



Lilliput Effect Revisited: Small States and EU Foreign Policy

European View
2020, Vol. 19(1) 80–87
© The Author(s) 2020
DOI: 10.1177/1781685820915375
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



Jean Crombois

Abstract

The role of small member states in EU foreign policy is increasingly being challenged, especially in view of the reforms being proposed to make the EU more effective as an international actor. These reforms, if adopted, will require the small Central and Eastern European member states, such as Bulgaria, to rethink their old foreign-policy strategies and practices. Instead of band-wagoning and balancing conflicting interests, these small member states will have to learn to be more proactive, to build their reputations and to form alliances if they want to continue to have any influence on EU foreign policy. These issues are discussed in the light of the EU sanctions adopted against Russia in the aftermath of the Ukrainian–Russian conflict of 2014.

Keywords

Small countries, Foreign policy, Sanctions, Russia, CFSP, QMV

Introduction

Cases of obstruction of EU foreign-policy decisions by EU member states, large or small, are not uncommon in this field, where the unanimity rule applies. Last October Hungary vetoed an EU statement regarding the Turkish operation in Northern Syria, leading to the EU's reaction to the event not being expressed until five hours after it had begun (Debeuf 2019). In other cases, the need to forge unanimity has often led to the EU punching well below its weight on the international stage, making it unable to design an effective foreign policy in accordance with its global aspirations (Blockmans 2017).

Corresponding author:

Jean Crombois, Department of Politics and European Studies, American University in Bulgaria, Faculty Office 212, 1 Georgi Izmirliiev Square, Blagoevgrad, 2700, Bulgaria.
Email: jcrombois@aubg.edu



The issue of the sanctions imposed on Russia in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis in March 2014 provides a good case study of the limitations of EU foreign policy, where decisions are adopted on the basis of unanimity. It is no surprise, therefore, that new proposals, including the extension of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) to EU foreign-policy decisions such as sanctions and the creation of a European Security Council (ESC), have been put forward with the aim of making EU foreign policy more effective.

This contribution argues that these proposals, if adopted, would have a profound impact on the way member states conduct their foreign policy in the EU framework. Such changes would, however, affect the small Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states, such as Bulgaria, even more than other small member states. Such proposals would require these countries to change their existing foreign-policy practices of great-power dependency and band-wagoning in order to maintain their influence on EU decisions.

To discuss these points, this contribution is divided into three parts. The first deals with the role of small EU member states in EU foreign policy from both a theoretical and practical point of view. The second section covers the issue of the EU sanctions on Russia and their impact on the small CEE member states, such as Bulgaria. Finally, the third section discusses the proposals for reforming EU foreign policy and their potential impact on the role of small CEE member states.

Small member states and EU foreign policy: theory and practice

With its successive enlargements, and especially the most recent ones welcoming the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the EU has seen a significant increase in the number of its small member states. Out of its 27 member states, 16 have populations of less than 10 million and, of these, 9 have populations below 5 million. While size of population may be an important factor in terms of the influence member states have on EU policymaking, it is not the only one. Other factors range from the investment of resources in their ministries to the ability to engage in multilateral negotiations, as well as the experience gained from EU membership, which naturally increases over time (Thorhallsson and Wivels 2006).

When it comes to EU foreign policy, the role of small member states has often been overlooked by the predominant realist perspectives, whose proponents prefer instead to allow EU foreign policy to be subsumed under the foreign policies of its large member states, such as the UK (before Brexit), Germany and France (Nasra 2011).

That being said, the main challenge facing the study of small-state foreign policy is the absence of a commonly accepted definition of a ‘small state’ (Long 2016). To some extent, small states share some of the strategic behaviours of small powers, especially in terms of great-power dependency, seeking alliances and a propensity for band-wagoning. However, the concept of ‘small power’ is not based on size but rather on a set of behavioural attributes. In this light, the EU is considered by some to be a small power (Toje 2010).

For the purposes of this paper, we define small states as those that combine an awareness of their small status, anchored in their historical experiences of great-power dependency, with a sense of helplessness on the international stage. Such a definition could include countries such as the Baltic states and Bulgaria (Vaicekauskaitė 2017; Crombois 2019).

Without denying the valuable insights provided by realist perspectives and small-state literature, some authors have proposed relying on a governance approach to understand the role of small states in EU foreign policy. Such an approach, according to them, has the advantage of not positing materially powerful actors as the only ones able to influence EU foreign policy. Instead they highlight the four main sources of small states' influence on EU foreign policy, which are their ability to commit to EU solutions; to build network capital, that is, to increase their embeddedness in networks with other countries; to use available immaterial resources, such as expertise; and to act as knowledge brokers (Nasra 2011).

These different sources of small states' influence on EU foreign policy also make it possible to distinguish between the small member states in terms of their length of membership. While the older small member states possess a huge amount of experience, extensive networks and expertise, the newer ones tend to be lacking in most of these assets.

EU sanctions and the small CEE member states

The annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the outbreak of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine led the EU, in March 2014, to impose its first restrictive measures on Russia. Later, in August, following the shooting down of flight MH457 and further Russian incursions into Eastern Ukraine, the EU decided to adopt more comprehensive economic sanctions, excluding Russian companies from the EU capital markets and banning the export of arms and dual-use goods, as well as goods used in the ongoing energy projects in the Arctic (Giumelli 2017).

These sanctions led the Russians to retaliate, adopting countermeasures consisting of an embargo on EU exports for a number of agri-food products, from poultry to fruit and vegetables. While the EU sanctions are renewed every six months and are targeted, the Russian ones are broader and will remain in place until the EU ones are lifted. The Russian counter-sanctions also have a bigger impact on the EU economy than the EU sanctions have on the Russian economy. This difference is explained by the importance of Russia as the second largest market for EU agri-food goods (Giumelli 2017).

Based on 2013 figures, the value of EU exports affected by the Russian import ban totals \$7.3 billion or 47.3% of total agri-food exports to Russia, although its impact differs across member states. Measured in terms of the absolute value of banned goods, Lithuania and Poland are affected the most, followed by Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Spain, Finland, Belgium and France (Fritz et al. 2017).

If the EU sanctions were considered by some member states to be too modest with regard to the situation in Eastern Ukraine, they also reflected a rare example of collective decision-making. It would be wrong to say that the decision pitted large member states against small ones (Szép 2019). Indeed, the supporters of the EU's sanctions included states of various sizes (Germany, the UK, Sweden, Poland, the Baltic states, Denmark and Finland) and the same can be said of their opponents (Austria, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary and Italy), not to mention the remaining countries, which can be considered lukewarm supporters and bystanders (Shagina 2017). In short, the adoption of these EU sanctions reflects another example of finding the lowest common denominator between the EU member states.

Interestingly enough, economic dependency on Russia does not account for the positions of the member states. Some of those that support the sanctions, such as Poland and Lithuania, are much more economically dependent on Russia than some of those, such as Cyprus and Hungary, that are opposed to them (Fritz et al. 2017). The economic impact has also had differing effects on the countries, regardless of their position on the sanctions. The worst-affected member states include Germany, Italy, Finland and Denmark, while the least-affected ones include Greece, Sweden and Luxembourg, followed closely by Cyprus and Bulgaria (Giumelli 2017). The economic impact of the sanctions is, however, only one part of the story. The sanctions have had a greater political impact on the the small CEE member states, such as Bulgaria, especially as far as their relations with Russia are concerned (Bechev 2019).

Bulgaria is considered a lukewarm supporter of the EU sanctions, and opposition to them in the country has remained largely rhetorical. For example, the government did not include the issue on the agenda of its EU Presidency in spring 2018 (Bulgarian News Agency 2018). Bulgaria's position is not so much based on the economic cost of the sanctions for the country—it has doubled its trade with Russia since 2014—but rather on its energy dependency on Russia and the closeness of some of its political parties to the Kremlin. The issue has proved to be quite challenging as Bulgaria has had to find a balance between its acceptance of EU sanctions and its commitment to Russian-backed energy projects such as the defunct South Stream and the current Turkish Stream. In other words, Bulgaria has never fully embraced the sanctions as part of EU foreign policy, but has viewed them from a strictly national perspective. At the EU level, the country has not tried to influence or engage with the issue by using the assets outlined in the previous section, such as making a strong commitment to EU decisions, building alternative alliances, asserting its expertise on the issue or acting as a knowledge broker (Crombois 2019).

The small CEE member states and the future of EU foreign policy

Two major proposals concerning the future of EU foreign policy have been put forward that may alter the balance of power between large and small member states: the first one

deals with the extension of QMV to some EU foreign-policy decisions, while the second one concerns the creation of an ESC. Both proposals present challenges and opportunities for the small member states.

In his 2018 State of the Union address, then EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker proposed extending QMV to some foreign-policy decisions such as sanctions by using the *passerelle* clause provided by the Treaty of Lisbon. This clause provides the member states with the possibility, on the basis of consensus, of using QMV in certain foreign-policy areas without a change to the treaties. This suggestion has been endorsed by the European Parliament and by the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (von der Leyen 2019). Such a proposal, however, is still considered highly sensitive. For example, the new EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stopped short of mentioning the issue during his first Foreign Affairs Council on 9 December 2019 (Barigazzi 2019).

The extension of QMV to foreign-policy decisions would present a country like Bulgaria with both challenges and opportunities. The main challenge is linked to the future of QMV in the post-Brexit age, where the voting power of the large member states will be strengthened at the expense of the smaller ones (Kirsch 2016). However, the extension of QMV would also offer small CEE members, such as Bulgaria, new opportunities to fully engage with EU foreign policy.

As shown above in the case of EU sanctions, the unanimity rule has led Bulgaria to approach EU foreign policy mostly through the lens of its national foreign policy interests. Conversely, more QMV would lead the country to intensify its negotiating efforts and to build alliances to achieve a consensus. Indeed, analysts of the EU decision-making process have long noted that the use of QMV pushes the member states towards consensus, also referred to as acting in the shadow of the vote. In other words, the use of QMV would replace the threat of a veto with decisions made in the shadow of the vote (Shuette 2019).

Such a change would require small CEE countries such as Bulgaria to develop new skills in terms of building their reputations, reaching out to other member states and acting as possible deal brokers. Such skills may prove even more critical when it comes to influencing EU foreign policy that takes decisions on the basis of QMV.

The second proposal, made in November 2018 by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and supported by French President Emmanuel Macron, consists of creating an ESC. The novelty in Merkel's proposal is that membership of the ESC would only include some of the EU member states, selected on a rotating basis, alongside post-Brexit UK. Its main objective would be to make EU foreign policy more ambitious in its scope by including its hard-power dimensions, speeding up its decision-making and improving its implementation (Kaim and Kempin 2019).

While the think-tank community has extensively discussed the various potential formats for such an ESC (Nováky 2019), the small member states have every reason to dread such an idea as it would revive the spectre of the old French concept of the *Directoire* or Directorate, whereby EU foreign policy would, in effect, be in the hands of France, the UK and Germany (Blockmans 2017).

The two proposals may have contrasting effects on the future of EU sanctions on Russia as far as small CEE member states such as Bulgaria are concerned. In the present situation, the arithmetical logic of a vote by QMV might well lead to more ambitious sanctions against Russia due to the inability of the anti-sanctions member states to achieve a blocking minority. This would certainly be an unwelcome development for a small CEE country like Bulgaria. However, the second proposal may prove to have more far-reaching consequences. Indeed, President Macron's call for a reset of EU–Russia relations best illustrates the risks for the CEE small member states when the EU foreign-policy agenda is dictated by the large member states (Aldershoff 2019). If these proposals might be good news for Bulgaria as far as EU sanctions are concerned, they would also contribute to further marginalising the country in EU foreign policy.

Conclusion

The EU's imposition of sanctions on Russia offers a good case study of the limitations of EU foreign policy, where decisions are made on the basis of unanimity. As concerns the small CEE member states, including Bulgaria, the political impact of these sanctions is perhaps greater than the economic effect, especially in terms of these states' foreign policy towards Russia. As shown in the case of Bulgaria, the unanimity rule has led the country to stick to its traditional foreign-policy practices of band-wagoning and balancing conflicting interests instead of fully engaging in the EU decision-making process.

The reforms proposed to make EU foreign policy more effective would, if adopted, present the smaller CEE states with both challenges and opportunities. The adoption of QMV would induce them to design new strategies if they want to maintain any influence on EU foreign policy. These strategies would consist of breaking away from their old practices of great-power dependency, band-wagoning and balancing in favour of fully engaging with EU foreign policy in order to contribute to a consensus in the shadow of a vote. Failing to do so would lead to the small CEE member states such as Bulgaria being marginalised in EU foreign policy decisions.

References

- Aldershoff, W. (2019). Macron and Merkel risk doing Putin's work. *Financial Times*, 7 December. <https://www.ft.com/content/653cb89f-00bd-4f9b-98de-f0acd796694f>. Accessed 12 December 2019.
- Barigazzi, J. (2019). Borrel urges EU to be foreign policy player not the playground. *Politico*, 9 December. <https://www.politico.eu/article/on-foreign-policy-josep-borrell-urges-eu-to-be-a-player-not-the-playground-balkans/>. Accessed 12 December 2019.

- Bechev, D. (2019). Central and Eastern Europe's pushback against sanctions on Russia. *Atlantic Council*, 11 October. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/central-and-eastern-europe-s-pushback-against-sanctions-on-russia/>. Accessed 12 December 2019.
- Blockmans, S. (2017). *Differentiation in CFSP: Potential and limits*. Instituto Affari Internazionali Rome, 8 March. http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/eu60_5.pdf. Accessed 10 August 2019.
- Bulgarian News Agency. (2019). EU Presidency Minister Pavlova: Bulgaria won't bring up question of lifting EU sanctions against Russia during Presidency. 2 January. <http://www.bta.bg/en/c/DF/id/1718914>. Accessed 14 March 2019.
- Crombois, J. (2019). Bulgaria's foreign policy and EU sanctions against Russia: Europeanization, politicization and small country diplomacy. *Southeastern Europe*. doi:10.1163/18763332-04302005.
- Debeuf, K. (2019). Turkish attack on Syria might revive Isis. *EU Observer*, 12 October. <https://euobserver.com/foreign/146219>. Accessed 25 November 2020.
- Fritz, O., Christen, E., Sinabell, F., & Hinz, J. (2017). *Russia's and the EU's sanctions: Economic and trade effects, compliance and the way forward*. European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies. October. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603847/EXPO_STU\(2017\)603847_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603847/EXPO_STU(2017)603847_EN.pdf). Accessed 18 March 2019.
- Giumelli, F. (2017). The redistributive impact of restrictive measures on EU members: Winners and losers from imposing sanctions on Russia. *Journal of Common Market Studies*. doi:10.1111/jcms.12548.
- Kaim, M., & Kempin, R. (2019). A European Security Council. *SWP Comment*, 2 January. https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2019C02_kim_kmp.pdf. Accessed 12 June 2019.
- Kirsch, W. (2016). *Brexit and the distribution of power in the Council of the EU*. CEPS Policy Brief. November. <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/brexit-and-distribution-power-council-eu/>. Accessed 15 June 2019.
- Long, T. (2017). Small states, great power? Gaining influence through intrinsic, derivative, and collective power. *International Studies Review*. doi:10.1093/ist/viw040.
- Narsa, S. (2011). Governance in EU foreign policy: Exploring small state influence. *Journal of European Public Policy*. doi:10.1080/13501763.2011.544490.
- Nováky, N. (2019). *EU it yourself: A blueprint for a European Security Council*. Martens Centre. Brussels. <https://martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/european-security-council-blueprint.pdf>. Accessed 19 December 2019.
- Shagina, M. (2017). Friend or foe? Mapping the positions of EU member states on Russia sanctions. European Leadership Network Commentary, 28 June. <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/friend-or-foe-mapping-the-positions-of-eu-member-states-on-russia-sanctions/>. Accessed 26 June 2019.
- Shuette, L. (2019). *Should the EU make foreign policy decisions by majority voting?* Centre for European Reform Policy Brief, 15 May. <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2019/should-eu-make-foreign-policy-decisions-majority-voting>. Accessed 26 June 2019.
- Szép, V. (2019). New intergovernmentalism meets EU sanctions policy: The European Council orchestrates the restrictive measures imposed against Russia. *Journal of European Integration*. doi:10.1080/07036337.2019.1688316.
- Thorhallsson, B., & Wivels, A. (2006). Small states in the European Union: What do we know and what would we like to know? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. doi:10.1080/09557570601003502.
- Toje, A. (2010). *The European Union as a small power: After the Cold War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Vaicekauskaitė, Z. M. (2017). Security strategies of small states in a changing world. *Journal of Baltic Security*. doi:10.1515/jobs-2017-0006.
- von der Leyen, U. (2019). *A Union that strives for more: My agenda for Europe. Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019–2024*. 16 July. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf. Accessed 6 September 2019.

Author biography



Jean F. Crombois, PhD is Associate Professor of EU Studies and currently Head of the Department of Politics and European Studies at the American University in Bulgaria.