

# MICROSTATES AS MODERN PROTECTED STATES:

*Towards a New Definition  
of Micro-Statehood*

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## ABSTRACT

The last decades have been marked by an increase in academic interest in the study of small political entities. Yet, despite countless publications, there is still no agreed or satisfactory definition of what constitutes small size in the politico-economic context. The situation is particularly problematic when it comes to the study of the smallest of polities, the microstates. The existing definitions of microstates are hampered by inconsistency, arbitrariness and lack of clarity. In response to these problems, this paper offers a novel, but historically justified, definition of microstates. It argues that a useful and viable way of looking at microstates could be to see them as modern protected states, i.e. sovereign states that can unilaterally depute certain attributes of sovereignty to larger powers in exchange for benign protection of their political and economic viability. Importantly, microstates' functioning in such institutional relationships is both permitted and necessitated by their real or perceived geographic smallness and significance. The suggested definition offers thus a useful tools for both studying qualitatively unique political entities and analysing the phenomenon of benign protection.

## INTRODUCTION

The political map of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century contains a significant number of very small distinct political entities with defined territories and varying degrees of self-governance. Some of them are independent in the conduct of their domestic and foreign affairs. Others, while sovereign, delegate some of their attributes of sovereignty to bigger neighbour or neighbours. Finally, there are those communities that are formally parts of larger powers and yet have a high degree of autonomy, especially at the domestic level. Even though tiny polities are hardly a novelty in international relations (Sundhaussen 2003; Dommen 1985, p.17), their current multitude and position in international relations and global economy have both fascinated and perplexed historians, sociologists, political scientists and economists (e.g. Benedict 1967; Harden 1985; Hintjens & Newitt 1992; Hobsbawm 1992; Parrish 1990; Reid 1975; Plischke 1977; Catudal 1975).

The desire to understand the phenomenon of politico-economic viability despite severe geographic or demographic constraints has resulted in the usage of an assumingly distinct, albeit not very precise (Warrington 1994), category of very small political entities: the microstates<sup>1</sup>. Presumably, microstates are polities distinctive enough to

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1 This is the currently most popular name for the smallest sovereign polities. Prior to World War Two such terms as "Lilliputian state" or "ministates" were more prevalent. In general, all these terms seem to have been used interchangeably in discussions on the world's smallest political entities. In line with the practice, I will use the three terms interchangeably, with some attention to the historical and academic practice.

merit being treated in separation from both “normal” and “small” states (ibid.). After all, if they were only quantitatively different from other political units, then looking at them in isolation from larger states would make little sense from the point of view of social scientists. For political scientists and economists, it is not merely geographic or demographic smallness in itself that should matter, but whether or not it carries any significant qualitative consequences. In other words, the microstates “as a category of analysis would only be useful in terms of the characteristics of these states and, the relevance of such characteristics to the role they play in the international system” (Mohamed 2002, p.3). As such, any viable definition or concept of microstates must permit a clear identification of *qualitatively* distinct political units whose peculiarity derives from certain geographic and demographic constraints.

Unfortunately, it seems that the existing scholarship on microstates lacks such a definition (Orlow 1995). While scholars appear to agree that a microstate is simply a “very small state”, there is little consensus (Warrington 1994), or even reasoned argument<sup>2</sup>, over what constitutes both “very small” and “state”. Consequently, the current definitions of microstates are hampered by serious problems of inconsistency, arbitrariness, vagueness and inability to meaningfully isolate *qualitatively* distinct political units.

In order to address this issue, this paper will offer a novel, but historically justified, definition of microstates. It will be argued that a useful and viable way of looking at microstates could be to see them as modern protected states, i.e. sovereign states that can unilaterally depute certain attributes of sovereignty to larger powers in exchange for benign protection of their political and economic viability. Importantly, these unique institutional relationships with larger states are both necessitated and permitted by microstates’ real or perceived smallness and geographic insignificance. From this perspective, microstates are not merely very small states, but unique political entities worthy of a focused academic enquiry. This approach to the study of microstates would permit not only to address the lack of “terminological clarity and theoretical coherence” (Sieber 1983) that characterize the current small and micro states scholarships, but also to study both the political phenomenon

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2 As noted by Crowards (2002) regarding the issue of determining what constitutes “small size” in international politics.

of protected statehood and the peculiar politico-economic situation of some of the world's smallest political communities.

A new, comprehensive and qualitative definition of microstates is both needed and long overdue. Without it, studies on very small political units face the problems of not only justifying the selection of their research objects but also making their findings useful and relevant to other researchers. At the same time, it is important to note that the aim of introducing it is not to question or reject the rich body of literature dedicated to studying tiny polities. Instead, the suggested conceptualization of microstates could help to organize and enrich the existing scholarship by offering a method for isolating qualitatively distinct political entities. Doing so would also permit to meaningfully draw clear boundaries between the otherwise often confused categories of sub-national jurisdictions<sup>3</sup>, microstates and larger states.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section offers a brief overview of the history of and reasons behind the current academic interest in small and very small polities. It also discusses the emergence of small states studies and the problems encountered by this discipline with defining “its own subject matter” (Amstrup 1976, p.165). The purpose of this section is to demonstrate the importance and relevance of research on the functioning of small polities, as well to locate the microstates scholarship within a broader discipline with which it shares many of the definitional problems. The second section presents the current approaches to defining microstates as well as their respective shortcomings. Finally, the third part of paper introduces and argues for the adoption of a new definition of microstates.

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3 While most, if not all, of the so-called sub-national jurisdictions are small, their peculiarity and attractiveness to researchers seem to lie in their lack of statehood and continuous existence within their metropolitan structures (e.g. Baldacchino 2008). Consequently, it does not appear as either useful or justified to lump them together with sovereign states into the same analytical category merely because of their shared, and arbitrarily selected, geographic or demographic features. In fact, this has been recognized by some scholars who differentiate between microstates and sub-national jurisdictions, but who at the same time still continue to identify these units on the basis of arbitrary quantitative thresholds (e.g. Grydehøj 2011).

**SMALL STATES IN INTERNATIONAL  
POLITICS AND ACADEMIA**

*The Perplexing Rise of Small States*

The “outburst of cartographic activity” (Herr 1988, p.185) that followed the two World Wars and the wave of decolonisation resulted in the creation of a significant number of small political units. Their proliferation was met with both academic interests and a significant degree of scepticism. After all, the dominant understanding of economic and political viability offered little more than pessimism regarding the continuous survival, not to mention the success, of small political units (Baldacchino 1993; Hobsbawm 1992). While many of the ancient (Alesina 2003) and enlightenment philosophers perceived “the small state as an attractive alternative to the big state, supposed to be absolutistic and centralized (...) the viability of small states was regarded as precarious” (Amstrup 1976, p.162). This perception of vulnerability was further enhanced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the politico-economic success of such large countries as France or Great Britain and the rise of the ideas of nation-states and great powers, made many of the contemporary thinkers and politicians see large size as greatly beneficial from the economic and geopolitical perspectives (Hobsbawm 1992; Amstrup 1976; Neumann & Gstöhl 2004). Consequently, while in the previous centuries “the small state was the norm” (Peterson 2006, p.735) by the 19<sup>th</sup> century even the existence of independent Belgium or Portugal seemed “ridiculous” because of their perceived small size (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 31). Similar attitudes prevailed through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with some authors claiming that small states are

economically and politically inefficient “anachronisms” that could even be seen as “dangerous to peace” because of their attractiveness to “powerful and unscrupulous neighbours” (Catudal 1975, p.187).

And yet, despite the repeated predictions of the demise of small polities (Buffet & Heuser, 1998, p. 15), the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by not only their unprecedented multiplication, but also politico-economic success. In general, it seems that diminutive political entities enjoy today more security, prestige and influence than “at any other time in history” (Hey, 2003, p. 1). Furthermore, contrary to the pessimistic predictions (e.g. Benedict, 1967; Marcy, Scitovsky and Triffin in Robinson, 1960), it is now evident that many of the small and very small sovereign political communities, and even more so the zones of special jurisdiction, can function as well or even better than large national economies (Armstrong & Read, 2000; Balzacchino, 1993; Bray & Fergus, 1986a; Dommen, 1980; Jalan, 1982; Mehmet & Tahiroglu, 2002)<sup>4</sup>. It has been suggested that this phenomenon might be a by-product of a revolution in transport and communication which, coupled with trade liberalisation, theoretically permit small states and other types of political units to provide services, mainly financial, directly to the global economy (e.g. Fossen, 2007; Hobsbawm, 1996; Palan, 2002). While not without merit, such arguments fail to explain why and how diminutive polities *in particular* have been so successful at making a use of the new economic and technological opportunities. After all, the same global changes have not led to an economic development of so many larger political units, most notably in Africa. In fact, it seems that at least some of the tiny polities have even surpassed the old, well-established Western economies in terms of all major economic indicators *per capita* – a development that certainly comes as a surprise to the proponents of various theories asserting that globalisation primarily benefits old capitalist centres (e.g. Simpson, 1990).

These developments have thus resulted in an increase of scholarly interest in diminutive polities and the subsequent emergence of an extensive small states scholarship (for an excellent overview see: Jazbec, 2001, pp. 36–40) centred around the idea that small size is of qualitative significance (Warrington 1994) and that it “may in fact be a

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4 In fact, their overall performance has been so impressive that it has served as an inspiration and justification for countless new separatist movements (Hobsbawm, 1996, pp. 281-282)

source of comparative advantage” (Mehmet & Tahiroglu 2002, p.152).<sup>5</sup> The problem is that, despite decades of academic enquiry, there is still no satisfactory or widely accepted definition of what constitutes small size and which states should be labelled as “small” (Jazbec 2001; Orlow 1995; Sutton & Payne 1993; Neumann & Gstöhl 2004).

#### *How Small is Small?*

From the very beginning, “research on small states in the international system has been hampered by the problem of a definition of its own subject matter, the ‘small state’, and a substantial part of the literature is concerned with this problem. Nevertheless, no satisfactory definition has been presented” (Amstrup 1976, p.165). While the existence of small states does not seem to be questioned, the problem has always been to meaningfully separate them from other analytical categories (Jazbec 2001, p.36). The main reason for this situation has been the very vague nature of the concepts of size and smallness (Amstrup, 1976). In order to determine what constitutes “small”, scholars have suggested a number of approaches ranging from “linking size with some measurable state attributes” (Jazbec 2001, p.39), through defining small states by what they are not, i.e. contrasting them with “great” and “middle” powers (Neumann & Gstöhl 2004, p.4) to declaring smallness purely a matter of perception (Rothstein 1968). All of these approaches have inevitably suffered from the problems of arbitrariness, incoherence and lack of clarity (Armstrong & Read, 2002; Baldacchino, 1998; Bray, 1987; Jazbec, 2001; Srinivasan, 1986; Taylor, 1969; Tönurist, 2010). In effect, the concept of small states remains so “vague and contested” (Sutton, 2011, p.150) that some scholars have even chosen to “avoid the entire problem of definition either because it is irrelevant to them or because it seems impossible to solve” (Amstrup 1976, p.165).

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5 It is worth noting that while the rise in the number of small states as well as in their politico-economic importance began shortly after the World War Two, due to the preoccupation “the emergent bipolarity and the Cold War” it took social scientists a couple of decades to appreciate the importance and peculiarity of this development (Neumann & Gstöhl, 2004, p. 8).

## THE EXISTING APPROACHES TO DEFINING MICROSTATES

Despite the problems with determining what constitutes a small state, the last decades have seen an expansion of the literature dedicated to the study of presumably even more distinct polities, the so-called “microstates”, i.e. “the smallest of the small states” (Neemia 1995, p.4). The most basic definitions of the term microstate suggest that it is simply “a very small state” (Richards 1990, p.40) or one with a size “so small as to invite comment” (Warrington 1994, p.4). The problem is that the meaning of neither “small” nor “state” is unambiguous (ibid.). Consequently, all studies on microstates face the challenge of selecting the appropriate criteria for size and deciding which entities can be called states (Bray 1987). As this section will demonstrate, the efforts to define microstates on the basis of the above composites have been mired with severe problems and limitations, often similar to those hampering the small states scholarship.

### *The Problem of Size*

Quite unsurprisingly, much of the search for a definition of microstates has been

almost exclusively focused on the question of size<sup>6</sup>, i.e. “the independent variable”<sup>7</sup> (Amstrup 1976; Jazbec 2001). It has thus been primarily concerned with determining how small merits the label “micro”. Yet, in order to do so, one must be able to offer a viable way of not only measuring size, but also of drawing a line between micro, small and large. Both of these endeavours can be seen as inherently problematic.

For a start, there are numerous ways of measuring a country’s size. These include: “population, geographical area, economic activity either singly or as composite indices” (Warrington 1994, p.4). Some scholars have argued for combining the above criteria together in order to create a ranking of states based on some composite score where microstates would simply be the states occupying the lowest positions (e.g. Reid, 1975). Such suggestions have been criticised on the grounds that making combined calculations would perhaps be too “cumbersome” and “arbitrary” (Neemia 1995, p.14). In result, more academics have tended instead to select one single “variable as a yardstick in the classification of states according to size” (ibid.). While in some cases territory has been used for this purpose (e.g. George, 2009; Mehmet & Tahiroglu, 2002), it seems that population size has gradually become the most commonly used variable (Neemia 1995) primarily because of its popularity in the previous literature (Crowards 2002, p.143). Yet, while focusing on a single parameter might appear more convenient or reliable, it is also quite problematic. One can argue that countries similar in one geographic or demographic aspect can nevertheless be so different on all others that putting them into one category makes little sense. For instance, Singapore has roughly the same size of territory as Tonga and yet it is difficult to imagine more contrasting states when it comes to such matters as economic performance, military strength and international standing. Similarly, while Iceland has similar population size as Brunei, there is little more that these two countries have in common. Conse-

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6 Some realist scholars, due to their preoccupation with power, seem prefer the term “the possession of power resources” rather than “size” (e.g. Oest & Wivel 2010). However, the two terms effectively refer to the same set of “capabilities such as population, territory or gross domestic product (GDP)” (ibid.).

7 As it was argued by Amstrup (1976) regarding small states, it is perhaps assumed that a satisfactory definition of the independent variable would make it possible to “predict something about dependent variable, viz. the behaviour of [micro] states”.

quently, it is unclear what benefit could be derived from grouping such diverse entities together on the basis of their single shared quantitative feature.

In any case, the problems with determining micro-size are not limited to choosing the right quantitative geographic or demographic attribute(s) for measurement. More importantly, there is little consensus over the issue of which particular quantitative threshold should be used for isolating microstates from larger political units. Some scholars choose to apply very precise quantitative cut-off points to a broad spectrum of indices. For instance, according to Taylor (1969) a microstate is an entity with a land area not larger than 144,822 square kilometres, a GNP smaller than 1,538 million \$ and a population of less than 2,928,000. Others prefer less rigid thresholds and apply them mostly to population size. Yet, even then there are significant differences in the suggested ceilings. While one million inhabitants seems to be the most widely used cut-off point (e.g. Baldacchino, 1993; Boyce & Herr, 2008; Sutton & Payne, 1993) the literature presents many alternative propositions ranging from 100,000 (Sutton 2011, p.145) to 10 million (Parrish, 1990, p. 41). In result, the current literature on microstates is “replete with a multiplicity of population cut-off points” that are not only weakly justified, but that also demonstrate “the lack of consensus among writers and observers of microstates” (Neemia 1995, p.15). In consequence of the above issues much of the microstate scholarship consists of numerous arbitrary and inconsistent definitions of micro-size that differ in both what to measure and at what point to separate the micro from other magnitudes (Dommen 1985, p.10; Warrington 1994, p.4).

Arguably, the broader enquiry into what constitutes small size is hampered by very similar problems. One response to these challenges in the scholarly research on small states has been to argue for rejecting definitions of small size (or small states) “based purely on objective or tangible criteria” (Rothstein quoted in Keohane, 1969, p. 292). What they suggest instead is to consider smallness as a “perceptual problem” (Amstrup 1976, p.166) or “merely a frame of mind, a subjective condition which pervades the mind-set of the actor thus moulding horizons and agendas for action and perception”(Baldacchino, 1993, p. 159). From this perspective, a small state would be one that either perceives itself or is perceived by others as such (Neemia, 1995, pp. 68–69; Geser cited in Neumann & Gstöhl, 2004, p.5). This approach, while not with-

out its own serious limitations<sup>8</sup>, might seem to offer a more justified and viable way of identifying smallness than any method reliant on arbitrary cut-off values. However, when it comes to identifying microstates it becomes inherently problematic. Oest and Wivel (2010, p.432) have rightly pointed out that any definition of smallness based exclusively on perception obscures “the distinction between microstates, small states and middle powers” and as such cannot be useful for isolating microstates from other types of polities.

Against these difficulties, small states scholarship offers yet another solution – a suggestion to focus on the dependent variable, i.e. behaviour, rather than the independent one, i.e. size (for an overview of this approach see: Amstrup, 1976). Arguably, such an approach can permit not only a clearer and more consistent method for identifying smallness but also a way for determining boundaries between different types of small states. The latter can be seen as of particular relevance and importance to the research on microstates. And indeed, the focus on behaviour, or “power projection”(Oest & Wivel 2010), forms a basis of some of the more recent definitions of microstates. To Oest and Wivel (2010, p. 434): “A microstate is a state that is always the weak state in an asymmetric relationship when interacting with another state at the global, regional or sub-regional levels, unless dealing with other microstates.”<sup>9</sup> By this definition, microstates appear as qualitatively, and not merely quantitatively, distinct units. However, this approach is also mired with several challenges. From a practical point of view, determining which states could be labelled as always weak is not an easy task, especially if one is concerned with actual power *projection* and not merely with identifying any objective power resources. The complexity of inter-state relations and the issue-specific nature of power (Neumann & Gstöhl 2004, p.5)<sup>10</sup> sug-

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8 From the practical point of view, any assessment of perception is inherently difficult and far from precise. What is more, defining smallness on this basis might result in conceptual confusion, particularly when it comes to differentiating between the small and the weak (Neemia 1995, p.69)

9 By the same token: „A superpower is a state that is never the weak part in an asymmetric relationship when interacting with another state at the global, regional or sub-regional level. A middle power is a state that is always the weak state in an asymmetric relationship at the global level but typically the strong state in an asymmetric relationship at the regional and sub-regional levels. A small state is a state that is the weak state in an asymmetric relationship at the global and regional levels but typically the stronger state at the sub-regional level” (Oest & Wivel 2010, p.434).

10 I.e. some states might be extremely strong in one particular area (e.g. the oil sector) and extremely weak in all others, including their military security (Neumann & Gstöhl 2004, p.5)

gest that any decision to label a state as permanently weak can easily be contested<sup>11</sup>. One can thus argue that the concept of weak behaviour can perhaps be seen as “no less elusive” (Amstrup 1976, p.165) than that of small or micro size.

Another problem with definitions focusing on the dependent variable, just like with some of the perceptual approaches to size (Rothstein 1968), is that they seem to suggest that small or micro states are not only weak powers (as proposed in Oest’s and Wivel’s definition), but also weak or very weak states (Sutton 2011)<sup>12</sup>. While this has been a rather common practice, there are good arguments for not confusing the two concepts (Neemia 1995; Amstrup 1976)<sup>13</sup>. Political entities may become (or never cease being) weak<sup>14</sup> for many different reasons and smallness is potentially only one of them. More often, weakness is a result of poor governance, conflict and/or underdevelopment (Rice & Patrick 2008)<sup>15</sup>. In fact, small size can be seen as a possible source of political and economic strength (e.g. Peterson 2006; Armstrong & Read 2002a)<sup>16</sup>. In general, weakness (either in terms of state strength or power) does not necessarily depend on or correlate with any particular demographic or geographic conditions. Therefore, treating smallness as analogous to weakness compromises the idea of stud-

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11 For instance, both Slovakia and the Vatican can be seen as weaker than any of their neighbours and probably not stronger than any of the regional or global players with which they have any meaningful interactions. Does this mean that Slovakia and the Vatican should belong to the same category? And if yes, then what category would that be? Microstates? Small States? If not, then which one is stronger? Is it the Vatican with its undisputable global influence or Slovakia with its greater geographic and demographic resources and ability to influence such bodies as the EU to an arguably greater degree than the Vatican? Finally, how do we classify these two entities in relation to other states with which they have little or no interactions? Is it even possible to assess foreign policy behaviour in the absence of interactions? For instance, is Slovakia stronger or weaker than New Zealand, Fiji or Bolivia? Answers to these questions are by no means simple and suggest the potential difficulties with defining micro-size from this perspective.

12 Buzan (1983) draws a clear distinction between weak powers and weak states. According to him (p.66): „states vary not only in respect of their status as powers, but also in respect of their weakness or strength as members of the category of states. (...) Strength as a state neither depends on, nor correlates with, power. Weak powers, like Austria, the Netherlands, Norway, and Singapore are all strong states, while quite substantial powers like Argentina, Brazil, Nigeria, Spain, Iran and Pakistan, are all rather weak as states”.

13 According to Sutton (2011, p.144) the confusion originates from both the habit of using the categories of small, middle and great powers to describe different actors in the international system and from the traditional focus on the study of war and diplomacy in which areas small states appeared as weak.

14 For a good description of the weak states’ characteristics see Holsti (1995).

15 E.g. Somalia can be seen as in the state of permanent weakness not because of its geographic or demographic size (it is in fact a large country) but due to its internal conflict.

16 In fact, many of the new small and very small states are indeed in at least some aspects stronger than the large empires of which they used to be parts (Herr 1988)

ying of the politico-economic effects of geographic smallness and insignificance. As such, it is of little help when it comes to understanding not only the functioning of some of the world's *smallest* polities, but also the concept of micro-size.

### *The Problem of Statehood*

It can be argued that the attempts to satisfactorily determine what constitutes micro-size have been largely unsuccessful. Yet, no less confusion surrounds the term “state”. According to perhaps the most authoritative and popular definition, a state is a *sovereign* entity with “a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other States” (Raič 2002, pp.24–25). In reality, the above criteria have been subject to quite different interpretations, especially when it comes to the understanding or appreciation of the concept of sovereignty. The last decades have seen the rise of an idea that sovereignty is an anachronistic, and practically meaningless concept in the age of globalisation and transnational institutions (Bickerton, Cunliffe, & Gourevitch, 2007; Furedi, 2007). Accordingly, the principle that for an entity to be called a state it needs to be undoubtedly sovereign has been weakened (e.g. Rendu, 2004, p. 17). This practice has been particularly prominent in the case of small polities. The term *microstate* has been applied to entities with quite distinct political or constitutional status (Warrington 1994, p.4) - from independent Malta (e.g. Armstrong & Read, 1995) through British quasi-colonies (e.g. McElroy & Parry, 2011) to dependencies (e.g. Rendu, 2004) or even China's Special Administrative Regions (e.g. George, 2009).

Yet, as was noted by Beattie, scholars dismissing the importance of sovereignty seem to confuse it with self-sufficiency (Beattie 2004, p.352). The concept of sovereignty does not imply autarky or independence from external circumstances, but freedom to choose how to react to them (Beattie, 2004, p. 352; Bickerton et al., 2007; Palan, 1998). In essence, it is based on the principles of ultimate government accountability and responsibility which cannot be relative or flexible (Furedi 2007; Bickerton et al. 2007). As such, it is inseparable from the notions of independence and statehood (Duursma 1996). If any degree of distinctiveness or self-governance can justify the label state, or microstate then the whole idea of studying the phenomenon of *politi-*

*cal* viability despite geographical constraints makes little sense. For this reason, some authors differentiate between sub-national (mostly insular) jurisdictions and microstates, with the former analysed with an exclusive focus on *economic* viability (e.g. Baldacchino, 2008; Grydehøj, 2011). Unfortunately, such practice is quite rare and in any case it is not followed by any attempt to offer a richer definition of microstates.

The idea of micro-statehood should then be viewed as inseparable from the concept of sovereignty. However, this does not mean that the exercise of sovereignty cannot be affected by the conditions of extreme smallness and geographic insignificance. It could perhaps be useful to look at microstates precisely from the perspective of how their geographic and demographic situation affects their sovereign existence. And indeed, it appears that much of the microstate literature “seems to congeal around issues of sovereignty and action capacity” (Neumann & Gstöhl 2004, p.6). Out of this focus, comes a definition of microstates that tries to capture the concept of micro-size by looking at its effect on sovereignty. To Neumann and Gstöhl (*ibid.*) microstates are states “whose claim to maintain effective sovereignty on a territory is in some degree questioned by other states, and that cannot maintain what larger states at any one given time define as the minimum required presence in the international society of states (membership in international organizations, embassies in key capitals, etc.) because of a perceived lack of resources” (p. 6)”. While perhaps well-directed, such a definition is ultimately problematic as it focuses merely on studying the opinions, standards and perceptions of certain “other states” and not the nature and actions of policies it seeks to define. As such, it can easily become inclusive of a great many entities experiencing institutional crisis and lack of administrative resources. It is important to note for instance that the officials of large states such as the United States have often labelled all sorts of states ranging from Congo to Myanmar as “failed” or unable to “maintain effective sovereignty” (e.g. Wyler 2008). Putting aside the question of biases in large powers’ assessments of other states’ ability to exercise sovereignty, this definition repeats the mistake of other approaches in that it equates weakness with smallness. In consequence, its ability to explain the phenomenon of *small* political communities’ politico-economic viability is debatable.

In sum, despite decades of academic research and countless publications, there is still no definition of the term microstate that could provide useful tools for a mean-

ingful identification of states qualitatively distinct due to their inherent quantitative conditions. As such, the understanding of the domestic and international factors permitting political and economic viability despite geographic and demographic constraints remains limited and obscured by the great variety of cases brought under the microstate category. Interestingly, a better way of defining microstates and grasping their peculiar nature can perhaps be found in the experiences and debates preceding the post WWII proliferation of new diminutive polities.

**MICROSTATES AS MODERN PROTECTED  
STATES: TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION**

*The League of Nations and the Lilliputian States*

Nearly a century ago the League of Nations was faced with the problem of the then called “Lilliputian States” (Crawford 2007, p.183). In 1919 and 1920 the Republic of San Marino, the Principality of Monaco and the Principality of Liechtenstein submitted their applications for membership in the organisation. While the first two soon abandoned the idea, Liechtenstein remained persistent in its efforts and “pursued the matter to the full” (Gunter 1974). In response to its request, the League ordered a detailed examination of the applicant’s qualifications. In 1920, following an inquiry into Liechtenstein’s situation, The Fifth (Admissions) Committee rejected its application arguing that:

There can be no doubt that juridically the Principality of Liechtenstein is a sovereign State, but by reason of her limited area, small population, and her geographical position, she has chosen to depute to others some of the attributes of sovereignty. (...) For the above reasons, we are of the opinion that the Principality of Liechtenstein could not discharge all the international obligations, which would be imposed on her by the Covenant. (quoted in: Schwebel, 1973, p. 108)

As it was observed by Edward Benes, the Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, the reason for the rejection of Liechtenstein’s application was not “its small size, but its close connection with another State (...) One may deduce from the decision taken with regard to these [mini-] States that, in practice, the smallness of a State does not prevent its being admitted into the League”(quoted in: Snyder, 2010,

p. 51). Yet, this opinion was not shared by various academics who insisted that constraints imposed by smallness were more important than deputation of certain sovereign attributes (e.g. Gunter, 1974, p. 499). One argument in favour of such a view was the fact that certain political units such as Austria or British India had arguably less (or no more) sovereignty over their affairs than Liechtenstein and yet were accepted as member states of the League of Nations (ibid.) Other scholars argued that following World War II the successor of the League, the United Nations, readily granted membership to the obviously non-sovereign states of Soviet Socialist Republics of Belarus and Ukraine and continued to deny it to the Principality (Kohn 1967, p.548). As observed by Dommen, although the League of Nations couldn't present any quantitative threshold for membership, it was clear that by rejecting Liechtenstein's application it demonstrated a "preference for large sizes" (1985, p.4).

These scholars are probably right to note that tiny size played an important role in the rejection of the Principality of Liechtenstein's application. Yet, the exclusive focus on geography oversimplifies the matter and fails to appreciate the *meaning* of smallness in the case of Liechtenstein (and other contemporary microstates). It seems that the key to the League's decision was the clear *political consequence* of smallness and not its particular numerical geographic or demographic representation. Liechtenstein was not only quantitatively different to the other applicants and member states. Due to its size it itself chose to become qualitatively distinct. Perhaps unwittingly, the League of Nations managed to provide a qualitative threshold for microstates. It was recognized that such states were entities so geographically and demographically constrained that they independently chose to depute some of their external sovereignty to their larger neighbours. The term "mini" or "micro" referred not only to the size of territory, but also the extent of state capacities. The League of Nations admitted that Liechtenstein was both sovereign (and internationally recognized as such) and yet under de facto and de jure benign protection of its larger neighbour. Interestingly, such a situation was not a novelty in the practice of international relations. Long time before the founding of the League of Nations, the theoreticians and practitioners of

diplomacy recognized a category of political units called “protected states” (Berridge & Lloyd 2012; Crawford 2007, pp.286–294).

### *Lilliputians as Protected States*

Many classical writers, including Grotius, believed that an “unequal alliance”, with one State offering benign or amicable protection or patronage over another, was “quite consistent with the sovereignty of the latter” (see: Crawford, 2007, p. 286). In the earlier centuries it was accepted that “states which were unable to maintain their sovereignty unaided could have their internal autonomy underwritten if a willing major power came forward to protect them” (Herr 1988, p.192). Unlike protectorates (especially in their colonial context), the protected states came into existence through genuine, consensual agreements between two or more sovereign parties (ibid. p. 289) and assumed: respect for independence, protection and assistance offered either unconditionally or in exchange for a rather benign and limited “accommodation to the wishes of the protector in matters of policy” (Baty 1921, p.109). The protected states delegated some of their authority but retained independent control over their domestic affairs and at least some degree of influence over their foreign affairs (Crawford 2007, p.288). What was peculiar was the fact that the relative benefits of such arrangements were far greater for the protected than for the protector. Although the protected states delegated some of their authority to the larger powers (with an at least theoretical option of terminating the agreement at will) they gained political protection and very “favourable economic terms such as market access” (Turner 2007, p.19). While this form of statehood was somewhat common in medieval and early modern Europe, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century it seemed that the “conception of a really independent, but protected, State had disappeared” (Baty 1921, p.111). According to historians, by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the protectors gradually dismantled any real independence of their protected states and either annexed them or turned them into non-independent façade states (Johnston 1973; Baty 1921; Alexandrowicz 1973). Although the term “protected State” was still in use in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and presented in contrast to the term “protectorate”), it referred to political units such as

the Malay and Persian Gulf states that were obviously non-sovereign (Crawford 2007, p.287; Parry 1960).

However, how else could one describe Liechtenstein's (and other Lilliputian states') status? According to the League of Nations Liechtenstein was truly sovereign and independent and yet at the same time protected and assisted by its neighbour's undertaking of some responsibility for the Principality's conduct of foreign affairs (Kohn 1967). The European microstates truly were "medieval relics" (Hass 2004), but not due to their size but because of being the only surviving protected states. Somewhat paradoxically their survival as protected sovereignties was arguably largely due to their extreme smallness, political insignificance and lack of any natural resources (Duursma 1996; Eccardt 2005; Sundhaussen 2003). The term ministate referred thus, perhaps implicitly, to both quantitative geographic insignificance and a peculiar political status, the two being inherently linked, the small size making a sustainable unequal alliance likely and protection making survival despite the odds possible.

The peculiarity of such entities as Liechtenstein lay in their survival as undoubtedly sovereign states despite both the extreme geographic and demographic constraints and the strong universal bias in favour of large nation-states. This survival can only be explained by looking at the protection offered to the Principality (and other microstates) by its large neighbour. Hence, it was the protected state status that merits a real academic inquiry. If the microstates had not entered into unequal alliances with larger neighbours, they most probably would have simply disappeared from the political map of Europe. In fact, their continual presence was widely perceived as a "historical accident" (Hass 2004; Bartmann 2012). This may explain the fact that following the League of Nation's decision regarding Liechtenstein very little, if any, attention was dedicated to the issue of micro/protected statehood. It was perhaps assumed that the model of political arrangement adopted by the European Lilliputian state was simply an out-dated anachronism of little relevance to any other present or future cases. It was probably expected that such oddities would in any case soon disappear, as they were seen as doomed to economic failure notwithstanding their protection. Indeed, all of the microstates were characterised by poverty (Hobsbawm 1996, p.281). Liechtenstein of the 1920s was among the poorest countries in Europe (Hass 2004; Stringer 2006); Monaco had a revolution in 1910 triggered by high unemployment and poverty

(Anon 1910); and San Marino remained a poor, remote, peasant economy (Sundhausen 2003). Hence, even though the European microstates were truly quantitatively and qualitatively unique entities, they never attracted significant attention and gradually became little more than cartographic oddities.

In consequence, by the time new political communities quantitatively similar to the European Lilliputian states emerged as a result of decolonisation (Herr 1988), the implicit understanding that microstates were not only small, but also protected states had largely been forgotten<sup>17</sup>. Instead, the microstate has become a vague and vast category defined purely in terms of arbitrary geographic or demographic cut-off points. In practical terms, the only difference between it and the broader “small states” grouping is the, rather unjustified, inclusion of various sub-national jurisdictions within its scope. Otherwise, when it comes to sovereign states, the microstate scholarship is hardly distinguishable from the broader and often richer study of small powers or economies. In its current meaning the term is thus of little help when it comes to the analysis of the phenomenon of modern protected states, or of long-term political and economic strategies for viability despite severe geographic constraints.

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17 Interestingly, certain scholars have actually noted that some of the new tiny sovereign polities can best be described as “modern protected states” (Michal 1993). However, this observation has not led them to explore the possibility that protected statehood could be seen as a criterion for a meaningful isolation of both qualitatively and quantitatively unique states.

*Microstates as Modern Protected States*

In the light of the above and drawing from the historical experiences, I suggest a new, but historically justified definition of microstates below:

Microstates are modern protected states, i.e. sovereign states that have been able to unilaterally depute certain attributes of sovereignty to larger powers in exchange for benign protection of their political and economic viability against their geographic or demographic constraints.

This definition permits an identification and isolation of states on the basis of their qualitative political uniqueness resulting from both their own and external perception of resourcelessness, physical constraints and geographic insignificance<sup>18</sup>. Their real or perceived geographic weakness and resourcelessness make microstates determined to seek or accept external protection and institutional assistance even at the cost of losing some of their sovereign attributes. At the same time, the real or perceived geographic insignificance of microstates, coupled with certain historical, personal or strategic considerations, makes larger countries willing to provide microstates with non-reciprocal, benign protection<sup>19</sup>. Micro-statehood thus entails not only a certain notion of geographic or demographic smallness, but also the voluntary and *non-reciprocal* delegation of some “authority normally exclusively retained by [sovereign] self-governing state, often in the field of defence and foreign affairs” in exchange for protection and/or “favourable economic terms such as market access” (Turner 2007, p.19)<sup>20</sup>.

Admittedly, microstates are not the only states delegating certain attributes of sov-

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18 As such, this definition goes beyond Neumann's and Gstöhl's notion that microstates are merely states externally perceived as lacking resources or effective sovereignty.

19 The empirical observations support the view that a relationship of benign protection is only accepted by and offered to states perceived as geographically or demographically diminutive and insignificant. When circumstances change (e.g. population growth, discovery of natural resources, ideological changes, etc.), it is likely that the parties may choose to end the agreement and the microstate subsequently either turns into a “normal” state or becomes annexed into a larger power.

20 It is important to note that the peculiar political arrangements adopted by microstates are not merely a consequence of their own condition, but also a reflection of the nature of the modern geopolitical system, which remains dominated by large states or economies with clear boundaries. As it was observed by Alesina and Wacziarg (1998, p.307): “In a world without international trade, political boundaries identify markets and countries face economic incentives to be large. On the contrary, the more a country can trade with the rest of the world, the less one can identify its political borders with the boundaries of its market”. In other words, in a world of absolutely unrestricted trade, there would be little economic incentive for microstates to seek affiliation

ereignty or decision-making powers to third parties. For instance, the EU member states delegate a significant number of functions to the EU while retaining their own sovereignty. The difference between such arrangements and protected statehood however is that in the case of the former these agreements are reciprocal in their nature and assume equal mutual benefits. In the case of protected states, both the delegation of attributes and benefits of the agreement (e.g. access to markets, consular assistance, economic aid, etc.) are largely or even exclusively one-sided. In contrast to military alliances that sometimes are of unequal nature, benign protection involves comprehensive political and economic arrangements that go beyond traditional or non-traditional security concerns and that to a large degree determine the internal and external functioning of microstates<sup>21</sup>. Unlike in the case of mere military allies, microstates are usually offered virtually unlimited access to their protecting powers' markets (for both goods and labour) and key social infrastructure (such as education or healthcare) as well as administrative assistance, particularly in the areas of diplomacy and border management. Benign protection is thus a unique type of inter-state relationship both because it is inherently linked to geographic or demographic challenges and because of its distinctive scope, character and significance to the protected (micro) state. Microstates can therefore be meaningfully distinguished from the broader category of small states not on the basis of some quantitative thresholds, but by the appreciation of their distinctive political status.

The unique relationship between microstates and their protecting powers allows them to overcome the challenges to their political and economic viability resulting from their unfavourable geographic or demographic conditions. Political viability can be understood as the ability to survive as sovereign political actor in domestic and international affairs. To a significant degree it is dependent on economic viability, but the latter is possible without the former, as demonstrated in the case of many sub-national jurisdictions. Economic viability can be seen as the ability to generate or acquire a satisfying amount of wealth in a given territory or for a given community in a sustainable manner. As Baldacchino (1993a, p.40) put it: "viability can mean simply

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with larger states. Similarly, it could be argued that in a world dominated exclusively by tiny polities the political survival of each state would not necessitate any unilateral delegation of any attributes of sovereignty.

21 In fact, in most cases military protection is not the central element of the arrangements between microstates and their protecting powers.

survivability or liveability, and thus need not imply anything close to self-reliant development, with an economy generating internally the productive requirements for expanded reproduction through time<sup>22</sup>.

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22 Benign protection can certainly help with economical survival. At the same time, it is worth noting that the microstates' arrangements with their protecting powers tend to offer to them and their citizens much more than mere survivability that characterises various small, "rentier" (Baldacchino 1993a) type states or economies. On the one hand, it often means an easier or even unlimited access to not only the protecting powers' market but also to the rest of the world. On the other hand, it usually guarantees an access to vital infrastructure (e.g. schools, hospitals, transportation) the independent maintenance of which would be beyond the capacity of even the wealthiest of microstates. These advantages mean better economic conditions on the microstates' territory, but also more freedom and opportunities for their citizens regardless of where they choose to live or travel.

By adopting the above definition of microstates, as of 2013, one can limit the number of microstates to the following nine states:

Microstate	Protecting Power(s)	Land area size	Population size
Liechtenstein	Switzerland	160 sq. km	36,713
San Marino	Italy	61 sq. km	32,140
Monaco	France	2 sq. km	30,510
Andorra	France and Spain	468 sq. km	85,082
Cook Islands	New Zealand	236 sq. km	10,777
Niue	New Zealand	260 sq. km	1,269
Federated States of Micronesia	USA	702 sq. km	106,487
Republic of Marshall Islands	USA	181 sq. km	68,480
Republic of Palau	USA	459 sq. km	21,032

All of the above polities are tiny sovereign states that have independently deputed some of the attributes of sovereignty to larger states in order to remain politically and economically viable despite their physical limitations. As such, they fit well into the classical definition of protected states. What is more, all these states also fall under all of the popular quantitative demographic and geographic thresholds for microstates.

In contrast to the currently dominant definitions of microstates, the above list does not include any of the numerous sub-national jurisdictions, as they, by definition, are not states. Furthermore, it excludes a number of sovereign states demographically very similar (i.e. with population not greater than 100,000) to the above microstates. These are: either very small countries that have managed to achieve viability (albeit usually not prosperity or security) without an external protection due largely to a favourable location or a unique position in the international affairs, or technically sovereign states that in practical terms survive only thanks to irregular foreign aid flows and/or the revenues derived from “renting” sovereignty (for example see:

Drezner, 2001; Rich, 2009). The latter clearly do not overcome the constraints imposed on them by geography or demographics and as such can be best seen “failed” states (e.g. Connell, 2006). They are perhaps best described as parodies of sovereign states that hide economic non-viability and de facto political dependence behind the façade of internationally recognized sovereignty<sup>23</sup>. The former, on the other hand, just like many larger, yet still small, sovereign states such as Malta, Barbados, Singapore, Brunei, Sao Tome and Principe, The Bahamas, Luxembourg and Iceland labelled as “microstates”(e.g. Herbertsson & Zoega 2002; Mehmet & Tahiroglu 2002), are structurally no different from other, larger sovereign states. While their often (but not always) above-average economic performance and political success might indeed deserve a closer academic scrutiny, there is little reason why this should take place outside of the broader and more established “small states”, “small economies” or even “small island states” scholarship concerned with the effects of size and scale on political and economic functioning of states (Castello & Ozawa 1999; Easterly 2000; Fox 1969; Ingebritsen et al. 2006; Katzenstein 1985; Livingstone 2010). Moreover, I choose not to include certain de facto states, such as Abkhazia in the list of microstates. While most of them are geographically and demographically small and exist under benign protection from a larger power, their constraints and motivations for accepting protection result mainly from the lack of any wider political recognition of de jure sovereignty and not from geographic constraints per se (e.g. Caspersen, 2008; Cornell, 2000; Pegg, 1999). Hence, from the academic point of view, these states should best be studied as a separate category of political units. I have also chosen not to include either the Vatican or the Sovereign Military Order of Malta on the list of microstates. While these two entities are sovereign subjects of international law (although not necessarily states<sup>24</sup>), their political status can be viewed as means of ensuring that their respective organizations (i.e. the Roman Catholic Church and the

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23 In fact, many of them perform worse than the so-called de facto states, i.e. independent state-like entities lacking international recognition (e.g. Caspersen, 2008; Pegg, 1999).

24 As it was observed by Mendelson (1972, p.612), „it may be doubted whether the territorial entity, the Vatican, meets the traditional criteria of statehood” as it hardly has a permanent population and as its governmental functions are „not, for the most part, exercised in relation to, or for the benefit of, the City itself.” Even more doubts surround the statehood of The Sovereign Military Order of Malta that not only does not have a permanent population, but is also essentially deterritorialized (Cox 2003; Rayfuse 2009). Consequently, the latter is rarely, if ever, recognized as a state even by those countries that recognize it as a sovereign entity (Cox 2003)

Military Order of Malta) and/or leaders (i.e. the Pope and the Grand Commander) can “freely exercise” their spiritual or charitable functions (Mendelson 1972, p.612). They should thus be regarded not as protected or micro *states*, but protected institutions. Finally, it is important to note that the above list of microstates is by no means fixed and can certainly be subject to changes. Indeed, some of the microstates (such as Monaco or some of the Pacific ones) used to exist, sometimes only temporarily, as non-sovereign entities directly controlled by large powers. Conversely, some of the currently fully sovereign states used to function as protected states but have since changed their status (Laing 1974; Gilmore 1982).

Providing a detailed description and comparison of the above-listed microstates is beyond the scope of this paper. It could, however, be a potentially fruitful avenue for further research. All of these microstates offer opportunities for exploring the nature of benign protection or unequal alliance in contemporary international relations. What is more, they are also interesting from yet another point of view. While structurally similar, these entities represent different politico-economic models and diverse levels of economic performance. Their rather significant differences in the levels of economic development despite strong structural similarities present an opportunity for evaluation of both various domestic developmental strategies and the ways in which the status of protected states can be exploited for economic gains. Similarly, their comparable external institutional circumstances and geographic or demographic constraints make research into their diverse political systems both more interesting and more viable.

## CONCLUSION

There is a long and rich history of scholarly research on small polities. However, despite countless publications, there is little agreement on how to define political and economic smallness. Consequently, the concept of small states is mired with problems and limitations. Yet, even more confusion surrounds the term “microstates”, as anyone interested in identifying them has to not only separate them from normal and large states, but also from small political units. As this paper has demonstrated, to this day there is no definition of microstates that would permit their clear and meaningful isolation from other types of polities. The existing approaches either are limited to suggesting arbitrary and inconsistent quantitative cut-off points or fall into the trap of viewing smallness as identical to weakness. In effect, they do not offer tools for studying qualitatively distinct political units. To meet and resolve these problems, this paper has suggested an alternative way of looking at microstates. It has been argued that microstates could viably be seen as modern protected states, i.e. sovereign political entities that have been able to unilaterally delegate some of the attributes of their sovereignty to larger powers in exchange for benign protection. Their unique status is a consequence of their real or perceived smallness and geographic insignificance, as these create both the necessity and the opportunity for the unique type of political arrangement. Such a definition of microstates offers tools for not only studying the functioning of some of the world’s smallest sovereign entities but also for analysing

the phenomenon of benign protection. As such, it can hopefully be found useful by not only those interested in the study of smallness, but also the ones eager to explore the more unusual forms of inter-state relations and strategies for political success in the world dominated by great powers.

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