

GUEST EDITORIAL

Public administration and crisis governance in small states

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ABSTRACT: The editorial sets the scene to the special section that brings together four articles on crisis governance in small states. While questions of crisis management and robust governance have received growing attention in the public administration literature, we lack knowledge on how these phenomena play out in the specific context of small states. The editorial briefly presents the articles and discusses common themes emerging across the very diverse study settings. It becomes apparent that vulnerability and robustness are two sides of the same coin: both are facilitated by typical small state features, including an inevitably higher exposure to external factors and influences, limited governing capacities, and small scale. Paradoxically, smallness facilitates vulnerability to crises as well as robustness in crisis response. The editorial concludes with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: crisis, governance, public administration, robustness, small states, vulnerability

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Introduction

We live in an era of complex policy challenges and ongoing crises. Crises are situations in which governments and public administrations must (re)act under conditions of uncertainty, urgency and perceived threat (Boin et al., 2016). Small states are especially vulnerable to crises due to their inevitably higher exposure to external factors, limited domestic capacities, and because problems can escalate quickly in small scale conditions. Furthermore, we see that new threats and vulnerabilities have recently emerged for small states, often interacting with ‘older’ or existing sources of vulnerability.

On the one hand, small states are economically and politically more dependent on the international arena than larger states (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020; Katzenstein, 1985; Sarapuu et al., 2021; Thorhallsson, 2011). The new external threats stem from climate change, transnational crime, pandemics, cyber warfare, changed security context, and economic globalization. The COVID-19 pandemic showed how small states were particularly dependent on open borders and free movement of people, either related to the ability of daily commuters

to move across borders or to a persistent reliance on tourism as a source of economic growth and employment (Högenauer et al., 2021). External vulnerability can easily evolve into a crisis – or even a polycrisis – since relatively small changes at the global level can have severe repercussions for small states on the national level (Jugl, 2024).

On the other hand, the external threats always interact with domestic institutions and settings. Events and tendencies related to the changing climate occur alongside small states' local political, economic, social, and cultural circumstances, giving rise to “context specific and interlinked vulnerabilities” (Foley & Moncada, 2021, p. 199). During the COVID-19 pandemic, strong measures to constrain the spread of the virus came along with major dilemmas in terms of economic impact and losses in gross domestic product, employment and trade volume (Högenauer et al., 2021). In some cases, the pandemic hit already highly challenged health systems with inadequate numbers of skilled staff, equipment and vaccine shortages and environments with poor physical infrastructure (e.g. Connell, 2022).

Therefore, we can expect crisis governance to have special characteristics in small states. While previous research has already identified distinct traits of public policy-making and administration in small countries manifested in limited resources and constraints on specialization, smaller numbers of actors, and more informal working procedures (Corbett et al., 2021; Hlynsdóttir, 2020; Jugl, 2022; Sarapuu & Randma-Liiv, 2020), we know little about how these special traits play out in the context of crises. Research on crisis governance and public administration in small states is limited and has focused particularly on the 2015 European migration crisis and on the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings suggest that small states can overcome limitations in formal capacities through pragmatic and cooperative practices, favoured by finely articulated personal relationships, intensive networking and short lines of communication (Jugl, 2024). Reliance on flexible specialization, prioritization, multi-functionalism, informal communication and personal leadership allow small countries to cope with the emerging challenges and to address the vulnerability of their political, economic and social spheres (Baldacchino, 2019; Sarapuu et al., 2021). Such pragmatic cooperation among officials is, among other things, fuelled by a “paradox of vulnerability” (Campbell & Hall, 2017), where past vulnerability leads paradoxically to future resilience via a sense of solidarity and shared perception of collective vulnerability to external risks. Previous experiences of vulnerability can make public officials in small states more aware of potential crisis warning signs, which favours the timely recognition of a crisis situation. Similarly, it is easier for small state governments to appeal to their citizens for solidarity, cooperation and compliance (Högenauer et al. 2021, p. 8).

A common theme that emerges from these earlier studies is that small state governments and administrations are able to respond in robust ways. Robustness refers to the ability to uphold basic state functions through constant adaptation (Ansell et al., 2023). It is a “specific characteristic of a system or organization that enables it to preserve its primary functional characteristics despite the uncertainties that are encountered” (Capano & Woo, 2017, p. 403). Robustness is a quality that emerges in time through specific internal routines, culture, and memory (*ibid.*). For instance, in the 2015 European migration crisis, small European states proved to be “effective survivors” (Wivel, 2021, p. 282). Small island states have been found to develop a capacity for prompt reorganisation and development (Foley & Moncada, 2021).

Consequently, it can be argued that higher vulnerability pressures small states towards domestic structures that are characterized by robustness: they have a capacity to improvise, to tinker with the established procedures, to collaborate over organizational and sectoral borders,

and to solve problems flexibly based on interpersonal relationships and trust (Sarapuu et al., 2021). However, it is less clear how robustness works in practice, what the dilemmas of small state decision-makers are, and what the price of any chosen coping mechanisms is. Wivel (2021, p. 275) argues that small states' flexible adaptation in the form of 'fire-fighting', ad hoc solutions, and quick pooling of resources does not eliminate narrower domestic action space created by crises and the challenges posed by limited administrative resources. Crisis-induced solutions may not be sustainable in the long run – when resource-stretched institutions address issues based on their acuteness, there is a high probability that another crisis drains attention, finances or human resources allocated to the field (Trei & Sarapuu, 2021).

Thus, we propose that characteristics such as institutional flexibility and pragmatism make small states particularly suitable and fine-tuned for robust practices and responses. However, while small states develop robustness to cope with external and internal threats, they still remain exposed to crises due to interlinked vulnerabilities. We need to learn more about this puzzle, especially from the perspective of public administration and governance that play such a critical role in the prosperity and security of small states.

Therefore, this special section aims to elaborate knowledge on the crisis governance in small states and to contribute to the emerging literature on small states' public administrations. We inquire into the nature of vulnerability in small countries, aim to find out what are the factors that nurture the robustness of their governments, and explore how small states' public administrations cope with interacting external and internal vulnerabilities.

Contributions to the special section

The four articles in this special section cover a range of topics. The crises and threats under study include climate change and adaptation, security risks linked to autonomous weapons, COVID-19, and sovereignty and marine border governance. The country cases span various continents and include Faroe Islands, Palau, Seychelles, and a set of Global South countries, with three out of the four articles focusing on small *island* states. Here we introduce each article and highlight its main contribution, before synthesizing some common themes across the four articles.

In *Strained missions: The diplomatic dilemmas of small states from the Global South in the area of autonomous weapons systems*, Ishmael Bhila focuses on the challenges that small state diplomats face in international discussions on autonomous weapons systems. Bhila argues that, while small state diplomats focus on the substantial aspects of this new threat related to the emerging technologies, they also need to manage power politics within the international law-making system and work with a limited domestic resource base. The challenges indicated by diplomats from a group of small countries from the Global South at the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons comprised a lack of expertise, small governments at home not able to address emerging issues, unequal international legal systems, great power politics, small diplomatic delegations, and a lack of common positions on disarmament. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, small states from the Global South managed to shape discussions on autonomous weapons systems to address their concerns through the creation of knowledge-based technical groups and through aligning with experts from outside diplomatic and state circles.

In *The disease dilemma: Neoclassical realism and Palau's border policy governance challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Andrew Halliday explores how the Pacific small island state of Palau reconciled isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic with the protection of its marine space. The article focuses on an incident in December 2020 when Palau's marine enforcement units stopped a Chinese fishing boat and its crew who had illegally crossed Palau's marine border to extract resources. Halliday analyses the factors that shaped this incident and the crisis decision making among Palau's officials. The analysis combines domestic factors with a neoclassical realism lens that emphasizes the international relations context, particularly the larger US-China relationship, to explain the motivation to apprehend the vessel despite the risk of COVID-19 infection. Domestic factors include the role of different ministries and administrative units representing competing policy goals, personal relationships among central actors, and the transition between two governments following presidential elections. The article sheds light on marine governance, which is central to small island states worldwide, but which deserves more attention in the international public administration and crisis management literature.

In *Managing adaptation finance in SIDS: A study of subnational allocation criteria and procedures in Seychelles*, Clara Bartram Gurrese takes a close look at a small state government's reaction to a creeping crisis: climate change and climate adaptation. While small island states are often considered unitary actors and passive recipients of international adaptation finance, Bartram Gurrese (2024) challenges this perspective and provides a qualitative account of the construction and contestation of vulnerability status within this small state. The assessment of which groups and communities are the most vulnerable and deserving of adaptation funding varies between and within ministries and other administrative units, and their relative political influence and administrative capacity shape which views prevail, and which communities or purposes actually receive funding. While, for example, the international donor community emphasizes gender as an element contributing to vulnerability to climate change, Bartram Gurrese's findings suggest that local decision makers do not share this view. Instead, many actors seem to prioritize protecting the economy, particularly the dominant tourism sector. This detailed analysis illustrates small states' agency in distributing adaptation on the ground in anticipation of further climate change, which may differ from donors' plans.

In *Small but sturdy: Lessons on robust crisis governance from the Faroe Islands*, Rógvi Olavson focuses on the governance of COVID-19 pandemic in the Faroes. Olavson posits that the Faroe Islands managed the pandemic relatively well and inquires what factors allowed the Faroese government to act in robust ways. Through the theoretical lenses of turbulence and robustness, the article investigates how quickly building up testing capacity, mobilizing social capacity, relying on soft law approach, and flexible organizational adaptation and communication helped the Faroe Islands to keep the society relatively open, avoid COVID-19 deaths for almost a year, and maintain citizen satisfaction. Olavson (2024) concludes that robustness was found in balancing stability and change, where the ability to take rapid action compensated for the lack of preparedness. The article contributes to a wider debate on timing and temporality in crisis governance and explores the 'speed versus deliberation' dilemma as a crucial aspect of robust governance. Olavson suggests that the case of the Faroes demonstrates the importance of speed, tinkering, flexibility, and different types of learning as critical traits in turbulent situations, many of which are reinforced by a small society with high trust levels.

Governing crises in small states: vulnerability and robustness

Vulnerability has been a long-recognized trait of small states, comprising both internal and external aspects. The articles in the special section provide insights into the governance of threats and crises impacting small state administrative systems that are already stretched, characterized by capacity problems, and under pressure. Bartram Gurrese's (2024) article focuses on the very idea of vulnerability. She questions the view of small states as uniformly vulnerable and, instead, based on the case of Seychelles, emphasizes that vulnerability to the climate change threat is unevenly distributed within small island developing states. Against this background, two types of factors shape allocation of climate adaptation finance: perception of vulnerability and adaptation priorities, and uneven power and capacity of actors. Halliday (2024) shows how the 2020 Palau incident with the Chinese fishing vessel unfolded in a context characterised by severe capacity challenges both in the health sector as well as in marine border control. Olavson (2024) argues that most of the disadvantages common to small states apply to the subnational archipelagic jurisdiction of the Faroe Islands. The Faroes' health sector was facing the COVID-19 pandemic with fewer resources and less specialization than its Nordic counterparts. Bhila's (2024) article gives insight into the interlinked vulnerabilities of small states: while small countries are more vulnerable to internal conflicts, terrorism, illicit arms trade and political instability, their lack of expertise and lack of resources limit small states' capacity to take part in and influence international discussions on autonomous weapons systems, leading to new vulnerabilities regarding these emerging technologies.

However, the articles in this special section reveal also several strategies and special traits of small states that allow them to cope with the challenges and, in some cases, to govern complex policy problems in remarkably robust ways. Olavson's (2024) case study of the Faroe Islands focuses on the very nature of *robustness* during the pandemic. He argues that governance of COVID-19 in the Faroes was robust because of the quick creation of testing capacity by scaling up the existing facilities for testing salmon's isavirus, mobilizing the social capacity of a small high trust society, relying on guidance instead of hard law, and an enhanced collaboration between public and private actors. It emerges from Olavson's (2024) study that small states can be characterized by interwoven elements of robustness – the soft law approach of the Faroes was facilitated by high level of compliance, and the adaptation of testing and isolation procedures was facilitated by quick and flexible collaboration stemming from a joint sense of ownership in a small society. Based on the experience of the Faroe Islands, Olavson (2024) asks if it is cost-effective at all for a very small society to have a wide-ranging preparedness when there is a great inbuilt ability to learn and adapt.

Bhila (2024), on the other hand, illustrates how the small states from the Global South have managed to overcome their lack of expertise and shape discussions on autonomous weapons systems through the creation of knowledge-based technical groups and through aligning with experts from outside diplomatic and state circles. In striving for impact, the dynamism, collaboration and mutual support of individual diplomats has been crucial, confirming the high level of personalism found in other studies on small states' foreign policy. Similarly, Halliday (2024) shows that Palau's authorities quickly adapted their marine enforcement policy during and after the incident, especially with the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines. Close personal and kin relations between central actors likely facilitated coordination of the responses. In the case of Seychelles, Bartram Gurrese's (2024) analysis shows how the funding provided by external donors is used in line with domestic prioritization, focussing on high impact and cost efficiency of funded projects rather than specific areas of vulnerability.

Thus, the funding tools are adapted to dominant domestic perspectives, while other funding criteria are maintained only formally to satisfy donors.

The work of both Bartram Gurræsø (2024) and Bhila (2024) indicates how one of the key traits of small state politico-administrative systems – a selective approach to public policies and prioritization – allows them to handle competing demands and limited resources. However, simultaneously, this strategy of dealing with complexity creates potential *new vulnerabilities*: in the case of Seychelles, the importance given to protecting the economy, particularly the tourism and fishery sectors, puts conservation and biodiversity at a disadvantage despite being officially among government priorities. In the case of autonomous weapons systems, for most small states from the Global South, international law-making on these emerging technologies is not among their priorities as they struggle with terrorism, insurgencies, debt and other immediate, more existential problems. It leads to sacrificing an issue with a prospective long-term security impact. Potential vulnerabilities related to the other elements of robustness also emerge from the studies. In the case of the Faroe Islands, the tightly knit community and high social capital manifested not only in compliance, but also in social surveillance and control, with people taking the initiative to report on other ‘misbehaving’ citizens (Olavson, 2024). In Palau, the personalism and kinship of several key actors reduced the transparency of decision-making and rendered it difficult to understand the background of the policy decisions and their sudden shifts (Halliday, 2024). Islandness comes forward as a risk factor and a source of vulnerabilities, but also as a source of economic welfare (Bartram Gurræsø, 2024) and an asset in keeping COVID-19 away from the population (Halliday, 2024).

Earlier studies have expected both vulnerability and robustness of small states to be considerably shaped by the international context. The *external dimension(s)* of crises are deemed to be central because small states are particularly vulnerable to external developments and actors as well as dependent on the support of external donors. This expectation is confirmed in one way or the other in all the studies in the special section. Bhila’s (2024) focus is fully on the challenges of defending small states’ interests on the international level. He argues that developments in the international system threaten the security of small states more than that of middle and great powers. By applying a postcolonial lens, he aims to unpack the challenges that small states face in this historically unequal system. In Bartram Gurræsø’s (2024) analysis of Seychelles, the local response to the climate crisis is closely intertwined with external actors: while the very crisis is fuelled by emissions in industrialized countries in the Global North, foreign actors, especially multilateral funds, provide much of the adaptation funding to small and developing states most impacted by the climate changes. Bartram Gurræsø’s article challenges perspectives of small states as passive recipients of adaptation finance and emphasizes their agency in distributing it domestically. Halliday’s (2024) international relations lens emphasizes how Palau’s crisis management was embedded in a larger international system and rivalry between the US and China. The Compact of Free Association between Palau and the US indicates a certain level of dependency. The patrol boats used on Palau’s side were provided by Australia and the United States, respectively. These relatively small steps by the larger states significantly changed the patrolling capacity of Palau that led to the apprehension of the Chinese fishing vessel. Halliday emphasizes the importance of the international community’s adherence and enforcement of international maritime agreements as well as the need for its assistance in building up small states’ monitoring and surveillance infrastructure. In the case of the Faroe Islands, as an interesting twist, the choice of soft law approach to governing the COVID-19 pandemic was guided by the wish to avoid Danish involvement in the issue (Olavson, 2024).

Last but not least, the choice between relying on hard law and maintaining autonomy in governing the COVID-19 pandemic in the Faroes represents one of the several *dilemmas* facing small state decision-makers. Small state policy actors often have to deal with competing alternatives that both have their advantages and disadvantages, with disadvantages often being very manifest. These are not minor choices on the borderlines of public governance; they concern core public policies and competences. For instance, Halliday's (2024) study of Palau illustrates how limited capacity vis-à-vis relatively large external challenges leads to the co-creation of small state vulnerability: the motivation to avoid any import of COVID-19 was clearly driven by concerns over the limited capacities of the fragile health system. On the other hand, Palau's vast marine borders compared to its limited patrolling capacity create important challenges for marine governance and sovereignty. The resulting dilemma that crisis managers faced was to reconcile public health and marine security goals given limited capacities. For Bhila (2024), dilemmas are an essential part of small state diplomats' work when they try to find the best ways forward in negotiating international power politics while having no national framework on international issues to rely on and operating with a limited expertise and resource base.

Conclusion and avenues for further research

The special section was launched to invite research on small state public administration and crisis governance. Although there is already significant understanding of the special traits of small administrations, there are still very few systematic and theoretically informed studies on the subject and even less on crisis governance in small countries. The four articles in the special section add insight into several crucial aspects of these issues and advance knowledge on the nature of vulnerability and robustness in small states, on the impact of small states' special traits on crisis governance, and how they handle external and internal threats.

The studies insist that vulnerability and robustness are two sides of the same coin in small states: higher exposure to the external factors, limited domestic capacities, and small scale push towards strategies of complexity management that allow small state governments to respond to uncertainties and to maintain basic public functions in times of turbulence. We see that smallness facilitates the emergence of robust administrations. Furthermore, similarly to the interlinked vulnerabilities, there seem to be interlinked elements of robustness that foster and support each other. We need further studies to understand these phenomena better. For both sides of the coin, vulnerability and robustness, researchers should keep an eye on the external dimensions and influences that seem to be significant in explaining crisis governance in small states. Also, at a time when robustness of public governance is a quality sought in all sizes of states globally, future research could ask what lessons do small states provide to the larger states and how or to what extent are these elements of robustness transferrable.

Vulnerability has been a central theme in small state studies. But the very nature of vulnerability needs to be questioned and critiqued. We can see that distinguishing between national-level and individual or actor-specific forms and understandings of vulnerability can be useful; as well as considering the role of perceptions, by insiders as much as by outsiders. We have also seen that vulnerability is the result of multiple factors or sources that range across sectors; this suggests that small state vulnerability must be studied from a holistic rather than a narrow, sector-specific perspective. In the same way, capacities and resources are combined over sectoral boundaries to achieve robustness. Although vulnerability has long been established as a small state feature, it deserves more conceptual and empirical attention. It is important to understand better who defines vulnerability, whose perceptions matter, and

whether perceptions of collective vulnerability are unique or specific to small states. From a public administration perspective, we must also ask how far-stretched public administrations contribute to small states' overall vulnerability.

Another avenue for future research concerns context. The studies in the special section illustrate vividly how small state traits play out in very diverse contexts. In each case, smallness is only one of many contingent factors. To better understand the role of context and the mechanisms behind it, we need to ask what other contextual features are relevant, including for example islandness, administrative traditions, economic development, and demography. Do these contextual factors interact with smallness to jointly affect crisis governance? Do some context features exacerbate or moderate the effect of smallness more than others? One way to approach such questions systematically is through quantitative large-N analyses that include observations with various combinations of size (smallness or not) and other contextual factors, to disentangle their effects and test for moderation effects. Such research designs may complement existing knowledge on small state crisis governance that is based overwhelmingly on qualitative case studies, as shown in all four studies in this special section. Future research could use quantitative techniques to explore if the patterns relating smallness to vulnerability and robustness also hold across a broader set of cases. Another approach is to compare and contrast crisis management in a small state with that in a larger state, potentially with similarity on other context factors.

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