
62nd International Academic Week of the Southeast Europe Association **Smallness in International Politics** **The Agency of Small States in Southeast Europe**

**Organizers: Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft) /
Akademie für Politische Bildung Tutzing
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Introduction

Do small states have agency in international politics? Is agency something desirable in the current return of geopolitics? And what can be considered a small state? These were some of the overarching questions that early-career researchers, experienced scholars, and practitioners in the field of international relations discussed during the 62nd International Academic Week of the Southeast Europe Association. The conference committee PD Dr. *Dietmar Müller* (University of Leipzig) and Prof. Dr. *Florian Bieber* (University of Graz) created a diverse program to approach the “smallness problem” since the emergence of nation states from the perspectives of international relations, political science, security studies, feminist approaches, cultural practices and history. The Akademie für Politische Bildung Tutzing, right at the shores of Lake Starnberg, became a place of intellectual and interdisciplinary exchange on this topic. Focusing on Southeast Europe, these elaborations offer especially fruitful ground for analysis, given the region’s past transformations that range from being part of empires, aligned or non-aligned with superpowers, struggles for independence, building of new nation states and recent pursuits to form novel alliances or

integration into supranational structures such as the European Union.

The conference commenced with a welcome by the organizers and hosts of this year’s conference, *Manuel Sarrazin* (President of the Southeast Europe Association and Special Representative of the German Government for the Countries of the Western Balkans) and *Beate Winterer* (Akademie für Politische Bildung), and a thought-provoking introduction to the topic by the conference committee. The week proceeded with an intensive program including academic panels, a movie screening, speed presentation workshops, a book presentation and a simulation of the Berlin Process. As a clear objective to promote the work of early-career researchers, the Southeast Europe Association also awarded its annual prize for the best master’s thesis in Southeast European Studies. This year’s awardee is *Olga Bostan* (University of Leipzig), who conducted ethnographic research on water infrastructure in rural Moldova in her thesis “One drop at a time – Waterways in rural Moldova”.

Day One: Power, Size, and Perception

The conference was kicked off by Dr. *Dimitar Bechev* (University of Oxford) with a keynote in

which he conceptualized the definition of a small state. Already by referring to population size, divergent definitions can be found: the World Bank for example regards countries with less than 1.5 million inhabitants as small, which would only include Montenegro of all Western Balkan states, whereas the general guideline for international relations scholars lies below 10 million. But population size is only one factor that determines the smallness of a state. Put in relation, Serbia for example can be regarded as a big regional player, whereas Ukraine – undoubtedly a large country in size and population – can be seen as small in comparison to the Russian Federation. Looking at smallness in the context of politics, power seems to be an important factor. Romania during the Cold War for instance – again no small country in population nor size – could have been regarded a small power in contrast to superpowers. The same accounts for the self-perception of the Yugoslav successor states in comparison to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. But does smallness equal no agency? Bechev argued “no” and showed how big players have had to adjust to bottom-up movements throughout history. However, he raised the question whether agency is ultimately positive or also something we should be cautious about. This statement opened a lively audience discussion.

Day Two, Panel 1: Misery and Splendor – Discourses on Smallness

The second conference day started with a meet and greet as well as a short introduction to the Young SOG, the youth branch within the Southeast Europe Association, by *Morten Nissen*. The first panel then circled around discourses on smallness between misery and splendor. *Dietmar Müller* moderated this heterogeneous panel, which started with *Diana Mishkova's* (Centre for Advanced Study, Sofia) presentation of Istvan Bibo's theory on the “The Miseries of East European Small States” (1946). She examined this theory against the backdrop of supranational consolidation, like the Balkan Federation as a cross-regional project in the 1930s. *Filip Ejodus* (University of Belgrade) then presented his recent research on the interrelations between ontological and epistemological security focusing on the Belgrade-Prishtina-Dialogue.

Based on a representative survey, he found that Serbs prefer to stay ignorant about the situation in Kosovo to keep hold of their preconceived narratives on the issue, hence prioritizing ontological security (being) over epistemological security (knowing). This panel concluded with *Ethem Mandić* (Faculty for Montenegrin Language and Literature, Cetinje), who delved into Miroslav Krleža's novel “Banners” and its reflection on the region's history, particularly focusing on the coexistence of different cultural realities within Yugoslavia. In his presentation, Mandić also raised the question about how well fiction represents history and politics.

Panel 2: The Agency of Small States in the European Integration Process

Florian Bieber moderated the second panel. *Nikolaos Tzifakis* (University of the Peloponnese, Corinth) discussed the negligence of the Western Balkan countries' agency in EU enlargement studies. In particular, he investigated how Serbia breaks out of structurally determined compliance and exploits alternative policy options with Russia to create reverse conditionality towards the EU, which tolerates illiberalism for restraining Serbia from full alignment with Russia. *Sabina Islamzade* (Bucharest) presented her PhD dissertation project, in which she analyses how Moldova has shaped the Eastern Partnership. By putting the focus on Moldova's agency, she analytically shifts away from the EU as policy sender, which can be considered as Eurocentric, and towards a circular process that puts the domestic level at the center of analysis. *Amer Kurtović* (International Burch University, Ilidža) explored structure and agency in Bosnia and Herzegovina's alignment with the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Drawing on interviews, he found foremost agency and little structure. Alignment with the CFSP was thus mostly dependent on the incumbent actors, especially presidency advisers.

Panel 3: Small States in International Organizations

Chair *Filip Ejodus* gave the floor to *Nikola Zečević* (University of Montenegro), who examined Montenegro's diplomatic struggle during the political exile of its government from 1919 – 1922, focusing particularly on its interactions with the

League of Nations. The Kingdom of Montenegro, despite its smallness, fought for sovereignty and acknowledgement on the international stage through several channels. This highlights the complex challenges small states face in a global order dominated by larger powers. Following, *Marko Kovačević* (University of Belgrade) presented small states' candidacies for the UN Security Council. Since candidacies have not yet been systematically explored, especially those of Southeast European states, the first objective of this research is to map these candidacies between 1989 and 2024. Furthermore, Kovačević explores the strategies behind these candidacies, which circle around coalition building, influence, and seeking status.

Movie Screening

After a day of academic discussions, the evening program brought discourses on screen. The film "Non-Aligned – Scenes from the Labudović Reels" (2022), presented by its director *Mila Turajlić*, shows long forgotten footage of the non-aligned movement captured by Stevan Labudović, the cameraman of Yugoslavia's president Tito. Turajlić takes the audience on a journey through Labudović's work life, the importance of his camera in the information battle during the decolonization era, and the day when Belgrade seemed to be the center of the world – at the Belgrade Conference 1961 (the first conference of the Non-Aligned Movement, *editor's note*).

The following discussion with *Turajlić* did not only allow to broach the topics shown in this nostalgic depiction, but also film and storytelling as a tool. Having an academic background herself, Turajlić explained how filmmaking gives her the creative freedom to deal with topics in a way she could not in academia. The participants of the Academic Week also voiced how this artistic intervention let them connect to the conference's topic on a different level, making the abstract more tangible.

Day Three, Panel 4: Small States in the Cold War

Following up on the movie screening, *Adrian Brisku* chaired this panel about small states during the Cold War. *Tvrško Jakovina* (University of Zagreb) explained Yugoslavia's role and for-

eign policy at this time, in which non-alignment should not be mistaken with neutrality. In contrast to other European small states, Yugoslavia was neither a buffer zone nor jumping on the bandwagon, but pursued an active and ambitious foreign policy, especially after the break with Stalin, when it became an independent initiator of international politics. Focusing on the same period and country, *Filip Mitričević* (Indiana University Bloomington, Chicago) demonstrated how Yugoslavia's impact as a small state was not defined by size or military capacities, but by its diplomatic power that transcended its actual size. Especially in the era of de-colonialization, Yugoslavia gained diplomatic influence as one of the initiators of the non-aligned movement and by playing the narratives of antifascism, liberation and independence in the Global South, thereby creating an anti-colonial solidarity network. *Iuliana Alexandra Jureschi* (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca) compared the rhetoric of East Germany and Romania between 1953 and 1965. Her research analyses how the GDR could be understood as an ally of Soviet policies during this time, whereas Romania – despite being part of the Eastern bloc – had more ambiguous approaches and could therefore be regarded as a "rebel". Focusing on the most isolated country during this time, *Anjeza Xhaferaj* (European University of Tirana) gave insights into Albania's foreign policies. These became more paranoid over the course of Enver Hoxha's rule, framing Albania as the true guardian of Leninist ideologies, while still emphasizing ties to other communist states in the world.

Panel 5: Political Economies and Trade of Small States

This panel was moderated by *Tvrško Jakovina* and focused on economic strategies and realities of small states in a historical and contemporary context. *Adrian Brisku* (Charles University Prague) reconceptualized small states' economic nationalism, thereby challenging the assumption that small states inevitably bend to economic pressure of bigger players and are capable of forging their own – and what forms of – economic policies. *Rigels Lenja* (Munich) explored the question of whether small states can play a role in the conflicts of faraway states, investigating the cases of Yugoslavia's,

Romania's, Bulgaria's, and Albania's arms delivery in 1955–1989. Besides the actual impact of this support, he also researched the motives and freedoms of each individual state's engagement. *Mimoza Agolli* (European University of Tirana) compared competitiveness scores of Baltic, Balkan and East European small economies before and after EU integration. While it is generally evident that EU integration enhanced competitiveness of small states, her research attempts to identify the particular EU policies that improved candidates' global competitiveness and influence.

Simulation Game

In the afternoon, participants of the conference assumed the roles of different actors in the Berlin Process, whose 10th anniversary summit was held in close timely proximity – 14 October 2024 – in Berlin. Acting as either one of the Western Balkan delegates, the chair (Germany), partner countries, or the EU Commission, participants voiced their representative actors' appeals towards enlargement and were tasked to formulate the Chair's Conclusion. This was followed up by a reflection and discussion of the process and its simulation.

Day Four, Panel 6: New Opportunities, Old Problems – Southeast Europe in the 1990s

Chaired by *Adrian-Daniel Stan* (Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj), this panel thematized the turbulent decade of the 1990s in Southeast Europe. *Rebecca Grossi* (University of Leipzig) reconstructed Romania's foreign policy rhetoric between 1992 and 2014, which she summarized under the leitmotif "away from East, closer to West". She especially focused on the presence and absence of the Black Sea region in this rhetoric, which was neglected in the 1990s, highlighted during the EU and NATO accession process, and again diminished – but not fully omitted – after integration into both organizations. *Christian Costamagna* (University of Leipzig/University of Rijeka) looked at the Kosovo War and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's allies during this period, exposing the absence of coherent long-term planning for its security strategy. This resulted in counterintuitive approaches towards the West and led yet to an exclusive reliance on Russia, which did not deliver the expected support. For his research, he

analyzed newly declassified primary sources from Yugoslavia and the United States.

Panel 7: Small Balkan States in Regional Initiatives

Focusing on regional cooperation, *Vladimir Vučković* (Masaryk University Brno) moderated this second to last panel of the conference. *Adrian-Daniel Stan* directed the attention to the often-overlooked initiatives and security strategies of the Black Sea region. Especially since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, foresight to emerging security challenges in this region have gained traction and accelerated the systemic development of projects to foster resilience. *Aleksandar Spasov* (University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius", Skopje) investigated the Western Balkan states' role in the European security architecture. Despite their categorization as small, the countries of the region prove to be significant for Europe, given the external influence of players such as China and Russia, but also regional conflicts like in – and stemming from – the 1990s. Spasov especially looked into regional initiatives such as Open Balkan, which was supported by the Trump administration, and how they compete with European formats such as the Berlin Process. *Elsa Krasniqi* (University of Prishtina) continued the discussion on the Open Balkan initiative, emphasizing its failure as some countries in the region rejected the idea. Considering that the initiators belonged to the larger countries of the region, the smaller states' hesitation to join highlights their agency to reject and oppose the assertion of power by their larger neighbors.

Panel 8: Balkan States and Europe in a Global Context

Christian Costamagna moderated the last panel of the conference, which focused on the Balkan states in a global context. *Alban Reli* (European University of Tirana) juxtaposed Edi Rama's foreign policy discourses and actions, and thereby showed the importance of narratives in shaping not only Albania's image on the international stage, but also real policies. *Vladimir Vučković* looked at another regional player, namely Serbia, and how the country challenges the assumption of small states being restricted in their decision-making independence. Attempting to position itself between East and West,

examples like Serbia's COVID-19 diplomacy, but also policies regarding the war in Ukraine, show a lack of political vision nonetheless.

Speed Presentations

In the afternoon, the floor was given to scholars who presented their current research projects in small working groups. *Alejandro Esteso Pérez* (University of Graz) presented his PhD-project "God Save the Mayor: local illiberal structures and practices in Serbia". *Bekim Lahi* (University of Belgrade) also focuses on Serbia in his MA-thesis "Deterioration of Queer Rights under the Auspices of the European Non-Discrimination Regime in Serbia". *Vladimir Lame* (ATC Institute, Albania) looks at EU enlargement in his research project "Enlargement fatigue in the Western Balkans, missing democratization". Taking a more historical approach, *Paula Seidel* (European University Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder) presented a paper connected to her PhD-dissertation with the working title "Connection by Reflection – Yugoslav and British Constructions of Belonging during World War I". *Mehdi Sejdiu* (Heidelberg University) discussed his idea for a book chapter titled "Behaving Like an Ally – Understanding the United States in the Kosovar Parliamentary Discourse". The work-

shop enabled researchers to exchange ideas with peers as well as experienced scholars.

Book Presentation: Pulverfass Balkan

In the evening, *Florian Bieber* presented his recently published book "Pulverfass Balkan". *Christian Hagemann* (Executive Director of the Southeast Europe Association, Munich) moderated the event, which was open to the public, and the following discussion held in German, simultaneously translating into English. Topics included the foreign influence in the region, especially China's and Russia's, the situation in Kosovo, and the EU. Bieber also discussed the controversial book title, referring to the Balkans as "powder keg", a narrative stemming from WWI.

Day Five: Wrap-Up

After four intensive days of academic and social exchange, the conference committee *Florian Bieber* and *Dietmar Müller* invited to a morning feedback session. This gave participants the chance to recap the discussions and activities and included a preview of the upcoming collection of conference papers in the *Südosteuropa-Jahrbuch 2025*.