

Editorial Introduction

Nordic countries' crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic: The effect of size

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Abstract: This special section in *SST* deals with size-related challenges and opportunities in the seven Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands) in relation to the crisis management of the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. No study has been carried out on whether the size of the Nordic countries affected their management of the COVID-19 crisis. Our aim is to address gaps in both the crisis management and small states literature. The crisis management literature has mainly made assumptions on small states based on cases of large states; while the small state literature has focused on the vulnerability of small states in handling crises. This special section provides new insights into how small state size, administrative design, and governance culture shaped crisis management in the Nordic region. We argue that administrative scale is important, but its effects are mediated by institutional design, leadership, and the ability to harness informality constructively. Small states are not inherently disadvantaged in crises. When paired with clarity, coordination, and trust-based governance, even the smallest Nordic countries can perform well – and at times, better – than their larger peers. Hence, the special section suggests that smallness is not a barrier to effective crisis management. These findings call for a more nuanced view of state size in both public administration and small state scholarship.

Keywords: COVID-19, crisis management, governance, Nordic states, pandemic, public administration, size, small states

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Introduction

The main aim of this special section in *Small States & Territories* is to produce valuable insights into how the size of the seven Nordic countries – Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands – affected their management of the COVID-19 pandemic during its early stage, from January to summer 2020. We focus on the central government and on the health issues; but not on economic compensation and support packages. The three papers offer a broad, systematic and comprehensive review of all the Nordic governments' responses to the pandemic, with the benefit and perspective of hindsight.

All seven Nordic states and territories are commonly defined as small jurisdictions (Thorhallsson, 2006). They share common Nordic culture and characteristics. They are economically and politically similar (Christensen & Lægveid, 2023b, p. 292), and known for

their consensus-oriented and unified political processes (Greve et al., 2016). Nordic societies are built on an extensive role for the state and the public sector, a comprehensive welfare state, universalism, equality and social corporatism (Lægreid, 2017).

There are indications that there might be a Nordic model due to the similarities between the Nordic countries (Peters, 2021). The Nordic administrative model is founded on rule-of-law culture, transparency and accountability. It is associated with five common values: neutral professionalism (expert knowledge); political loyalty based on majority rule and the parliamentary principle of governance: the so-called Rechtsstaat values, such as impartiality, neutrality, fairness, predictability, due processes and rule of law; policy-making based on evidence; responsiveness and inclusiveness; and, finally administrative and financial efficiency (Lægreid, 2017). The Nordic countries form one of the most unified regions in Europe (Thorhallsson & Elínardóttir, 2020). Also, the Nordic region may seem remote on a world map, but the countries are highly connected to the outside world (e.g. with frequent direct flights to all parts of Europe, North America and Asia); while Greenland and the Faroe Islands are well integrated in the Danish Kingdom.

These features provide an ideal framework for an analysis and comparison of crisis management strategies during the pandemic. In other words, the different strategies that the culturally and politically similar Nordic countries opted for when faced with a common crisis provide an excellent laboratory to study the effectiveness of the various approaches.

COVID-19 is by no means the only crisis that the Nordic countries have had to manage in recent decades. They have, in fact, had to deal with a string of challenges, including cyber threats, financial crises, natural disasters, swine and bird flu, influx of refugees as well as climate change. In such crisis situations the Nordic public administrations, which are generally thought to be effective and exemplifying good governance, should be resilient. This kind of resilience and consistency could be witnessed through three decades of economic turbulence before the pandemic (de la Porte, 2022). For instance, in comparison with other European countries, the Nordics' responses to the 2008 financial crisis display how they better shielded their citizens from the crisis' most severe effects (Ólafsson et al., 2016).

However, the Nordic countries are of course not all the same. They differ in size and have different political models. For instance, Sweden, by far the largest of the group, does not have ministerial rule, and boasts bigger and more autonomous central agencies than the others. They all have distinctive national cultures. Greenland and the Faroe Islands form a self-governing overseas administrative division of the kingdom of Denmark. Finland, Sweden and Denmark are members of the European Union (EU); but Iceland and Norway only take part in the common market though the European Economic Area (EEA) (though they are all part of Schengen). These differences need to be considered in comparing their responses to the pandemic.

There have been frequent comparisons of the COVID-19 situation in the Nordic countries by the media, and investigation commissions have covered different facets of the pandemic in all the countries, addressing different aspects of crisis management (NOU, 2021:6; NOU, 2023:16; NOU, 2022:5; SOU, 2020:80; SOU, 2021:89; SOU, 2022:10; Folketinget, 2021; Investigation report, 2021; Bernhardsdóttir et al., 2022; Safety Investigation Authority, 2020; Stenvall et al., 2022; Deloitte, 2021). Several studies, and few comparative studies, on the individual countries' handling of COVID-19 were written over the course of the pandemic, from the early phase up to the present (e.g. Haug, 2024; Lynggaard et al., 2023; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b; Christensen et al., 2023). These studies indicate that there were significant variations between the Nordic countries regarding their crisis management, including their preparedness, regulatory measures, policy strategies, the role of experts and politicians, patterns of governance, policy responses and the intergovernmental relations which might be affected by differences in size of country, polity

design, experiences with previous crises and culture differences (Lyngaard et al., 2023; Haug, 2024; Christensen et al., 2023; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2023a).

Still, the Nordic countries performed rather well in 'crisis managing' the COVID-19 pandemic. They were among the European countries with the lowest mortality rate, lowest burden of measures and the smallest reduction in economic activity. Nordic countries scored above the European average; and, among 98 countries covered in an Australian COVID-19 performance evaluation in January 2021, Iceland, Finland and Norway were among the top 20 and Sweden ranked as 37th (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2023a; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2023b, p.294).

The Nordic countries are all cohesive societies, with healthy economies, high levels of trust in government as well as strong trust relations among citizens: these factors affected the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to many other countries, the Nordic governments were able to establish a national consensus about crisis management and faced a cooperative political elite as well as collaborative citizens. Overall, there was an absence of confrontation, a high level of trust and no mass polarization (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2022b, p. 297). Governance capacity and governance legitimacy were high, contributing to a well performing crisis management.

Hence, the overall conclusions of all these studies indicate that the Nordic countries' management of the COVID-19 crisis was successful. This is particularly noticeable for two reasons. Firstly, even though there are some noticeable works on policy success in public administration literature in small and medium sized states (e.g., Boin et al., 2021; Lindquist et al., 2022; Luetjens et al., 2019), most of the crisis management literature focuses on failures while the Nordic countries provide examples of success. Secondly, the small state literature normally claims that small states have greater difficulties coping with crisis situations as compared with larger states (Vital, 1967; Koehane, 1969; Thorhallsson, 2019).

This makes the Nordic countries highly interesting cases; a key factor in their selection. Moreover, the Nordic authorities' successes in handling COVID-19 make us question the assumptions of the crisis management and small state literature. This leads us to the overall research questions of the special section: Can the small size of the public administration of the Nordic countries explain their well-performing crisis management of COVID-19?

Our aim is to address gaps in both the crisis management and small states literature. The crisis management literature has until now mainly made assumptions on small states based on cases of large states; while the small state literature has focused on the vulnerability of small states in handling crises. This special section is about the internal dimension of inherent size-related challenges and opportunities in the Nordic countries in relation to the crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic. No study has yet been carried out to review whether the size of the Nordic countries affected their management of COVID-19. And, as scholars of small states have pointed out, comparative studies of states need to take account of their difference in size, otherwise they are in danger of overlooking smallness as an important explanatory variable (Thorhallsson, 2019). Hence, we will specifically address the gap in the literature and provide much needed policy lessons for crisis management in small states.

Theoretical framework

The size of states and crisis management: The small state perspective

We assess the effects of size of the public administration on the responses in the respective countries and compare their crisis responses considering their size. The argument is not to adopt a particular cut-off point regarding population size. Accordingly, we will also examine whether there is evidence for a continuum of size, in which these mechanisms become more apparent

the smaller the population becomes as compared with others, regardless of other traits in the country.

This project defines all the Nordic countries as small. Small state and territory size has been defined in various ways using both subjective and objective ways, such as number of inhabitants, geographical area, size of economy, military strength, the size of the public administration; as well as domestic and foreign actors' views of the state's size and capabilities (Archer & Nugent, 2002). A degree of relativism is always present with reference to the size of states (Thorhallsson & Wivel, 2006). Nevertheless, the most common factor defining small states is population size (Thorhallsson, 2006). Historically, various scholarly definitions regard those states with less than 10 million inhabitants as small (Easterly & Kraay, 2000; Jalan, 1982; Katzenstein, 1985; Kuznets, 1960; Ross, 1983; Keohane, 1969; Vital, 1967).

The Faroe Islands and Greenland are the smallest of the Nordics with a population of just over 52,000 and 56,000 retrospectively in 2019 (see [Table 1](#)). Iceland, with population of approximately 357,000, is also considerable smaller than the other four Nordic states, with populations ranking from just over 5.3 million in Norway, 5.5 million in Finland, 5.8 million in Denmark to 10.2 million in Sweden in 2019. We will distinguish between grading of smallness from the smallest countries (Iceland, Faroes and Greenland), 'the typical small states' (Norway, Finland and Denmark) and the rather 'big small state' (Sweden) to explore if and how the degree of smallness makes a difference. This creates an additional added value of the design.

[Table 1](#) illustrates the continuum of scale in terms of population size and public administration among the Nordic countries. It presents the size of the main governmental agencies involved in managing the COVID-19 pandemic as of 2019. We have chosen to use 2019 figures, as our analysis focuses on how these agencies responded during the early phase of the pandemic, from January to summer 2020. Additionally, several of these agencies underwent significant changes during the pandemic.

There is a notable difference in agency size between the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland on the one hand, and the four larger Nordic countries on the other. The Faroe Islands and Greenland had fewer full-time equivalent (FTE) personnel than Iceland. Sweden generally had larger agencies in terms of personnel compared to Norway, Finland, and Denmark-excluding some sizable Finnish organizations, whose broader mandates are explained in the notes accompanying [Table 1](#).

Traditionally, research on governance and crisis management has focused on large states, making generalised assumptions that are then automatically translated to smaller states (Bernhardsdottir & Svedin, 2004). However, research shows that there are fundamental differences in the functioning of governance between small and large states. Small states have inbuilt structural weaknesses related to their smallness (Thorhallsson, 2019): a small public administration, a small domestic market and limited defence capacity (Rothstein, 1968, pp. 36-37; Vayrynen, 1971). The small state literature has emphasized that small states cannot withstand stress due to their more limited resources as compared to larger states (Vital, 1967). Reid (1974) argued that small states tend to be more cautious and slow to perceive opportunities and constraints. This reflects the small size of their bureaucracies as well as their smaller propensity to risk and loss (Barston, 1973). The same absolute loss of human power, territory or economic infrastructure is seemingly more serious for a small state than for a larger one (Bernhardsdottir & Svedin, 2004). Moreover, one of the most common claims of the small state literature is that small states need to form alliances with larger states to guarantee their survival and prosperity (Keohane, 1969). Small states seek shelter provided by larger states and international organizations to compensate for their structural domestic and external weaknesses (Thorhallsson, 2019).

Table 1. Number of Inhabitants and Full-Time Equivalent Personnel (Annual Work Units) in Government Agencies involved in COVID-19 Management: 7 Nordic Countries, 2019.

	Population (thousands)	Ministry of Health	PM's Office	Health Directorate/ Institute	Chief Epidemiologist Office*	Civil Protection Agency**
Faroe Islands	52	15	17	<i>in Denmark</i>	3	12
Greenland	56	8	32	3	6	<i>no institute</i>
Iceland	357	49	52	66	8	7
Norway	5,328	225	120	903	644	627
Finland	5,518	427	658	1000	including in Health Directorate 50	
Denmark	5,806	217	47	201	640	465
Sweden	10,230	250	191	749	540	1170

* **The Office of the Chief Epidemiologist/Director of Communicable Disease Control.**

****Civil Protection Agencies:** the Faroese Safety Authority; Almannavarnadeild Ríkislögreglustjóri (Iceland); *Direktoratet for samfunnsikkerhet og beredskap* (Norway); Emergency Supply Agency (Finland); Beredskabsstyrelsen (Denmark), *Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap* (Sweden).

Explanations:

Faroe Islands: The Chief Epidemiologist's office functioned as Directorate of Health during COVID-19. The Chief Epidemiologist was part of a bigger Danish organization (Styrelsen for Patientsikkerhed).

Greenland: Tasks regarding civil protection are spread between different Greenlandic and Danish agencies.

Finland: The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (STM) is relatively large, as it is responsible for both health and social affairs. There were overlapping departments and groups which were working with Covid issues in STM. The Wellbeing and the Services Department in the STM with *130 staff* was mainly in charge of Covid issue, but only part of them worked with Covid Issues. The Prime Minister's Office is also relatively large, due to the division of labour in which the Prime Minister handles EU matters, while the President of the Republic is responsible for other foreign policy issues.

Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) is responsible for both social and health affairs.

Sweden: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

Sources:

Population: Eurostat: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00001/default/table?lang=en> (25 June 2025); Statistics Faroe Islands: <https://hagstova.fo/en/population/population/population> (25 June 2025); Statistics Greenland: <https://stat.gl>.

Faroe Islands: Information provided by the relevant agencies (June 2025).

Greenland: Landslægeembedet: https://nun.gl/emner/om_landslaegeembedet/medarbejdere?sc_lang=da; Departementet for sundhed:

https://naalakkersuisut.gl/Departementer/Sundhed_Personer_med_handicap?sc_lang=da; Correspondance with PM's office through e-mail 20.5.2025

Iceland: Information provided by the relevant agencies (May 2025).

Norway: The Norwegian Central Bureau of Statistics (SSB) (June 2025).

Finland: Sosiaali- ja Terveysministeriön Tilinpäätös- ja toimintakertomus vuodelta 2019, Sosiaali- ja Terveysministeriön raportteja ja muistioita 20:8; Valtioneuvoston kanslian tilinpäätös 2019, Valtioneuvoston kanslian julkaisuja 2020:4; Terveys- ja Hyvinvoinninlaitos THL, Tilinpäätös 1.1.-31.12.2019; Viljasta verkostoihin- Huoltovarmuuskeskuksen arviointi. Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriön julkaisuja 2021:32.

Denmark: Information provided by the relevant agencies (June 2025).

Sweden: Civil contingencies agency (Civil Protection Agency): Årsredovisning 2021, p. 84
<https://rib.msb.se/filer/pdf/29913.pdf>.

National board of health and welfare: Årsredovisning 2019, p 11; Årsredovisning 2020, p 10; Årsredovisning 2021, p12. <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2020-2-6609.pdf> <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2021-2-7188.pdf> <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2022-2-7751.pdf>

Folkhälsomyndigheten (Public health agency) Årsredovisning 2021, p 29

(<https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/publikationer-och-material/publikationsarkiv/aa/arsredovisning-2021/>)

Ministry of health and social affairs: Regeringskansliets årsbok 2021, p.82,

<https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/regeringskansliets-arsbok/>.

PM's Office: Regeringskansliets årsbok 2021, p.82 <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/regeringskansliets-arsbok/>.

And so, although small states are a very diverse group, they all must compensate for size-related problems. Small states have developed certain domestic features, such as informal and flexible public administration (Thorhallsson, 2000; Jugl, 2022, Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu, 2019), and welfare states and democratic corporatism (Katzenstein, 1985), to cope with their smallness. Their everyday politics tend to be highly reliant on informal dynamics and personal characteristics of key leaders (Corbett and Veenendaal, 2018); but this does not seem to have been analysed in light of the crisis management literature.

The importance of Iceland's characteristics as a small state (such as limited domestic resources, limited administrative capacity, lack of human resources and dependency on international markets) has gained research visibility. For instance, Iceland could not withstand the stress of the 2008 international financial crisis due to such limitations (Thorhallsson, 2010; 2011; Thorhallsson & Kirby, 2012). Iceland was significantly more hit by the financial crisis than other Nordic countries (Kristinsson and Mathiasson, 2016). Iceland's European policy has been shaped by the smallness of its public administration, relative lack of knowhow and its small domestic market (Thorhallsson, 2004; Thorhallsson and Rebhan, 2011); and the smallness of the public administration in Iceland explains the different adaptation patterns to the European Economic Area (EEA) membership of Iceland and Norway (Lægred, Steinthorsson & Thorhallsson, 2004). Importantly, observations on crisis management in Iceland (Thorhallsson & Ellertsdóttir, 2004) have generated hypotheses for future research (Bernhardsdóttir & Svedin, 2004) that will now be examined, for the first time, as a part of this special section, as follows below.

Research suggests that population size influences the inner workings of small states mainly through two mechanisms: first, through the limited availability of resources, mostly human capital; and second, through a particular type of social ecology (Bray & Packer, 2006; Sarapuu, 2010; Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu, 2019). Moreover, small states provide examples of extremely personality-driven politics with 1) strong connections between individual leaders and constituents; 2) a limited private sphere; 3) a limited role for ideology and programmatic policy debate; 4) strong political polarization; 5) a tendency towards patronage-based politics; and 6) the capacity of leaders to dominate all aspects of public life (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018). Whether this is the case in the small states under study, and their effects on the crisis management, will be examined here. The argument is that small states display more frequent and informal interaction between decision elites and experts. This allows for rapid knowledge sharing and decision making.

Accordingly, we understand resident population and size of the public administration/government crisis management organizations as the two core variables defining the capacity of the state apparatus of the Nordic countries; especially in terms of the core crisis management authorities. We leave aside other variables sometimes used to define small states'

behaviour, such as size of the economy, military and territory. For instance, even though inhabitants of Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland and Greenland are spread over a rather large territory which would have affected the spread of COVID-19, the concentration of the population in the capital areas of these countries make them not that different from other European states, as well as Denmark and the Faroe Islands. Our main concerns are with the crisis management and small state literature's claims about the countries' capacity in terms of human resources and state apparatus.

To this end, the special section aims to analyse and answer three hypotheses based on assumptions of the crisis management literature and small state studies. They have been developed to highlight specific characteristics that can be traced to the smallness of countries' public administration and are indicative of the challenges they face in addressing complex problems. Accordingly, the special section is organised into three papers. Each of these will address one specific hypothesis, and in the following order.

The first paper examines the hypothesis that limited resources and 'lay characteristics' (greater public participation and little professional staff to organize and manage crises) prominent in small states crisis management systems make them more prone to be reactive than proactive in identifying and managing crises (Ackrén, Hokkala, Lægreid, Palmujoki, Trengereid, Bernhardsdóttir et al., 2025a).

The second article explores the hypothesis that cooperation problems and bureaucratic infighting in small states tend to be the result of a lack of planning and unclear rules in crisis situations rather than the actors' concerns over a future distribution of the state's scarce resources (Ackrén, Hokkala, Lægreid, Palmujoki, Trengereid, Bernhardsdóttir et al., 2025b).

Finally, the third paper evaluates the hypothesis that small states tend to have less formal governance structures that enable frequent interaction between decision elites and experts. This may facilitate knowledge sharing and rapid policy responses in times of crises (Ackrén, Hokkala, Lægreid, Palmujoki, Trengereid, Bernhardsdóttir et al., 2025c).

All three articles will especially consider whether there is evidence for a continuum of size, in which these expectations become more apparent with a progressively smaller population. Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands constitute our first category of size. Norway, Denmark and Finland make up the second. Sweden, alone, makes up the third and final category.

Analysing these three hypotheses in this context should provide new and important insights into how small states manage and address complex crisis situations. This is an under-researched field in the crisis management literature, making it important that the COVID-19 crisis is also studied specifically in this context. In addition, there is a short summary section at the end of the special section.

Crisis management: Concepts and methodology

The research method followed in our analysis, on the crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Nordic countries from January to summer 2020, was developed by the Centre for Crisis Management and Training, Crismart (now Centre for Societal Security) at the Swedish Defence University and the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Syracuse University, USA (as discussed below), placing the crisis in its relevant historical, institutional, and political context.

The study of crisis and crisis management that was on the rise in the last decades of the 20th century has been enhanced considerably in this century, with strings of crises that have demanded the attention of policy makers and scholars (Wolbers et al., 2021, Lægreid & Rykkja, 2023). The study of crisis management has thus come to provide valuable knowledge; but the effort to develop this relatively new field of research needs to continuously provide better

understanding by rigorous research in response to the need of societies to prepare for all too frequent crises. This is especially due to the escalation of transboundary crises in the last decades: crises that exceed national, geographical, political, cultural, and legal boundaries that normally enable decision makers to classify, manage, and contain a crisis. Examples of a transboundary crisis include the 2008 financial crisis, the Iceland volcanic ash crisis of 2010, various terrorist attacks, immigration influxes, social unrest, and climate change.

COVID-19 is a transboundary crisis of a meta scale (Boin, McConnell & 't Hart, 2021). The tendency of the coronavirus to escalate rapidly and mutate constantly makes it extremely difficult to define the causes and possible consequences, as well to identify the leadership hierarchy (Boin et al., 2021). As noted above, our research focuses on the COVID-19 crisis decision-making and implementation by the government, state agencies and institutions; it excludes the decisions left for medical doctors and health personnel in hospitals and nursing homes.

Several crises have been documented and analysed at the regional, national and international level, in various countries, as a part of crisis management research programs run by Crismart (now Centre for Societal Security) and the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs. The research method developed within these programs is originally grounded within the cognitive-institutional approach to crisis management that draws on cognitive and social psychology, organizational theory, public administration, political science, and foreign policy analysis. Individuals, groups, and organizations occupy centre stage when crises occur and thus the behaviour of these actors are the focus of analysis (Stern, 1999).

According to the research method, the first step is to empirically map out the course of crisis events in detail. This would create a comprehensive and comparable chronology of events, pasting together the many pieces of information from various sources.

The second step of the research divides the crisis into several important decision-making occasions. The reconstruction of events enables the identification of key decision-makers and key decision-making occasions (the so called “what do we do now” situations).

In the third step, decision-making occasions are analysed further and used to construct different theoretical and explanatory perspectives regarding the decision-making processes.

The fourth and final step is to analyse prioritized crisis management themes (Hermann et al., 2006; Sundelius et al., 1997; Stern & Sundelius, 2002).

These findings are the foundation, or provide the data used, for testing hypothesis on small state crisis-management. The same crisis management's phases and themes are studied within the countries to ensure comparability. The findings give the opportunity to analyse the proposed influence of the size of states on the behaviour of decision-makers in managing crises.

Several documented case studies by the Centre for Societal Security can be used for future comparative studies and offer data for large-N comparative work. Lessons learned about issues such as preparedness, issue framing, cross-agency coordination, interaction with the media, and decision-making procedures have been used to create training materials for a variety of policy communities as well as to facilitate the development of more robust theories of crisis behaviour. Hence, the existing data is especially useful for studying the effectiveness of collaborative crisis responses and strategic communication on the threats and counter-measures involved in major disruptive events (Sundelius, Stern & Bynander, 1997; Stern & Sundelius, 2002; 't Hart & Sundelius, 2013). Case-studies of crises management from various countries have also been studied at Syracuse University and used in comparative crisis management research (Hermann et al., 2006; Svedin, 2016; Bernhardsdóttir, 2015).

Various sources of material are assessed, including COVID-19 inquiry and governmental reports, statements and documents as well as media articles, scientific papers and books on crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Nordic countries and beyond. Discourse analytical tools are used for content analysis where predetermined themes

have been identified through the crisis management framework as important units of analysis. The researchers also kept alert to other themes more locally embedded and that become evident through the analysis.

Summary of the main findings

The first paper examines whether smaller Nordic countries were more prone to reactive than proactive crisis management during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings support the hypothesis that limited resources and lay characteristics contribute to more reactive responses, particularly in the smallest states and territories (Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands). However, Sweden – despite being the largest Nordic state – does not conform to expectations of more proactive capacity. Its crisis response was late and weak, particularly regarding public health measures. The Swedish case shows that administrative size alone does not guarantee effectiveness; overly formalized structures, decentralization, and ambiguous responsibility-sharing may undermine responsiveness. In contrast, countries like Denmark and Norway initially displayed reactive tendencies but quickly moved toward more proactive strategies, often informed by international cooperation and expert dialogue. Finland, too, improved its proactivity over time, despite early political hesitance. The analysis confirms that reactive and proactive elements coexisted across cases; but both institutional design and political will were more decisive than population size alone. Thus, smallness amplifies vulnerabilities; but poor planning and rigid structures – regardless of size – pose the greatest risks to effective crisis management (Ackrén, M., Hokkala, N., Læg Reid, P. ... & Vrangbæk, K., 2025a).

The second paper explores whether cooperation problems and bureaucratic infighting during the early stages of the pandemic were more often rooted in unclear planning and institutional responsibilities than in competition over resources. Across the Nordic states, this hypothesis is largely confirmed. This is especially so in Sweden and Finland, where fragmented mandates, legal ambiguity, and weak central coordination led to friction and confusion. Also, in Norway ambiguous responsibility relations between central agencies as well as between central and local government resulted in tensions. In contrast, Denmark and Iceland both stood out for their ability to dampen infighting through strong central leadership. In Denmark, the Prime Minister and her office swiftly asserted control, designating coordination roles early and clearly. Iceland followed a similar path: political leaders – working closely with the Chief Epidemiologist – quickly consolidated authority and ensured coherent communication between ministries and expert bodies. These cases contrast sharply with Sweden's and Finland's more ambiguous leadership structures. The smallest jurisdictions - Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland - differed from the larger Nordic states in another way: their compressed administrative systems and tight elite networks facilitated more direct lines of communication and decision-making. Although resource limitations were evident, the clarity of roles and a collaborative ethos prevented serious bureaucratic infighting. Their smallness – often viewed as a disadvantage – thus enabled a level of cohesion and agility that many larger states struggled to match (Ackrén, M., Hokkala, N., Læg Reid, P. ... & Vrangbæk, K., 2025b).

The third and final paper investigates whether small Nordic states benefited from less formal governance structures that enhanced rapid knowledge sharing and facilitated agile responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings generally confirm the hypothesis that smaller administrative systems – especially in Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands – relied more heavily on informal networks, elite proximity, and flexible coordination than their larger counterparts. These traits allowed for fast information flow, trust-based decision-making, and adaptive crisis responses, often outside rigid institutional frameworks. In contrast, Sweden's highly formalized system limited cross-sectoral interaction and created bottlenecks

in political-expert collaboration. Finland, Denmark, and Norway adopted hybrid approaches, combining formal crisis structures with informal consultations, especially through cross-ministerial groups and expert fora. The study suggests that smallness enables certain compensatory advantages: compressed decision spaces, social intimacy, and close-knit leadership-expert ties enhance responsiveness. However, these same features may raise questions about transparency and accountability. Ultimately, the paper argues that informality in small state governance can serve as a strength in crisis contexts; provided it is embedded within a broader structure of administrative capacity and mutual trust. Informality, when balanced with institutional coherence, enabled Nordic small states to remain responsive and adaptive throughout the crisis (Ackrén, M., Hokkala, N., Lægreid, P. ... & Vrangbæk, K., 2025c).

Conclusion

In sum, the three papers in this special section of *SST* collectively provide new insights into how small state size, administrative design, and governance culture shaped crisis management in the Nordic region during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This collection suggests that administrative scale is important; but its effects are mediated by institutional design, leadership, and the ability to harness informality constructively. Small states are not inherently disadvantaged in crises. When paired with clarity, coordination, and trust-based governance, even the smallest Nordic states can perform well – and, at times, better – than their larger peers. Hence, the special section argues that smallness is not a barrier to effective crisis management. These findings call for a more nuanced view of state size in both public administration and small state scholarship.

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