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ABSTRACT

This Special Issue seeks to provide a better understanding of the strategic responses to Brexit from small EU member states. To this end, it links different streams of research and presents innovative inquiries into how ten states positioned themselves in the face of the British exit and with what foreign policy ramifications. More specifically, the collection examines the different countries' coping strategies vis-à-vis Brexit, the underlying drivers of these responses, as well as their implications for patterns of national foreign policy Europeanization. After presenting the rationale and aims of the collection, this introductory article outlines the comparative framework used by the different contributors in their country studies. It then offers an overview of the main research findings derived from the individual articles. Subsequently, it summarises the comparative findings, with all contributions pointing to significant 'sheltering' within the EU, while 'hedging' strategies receive greater visibility for the countries most directly affected by Brexit. The overall results also evince a limited Brexit impact upon the foreign policy Europeanization of the countries examined. Finally, this introduction offers a reflection on the main conceptual and empirical 'pay-offs' of this Special Issue, closing with some avenues for future research.

The Brexit process, inaugurated by the June 2016 British referendum and materialised at the end of January 2020, emerged as a disruptive new reality bringing about a multitude of implications for both the European Union's (EU) internal affairs and external action. Within the EU's fold, the departure of such a key politico-diplomatic actor, economic/trade player, military power and budgetary contributor as the UK was seen as engendering a shift in the internal balance of power, diplomatic and trade tensions, and geopolitical competition (Greer and Laible 2020; Vara and Wessel 2021). On the other hand, Brexit has already unleashed new cooperative initiatives and tangible advances, notably in the security and defence domain (Baciu and Doyle 2019; Ferreira-Pereira 2020). Thus, the UK's departure surely affects the present and future of all EU member states, leaving no stone unturned across a wide range of the Union's policy areas and institutions (Martill and Staiger 2018; Jacobs 2018; Diamond, Nedergaard, and Rosamond 2018; Fossum and Lord 2023). However, it entails more pronounced adjustments, dilemmas and difficulties for smaller states given their lack of capabilities, vulnerabilities and idiosyncrasies, resulting not only from size and geographical factors, but also from foreign policy cultures and orientation, as well as path dependence patterns. Such vulnerabilities, after all, led them to look for and find in international organizations like the EU stable shelters and rule-based cooperative platforms to make their voices heard and even seek a differentiated status (Thorhallsson and Bailes 2016; Thorhallsson and Steinsson 2017).

Small European states inside and outside the EU, as a scientific topic, have been the subject of various relevant works (Goetschel 1998; Hanf and Soetendorp 1998; Steinmetz and Wivel 2010; Archer, Bailes, and Wivel 2014). A still very limited number of newer studies dedicated to the implications of Brexit on small European states have casted light on the Brexit strategies of some individual countries, namely Ireland (Rees and O'brennan 2019), Czech Republic (Weiss 2020) and Portugal (Raimundo and Ferreira-Pereira 2021). More theoretically oriented literature on small states has explored the implications of Brexit upon the traditional functions of 'shelter' and 'platform' provided by the full-fledged membership to the EU. It has also anticipated the strategies which small states are likely to pursue in order to meet the challenges stemming from the UK's withdrawal. Some have identified varying degree(s) of negative impact across small states largely conditioned by more or less close politico-diplomatic and socio-economic ties with the UK (Wivel and Thorhallsson 2018).

The coping strategies of small European states towards Brexit, albeit propitious, is a challenging topic for scholars whose main research interests focus on foreign policy analysis, in general, and small states foreign policies, in particular. As a typical EU-related subject matter, it calls for considerations regarding endogenous and exogenous factors, EU and national level foreign policy making structures, EU-domestic policy interface, core-periphery tensions, supranational-intergovernmental debate. It also allows for reflections on a variety of interconnections embracing legal, political, diplomatic, economic, social, military, geopolitical and geostrategic issues, among others.

While acknowledging the merits of previous scientific efforts, one can say that the available literature has not yet incorporated a cogent debate on the challenges posed to small European states by the UK's departure from the EU. The same applies to their strategies towards the Brexit negotiations and their responses, in the form of adaptation and change, to the detrimental effects resulting from the materialization of Brexit. To be sure, a comparative study across different countries located in the existing different Europes – i.e. Scandinavia, Mediterranean Europe, Peninsular and Maritime Europe, Central Europe and South-East Europe – has not been hitherto produced. Considering the existing numerous studies focusing on Brexit and the 'big three', i.e. UK, France and Germany (e.g. Oliver and Williams 2016; Martill and Sus 2018; Krotz and Schild 2018; Whitman 2019), one believes that a comprehensive, balanced and comparative study aimed at scrutinizing the coping strategies of small European states towards Brexit deserves a forceful academic endeavour. Equally important, the studies produced so far have not explored the connection between the impact of the Brexit process upon small EU states and the Europeanization of national foreign policies, a topic which has become part of the mainstream academic literature on EU studies (Radaelli and Exadaktylos 2010; Tonra 2015).

Small states' vulnerabilities, briefly mentioned above, help to explain the processes of Europeanization, by means of which those countries have been adapting their national foreign and security policies to the EU's priorities, structures and instruments. But those smaller players have been equally attempting to generate national inputs in the form of preferences, interests and values in order to shape/influence the EU's external action. Therefore, it can be argued that whilst affecting the EU as a whole, the Brexit process has the potential to impact upon the Europeanization of national foreign policies, which is a process in flux varying over time. Accordingly, Brexit could even fuel an emerging reverse trend in that process, which has been labelled 'de-Europeanization' (e.g. Müller, Pomorska, and Tonra 2021; Rosamond 2019). So to question and understand what is at stake for small European states regarding Brexit, one might also benefit from a reflection on the effects of this novel development upon more or less deep and embedded Europeanization processes (according to each country's integration experience). In this sense, this Special Issue also engages with the ongoing debate on the Europeanization of national foreign policies.

In sum, this collection of articles examines the extent and the ways Brexit has impacted smaller EU member states, analysing the strategies they have devised in order to better deal with the challenges raised by such a disruptive development, as well as considering the implications of such strategic responses for the level of Europeanization of their national foreign policies.

Small EU states vis-à-vis Brexit: a comparative framework

In order to achieve its aims, this Special Issue draws on conceptual tools derived from three main bodies of literature: small states foreign policy, institutional theory and Europeanization. Within the vast literature on small states diplomacy, Wivel and Thorhallsson (2018) have proposed an analytical model for understanding small European states' responses to Brexit. These authors have advanced three major strategies these countries are likely to adopt for coping with Brexit, which are conditioned by the type of ties they have developed with the UK in different policy-areas. These strategies are 'hiding', 'seeking shelter' and 'hedging'. Hiding corresponds to a more passive and circumspect posture, which may involve the adoption of a neutral position or avoidance of expressing a clear stance. Shelter-seeking is a more active stance, as it may involve endeavours on the part of small states to align themselves with EU institutions and/or bigger and more influential member states, in order to ensure their protection. Finally, hedging is a proactive and more sophisticated strategy, which leads small states to explore multiple simultaneous options, in order to minimise the risks resulting from choosing limited alternatives (ibidem). Thus, a central guiding question for this Special Issue considers what were the main coping strategies adopted by small European states: 'hiding', 'shelter-seeking' or 'hedging'?

A related concern for this collection of studies is to appraise the logic underpinning small European states' coping strategies vis-à-vis Brexit. This is done by drawing on conceptual insights from institutional theory, notably March and Olsen's neo-institutionalist approach in which a 'logic of consequences' is set against a 'logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen 1998, 2011). According to the former logic of action, actors choose among alternative options by evaluating their likely consequences for individual or collective objectives. In other words, human decisions are driven by a utilitarian reasoning, calculating costs and benefits. Therefore, national decision-makers will opt for a specific strategy vis-à-vis Brexit because they expect it to better suit national or joint EU interests. In contrast, following the 'logic of appropriateness' options are chosen when they match the actor's normative identity and role. Here, rather than resulting from a cost–benefit calculation, decisions are rule-driven, being made on the basis of what social norms deem right in a specific situation. In this regard, national policy-makers will choose a specific path in reaction to Brexit based on considerations of what constitutes appropriate behaviour in view of the country's identity and EU membership status. Therefore, this Special Issue also aims at identifying whether and to what extent these national coping strategies vis-à-vis Brexit were guided by a 'logic of consequences' or a 'logic of appropriateness'.

A third concern germane to this Special Issue links to the implications of national reactions to Brexit for patterns of foreign policy Europeanization. More specifically, it is considered whether and to what extent Brexit advanced or, instead, undermined levels of foreign policy Europeanization among smaller EU states. As briefly alluded to above, Europeanization might involve the national adaptation to EU foreign policy priorities, structures and instruments ('downloading'), as well as the projection of national foreign policy ideas, interests and preferences onto the EU level ('uploading') (see Tonra 2015; Wong and Hill 2011). Thus, this collection scrutinizes whether smaller EU member states' coping strategies vis-à-vis Brexit have been accompanied by the experience of further national foreign policy Europeanization indicated, for example, by growing national adaptation to Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) initiatives or/and an increase of national actions within the EU foreign and security policy framework. Conversely, de-Europeanization implies a regression from previous achievements of foreign policy Europeanization that can be expressed through a growing emphasis on national priorities ('re-nationalization'), reduced commitment ('disengagement'), greater reliance on separate options ('circumvention') or even opposition to the CFSP agenda ('resistance') (see Müller, Pomorska, and Tonra 2021). Hence, it is also considered whether such coping strategies have been accompanied by a tendency towards de-Europeanization as evinced, for example, by national attempts to influence the EU's foreign policy on the basis of more nationalistic standpoint or actions complicating the adoption of a given CFSP position.

In short, this Special Issue relies on a triple proposition with which all articles engage: the type of coping strategy vis-à-vis Brexit (i.e. hiding, shelter-seeking, hedging); the logic underlying such strategies (i.e. 'logic of consequences vs. 'logic of appropriateness'); and the influence of these strategies on the Europeanization of national foreign policies (i.e. undermining or reinforcing).

Some of the Brexit-related challenges facing small EU states started to take shape during the Brexit negotiation process, which eventually resulted in the approval of the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration, in October 2019 (entered into force in February 2020). Hence, for analytical purposes, the temporal focus considered to be most relevant to this Special Issue corresponds to the period between 2016 and 2020, marked by the British referendum and the conclusion of the formal withdrawal process, respectively. Although at the time of writing Brexit's full implications were still far from clear, small EU countries had already been adapting to such development, trying to anticipate certain trends and adjusting to eventual consequences. As such, the present Special Issue focuses on the concrete policy decisions and actions smaller EU countries have devised and implemented, in order to cope with Brexit. As earlier elucidated, the emphasis is placed on coping strategies adopted in the realm of foreign and security policies. However, attention is also paid to goals, preferences and priorities prevailing in other relevant interrelated domains, like the economic and social domains, among others.

This Special Issue covers ten small EU member states: Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal and Slovakia. It is worth noting that these countries have moved towards the EU at different stages of their national history, but also of the history of European integration project. This has conditioned their distinctive integration experiences. Ireland was part of the first enlargement of the European Communities (1973); Portugal belonged to the so-called Iberian enlargement of 1986; Finland entered the EU in 1995 in the context of the first post-Cold War enlargement; Czech Republic, Slovakia and Malta took part in the 2004 enlargement; and Croatia became a full-fledged member in 2013. While resting on a combination between more established EU members and new Eastern members, this selection allows for an interesting set of case studies in terms of geographical location, foreign policy traditions and cultures, types of ties with the UK (e.g. historic, cultural, economic and military), and levels of participation across key EU policy areas. It should be emphasized that these aspects are explored with respect to countries that have been relatively neglected or/and underexplored in the small states literature. This is particularly the case for the states which entered the EU as a result of the 2004 and 2013 enlargements, given the existing limited expertise.

Overview of the special issue

The Special Issue opens with a contribution by Murphy (2022) on the 'extreme case' of Ireland, the small EU member state most directly impacted by Brexit due to strong historical, socio-cultural, economic and political ties with its larger neighbour. The UK is one of Ireland's most important trading partners and the two countries are co-guarantors of the Northern Ireland peace process. Moreover, Britain was an important EU ally for Ireland on many important issues, owing to their shared 'liberal' inclinations. Murphy argues that there was no 'hiding' in the Irish response to Brexit. Ireland's representatives pursued determined efforts to 'seek shelter' from the EU and, simultaneously, implemented a 'hedging' strategy that involved stepping up relations with Germany and France, developing links with the New Hanseatic League and elevating the country's own leadership role within the EU. The robustness and comprehensiveness of these coping strategies marked a shift in Ireland's traditional approach to EU issues, reinforcing the Europeanization of this (militarily neutral) country's foreign policy. As put by the author, the Europeanization effect derived from 'Ireland's positive experience of uploading during the Brexit negotiation period, and by an acknowledgement that in the wake of Brexit, Ireland's geopolitical and security interests are best served by an EU which has a strong and effective common foreign policy' (Murphy 2022, 10–11).

The collection proceeds with a pair of articles dealing with two peripheral European countries, which also happen to be 'core' EU member states. Raimundo and Ferreira-Pereira (2022) focus on Portugal, a Southwestern European state with a significant exposure to Brexit owing to its important socio-economic and diplomatic links with the UK. The latter has been a top destination for Portugal's vast emigration flows and its fourth biggest export market. Besides, the two countries are old allies, sharing an Atlanticist outlook. While finding significant evidence of sheltering, the authors emphasize Portugal's hedging behaviour, seeking to 'balance a steady commitment to the EU with the protection of relevant links with the UK and a strong engagement within NATO' (Raimundo and Ferreira-Pereira 2022, 2). This reaction to Brexit confirmed preexisting patterns of limited foreign policy Europeanization. Jokela (2022) addresses the case of Finland, a Nordic country with limited direct exposure to Brexit. He argues that 'Finland has responded to Brexit by increasingly seeking shelter in the EU as well as hedging against related identified political and economic risks' (Jokela 2022, 10). The country prioritized the EU consolidation over UK relations, impelled notably by a worsened European security environment. Finland's support for stronger EU defence cooperation contributed to the further Europeanization of its foreign and security policy, even if this dynamic included increasing uploading attempts and was not pursued as an exclusive option.

Harwood (2022) produces a contribution on Malta, the tiny Mediterranean island and smallest EU member state. This former British colony kept great political, economic, social and cultural closeness to the UK, but less so in foreign policy due to its neutral status and the regional scope of its external priorities. According to Harwood, Malta's response to Brexit was 'a combination of shelter and hedging' (2022: 9). The country sought shelter from the EU for large-scale issues, such as ensuring continuing access to the UK market, while following a hedging strategy in more specific areas of special national interest, like the residency status of Maltese citizens in the UK, education and health services. This hedging strategy was pursued through bilateral arrangements, partly reflecting the country's limited capacity to form coalitions of like-minded states. Whereas in the foreign policy area Malta followed primarily a shelter approach, the Brexit's impact on the Europeanization of Maltese foreign policy was seen as limited and is expected to remain so considering the country's neutrality and the strong instrumentalism underlying its actions in this domain.

The Special Issue then proceeds with two cross-country comparative studies. Brusenbauch Meislová (2022) looks at Czechia and Slovakia, two Central European and landlocked EU states, without any unusually close ties to the UK. These two neighbouring countries also share a communist past and are NATO members, but differ in terms of their approaches to the EU and strength of their relationship with the UK. Whereas Slovakia has had a comparatively more positive or enthusiastic EU approach, Czechia was closer to the UK's pragmatic and cautious views on EU foreign and security policy. Focusing on security and defence matters, the author argues that 'both Czechia and Slovakia largely pursued a shelter-seeking strategy in order to effectively mitigate and optimise the risks of Brexit' (Brusenbauch Meislová 2022, 5). No hedging is identified from Czechia, 'despite numerous proclamatory declarations on the importance of bilateral Czech–British relations' (Brusenbauch Meislová 2022, 8). Moreover, both countries remained outside the French-led European Intervention Initiative, which further corroborates the idea of EU 'sheltering'. Nevertheless, Brexit is considered to have had a limited impact on Czech and Slovak security and defence policies, neither advancing nor undermining their Europeanization.

The second comparative study is written by Bukovskis and Kasekamp (2022), who focus on the Baltic states. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are recent EU member states which used to share the UK's views on many economic matters and on the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The authors contend that, against a challenging regional context, 'the Baltic position on Brexit was fueled by their fear of being abandoned' (Bukovskis and Kasekamp 2022, 11). The Baltics coped with Brexit through a combination of 'hiding' and 'sheltering', seeking to be neutral on issues not in their immediate interests for the sake of EU-27 unity, while simultaneously coordinating and aligning their positions with other EU actors on issues of primary concern, such as their diasporas and enduring economic cooperation with the UK. The 'special interest' in continued UK engagement in the security

and defence structures of their region was alleviated by British assurances to the three countries. Both the chosen strategies and their underlying reasoning laid the ground for more integrated foreign policies towards Brexit, resulting in (circumscribed) top-down Europeanization of Baltic foreign policies.

Kotarski and Šelo-Šabić (2022) deal with Croatia, the small Adriatic country and youngest EU member state, which has had distant relations with the UK. As put by the authors, 'Croatia and the UK were neither close allies nor did they share views on the key challenges facing the EU' (Kotarski and Šelo-Šabić 2022, 4). The country's coping reaction to Brexit was a combination of 'hiding' and 'shelter-seeking', with no evidence of 'hedging'. As argued in the article, after securing the 'key concern' related to the free movement of workers and reciprocity on residence permits, 'Croatia seemed content to leave the Brexit negotiations to the chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier' (Kotarski and Šelo-Šabić 2022, 9). Brexit is depicted as having had no significant impact on patterns of Europeanization in Croatia, even if the country is expected to continue supporting the build-up of defence capabilities at the EU level.

Major analytical findings and pay offs

Considered together, the contributions collected in this Special Issue offer rich insights on the strategic implications of Brexit for smaller EU member states. Regarding the first analytical concern of this collection, on the type of coping strategies adopted by small European states towards Brexit, the overall results point to significant 'shelter-seeking' from all countries, with this strategy occupying a preeminent place for those less directly affected by the British exit, i.e. Czechia, Slovakia, the Baltic states and Croatia. In the latter two cases, the more passive coping strategy of 'hiding' is also identified. By contrast, the more proactive strategy of 'hedging' is identified in the reactions of the countries most directly affected by Brexit, i.e. Ireland, Portugal, Finland and Malta. While in the Irish case such hedging has a broad scope, for the other three states it features a comparatively more restricted reach or policy-specific nature. These research findings largely corroborate the general expectations and initial results provided by Wivel and Thorhallsson (2018), but add greater depth and nuance by virtue of a more empirically grounded and detailed analysis.

Regarding the second analytical dimension of this Special Issue, on the logics of action underpinning small EU states' coping strategies vis-à-vis Brexit, all contributions without exception identify a mix of normative and instrumental considerations at play, with the latter receiving significant visibility in the case of Ireland. Surely, this is not unrelated to the numerous interests at stake for this country under Brexit. This general point confirms the difficulty highlighted by the neo-institutionalist literature in separating completely appropriateness from consequentiality in practice (see March and Olsen 2011).

Finally, with respect to the analytical concern with the implications of national reactions to Brexit for patterns of foreign policy Europeanization, the broad picture which emerges from the different individual contributions is one of a limited impact, a conclusion that matches general insights from previous studies in this field of research (see Wong and Hill 2011; Hadfield, Manners, and Whitman 2017). While no foreign policy de-Europeanization effects are identified, the dynamics of Europeanization reinforcement are presented as modest at best. The Irish case appears again as an interesting and distinctive one, since Brexit is depicted as having stimulated a greater propensity to upload national preferences, including in the EU's foreign policy domain.

In short, faced with the important dilemmas and challenges brought about by Brexit, the ten small European states examined in this collection sought protection under the EU 'umbrella'. The most exposed among them had to be more proactive and develop innovative ways in order to preserve specific national interests, priorities and preferences. In so doing, these states were driven by both cost–benefit calculations and normative considerations based on their sense of identity and EU membership status. These reactions to Brexit revealed an enduring commitment to the process of European integration, but only entailed a modest impact on national foreign policies. Ultimately, the results show how much the EU matters for smaller member states. Multilateral organizations, such as the EU, formalize

interstate relations, thus providing small European countries with benefits in terms of protection and influence (see Thorhallsson and Steinsson 2017).

By offering an assessment of the three dimensions mentioned above (i.e. coping strategies, logics of action and Europeanization dynamics), this Special Issue addresses questions which have not been simultaneously examined in the scholarly literature so far. In so doing, it bridges, in an original way, two streams of research: small European states responses to Brexit and national foreign policy Europeanization. This can be considered one key pay-off of the current set of analyses. Another contribution rests on the fact that it enhances the comprehension of smaller EU states foreign and security policies, offering a systematic and comparative analysis of how political and diplomatic elites in ten countries positioned themselves domestically and within the EU vis-à-vis the Brexit process. Indeed, this collection gathers updated knowledge on contemporary issues from Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal and Slovakia, providing room for debate on the comparability of the way(s) in which smaller EU member states have approached their Brexit strategies.

This combination of conceptual insights and valuable empirical accounts, across different geographical, historical and thematic dimensions, but also diverse experiences of (European) integration, self-identity, and (self)perception of 'smallness', speaks equally to the construction and conduct of the EU foreign policy, as it provides clues on some of its main actors' perspectives and positions towards such collective cooperative endeavour. Thus, overall, this Special Issue contributes to the literature on small states foreign policy analysis and, more broadly, to EU foreign policy and European studies in general. Apart from scholars of European foreign policy, notably CFSP/CSDP, it will appeal particularly to officials and diplomats engaged in relations between the states being considered and the EU.

Future research might take this comparative discussion on small European countries and Brexit forward by including other small EU member states, but also countries with a candidate status (e.g. Albania, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia) and small neighbouring states with diverse affiliations to the EU (e.g. Liechtenstein, Iceland, Norway and Switzerland). Research opportunities might also stem from exploring small EU states' responses to Brexit in connection with developing theoretical concepts, like differentiated integration. Another promising avenue is the critical overlap between the continued unfolding of Brexit and the war in Ukraine, which erupted in February 2022 and seems to have dramatically increased the necessity of small European states to seek shelter within NATO, but also under the umbrella of a reinforced membership to the EU and its CSDP. In sum, by focusing on such important and timely issues, while pointing to new research opportunities, this Special Issue hopes to have contributed to stimulating further the debate on small European states and the EU.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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