors the capacity for meaningful agency, Long views small-state agency as the capacity to articulate interests and identities and to make meaningful, albeit never unlimited, choices within asymmetrical contexts. Agency is neither a metaphysical remnant nor just a synonym for strategic calculation. Instead, it is relationally constituted and contextually conditioned. Different asymmetrical relationships confer varying degrees of room for manoeuvre, and this space can expand or contract subject to the issue, broader international environment, and configuration of preferences among more powerful actors.

Long's most practical contribution is his attempt to identify the conditions in which influence is more or less likely (Long 2022, 52–54). Rather than resorting to vague claims about diplomatic skill or the advantages of reputation, he proposes a diagnostic framework centred on three relational variables: (i) the degree of policy divergence between the small state and the stronger actor; (ii) the importance of the issue within the relationship; and (iii) the degree of cohesion of preferences within the more powerful actor. The value of this tool is found in its middle-range clarity. It links abstract relational asymmetry to concrete foreign policy situations and offers a more operational vocabulary for considering when small states' actions are likely to be effective and which strategies are most

[9] Long's relational turn should be read in conjunction with the bridges opened by Neumann and Gstöhl (2006), Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006), Wivel et al. (2014), Thorhallsson (2018) and Wivel and Ingebritsen (2019).

likely to produce influence. Consequently, the agency of small states appears as neither a residual category nor a miracle (cf. Baldacchino 2023), but as a conditional capacity that is strategically exercised within asymmetry.

Such a reformulation explains why much of the earlier research on small states became bogged down on the definition level. When the relationship, rather than the attribute, becomes analytically primary, the question goes from "what is a small state?" to "within which asymmetrical relationship, regarding which issues, and under which historical and institutional conditions does 'smallness' become politically significant?". Long therefore does not merely add yet another theory of influence, and instead provides a conceptual framework via which it is possible to cumulatively interpret the realist concern for asymmetry, the institutional concern for embeddedness, and the constructivist concern for recognition.

Recent research on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) extends this relational problem to recognition itself. Kavalski and Pomorska (2026, 694–95) conceptualise actorness through recognition, encounter and enactment rather than as an attribute secured by material power or institutional membership. Their discussion of the post-2022 'Ukraine moment' concerns the changed reception of previously marginalised knowledge, not the sudden creation of agency (2026, 692–93). For the present framework, the distinction is crucial – capacities can persist while their recognition and opportunities for effective exercise fluctuate. The regional debate is relevant without making CEE a homogeneous category of small states.

At the same time, Long's intervention should be understood as a bridge, not an endpoint. It connects the older literature on small states with a more distinctly relational mode of analysis, without requiring a fully developed social ontology. Small states are not treated as isolated units facing an external system, nor are they dissolved into discourse. They are constituted as weaker actors within salient asymmetrical relationships. This makes Long's framework useful for translating the claim that there are no small states without structured contexts into an empirically oriented vocabulary. The further account of these contexts as emergent and stratified is developed here, rather than attributed to Long himself.

The first question concerns the ontology of asymmetry. Long's account identifies relational conditions of influence, while the present framework additionally asks how these relations endure, how their dimensions interact, and how they acquire causal powers beyond particular bargaining episodes. This is a difference in explanatory scope rather than evidence that a relational approach must already subscribe to critical realism.

The second question concerns reproduction and transformation. Explaining when a smaller actor can exert influence does not settle whether its strategy alters the conditions of future action or reproduces the asymmetry within which that influence is achieved. The dialectical extension thus considers contradictions, absences, and unequal access to action alongside strategic effectiveness.

The third question relates to axiology. Strategic achievement within an existing relationship does not by itself establish whose capacities have expanded. A dialectical analysis must distinguish the benefits accruing to small-state elites, ruling coalitions, bureaucracies, and wider populations. This question, already raised in the concluding discussion of Brglez (2005), informs the present article's assessment of both the reproduction and transformation of asymmetry.

Yet precisely because Long is at his strongest at the level of relational diagnosis, his framework invites a further ontological step.[10] A second bridge concerns practice and deeper social structure. Joseph and Kurki (2018, 91–94) argued that ontological realism can complement the practice turn by restoring attention to the conditions of possibility under which practices emerge. Their criticism concerns the risk of treating practice as ontologically exhaustive, not the value of studying practices. Kurki and Sinclair (2010, 7–8, 18) similarly showed that accounts of mutual constitution can leave deeper social structures and unequal positions insufficiently theorised. Read along with Long, these interventions support examining how salient asymmetrical relationships are sustained through multi-layered, enduring and causally efficacious structures.

The relational diagnosis–ontological explanation distinction is therefore a matter of complementary questions. Long's work moves beyond fixed size categories towards relationally conditioned agency. Critical realism[11] asks which kinds of relations and causal powers make that conditioning possible. Its dialectical development further asks how contradictions, absences, and blocked possibilities enter the reproduction or transformation of asymmetry. The purpose is not to displace Long's middle-range framework. Instead, it is to clarify its place within a wider account of the conditions, practices and consequences of small-state agency.

TOWARDS A RELATIONAL-CRITICAL REALIST FRAMEWORK

Asymmetrical international relations are real, emergent and stratified. Their effects cannot be reduced to either states' attributes or shared meanings. Ontological realism here labels this explanatory commitment, not a version of political realism or a claim that social structures exist independently of human activity. Structures are reproduced via activity while remaining irreducible to any particular episode or actor's understanding (Bhaskar [1979]1998; Patomäki

[10] For the wider critical realist argument in IR, see Patomäki and Wight (2000), Patomäki (2002), Wight (2006), Kurki (2008) and Joseph and Wight (2010). For Slovenian contributions to the interpretation, application and development of critical realism, as well as related metatheoretical debates across the social sciences, including International Studies and IR, also see Brglez (2001), Lange [Kajnč] (2006), Bojinović Fenko (2009), Lovec (2013), Amon Prodnik (2014), Rutar (2016; 2017; 2018) and Hočevar et al. (2023). This article is situated within this wider intellectual context, with its particular contribution being the development of a relational and dialectical critical-realist account of small-state agency.

[11] Critical realism combines ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationality (Bhaskar [1975]2008; [1979]1998; Collier 1994; Brglez 2008, 73–75). Its dialectical development informs the treatment of absence, contradiction, and transformative practice (Bhaskar 1993; 1994; Ollman 2003; Norrie 2010; Patomäki and Morgan 2023a; 2023b).

and Wight 2000; Wight 2006; Brglez 2008, 73–75). The task is to explain their causal relevance to small-state agency more than to restate critical realist philosophy in full.

The relational premise also has an earlier genealogy. Marx's conception of society as constituted by relations rather than as an aggregate of individuals ([1857–58]1985, 159) informs the transformational model the author developed in his earlier work (Brglez 2008, 74–75) based on Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Activity ([1979]1998, 34–42). This is an ontological starting point, not an endorsement of a predetermined historical trajectory. It directs attention to the relations through which actors and their capacities are constituted, whilst retaining the distinction between those capacities and the conditions in which they are exercised.

For small states, the relevant asymmetries are material, institutional, ideational and historical. Unequal resources and dependencies intersect with rules governing access, authority and representation, with hierarchies of legitimacy and recognition, and with the sedimented consequences of earlier conflicts, alignments and exclusions. Even though these dimensions are analytically distinguishable, they cannot simply be added as independent variables. Their configurations condition different possibilities for action without determining a single outcome.

Ejdus' analysis of "ontic spaces" gives this multidimensional claim a useful material-ideational specification. Material environments can anchor collective identity and purposeful agency, yet only when incorporated into identity narratives. Even then, states do not fully control the process because those narratives remain contested domestically and internationally (Ejdus 2017, 23–24). This reinforces the need to treat material and ideational dimensions as internally related without collapsing one into the other.

Relational sociology helps specify this account but does not resolve all the differences among relational approaches. Emirbayer (1997, 281–86) and Jackson and Nexon (1999, 291–95) challenged substantialist starting points, while Donati (2015, 87–90; see also Donati and Archer 2015) emphasised the emergent effects of relations irreducible to individuals or systemic wholes. Kurki (2020) extended the relational challenge beyond an exclusively inter-state horizon. The narrower concern here is how relatively durable social relations mediate small-state capacities rather than an assumption that all of these approaches share an identical ontology.

Bourdieu's account of social space connects objective positions, dispositions and symbolic struggles without reducing practice to either visible interaction or the mechanical expression of structure (1989, 15–18; see also Vandenberghe 1999). Akram's critical realist reconstruction sharpens this connection by treating habitus as a historically formed, generative system of durable dispositions (2023, 59–61), field as a configuration of objective relations between positions (2023, 110–11), and institutional settings as contexts in which situated agents

(*agentes*), unequally endowed with resources or capital, reproduce or contest systems of power (2023, 162). Applied here, these arguments help conceptualise diplomatic competence not simply as an individual skill but as a practical capacity arising from the habitus–field relation. Historically acquired dispositions are exercised from unequal positions and via differential access to resources, whereas action remains open to improvisation and contestation.[12]

These distinctions matter for the analysis of security guarantees, aid relationships, dependency ties, coalitions, and status hierarchies. None can be reduced to the patron's preferences or the client's weakness. Guzzini (2012, 5–7) distinguishes governance as steering capacity from governance as informal rule, while resisting the reduction of governance to power. Ordering can also work by way of diffuse, habitual practices rather than overt commands (Guzzini 2012, 9). Small-state agency must thus be examined relative to both direct influence and the wider mechanisms through which political order is sustained.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 970–73) expanded on this point by considering agency as a time-embedded process comprising iterative, projective and practical-evaluative dimensions. This is especially useful for small-state studies as it avoids two common pitfalls: (i) equating agency with immediate success; and (ii) the assumption that strong asymmetry completely precludes agency. Smaller actors rely on past routines, project possible futures, and assess context-dependent possibilities in the present. What changes in the face of asymmetry is not the existence of agency, but the horizons within which these temporal dimensions can be realised.

Institutional and legal structures form part of this explanation, not just its background. Kurki and Sinclair (2010, 18–20; see also Sinclair 2010) challenge accounts that treat international law primarily as rules and intersubjective meanings, whereas Sinclair (2021, 216–20) identifies international law's structural significance for agency. The implication is not that international law determines state conduct. It is that legal positions and procedures can constitute capacities whose activation, obstruction or non-use requires further explanation. Formal availability, practical exercise and successful influence must therefore remain analytically distinct.

Causal explanation must identify how such conditions combine. In open social systems, this requires reconstructing causal complexes rather than assuming invariant sequences between isolated variables (Patomäki 2002, 78; Brglez 2008, 73). Practices mediate these configurations, yet their observed regularities do not exhaust the powers and relations which sustain them. The dialectical contribution is to include contradictions and consequential absences in that reconstruction, and to examine possibilities of reproduction and transformation

[12] This is a selective dialogue, not a claim of wholesale philosophical equivalence. Donati (2015, 88) explicitly criticises both Bourdieu and Emirbayer. The present argument draws on particular insights without treating their ontologies as interchangeable.

without presuming their outcome (Bhaskar 1993, 92, 97; 1994; Norrie 2010, 13–16, 65–75, 81–85; Patomäki 2017).

The debate over agency also becomes clearer. Small states must be understood as actors possessing 'power to' – the capacity to act, to refrain from acting, and to permit others to act. This formulation (and the initial idea for Diagram 1) has a special genealogy. Guzzini's discussion of agent power (1993, 471, esp. n. 85) explicitly directs the reader to Patomäki's closely related definition of power within critical social realism (1991, 234). Agency is hence not limited to successfully influencing others, nor does it disappear where asymmetry is strong. It exists within pre-existing but transformable structures. Wight's ontological treatment of agency (2006) is useful here because it resists both voluntarism and structural reification. Whether a particular omission manifests strategic restraint, institutional blockage or an unavailable capacity cannot be decided from non-action alone. It requires examining the relations, authorisations and alternatives involved. This keeps the reality of agency distinct from both its exercise and its effects.

The epistemological implication is equally significant. Explanation must identify the real relations and mechanisms that condition outcomes, while understanding reconstructs the meanings actors attach to their conduct. Neither is sufficient when taken in isolation. Explanatory critique connects them by investigating how certain relations sustain domination or obscure its conditions (Bhaskar 1986; 2016, 95–102; cf. Fluck 2017). Koskenniemi (2005, 540–41, esp. 541 n. 58) discusses the critical challenge to false consciousness whilst warning against assuming that the critic already knows others' interests. Critique is not simply an external judgement added after explanation since it examines how constraints, interests and their representations are themselves socially produced. Nonetheless, the existence of a constraint does not by itself establish domination, nor does every transformation imply emancipation. Evaluation must specify the actors affected, the alternatives available, and the normative grounds of judgement. This gives substantive content to the question "for whom?" without deriving a verdict from asymmetry alone.

The resulting framework is not a compromise between materialism and idealism. It re-specifies the object of inquiry as relationally constituted capacities within historically structured asymmetries. Table 2 summarises the conceptual distinctions. The next section develops their practical implications: how capacities are exercised, internally authorised and implicated in the reproduction or transformation of relations.

Table 2: A RELATIONAL-CRITICAL REALIST EXTENSION OF SMALL-STATE STUDIES

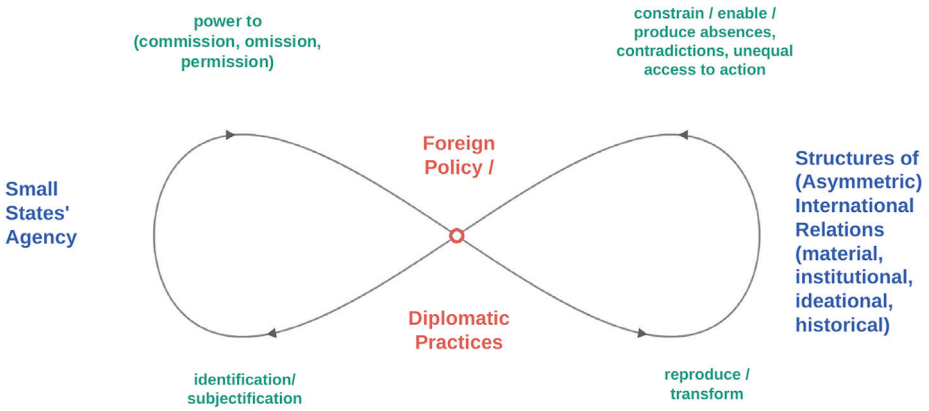
Ontology	Materialism	Ontological Realism	Idealism
Structures	The international system as external structures in anarchic (global, regional and bilateral) environments of balance of power and hegemony. Smallness is treated primarily as a function of relative material capabilities, systemic position, vulnerability, and dependence.	Asymmetric international relations as real, emergent and stratified (material, institutional, ideational, historical) structures that pre-exist particular actions, possess causal efficacy, and shape differentiated opportunities for action. Small states are embedded in structured contexts that are real even when not directly observable.	The international community/ society as collective rules and international institutions within asymmetric (global, regional and bilateral) international (social) relations. Smallness is mediated through norms, legitimacy, recognition, and institutional inclusion or exclusion.
Processes	Balancing, bandwagoning, deterrence, bargaining, capability aggregation, dependence management, and adaptation to external pressure. The main analytical focus is on how materially weaker states cope with systemic constraints.	Generative mechanisms linking structure and agency through enablement/constraint, emergence, positionality, morphostasis/morphogenesis, and practical mediation. The task of analysis is to identify how structured contexts shape, channel and condition the possibilities of small-state action.	Socialisation, norm diffusion, recognition, institutionalisation, identity formation, role enactment, persuasion, and status performance. The emphasis is on how meanings, roles and norms shape what small states can plausibly do.
Relations	Asymmetric interdependence, alliance ties, shelter relations, dependency relations, and resource differentials. Relations are treated mainly as channels via which material inequalities operate.	Relations connect material asymmetry, institutional position, recognition, and historical context. Long's (2017; 2022) account of salient asymmetrical relationships provides a bridge – weaker actors' agency is conditioned, not eliminated. Treating these relations as emergent and causally efficacious is this article's critical realist extension, not an attribution of that ontology to Long.	Intersubjective relations, status, role/position, recognition/misrecognition, and communities of practice. Smallness is constituted relationally through social interaction and shared understandings rather than material capability alone.
Agency	Units of the system – small states identified via measurable properties and perceptions/cognitions, acting rationally on the basis of their own resources and capabilities. Agency is limited, instrumental, and usually derivative of material position.	Small states as agents (*agentes*) possessing 'power to' – the capacity to act, to refrain from acting, and to permit others to act – are reflexively positioned and subjectified within asymmetric relations. Capacities are also internally constituted through strategically selective institutions. Foreign-policy and diplomatic practices mediate their exercise within pre-existing but transformable structures. Agency is distinct from both its activation and successful influence.	Subjects – small states as social constructs and their roles/positions acting reasonably on the basis of opportunities within international (social) relations. Agency is shaped by identity, recognition, legitimacy, and role expectations.
Epistemology	***Explaining***	***Critique***	***Understanding***

Source: Author's elaboration developed from Brglez (2008, 125), with relational and strategic-relational extensions drawing on Long (2017; 2022) and Jessop (2007, 29–37).

AGENCY, PRACTICE AND THE REPRODUCTION OR TRANSFORMATION OF ASYMMETRY

Foreign-policy and diplomatic practices mediate between small-state capacities and asymmetrical international relations. They neither express an unconstrained sovereign will nor mechanically implement structural imperatives. Negotiating, representing, framing claims, and maintaining institutional routines draw upon inherited resources and positions at the same time as reproducing or modifying them.[13] Practice is accordingly indispensable to explanation, albeit it does not exhaust the relations that make action possible (Neumann 2002, 627–30; Joseph and Kurki 2018, 91–94). Diagram 1 summarises this relationship.[14]

Diagram 1: CAPABILITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL STATES' AGENCY



Source: Author's conceptual synthesis and design. The specific conceptual and visual starting point for Diagram 1 is Guzzini's (1993, 471–74) dyadic conceptualisation of power phenomena, particularly his distinction between agent power and impersonal governance and the accompanying visual representation. While discussing agent power, Guzzini (1993, 471, n. 85) explicitly notes the affinity with Patomäki's (1991, 234) critical-social-realist definition of power. Diagram 1 does not reproduce Guzzini's model but develops its relational insight within a dialectical critical-realist account of small-state agency in which foreign-policy and diplomatic practices mediate between small states as agents (*agentes*) and historically constituted asymmetrical structures, reproducing or transforming the conditions of subsequent action. The wider relational genealogy and conceptual elaboration draw on Marx ([1857–58]1985, 159), Guzzini and Leander (2001, 326), Patomäki (2002; 2017), Brglez (2008, 74–75), Patomäki and Morgan (2023a; 2023b), and Guzzini and Casas Klausen (2025, 667).

Note: The diagram illustrates external relational mediation. The internal constitution of state capacities is developed in section 4.

[13] The studies discussed in section 1 illustrate this mediation: prioritisation, argumentative fit, coalition-formation and legally structured bargaining alter how limited capacities are activated without dissolving the asymmetry in which they operate (Panke 2012a, 313; Panke 2012b, 329; Deitelhoff and Wallbott 2012, 345; Jackson 2012, 367; Arbeiter et al. 2019).

[14] Diagram 1 also builds on a teaching aid based on Brglez (2008). The author thanks the students at the Faculty of Social Sciences whose engagement with successive versions helped clarify the model.

The exercise of agency need not take the form of overt intervention. Withholding cooperation, delaying a decision, or leaving a legal position nonactivated may be consequential practices. Yet the same observed non-action can result from a blocked procedure or lack of capacity. The distinction is not between action and an empty absence, but between differently constituted possibilities and the practices via which they are used or foreclosed. Analysis must therefore reconstruct what actors could authoritatively attempt, not simply infer either freedom or powerlessness from the outcome.

Recognition and subjectification influence these possibilities. Foucault's account of power as action upon possible actions is useful because it links the shaping of subjects with a field of responses, rather than equating power with either consent or direct physical coercion (1982, 781, 789–92).[15] Diplomatic status, expertise, and role expectations can enlarge access while also disciplining how a smaller actor may speak or act (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015; Kaul 2023). Such recognition is not just symbolic decoration nor is it a guarantee of influence.

Formal institutional membership does not remove these asymmetries. Comparing CEE participation in the EU and NATO, Lovato and Pomorska (2026, 741–42) explain how competence claims are recognised, dismissed or reprimanded through role expectations and inherited preconceptions. Their findings qualify claims that post-2022 recognition has durably transformed diplomatic hierarchies. Increased recognition coexists with resilient hierarchies, while defence contributions carry different weight in NATO from the cross-issue reputational effects found in the EU (Lovato and Pomorska 2026, 753–54). Practical mediation thus depends on the institution and issue, not on formal membership or diplomatic skill alone.

Weiss's comparison of Czech specialisation in human rights and the Western Balkans sharpens the distinction between expertise and its political recognition (2026, 796–97). Comparable resource commitments and prominent policy declarations did not generate comparable recognition. Czechia's participation in a relatively small network promoting the Western Balkans made its contribution more recognisable than its human-rights specialisation in a crowded and fragmented field. This supports treating demand for expertise and relative positioning as conditions of its political usability rather than inferring influence from investment or competence alone. The finding concerns recognition, and it is not by itself a measurement of influence over policy outcomes.

External relations do not, however, act upon an internally undifferentiated state. Jessop's strategic-relational approach understands state power as a social relation mediated by a strategically selective institutional ensemble, not as a thing or a coherent subject standing above society (2007, 29–37; 2016). Individual

[15] This borrowing concerns subjectification and the shaping of possible action, not a wholesale identification with critical realism (cf. Marsden 1999). The present framework retains the distinction between a capacity, its exercise, and its effects.

and collective actors encounter unequal access to representation, resources and decision-making, whilst institutional arrangements privilege some strategies, projects and temporal horizons over others. A diplomatic opportunity must consequently be translated through procedures of mandate formation, legal assessment and authorisation before it can be pursued as a foreign-policy initiative attributable to the small state. Implementation then shapes its effects. This internal constitution of agency complements the external analysis without collapsing the two into one. Domestic and international relations are analytically distinguishable, not self-contained spheres (cf. Gourevitch 1978; Putnam 1988). Their interaction can enable action, leave a capacity nonactivated, or block its use (cf. Bojinović Fenko and Lovec 2015, 113–17; Bojinović Fenko and Šabič 2017, 42–43). Agency attributed internationally to 'the state' – including 'the small state' – is thus internally produced and contested.

A complementary argument about emergence is laid out by Ejdus and Rečević (2021, 29). Drawing on complexity theory, they conceptualise collective ontological insecurity as a macro-level phenomenon that can arise non-linearly from horizontal micro-interactions and feedback loops. Their object is ontological insecurity rather than foreign-policy capacity, and hence the analogy should not be overstated. Yet it supports the more general point at issue here – properties attributed to 'the (small) state' may be emergent without being reducible to either individual intentions or a pre-given unitary state subject.

This double perspective makes contradictions and absences analytically consequential. The same arrangement may enable diplomatic access while foreclosing alternatives, or strengthen executive discretion while restricting other actors' participation. A missing safeguard or blocked route matters when it can be shown to shape a specific possibility of action, not merely because it falls short of an analyst's preference. Dialectical critical realism directs attention to such relations between realised capacities and foreclosed possibilities (Bhaskar 2016, 116–26, 129–32, 140–41). The question is how these tensions are sustained, displaced or contested in practice.

Practices can reproduce asymmetry even when they secure immediate gains. Adaptation may preserve access while stabilising dependence, and competent diplomatic performance may obtain benefits without changing the hierarchies within which it is recognised (Corbett et al. 2019). Transformation requires a change in the conditions of subsequent action, for example through altered institutional access, recognition, or dependency relations. The reproduction–transformation distinction is thus neither a contrast between failure and success nor a presumption of sudden systemic rupture. Changes may be partial, uneven and reversible. Morphostasis and morphogenesis provide terms for investigating these different effects, rather than labels assigned in advance (Norrie 2010, 113–17; Donati and Archer 2015).

The internal constitution of agency also sharpens the question of its beneficiaries. A strategy may expand the executive's external room for manoeuvre

while narrowing parliamentary, social or minority participation. Conversely, restraint may preserve accountability or a capacity for future contestation. These are possibilities to investigate, not necessary properties of certain strategies. State effectiveness and social emancipation must as a result be distinguished. Asking who gains security, influence or transformative capacity connects the analysis of diplomatic practice to the distribution of its benefits and costs, within the state and across its international relations.

SMALL STATES' AGENCY IN THE ILIO

The framework developed thus far allows for a re-examination of small-state agency under 'illiberalisation'. The following discussion identifies mechanisms and analytical expectations, not a uniform causal effect established across all small states. Work on agency, security and governance provides a broader point of departure (Koff and Kolnberger 2024). Long's (2022, 60–61) language of conditioned agency therefore remains indispensable, yet it must be read alongside older literature on vulnerability, hedging, openness, resilience, alliance policy and status since their effects depend on the particular configurations of 'illiberalisation'. What is changing is not a single variable called "order" (Ish-Shalom et al. 2021; Česnakas and Juozaitis 2023; Panke and Thorhallsson 2024; Aryal and Pulami 2026), but a pattern of market dependence, strategic coercion, institutional access, legal protection and hierarchies of recognition, within which smaller actors operate.

Material asymmetries involve both security dependence and exposure to economic and infrastructural pressures. Research on geopolitics and small-state foreign policy illustrates how geopolitical change can reshape roles (Moisio 2022; Michalski et al. 2024), while Schindler et al. (2022) direct attention to infrastructure and geoeconomic competition. Earlier political-economy research shows that openness is mediated by domestic adjustment and compensatory institutions rather than producing a single outcome (Katzenstein 1985; Armstrong and Read 1998; Briguglio et al. 2006; Bohle and Jacoby 2017; Jaklič 2024, 15). The implication for 'illiberalisation' is conditional. Where access to security, markets or infrastructure becomes more coercively managed, dependence may supply leverage while also increasing vulnerability (cf. Vangeli et al. 2026). The task is to identify which relations change and which strategies remain available, rather than infer a uniform loss of agency (Wivel and Thorhallsson 2018).

These changes operate through historically differentiated relations. Past alignments, colonial and postcolonial positions, strategies of Europeanisation or non-alignment, and accumulated economic specialisations influence the conditions of present action. They should be investigated rather than treated as a shared essence of 'smallness'. Kaul (2023) examines geopolitical subalternisation in Bhutan, and Montana (2022) analyses mediated sovereignty in the British Overseas Territories. The latter are not sovereign small states, but provide a bounded comparison which highlights why formal status and practical capacities must be distinguished.

Historical differentiation here should not be reduced to path dependence. Rosenberg's reconstruction of uneven and combined development (UCD) identifies societal multiplicity – the plural nature of human social existence – as one of UCD's distinctive ontological premises and uses it to reopen the role of "the international" in social development (Rosenberg 2021, 152–53).[16] While UCD is not identical to the critical realist framework adopted here, its insistence on multiplicity, unevenness and combination complements the claim that small states act from differently structured historical positions. Leigh (2021, 186) adds an ideational mechanism with his theory of geocultural feedback, locating the formation of identities and discourses within conjunctures of global unevenness rather than viewing culture as an internally generated domain. Together, these interventions help specify why historical and ideational asymmetries should not be treated as passive background variables.

Institutional and legal asymmetries require a similarly differentiated analysis. 'Illiberalisation' does not render institutions irrelevant. Their importance may increase even where expectations of stable reciprocity and shared international social and/or legal norms are weakened. Small states still rely on institutions (Wivel and Thorhallsson 2018) to secure a voice, protection, and procedural influence, yet these gains remain uneven and potentially reversible. Here, the literature on soft law, legalisation, and imperial hierarchies becomes relevant (Abbott and Snidal 2000; Chimni 2004; Anghie 2016). Although formal rules may remain in force, their protective effects may be diluted by selective enforcement or by shifts to more informal arrangements of guidance and discipline (Guzzini 2012, 5–6, 9; Guzzini and Casas Klausen 2025, 667). These possibilities turn on institutional enactment rather than on the vocabulary of order alone (Brglez 2026, 94–95).

Ideational and political asymmetries concern the recognition of legitimate speakers, expertise, and roles. Niche diplomacy and struggles over competence show how visibility can create opportunities without removing subordination (Fromm 2019; Lovato and Pomorska 2026, 741–42). Recognition may accordingly enable mediation while confining a smaller actor to restrictive role expectations. The question under 'illiberalisation' is how these expectations are contested or reorganised, not whether status suddenly becomes relevant.

Status here is significant not only because it expands or restricts access to forums, but because it shapes the strategic significance of action. A state recognised as a credible mediator, a rule-abider or an indispensable hub can sometimes compensate for its material weakness (Eriksson 2020). A state treated as peripheral or unreliable struggles to transform even favourable conditions into

[16] More generally, both contemporary IR scholarship and the practice of international relations should take account of not just the political logic of anarchy but the social logic of multiplicity as well (Kurki and Rosenberg 2020). In this article, "the international" is therefore understood in terms of the dialectical containment of the political logic of anarchy within the social logic of multiplicity, and vice versa (Davenport 2020; Rosenberg 2020; Brglez 2022, 41).

influence. Status literature and relational sociology of diplomacy (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015; Adler-Nissen 2015; 2025) help analyse how the room for manoeuvre of small states is filtered via symbolic hierarchies that are themselves politically contentious (Selg and Ventsel 2020).

Here, the distinction between state and socially distributed capacity for action is crucial. 'Illiberalisation' can increase the room for manoeuvre of executive bodies, foreign policy elites or security bureaucracies, whilst simultaneously restricting the scope of action of parliaments, the opposition, civil society, or vulnerable social groups (Bailes 2014; Briguglio 2018; Joensen and Taylor 2021; Briguglio et al. 2023). A small state may appear strategically successful since it attracts investment, secures external support or gains diplomatic significance (Kozera 2025). Such gains do not by themselves establish broader social empowerment. Research on democratic regression identifies distinct domestic processes (Diamond 2021). Whether these coincide with or are reinforced by external strategic gains requires case-specific explanations. An axiological question therefore becomes unavoidable. It is not merely a question of whether the capacity to act or agency exists, but whose capacity to act is expanding, whose is contracting, and with which practices these shifts are being stabilised.

This perspective also reframes the strategic debate. The contemporary grand strategies of small states cannot be reduced to balancing, accommodation or neutrality alone (Benko 1969; 1992; 1997; Bebler 1998). They are better understood as selective combinations of seeking shelter, specialising in specific issues, building coalitions, diversifying dependencies, managing status, hedging against risks, and controlling exposure to greater powers (cf. Bojinović Fenko and Požgan 2014; Lange and Marn 2024, 57–59). Wivel's (2021) description of the grand strategy of small states is useful here as it shows that smaller actors do not choose between autonomy and dependence in a binary manner. They prioritise and combine strategies in order to survive and shape their environment, especially their immediate environment (Mouritzen 1998), within a context of structural inequality. Strating's (2020) work on risk management demonstrates a similar pattern in a more openly competitive regional environment.

Haxhiraj's study of Albania provides a bounded illustration of such strategic combinations (2026, 16–17, online-first pagination). A continuing Euro-Atlantic orientation coexists with expanded regional and multilateral engagement, indicating changes in the exercise of agency rather than a wholesale change of strategic direction. Institutional embedding is thus an enabling as well as a constraining relation. Even though this case does not establish a general effect of 'illiberalisation', it identifies institutionally mediated adaptation whose conditions and consequences the present framework can help investigate.

For this reason, the most useful question is not whether the ILIO makes small states more or less important in general. Rather, it is a question of which types of action by small states become more feasible, which become more costly, and which are completely sidelined. Some aspects of the problem may reward agility,

mediation, ambiguity, or niche expertise. Others may penalise openness, legalist strategies (Hoffmann 2016; Brglez 2026) or dependence on routine reciprocity. Relational-critical realist analysis is valuable precisely because it does not presuppose a single answer. It inquires into how different combinations of coercion, recognition, institutional access, legal forms and historical dependencies create different strategic repertoires and different political consequences.

The analytical implication is clear. Small states in the ILIO should not be viewed as either heroic defenders of the rules or passive objects of domination. They are reflexive actors operating within historically specific asymmetrical relationships which simultaneously enable, constrain, stratify and sometimes reshape their scope for action. Their agency is real but unevenly conditioned, strategic yet socially mediated, potentially innovative yet often reproductive of broader hierarchies. This means that an appropriate analysis of small states in contemporary circumstances involves tracing the causal mechanisms or causal complexes (Patomäki 2002, 78; 2023, 79) via which different opportunities for action emerge, and assessing the distributional consequences of their use.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued in this article that the ILIO does not eliminate the agency of small states, and instead reshapes it. To grasp this reshaping, small-state studies must leave behind definitions of 'smallness' based on attributes and fragmented interpretations that isolate either material weakness or ideational positioning. The key analytical shift is from small states as fixed units to asymmetrical relationships within which smaller actors are constituted, enabled, constrained and valued. The described shift preserves the field's central achievements – from classical debates on the vulnerability and behaviour of weak states to more recent work on shelter, status, hedging and resilience – whilst situating them within a relational ontology which makes their conditions of possibility explicit.

Its (meta-)theoretical contribution is to connect conditioned agency, practical mediation and the selective constitution of state capacities. The framework treats practices as the means by which real asymmetrical relations are reproduced or transformed, without reducing those relations to their immediate enactment. It also distinguishes the availability of a capacity, its authorised exercise and its consequences. These distinctions make it possible to examine why similar external positions can generate different courses of action, and why apparently successful state strategies may distribute benefits and costs unevenly.

A further implication concerns the articulation of external relations and internal state selectivities. Their correspondence should not be presumed. Drawing selectively on Althusser's materialism of the encounter (2006, 163–74), their conjunction may be understood as contingent, sometimes stabilising and acquiring durable effects, sometimes failing to take hold. This is an opening for further research, not a claim that aleatory materialism and critical realism are fully reconciled. The proposed articulation rejects a guaranteed historical outcome

without abandoning causal explanation or the reality of emergent structures.

The main contribution is thus theoretical, yet with clear analytical implications. The capacity of small states to act should no longer be regarded as a fixed quantity stemming from weak capabilities, nor as a residual exception to structural constraints. It must be analysed as relationally conditioned and unevenly distributed agency within historically structured fields of asymmetry. Once this shift is made, the central question ceases to be whether small states have agency. A more productive question becomes how their agency is structured, via which practices it is exercised, in what conditions it reproduces or transforms asymmetry, and for whom security, influence and transformation are ultimately produced.

FUNDING

This article is the result of research conducted within the Research Programme Group "Slovenia and its actors in international relations and European integration" (P5-0177) financed by ARIS – the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

DATA AVAILABILITY

No new research data were generated.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbott, Kenneth W., and Duncan Snidal. 2000. "Hard and Soft Law in International Governance". *International Organization* 54 (3): 421–56.

Abt, Clark C., and Karl W. Deutsch. 1993. "Basic Problem of Small Countries". In *Kleinstaat: Grundsätzliche und aktuelle Probleme*, edited by Arno Waschkuhn, 19–30. Verlag der Liechtensteinischen Akademischen Gesellschaft.

Adler, Emanuel. 1997. "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics". *European Journal of International Relations* 3 (3): 319–63.

Adler, Emanuel, and Vincent Pouliot. 2011a. "International Practices". *International Theory* 3 (1): 1–36.

Adler, Emanuel, and Vincent Pouliot, eds. 2011b. *International Practices*. Cambridge University Press.

Adler-Nissen, Rebecca. 2015. "Conclusion: Relationalism or Why Diplomats Find International Relations Theory Strange". In *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*, edited by Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot and Iver B. Neumann, 284–308. Cambridge University Press.

Adler-Nissen, Rebecca. 2025. "Practices". In *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Sociology*, edited by Stacie Goddard, George Lawson and Ole Jacob Sending, 177–98. Oxford University Press.

Akram, Sadiya. 2023. *Bourdieu, Habitus and Field: A Critical Realist Approach*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Althusser, Louis. 2006. *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–1987.* Edited by François Matheron and Olivier Corpet. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian. Verso.

Amon Prodnik, Jernej. 2014. *Protislovja komuniciranja: h kritiki poblagovljenja v politični ekonomiji komuniciranja* [Contradictions of Communication: Towards a Critique of Commodification in the Political Economy of Communication]. University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences Publishing House.

Amstrup, Niels. 1976. "The Perennial Problem of Small States: A Survey of Research Efforts". *Cooperation and Conflict* 11 (3): 163–82.

Anghie, Antony. 2016. "Imperialism and International Legal Theory". In *The Oxford Handbook of the Theory of International Law*, edited by Anne Orford, Florian Hoffmann and Martin Clark, 156–72. Oxford University Press.

Arbeiter, Jana, Maja Bučar, and Boštjan Udovič. 2019. "Slovenian Development Cooperation and Commercial Diplomacy: Twins or Rivals?". *Teorija in praksa* 56 (Special Issue): 454–71.

Armstrong, Harvey W., and Robert Read. 1998. "Trade and Growth in Small States: The Impact of Global Trade Liberalisation". *The World Economy* 21 (4): 563–85.

Aryal, Saroj Kumar, and Manish Jung Pulami. 2026. "Dispersed Agency in Global Politics: Reimagining Small States in the Post-International Era". *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*. Published online 17 January. https://doi.org/10.1177/03043754261418573.

Baehr, Peter R. 1975. "Small States: A Tool for Analysis?". *World Politics* 27 (3): 456–66.

Bailes, Alyson J. K. 2014. "Societal Security and Small States". In *Small States and International Security: Europe and Beyond*, edited by Clive Archer, Alyson J. K. Bailes and Anders Wivel, 66–79. Routledge.

Baillie, Sasha. 1998. "A Theory of Small State Influence in the European Union". *Journal of International Relations and Development* 1 (3/4): 195–219.

Baldacchino, Godfrey. 2018. "Mainstreaming the Study of Small States and Territories". *Small States & Territories* 1 (1): 3–16.

Baldacchino, Godfrey, ed. 2023. *The Success of Small States in International Relations: Mice That Roar?* Routledge.

Baldacchino, Godfrey, and Anders Wivel. 2020. "Small States: Concepts and Theories". In *Handbook on the Politics of Small States*, edited by Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel, 2–19. Edward Elgar.

Bebler, Anton. 1998. "Security Policy of a Small Central-European Candidate for the Enlarged EU: Slovenia". In *Small States inside and outside the European Union: Interests and Policies*, edited by Laurent Goetschel, 125–37. Kluwer.

Benko, Vlado. 1969. "Majhne in srednje države v svetovni politiki" [Small and medium-sized states in world politics]. *Teorija in praksa* 6 (2): 183–94.

Benko, Vlado. 1992. "The Position and the Role of Small States in the International Community: The Case of Slovenia". Heidelberg: Pan-European Conference on International Relations (ECPR, SG on IR), 16–20 September.

Benko, Vlado. 1997. *Znanost o mednarodnih odnosih* [The Science of International Relations]. University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences Publishing House.

Beyer, Jessica. 2006. "Annotated Bibliography". In *Small States in International Relations*, edited by Christine Ingebritsen, Iver B. Neumann, Sieglinde Gstöhl and Jessica Beyer, 293–318. University of Washington Press and University of Iceland Press.

Bhaskar, Roy. [1975]2008. *A Realist Theory of Science*. London and New York: Routledge.
Bhaskar, Roy. [1979]1998. *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*. Routledge.
Bhaskar, Roy. 1986. *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*. Verso.
Bhaskar, Roy. 1993. *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*. Verso.
Bhaskar, Roy. 1994. *Plato Etc.: The Problems of Philosophy and Their Resolution*. Verso.
Bhaskar, Roy. 2016. *Enlightened Common Sense: The Philosophy of Critical Realism*. Edited with a preface by Mervyn Hartwig. Routledge.
Björkdahl, Annika. 2008. "Norm Advocacy: A Small State Strategy to Influence the EU". *Journal of European Public Policy* 15 (1): 135–54.
Bohle, Dorothee, and Wade Jacoby. 2017. "Lean, Special, or Consensual? Vulnerability and External Buffering in the Small States of East-Central Europe". *Comparative Politics* 49 (2): 191–212.
Bojinović Fenko, Ana. 2009. *Sooblikovanje in sovplivanje zunanje politike držav in regionalne strukture v kontekstu procesa regionalizacije v Sredozemlju* [The Mutual Constitution and Reciprocal Influence of States' Foreign Policies and Regional Structure in the Context of Regionalisation in the Mediterranean]. PhD diss., University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences.
Bojinović Fenko, Ana, and Marko Lovec. 2015. "From a Good to a Poor Student: The De-Europeanisation of Slovenian Foreign Policy in the Light of (European) Economic and Financial Crisis". *Études helléniques / Hellenic Studies* 23 (1): 111–40.
Bojinović Fenko, Ana, and Jure Požgan. 2014. "Regionalisation of Slovenian Foreign Policy: Escape from the Balkans, Return to the Western Balkans". *Studia Historica Slovenica* 14 (1): 55–73.
Bojinović Fenko, Ana, and Zlatko Šabič. 2017. "Slovenia's Foreign Policy Opportunities and Constraints: The Analysis of an Interplay of Foreign Policy Environments". *Croatian International Relations Review* 23 (79): 41–72.
Bourdieu, Pierre. 1989. "Social Space and Symbolic Power". *Sociological Theory* 7 (1): 14–25.
Brglez, Milan. 1997. "Understanding and explaining small states: Realist perspectives within international relations". ECPR Workshop on Small States in the Transforming European System, 27 February – 4 March.
Brglez, Milan. 2001. "Reconsidering Wendt's Meta-theory: Blending Scientific Realism with Social Constructivism". *Journal of International Relations and Development* 4 (4): 339–62.
Brglez, Milan. 2002. "NATO Enlargement and Slovenia: Interpreting, Mapping and Constructing International Relations Perspectives". In *Small States in the Post-Cold War World: Slovenia and NATO Enlargement*, edited by Zlatko Šabič and Charles Bukowski, 25–52. Praeger.
Brglez, Milan. 2005. "A New International Role for Small(er) States? Lessons Learned from Small State's Research for Contemporary Diagnosis, Prognosis, Therapy". Paper presented as a keynote speech at CEPSA Annual Conference.
Brglez, Milan. 2008. *Filozofija družbenih ved v znanosti o mednarodnih odnosih: od kritike političnega realizma h kritičnemu ontološkemu realizmu* [Philosophy of Social Sciences in International Relations: From Criticism of Political Realism towards Critical Ontological Realism]. University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences Publishing House.
Brglez, Milan. 2011. "K slovenskim diplomatskim študijam" [Towards Slovenian Diplomatic Studies]. *Teorija in praksa* 48 (3): 545–61.

Brglez, Milan. 2021. "Očrt 'znanstvenosti' v znanosti o mednarodnih odnosih" [An Outline of 'Scientificity' in the Science of International Relations]. In *60 let študija in raziskovanja mednarodnih odnosov na Fakulteti za družbene vede* [60 years of Study and Research into International Relations at the Faculty of Social Sciences], edited by Bojko Bučar, 11–36. University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences Publishing House.

Brglez, Milan. 2022. "Prolegomena: kritično ovrednotenje, kontekstualna teoretična aktualizacija ter povabilo k ponovnemu branju znanstvenega opusa profesorja Vlada Benka" [Prolegomena: A Critical Assessment, Contextual Theoretical Reappraisal, and an Invitation to Reread the Scholarly Oeuvre of Professor Vlado Benko]. In *Vlado Benko: Sociologija in teorija mednarodnih odnosov* [Vlado Benko: Sociology and Theory of International Relations], edited by Niko Toš and Milan Brglez, 15–41. University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences Publishing House.

Brglez, Milan. 2026. "International Law- or Rules-Based International Order? The Politics of International Law in Comparative Perspective". *Journal of Comparative Politics* 19 (2): 93–126. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20969965.

Briguglio, Lino, ed. 2018. *Handbook of Small States: Economic, Social and Environmental Issues*. Routledge.

Briguglio, Lino, Michael Briguglio, Sheila Bunwaree, and Claire Slatter, eds. 2023. *Handbook of Civil Society and Social Movements in Small States*. Routledge.

Briguglio, Lino, Gordon Cordina, Nadia Farrugia, and Stephanie Vella. 2006. "Conceptualising and Measuring Economic Resilience". In *Building the Economic Resilience of Small States*, edited by Lino Briguglio, Gordon Cordina and E. J. Kisanga, 265–87. Formatek.

Browning, Christopher S. 2006. "Small, Smart and Salient? Rethinking Identity in the Small States Literature". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19 (4): 669–84.

Bučar, Bojko, and Primož Šterbenc. 2002. "Relations between Large and Small States in a Multilateral Context: A Case Study of U.S.-Slovenian Relations Concerning NATO". In *Small States in the Post-Cold War World: Slovenia and NATO Enlargement*, edited by Zlatko Šabič and Charles Bukowski, 103–28. Praeger.

Butler, Petra, and Caroline Morris, eds. 2017. *Small States in a Legal World*. Springer.

Calleya, Stephen. 2016. "Developing States Diplomacy". In *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy*, edited by Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr and Paul Sharp, 423–34. SAGE.

Česnakas, Giedrius, and Justinas Juozaitis, eds. 2023. *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security: In the Shadow of Power*. Routledge.

Chimni, B. S. 2004. "International Institutions Today: An Imperial Global State in the Making". *European Journal of International Law* 15 (1): 1–37.

Christmas-Møller, Wilhelm. 1983. "Some Thoughts on the Scientific Applicability of the Small State Concept: A Research History and a Discussion". In *Small States in Europe and Dependence*, edited by Otmar Höll, 35–53. Westview.

Collier, Andrew. 1994. *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy*. Verso.

Cooper, Andrew F., and Timothy M. Shaw. 2009. "The Diplomacies of Small States at the Start of the Twenty-first Century: How Vulnerable? How Resilient?". In *The Diplomacies of Small States: Between Vulnerability and Resilience*, edited by Andrew F. Cooper and Timothy M. Shaw, 1–20. Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan.

Corbett, Jack, Yi-chong Xu, and Patrick Weller. 2019. "Norm Entrepreneurship and Diffusion 'from Below' in International Organisations: How the Competent Performance of Vulnerability Generates Benefits for Small States". *Review of International Studies* 45 (4): 647–68.

Crowards, Tom. 2002. "Defining the Category of 'Small' States". *Journal of International Development* 14: 143–79.

Davenport, Andrew. 2020. "Multiplicity: Anarchy in the Mirrors of Sociology". *Globalizations* 17 (3): 532–45.

de Carvalho, Benjamin, and Iver B. Neumann. 2015. "Introduction: Small States and Status". In *Small State Status Seeking: Norway's Quest for International Standing*, edited by Benjamin de Carvalho and Iver B. Neumann, 1–21. Routledge.

Deitelhoff, Nicole, and Linda Wallbott. 2012. "Beyond Soft Balancing: Small States and Coalition-Building in the ICC and Climate Negotiations". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25 (3): 345–66.

Dépelteau, François, ed. 2018. *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Diamond, Larry. 2021. "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes". *Democratization* 28 (1): 22–42.

Donati, Pierpaolo. 2015. "Manifesto for a Critical Realist Relational Sociology". *International Review of Sociology* 25 (1): 86–109.

Donati, Pierpaolo, and Margaret S. Archer. 2015. *The Relational Subject*. Cambridge University Press.

Drieschova, Alena, Christian Bueger, and Ted Hopf, eds. 2022. *Conceptualizing International Practices: Directions for the Practice Turn in International Relations*. Cambridge University Press.

Dunne, Timothy. 1995. "The Social Construction of International Society". *European Journal of International Relations* 1 (3): 367–89.

East, Maurice A. 1973. "Size and Foreign Policy Behavior: A Test of Two Models". *World Politics* 25 (4): 556–76.

Ejdus, Filip. 2017. "'Not a Heap of Stones': Material Environments and Ontological Security in International Relations". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 30 (1): 23–43.

Ejdus, Filip, and Tijana Rečević. 2021. "Ontological Insecurity as an Emergent Phenomenon: Bottom-Up Securitization of Migration in Serbia". *European Psychologist* 26 (1): 29–44.

Elman, Miriam Fendius. 1995. "The Foreign Policies of Small States: Challenging Neorealism in Its Own Backyard". *British Journal of Political Science* 25 (2): 171–217.

Emirbayer, Mustafa. 1997. "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology". *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (2): 281–317.

Emirbayer, Mustafa, and Ann Mische. 1998. "What Is Agency?". *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (4): 962–1023.

Eriksson, Jacob. 2020. "Mediation by Small States: Norway and Sweden in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict". In *Handbook on the Politics of Small States*, edited by Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel, 207–21. Edward Elgar.

Fluck, Mathew. 2017. *The Concept of Truth in International Relations Theory: Critical Thought Beyond Post-Positivism*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, Michel. 1982. "The Subject and Power". *Critical Inquiry* 8 (4): 777–95.

Fox, Annette Baker. 1959. *The Power of Small States: Diplomacy in World War II*. University of Chicago Press.

Fromm, Nicolas. 2019. *Constructivist Niche Diplomacy: Qatar's Middle East Diplomacy as an Illustration of Small State Norm Crafting*. Springer VS.

Galal, Abdelraouf Mostafa. 2020. "External Behavior of Small States in Light of Theories of International Relations". *Review of Economics and Political Science* 5 (1): 38–56.

Go, Julian, and Daniel H. Nexon. 2025. "What Is Relationalism?". In *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Sociology*, edited by Stacie Goddard, George Lawson and Ole Jacob Sending, 31–62. Oxford University Press.

Gourevitch, Peter. 1978. "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics". *International Organization* 32 (4): 881–912.

Guzzini, Stefano. 1993. "Structural Power: The Limits of Neorealist Power Analysis". *International Organization* 47 (3): 443–78.

Guzzini, Stefano. 2012. "The Ambivalent 'Diffusion of Power' in Global Governance". In *The Diffusion of Power in Global Governance: International Political Economy Meets Foucault*, edited by Stefano Guzzini and Iver B. Neumann, 1–37. Palgrave Macmillan.

Guzzini, Stefano. 2013. "Liberal International Order". In *Liberal World Orders*, edited by Tim Dunne and Trine Flockhart, 247–56. Proceedings of the British Academy 190. Oxford University Press.

Guzzini, Stefano. 2017. "Power and Cause". *Journal of International Relations and Development* 20 (4): 737–59.

Guzzini, Stefano, and Jimmy Casas Klausen. 2025. "Power in International Political Sociology". In *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Sociology*, edited by Stacie Goddard, George Lawson and Ole Jacob Sending, 661–93. Oxford University Press.

Guzzini, Stefano, and Anna Leander. 2001. "A Social Theory for International Relations: An Appraisal of Alexander Wendt's Theoretical and Disciplinary Synthesis". *Journal of International Relations and Development* 4 (4): 316–38.

Handel, Michael I. 1981. *Weak States in the International System*. London: Frank Cass.

Haxhiraj, Elmas. 2026. "Small-State Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans: Continuity and Change in Albania's Euro-Atlantic and Regional Strategy". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. Published online 22 July. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2026.2701994.

Hey, Jeanne A. K., ed. 2003. *Small States in World Politics: Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior*. Lynne Rienner.

Hočevar, Marko, Tibor Rutar, and Marko Lovec, eds. 2023. *The Neoliberal World Order in Crisis, and Beyond*. University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences Publishing House.

Hoffmann, Florian. 2016. "International Legalism and International Politics". In *The Oxford Handbook of the Theory of International Law*, edited by Anne Orford, Florian Hoffmann and Martin Clark, 954–84. Oxford University Press.

Hollis, Martin, and Steve Smith. [1990]1991. *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*. Clarendon.

Ikenberry, G. John. 2018. "The End of Liberal International Order?". *International Affairs* 94 (1): 7–23.

Ish-Shalom, Piki, Markus Kornprobst, and Vincent Pouliot, eds. 2021. *Theorizing World Orders: Cognitive Evolution and Beyond*. Cambridge University Press.

Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus, and Daniel H. Nexon. 1999. "Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics". *European Journal of International Relations* 5 (3): 291–332.

Jackson, Sarita. 2012. "Small States and Compliance Bargaining in the WTO: An Analysis of the Antigua–US Gambling Services Case". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25 (3): 367–85.

Jahn, Beate. 2018. "Liberal Internationalism: Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects". *International Affairs* 94 (1): 43–61.

Jaklič, Andreja. 2024. "Has Twenty Years of Slovenia's EU Membership Boosted Competitiveness and Foreign Direct Investments?". In *Slovenia and the EU: 20 Years of Membership in Perspective*, edited by Michael Kaeding and Boštjan Udovič, 9–16. Springer.

Jessop, Bob. 2007. *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach*. Polity.

Jessop, Bob. 2016. *The State: Past, Present, and Future*. Polity.

Joensen, Tómas, and Ian Taylor, eds. 2021. *Small States and the European Migrant Crisis: Politics and Governance*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Joseph, Jonathan, and Milja Kurki. 2018. "The Limits of Practice: Why Realism Can Complement IR's Practice Turn". *International Theory* 10 (1): 71–97.

Joseph, Jonathan, and Colin Wight, eds. 2010. *Scientific Realism and International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Katzenstein, Peter J. 1985. *Small States in World Markets: Industrial Policy in Europe*. Cornell University Press.

Katzenstein, Peter J. 2003. "Small States and Small States Revisited". *New Political Economy* 8 (1): 9–30.

Kaul, Nitasha. 2023. "Subalternizing Geopolitics: Bhutan as a Small Himalayan State". *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* 9: 11–18.

Kavalski, Emilian, and Karolina Pomorska. 2026. "Coming out of the Periphery? The Curious Case of the (Vanishing) Actorness of Central and Eastern Europe in World Affairs". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 39 (5): 692–707. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2026.2724192.

Keohane, Robert O. 1969. "Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics". *International Organization* 23 (2): 291–310.

Keohane, Robert O. 1971. "The Big Influence of Small Allies". *Foreign Policy* 2 (Spring): 161–82.

Knudsen, Olav F. 2002. "Small States, Latent and Extant: Towards a General Perspective". *Journal of International Relations and Development* 5 (2): 182–98.

Koff, Harlan, and Thomas Kolnberger. 2024. "Introduction: Agency, Security, and Governance of Small States in a Fast-Changing World". In *Agency, Security and Governance of Small States: A Global Perspective*, edited by Thomas Kolnberger and Harlan Koff, 1–10. Routledge.

Koskenniemi, Martti. 2005. *From Apology to Utopia: The Structure of International Legal Argument – Reissue with a new Epilogue*. Cambridge University Press.

Kozera, Łukasz. 2025. "Strategies of Asymmetric Diplomacy of Small States in a Multipolar World". *Foreign Affairs* (Ukraine) 35 (5): 18–28. https://doi.org/10.59214/ua.fa/5.2025.18.

Kurki, Milja. 2008. *Causation in International Relations: Reclaiming Causal Analysis*. Cambridge University Press.

Kurki, Milja. 2020. *International Relations in a Relational Universe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kurki, Milja, and Justin Rosenberg. 2020. "Multiplicity: A New Common Ground for International Theory?". *Globalizations* 17 (3): 397–403.

Kurki, Milja, and Adriana Sinclair. 2010. "Hidden in Plain Sight: Constructivist Treatment of Social Context and Its Limitations". *International Politics* 47 (1): 1–25.

Lange [Kajnč], Sabina. 2006. *Razumevanje evropske zunanje politike z vidika dihotomije agent–struktura* [Understanding European Foreign Policy from the Perspective of the Agent–Structure Dichotomy]. PhD diss., University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences.

Lange, Sabina, and Matej Marn. 2024. "Twenty Years in the EU (CFSP): From 'Now What'? To Finding a Distinct Voice for Slovenia's Foreign Policy". In *Slovenia and the EU: 20 Years of Membership in Perspective*, edited by Michael Kaeding and Boštjan Udovič, 55–60. Springer.

Lange, Sabina, and Marjan Svetličič. 2024. "Slovenia's First and Second EU Council Presidency: Lessons Learnt to Enhance the Benefits of EU Membership". *Acta Histriae* 32 (3): 367–90.

Leigh, Joseph. 2021. "Geoculture and Unevenness: Occidentalism in the History of Uneven and Combined Development". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34 (2): 186–206.

Long, Tom. 2017. "It's Not the Size, It's the Relationship: From 'Small States' to Asymmetry". *International Politics* 54 (2): 144–60.

Long, Tom. 2022. *A Small State's Guide to Influence in World Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Lovato, Marianna, and Karolina Pomorska. 2026. "Preserving the 'Pecking Order' in Europe's Diplomatic Hierarchies: Comparing the Place of Central Eastern Europeans in the EU and NATO". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 39 (5): 736–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2026.2698112.

Lovec, Marko. 2013. *Ontološka realistična analiza reform Skupne kmetijske politike Evropske unije* [An Ontological Realist Analysis of Reforms of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy]. PhD diss., University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences.

Lovec, Marko, and Marjan Svetličič. 2019. "Saving Liberal Internationalism from a Liberal World Order in Crisis". *Teorija in praksa* 56 (Special Issue): 356–71.

Luša, Đana, and Petra Mijić. 2012. "Vanjska politika malih država – normativna moć kao faktor utjecaja u međunarodnim odnosima" [Foreign Policy of Small States – Normative Power as a Factor of Influence in International Relations]. *Političke perspektive* 2 (3): 39–65.

Maass, Matthias. 2009. "The Elusive Definition of the Small State". *International Politics* 46 (1): 65–83.

Maass, Matthias. 2017. *Small States in World Politics: The Story of Small State Survival, 1648–2016*. Manchester University Press.

Maass, Matthias. 2020. "Small States: Surviving, Perishing and Proliferating Through History". In *Handbook on the Politics of Small States*, edited by Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel, 20–37. Edward Elgar.

Magid, Jacob. 2026. "Full text: Charter of Trump's Board of Peace". *The Times of Israel*, 18 January 2026. https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-charter-of-trumps-board-of-peace/.

Marsden, Richard. 1999. *The Nature of Capital: Marx after Foucault*. Routledge.

Marx, Karl. [1857/58]1985. *Kritika politične ekonomije 1857/58* [Grundrisse]. METI I/8. Delavska enotnost.

Michalski, Anna, Douglas Brommesson, and Ann-Marie Ekengren. 2024. "Small States and the Dilemma of Geopolitics: Role Change in Finland and Sweden". *International Affairs* 100 (1): 139–57.

Moisio, Sami. 2022. "Geopolitics of Explaining Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Challenge of Small States". *Political Geography* 97: 102683. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102683.

Montana, Jasper. 2022. "Mediating Sovereignty for the Environment in the British Overseas Territories". *Small States & Territories* 5 (1): 103–20.

Mouritzen, Hans. 1983. "Defensive Acquiescence: Making the Best of Dependence". In *Small States in Europe and Dependence*, edited by Otmar Höll, 239–62. Westview.

Mouritzen, Hans. 1991. "Tension between the Strong, and the Strategies of the Weak". *Journal of Peace Research* 28 (2): 217–30.

Mouritzen, Hans. 1998. *Theory and Reality of International Politics*. Ashgate.

Mouritzen, Hans, and Anders Wivel, eds. 2005. *The Geopolitics of Euro-Atlantic Integration*. Routledge.

Neumann, Iver B. 2002. "Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy". *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 31 (3): 627–51.

Neumann, Iver B. 2024. "The Graded Agency of Small States". In *Agency, Security and Governance of Small States: A Global Perspective*, edited by Thomas Kolnberger and Harlan Koff, 49–62. Routledge.

Neumann, Iver B., and Sieglinde Gstöhl. 2006. "Lilliputians in Gulliver's World?". In *Small States in International Relations*, edited by Christine Ingebritsen, Iver B. Neumann, Sieglinde Gstöhl and Jessica Beyer, 3–36. University of Washington Press and University of Iceland Press.

Norrie, Alan. 2010. *Dialectic and Difference: Dialectical Critical Realism and the Grounds of Justice*. Routledge.

Ollman, Bertell. 2003. *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*. University of Illinois Press.

Panke, Diana. 2012a. "Dwarfs in International Negotiations: How Small States Make Their Voices Heard". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25 (3): 313–28.

Panke, Diana. 2012b. "Being Small in a Big Union: Punching Above Their Weights? How Small States Prevailed in the Vodka and the Pesticides Cases". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25 (3): 329–44.

Panke, Diana, and Baldur Thorhallsson. 2024. "Foreign Policy of Small States". In *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*, edited by Juliet Kaarbo and Cameron G. Thies, 501–18. Oxford University Press.

Parmar, Inderjeet. 2018. "The US-Led Liberal Order: Imperialism by Another Name?". *International Affairs* 94 (1): 151–72.

Patomäki, Heikki. 1991. "Concepts of 'Action', 'Structure' and 'Power' in 'Critical Social Realism': A Positive and Reconstructive Critique". *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 21 (2): 221–50.

Patomäki, Heikki. 2002. *After International Relations: Critical Realism and the (Re)Construction of World Politics*. Routledge.

Patomäki, Heikki. 2017. "Praxis, Politics and the Future: A Dialectical Critical Realist Account of World Causation". *Journal of International Relations and Development* 20 (4): 805–25.

Patomäki, Heikki. 2023. *World Statehood: The Future of World Politics*. Springer.

Patomäki, Heikki, and Jamie Morgan. 2023a. "World Politics, Critical Realism and the Future of Humanity: An Interview with Heikki Patomäki, Part 1". *Journal of Critical Realism* 22 (3): 562–603.

Patomäki, Heikki, and Jamie Morgan. 2023b. "World Politics, Critical Realism and the Future of Humanity: An Interview with Heikki Patomäki, Part 2". *Journal of Critical Realism* 22 (4): 720–66.

Patomäki, Heikki, and Colin Wight. 2000. "After Postpositivism?: The Promises of Critical Realism". *International Studies Quarterly* 44 (2): 213–37.

Pedi, Revecca, and Anders Wivel. 2024. "The Power (Politics) of the Weak Revisited: Realism and the Study of Small-state Foreign Policy". In *Agency, Security and Governance of Small States: A Global Perspective*, edited by Thomas Kolnberger and Harlan Koff, 13–28. Routledge.

Putnam, Robert D. 1988. "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games". *International Organization* 42 (3): 427–60.

Radoman, Jelena. 2018. "Small States in World Politics: State of the Art". *Journal of Regional Security* 13 (2): 179–200.

Rickli, Jean-Marc, and Khalid Almezaini. 2017. "Theories of Small States' Foreign and Security Policies and the Gulf States". In *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring*, edited by Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli, 8–30. Routledge.

Rosenberg, Justin. 2020. "Trotsky's Error: Multiplicity and the Secret Origins of Revolutionary Marxism". *Globalizations* 17 (3): 477–97.

Rosenberg, Justin. 2021. "Results and Prospects: An Introduction to the CRIA Special Issue on UCD." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34 (2): 146–63.

Rutar, Tibor. 2016. *Sodobni zagovor historičnega materializma: sociologija, zgodovina, filozofija* [A Contemporary Defence of Historical Materialism: Sociology, History, Philosophy]. Sophia.

Rutar, Tibor. 2017. *Od klasične sociologije k mednarodni historični sociologiji: izvori in narava modernosti* [From Classical Sociology to International Historical Sociology: The Origins and Nature of Modernity]. Ljubljana University Press, Faculty of Arts.

Rutar, Tibor. 2018. *Mikrotemelji in makrovzroki družbenih pojavov: sodobna sociološka metateorija* [Microfoundations and Macro-Level Causes of Social Phenomena: Contemporary Sociological Metatheory]. Ljubljana University Press, Faculty of Arts.

Schindler, Seth, Jessica DiCarlo and Dinesh Paudel. 2022. "The New Cold War and the Rise of the 21st-Century Infrastructure State". *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 47: 331–46.

Selg, Peeter, and Andreas Ventsel. 2020. *Introducing Relational Political Analysis: Political Semiotics as a Theory and Method*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sending, Ole Jacob, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann, eds. 2015. *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Sinclair, Adriana. 2010. *International Relations Theory and International Law: A Critical Approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Sinclair, Adriana. 2021. "Why We Should See International Law as a Structure: Unpicking International Law's Ontology and Agency". *International Relations* 35 (2): 216–35.

Strating, Rebecca. 2020. "Small Power Hedging in an Era of Great-Power Politics: Southeast Asian Responses to China's Pursuit of Energy Security". *Asian Studies Review* 44 (1): 97–116.

Sutton, Paul. 2011. "The Concept of Small States in the International Political Economy". *The Round Table* 100 (413): 141–54.

Šabič, Zlatko. 2002. "Small States Aspiring for NATO Membership: Some Factors Influencing the Accession Process". In *Small States in the Post-Cold War World: Slovenia and NATO Enlargement*, edited by Zlatko Šabič and Charles Bukowski, 1–24. Praeger.

Šabič, Zlatko, Ana Bojinović Fenko, and Petra Roter. 2016. "Small States and Parliamentary Diplomacy: Slovenia and the Mediterranean". *Mediterranean Quarterly* 27 (4): 42–60.

Šabič, Zlatko, and Milan Brglez. 2002. "The National Identity of Post-Communist Small States in the Process of Accession to the European Union: The Case of Slovenia". *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 35 (1): 67–84.

The White House. 2025. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC.

Thorhallsson, Baldur. 2012. "Small States in the UN Security Council: Means of Influence?". *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 7: 135–60.

Thorhallsson, Baldur. 2018. "Studying Small States: A Review". *Small States & Territories* 1 (1): 17–34.

Thorhallsson, Baldur, and Alyson J. K. Bailes. 2016. "Small State Diplomacy". In *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy*, edited by Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr and Paul Sharp, 294–307. SAGE.

Thorhallsson, Baldur, and Anders Wivel. 2006. "Small States in the European Union: What Do We Know and What Would We Like to Know?". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19 (4): 651–68.

Timilsana, Binod Khanda. 2024. "Soft Power and Small States: A Theoretical Discussion". *Journal of Political Science* 24: 139–58.

Udovič, Boštjan, and Marjan Svetličič. 2007. "Majhne države v novih teorijah mednarodne trgovine" [Small States in New Theories of International Trade]. *Teorija in praksa* 44 (1/2): 29–48.

United States Department of War. 2026. *2026 National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age of America*. Washington, DC.

Vandenberghe, Frédéric. 1999. "'The Real Is Relational': An Epistemological Analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's Generative Structuralism". *Sociological Theory* 17 (1): 32–67.

Vangeli, Anastas, Ana Bojinović Fenko, and Faris Kočan. 2026. "Doomscrollers by Day, Gamers by Night: Patching Digital Sovereignty in the Western Balkan States amid US-China Technological Rivalry". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 34 (2): 387–409.

Väyrynen, Raimo. 1983. "Small States in Different Theoretical Traditions of International Relations Research". In *Small States in Europe and Dependence*, edited by Otmar Höll, 83–104. Westview.

Veenendaal, Wouter P., and Jack Corbett. 2015. "Why Small States Offer Important Answers to Large Questions". *Comparative Political Studies* 48 (4): 527–49.

Vital, David. 1967. *The Inequality of States: A Study of the Small Power in International Relations*. Clarendon Press.

Vital, David. 1971. *The Survival of Small States: Studies in Small Power/Great Power Conflict*. Oxford University Press.

Weiss, Tomáš. 2026. "Specialisation (Un)recognised: Human Rights and Western Balkans in Czech Foreign Policy". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 39 (5): 784–802. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2025.2574688.

Wendt, Alexander. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Wight, Colin. 2006. *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology*. Cambridge University Press.

Wivel, Anders. 2021. "The Grand Strategies of Small States". In *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, edited by Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs, 490–505. Oxford University Press.

Wivel, Anders. 2025. "Why Small States Offer Answers to Important Questions in International Relations: Rethinking Power and Agency". *Small States & Territories* 8 (1): 26–29.

Wivel, Anders, Alyson J. K. Bailes, and Clive Archer. 2014. "Setting the Scene: Small States and International Security". In *Small States and International Security: Europe and Beyond*, edited by Clive Archer, Alyson J. K. Bailes and Anders Wivel, 3–25. Routledge.

Wivel, Anders, and Christine Ingebritsen. 2019. "Why Shelter Theory Matters: Ramifications for International Relations and Small State Studies". In *Small States and Shelter Theory: Iceland's External Affairs*, edited by Baldur Thorhallsson, 205–13. Routledge.

Wivel, Anders, and Baldur Thorhallsson. 2018. "Brexit and Small States in Europe: Hedging, Hiding or Seeking Shelter?". In *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of Brexit*, edited by Patrick Diamond, Peter Nedergaard and Ben Rosamond, 266–77. Routledge.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2011. *Poskusiti znova – spodleteti bolje* [Try Again – Fail Better]. Edited by Peter Klepec. Translated by Simon Hajdini and Lidija Šumah. Cankarjeva založba.

ONTOLOŠKO PROUČEVANJE ZMOŽNOSTI DELOVANJA MALIH DRŽAV V NELIBERALNEM MEDNARODNEM REDU

Povzetek. *Članek trdi, da neliberalni mednarodni red ne odpravlja zmožnosti delovanja malih držav, temveč se ta zmožnost preoblikuje v okviru asimetričnih materialnih, institucionalnih, idejnih in zgodovinskih mednarodnih (družbenih) odnosov. Najprej rekonstruira genealogijo študij malih držav, nato Longov relacijski obrat prebere kot most od atributivnih definicij malih držav k njihovi pogojeni zmožnosti delovanja ter ga razširi z (dialektično) kritično realističnim okvirom. Zunanjepolitične in diplomatske prakse posredujejo med asimetričnimi mednarodnimi odnosi in notranje konstituiranimi zmožnostmi države ter reproducirajo ali preoblikujejo pogoje delovanja. Zato mora analiza malih držav odgovoriti na vprašanje, kako, pod kakšnimi pogoji in za koga se v mednarodnih odnosih oblikujeta varnost in vpliv ter potekajo procesi transformacije.*

Ključni pojmi: *(dialektični) kritični realizem, diplomacija, neliberalni mednarodni red, prakse, relacijski obrat, študije malih držav, zmožnost delovanja.*