

## **Bound to lose? The usage of smallness in the strategic narratives of smaller states during armed conflict**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines how smaller states use their smallness in their strategic narratives during armed conflicts fought with a bigger power. The analysis mainly focuses on two questions: whether these jurisdictions project themselves as small states on the international level, and whether they offer an interpretation of the conflict in which size difference is identified as a major factor. Comparing the speeches delivered in the United Nations by Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion (1990-1991), Armenia during the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (2020-2021), and Ukraine after the Russian attack (2022-2023), the research concludes that smaller countries can use their smallness with three specific objectives – gathering support, gaining sympathy, and deflecting responsibility – although the strategy is not automatic. While the representatives of Kuwait and Ukraine referred to their small size often, the diplomats of Armenia avoided such narratives. The variation between the three cases suggests that instead of absolute or relative size, the size difference between the belligerents, the selected target audience, and the timing of the conflicts have a stronger explanatory value.

**Keywords:** Armenia, conflict studies, Kuwait, small states, smallness, strategic narratives, Ukraine

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### **Introduction**

According to the general wisdom of international relations, smallness – in terms of the actual material size of a country – is seen as a cause of security deficit and weakness. Their survival is seen as being dependent on external protection (Keohane, 2006, pp. 56-57), and they are regarded as being vulnerable to coercion (Vital, 1967, Lee & Smith, 2010). Consequently, traditional warfare basically constitutes a nightmare scenario for small states which they try to avoid (Fox, 2006), as their small size would automatically be regarded as a weakness.

Nevertheless, smallness can be used as an advantage in traditional armed conflicts as well. If attacked, a state can utilize its smallness and project it on the international level to attract sympathy or material support and shape the narrative connected to the conflict. Consequently, projecting an identity of being small and weak can be a very useful tool in winning the political and communicational dimensions of the conflict, even if smallness had not played a significant role in the self-identification of the given country before the war.

The present paper aims to analyse whether smaller states project their smallness via their rhetoric during an armed conflict in which they are involved on the international level as a political tool. The hypothesis of the research is that on international forums like the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and Security Council, smaller states construct strategic narratives about themselves and the war they suffer using their smallness or the size difference between them and their opponents to shape the discursive framework in which the conflict is

discussed. The paper's argument is that such a strategy aims at three separate goals: to gather the political and military support of other states, to gain and raise sympathy with the international public, and to deflect responsibility. From this perspective, one can come to the conclusion that smallness can indeed be a normative tool in international relations in the post-bipolar era, especially during wartime.

The methodology of the research is based on the comparative case study framework. Three cases will be analysed, all of which are taking place between 1990 and 2023 – Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion (1990-1991), Armenia during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war (2020-2021) and Ukraine during the Russian invasion (2022-2023). The selection was mainly driven by two considerations – on the one hand, I wanted to analyse cases when smaller states were not directly responsible for starting the war but were, according to the mainstream interpretation, attacked by a bigger state. In this category, on the other hand, I wanted to pick as diverse cases as possible in terms of the date, the material size of the country, and the region.

The theoretical background of the case study analysis will be laid down in the first part, which focuses on the wartime behaviour of small states and the possible arguments for and against projecting smallness during an armed conflict. The case studies will be analysed in the second part, investigating strategic narratives of the three countries relying on qualitative discourse analysis concerning the speeches delivered by representatives of the chosen states in the UN Security Council and General Assembly, arguably the most important forums of international politics. Contrary to other speech acts, these ones are definitely aimed at international audiences and represent an ideal opportunity for all countries to express their strategic narratives to the world.

In the framework of the paper, the notion of small states will be used in a relative materialist sense. While the paper touches upon identity narratives and perception, the term small states refers to those state actors whose capacities in terms of territory, population, economic output, and military capacities are below the average of a given region or group of states. The term smaller states, however, is only used in the context of armed conflicts and will refer to those countries which have fewer resources than the other side.

### **Projecting smallness through strategic narratives during wartime**

Effective communication has always played a crucial role for small states to survive armed conflicts. In her groundbreaking study of small state behaviour during the Second World War, Anette Baker Fox (2006, p. 45) argued that the security of small states depended on their ability to maintain neutrality, which can only be achieved through convincing great powers that the country's neutral status is in their interests. Given that the success of this endeavour largely relies on factors that are outside the leverage of small states, they have to make great powers more sympathetic to their survival, which is why their diplomatic and negotiation capacities are crucial (Fox, 2006, pp. 48-51). Later, David Vital's seminal work on small state foreign policy also concluded that the main possible strategies available for small states (besides total passivity) involve messaging and strategic communication: an active foreign policy incorporates subversion and improving one's political position vis-à-vis the dominant great power, while a defensive approach has to create the political and military conditions for relative deterrence (Vital, 1967, pp. 124-152).

Building on these fundamental writings of small state studies, several other authors have presented case studies which highlighted the importance of communicative tools for small states during wartime. Wilhelm Mirow argued that during and after the Second World War, Switzerland relied on a concept known as spiritual defence (*geistige Landesverteidigung*), a political campaign aimed at strengthening nationalist sentiments in the society while enhancing the international status of the country "by fostering the altruistic, solidarity component of Swiss

neutrality” (Mirow, 2012, pp. 348-349). Communication has been identified as playing a key role in the military strategy of small states in general as well. Michael Raska (2016, pp. 223-224) talked about how Singapore has pursued “an integrated and adaptive defence posture”, which was based on external deterrence and diplomacy at the same time. Analysing the case of Norway, Kjell Inge Bjerga and Torunn Laugen Haaland (2010) observed that small states do not even have the intellectual or institutional capacity to develop their own military doctrines, therefore they rely on their great power allies to not just defend themselves but developing their strategic documents. Going even further, one can argue (Szalai, 2023) that such strategic documents themselves serve better as communication tools than actual operational guidelines for small states to signal both their friends and foes.

While some of these communication activities are taking place behind closed doors, small states also produce and publicly disseminate strategic narratives, through which they “attempt to give determined meaning to past, present and future to achieve political objectives” (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 5). While strategic narratives can generally aim to acquire legitimacy for a specific political decision (*ibid.*, pp. 8-9), in the case of small states, creating or strengthening a positive perception or offering a framing of the conflict according to their interests are more likely to be among the primary aims.

Among the various types of strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 8), one possible tool for small states is either to emphasize one’s smallness (as an identity narrative) or provide an interpretation of the conflict that emphasizes size difference (as a policy narrative). Theoretically, promoting such discourses can be useful in many ways. Even if in the mainstream understanding of international politics, small size is connected to weakness, “more positive readings of smallness may create opportunities for action and innovation” (Browning, 2006, p. 674). Therefore, if the strategic narrative is constructed such that smallness is explicitly or implicitly connected to desirable and utilizable norms or values for other members of the international society, it can be instrumentalized in foreign policy. Positive connotations related to smallness include being peaceful, altruistic, more detached, and devoid of hidden agendas and less ambitious national goals in foreign policy (Browning, 2006, p. 674, Chong, 2010, p. 387). While such a positive myth has emerged in the last centuries about the role of small states in the international system organically (Thürer, 1998), it was also reinforced and reproduced by small states themselves, which seek to “be perceived as good, reliable partners in a hegemonic arrangement or within a multilateral set-up” (Neumann & de Carvalho, 2015, pp. 10-11). This image can be easily utilized, for example, to perform mediation (Chong, 2010, p. 387).

From this perspective, projecting smallness can also be useful if a state is attacked or actively engaged in a war. The main argument of this paper is that such strategic discourses can have three key functions. First of all, by invoking or strengthening the general perception in the international community that they represent the “good side” and suffer from the aggressive and imperialist policies of bigger states (Fox, 2006, p. 40), small states can aim to acquire support from other members of the international society. Before war breaks out, the aim of small states is “to keep the great powers in line in favouring the peaceful status quo” (Chong, 2021, p. 194), while after, it more likely focuses on gathering actual political or military help. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, communicating “a self-image of moral superiority” and “limited actual strength” was observable in the foreign policy communication of several European countries, especially in the case of the Netherlands, the Benelux states or Scandinavia (Amersfoot & Klinkert, 2011, pp. 10-11). Based on the thoughts of Fox, one possible way is to prove one’s value for great powers, like in the case of Singapore, which projected its “convening power” to maintain the support for its survival, namely the ability to invite all regional great powers to the same table (Chong, 2021, p. 194). At the end of the day, the fate of neutral (and small) states

during wartime is “in the last instance determined in the capitals of great powers” (Amersfoot & Klinkert, 2011, p. 8); therefore the value of such attempts is undeniable.

Second, given the changing nature of contemporary warfare and the increased value of media manipulation during a conflict (Kaldor, 2012, pp. 1-14; Kilcullen, 2020), states put more effort into shaping not just the perception of other states, but the international public opinion in general. In this environment, small states can utilize their smallness by connecting it to other values in order to efficiently shape the discourse of the international media, thus gathering sympathy from non-state and sub-state actors (Baldacchino, 2009, pp. 34-36). With this strategy, they can put political pressure on the other side to stop (or other states to intervene). The leaders of Czechoslovakia used this strategy, arguing that defending small states from great powers equals defending liberal nationalism from imperialism (Chong, 2021, pp. 188-189). In a similar manner, the former President of Ghana, connected the foreign policy of the country, a small non-aligned state, to decolonisation and rejecting neo-colonialism (*ibid.*).

Third, referring to limited size and capacities can also serve to downplay responsibility in a conflict, and implicitly or explicitly blaming other parties. Smallness can also be useful when the conflict reaches the phases of negotiations as in these circumstances, small states can receive a bigger share of public goods or international aid (Handel, 2006, p. 191).

Naturally, counterarguments can also be made against this strategy. First, projecting an image of smallness can be understood as admitting being weaker and can undermine the communication of a credible defence posture badly needed for small states, as in the case of Singapore (Raska, 2016). Consequently, a self-image of smallness can be understood as being the likely loser of the conflict. States might be open to offer moral support to such actors; but providing actual material support is another story. In addition, such a narrative can be utilized by belligerents or other actors interested in weakening the given state, emphasizing its vulnerability (Ong, 2022, p. 45). Second, smallness might not provoke positive feelings in the international public; besides the optimistic narrative about small states having the moral high ground and defending the liberal values of the international order, they have been associated also with being “modern day pirates” (Prasad, 2009, p. 41), capitalizing on their remoteness and their under-the-radar status by creating safe-havens for tax-avoiding capital. Third, when promoting a specific identity narrative, a government cannot ignore the perception of either international or domestic actors (Thorhallsson, 2009). Expressing small statehood by a state that so far has been regarded as a big one might be counterproductive and can cause troubles for the government at home and abroad alike, especially if projecting smallness and weakness contradicts other aspects of national identity: like the case of the Netherlands at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which wanted to express images of smallness and colonial status at the same time (Amersfoot & Klinkert, 2011, p. 11). Consequently, including smallness in the strategic narrative of small states during wartime is not an automatic process and should not be viewed as their only choice.

### **Case study analysis: Strategic narratives of three smaller states during wartime**

#### *The comparison of the three cases*

The following case study analysis aims to show how small states use their smallness in their strategic narratives during wartime and with which aims. The three case studies focus on three traditional interstate conflicts that were initiated by a bigger state against a smaller one:

The first case focuses on the Gulf War or the Iraqi-Kuwaiti war: on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1990, Iraq invaded neighbour Kuwait, defeated its army relatively quickly, and installed an Iraq-friendly government (Kamrava, 2005, pp. 169-196). After the UN Security Council adopted three resolutions condemning Iraq and paving the way for a legally grounded intervention (UNSC

Resolutions 660, 661, 678), a coalition led by the United States attacked Iraqi forces in Kuwait on January 17<sup>th</sup> 1991, and expelled them, re-establishing the *status quo ante*.

The second case study revolves around the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, which started with an Azeri offensive against the self-declared state of Artsakh and its patron, Armenia (Yavuz & Gunter, 2023, pp. 153-194). While there was no direct military intervention by a third party, Turkey is widely seen as the main supporter of Azeri efforts. The war ended in six weeks with a cease-fire agreement and a clear Azeri victory.

The third case study focuses on the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which started on February 24<sup>th</sup> (Ghincea, 2022, pp. 472-492). After occupying Crimea and Eastern regions of the country by political and military means eight years before, Moscow started a ground offensive against the capital and other parts of the country, resulting in a prolonged war between the two sides. Third-party interventions in this case include the massive support provided to Ukraine by the United States, Great Britain, members of the European Union, and some other countries (and by Iran or China to Russia).

Besides the similarities regarding the balance of power between the belligerents, some crucial differences need to be highlighted. Above all, the extent of size disparities varied in the three cases. The three countries under attack had different positions in terms of the regional distribution of material resources. Table 1 summarizes the relative size of the six belligerent countries as a percentage of the regional (and sub-regional) average. For the three pairs, different regions and sub-regions were calculated. In the first case, the regional average refers to the Middle East and North Africa (including all members of the League of Arab States, Iran, Turkey, and Israel), while the sub-region includes the Gulf (with the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Yemen, Iraq and Iran). For the other four countries, the region included the EU, UK, members of the Eastern Partnership program, Russia and Turkey. Contrarily, the sub-regions differed in the second and third cases: for Armenia and Azerbaijan, only the three South Caucasus states, Russia, and Turkey were included; while for Ukraine and Russia, the members of the Eastern Partnership countries and the border states of the EU (the four Visegrád countries, Romania, and Bulgaria) were added.

**Table 1: Relative size of belligerent states at the beginning of the analysed conflict as a percentage of regional (and sub-regional) average.**

	<b>Territory</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>GDP</b>	<b>Size of armed forces</b>	<b>Military budget</b>
<b>Kuwait (1990)</b>	2.8% (3.1%)	12.3% (13.8%)	46.3% (31.8%)	3.4% (2.8%)	66.4% (44.7%)
<b>Iraq (1990)</b>	68.2% (76.4%)	129.6% (145.6%)	453.1% (311.7%)	674.6% (561.7%)	380.1% (255.8%)
<b>Armenia (2020)</b>	4.6% (0.8%)	12.4% (5.7%)	2.2% (2.8%)	36.4% (11.1%)	5.9% (3.9%)
<b>Azerbaijan (2020)</b>	13.3% (2.4%)	44.5% (20.6%)	7.5% (9.3%)	63.5% (19.3%)	20.1% (13.6%)
<b>Ukraine (2022)</b>	93.2% (40.9%)	193.5% (164.5%)	30.8% (58.3%)	230.8% (141.9%)	51% (66%)
<b>Russia (2022)</b>	2634.2% (1155.5%)	633.8% (538.7%)	283.4% (535.6%)	1125.9% (692.4%)	565.5% (734.4%)

Sources: World Bank, 2023; IISS, 1991.

The data shows that, when attacked, Kuwait and Armenia were much smaller than Ukraine in regional comparison. Kuwait’s territory and military did not constitute 4% of either the regional or subregional average, while its economic size almost reached half (and a third) of it. While the military budget is somewhat larger, it still did not surpass two-third of the regional average. Contrarily, Armenia is the least small in terms of its military, which is 36.4% of the regional average, while its population, territory, and GDP are much lower. Ukraine, on the other hand, surpasses the regional and sub-regional averages in terms of its population and military. Its military budget, nevertheless, was half (and two-thirds) of the regional (and sub-regional) average. The invading countries were in all cases much larger, especially in the case of Russia and Iraq, nevertheless, the relative size of Azerbaijan was much smaller, as it did not reach the regional average in either category.

Comparing the size of only the belligerent states without the regional context (Table 2), the difference was the largest in the case of Kuwait and the smallest in the case of Armenia. In terms of territorial, economic, and military size, Armenia is the closest to its enemy. Demographic size is the only dimension in which Ukraine is closer to Russia than Armenia to Azerbaijan. This shows that from an absolute (or regional relative) perspective, Ukraine is the biggest one out of the three, but in comparison with the other belligerent states, Armenia is less small.

Besides these differences, there are other alterations between the case studies which worth mentioning. First, the timing of the three conflicts differed considerably. The Iraqi-Kuwaiti war took place 20 years before the second two wars, at the beginning of the emergence of the post-bipolar order, during a momentum of superpower cooperation. In contrast, both the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh war and the Russian-Ukrainian war started in the context of intensifying superpower rivalry, various processes undermining the international liberal order, and a growing threat of the return of spheres of influence. Moreover, the transformation of contemporary warfare arguably reached a different stage by the late 2010s, especially given the rise of social media.

Second, as was mentioned earlier, foreign intervention and help received by the smaller side was different. Kuwait, the smallest of the three cases, received overwhelming support and a friendly intervention to help its survival. Ukraine also enjoys political, economic, and military aid, whereas Armenia is mostly left alone. Its main potential supporter would have not been Western countries, but Russia, or Iran. Third, the length of the three wars was different as well: the Armenian-Azeri conflict was the shortest with six weeks, followed by the Iraqi-Kuwaiti war with almost seven months, and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict which is not yet over and (by May 2024) has already lasted for over two years. All these aspects could have had an effect on the strategic narratives of the three smaller states.

**Table 2: The relative size of the three states under attack as a percentage of the other belligerent states (Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Russia, respectively).**

	<b>Territory</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>GDP</b>	<b>Size of armed forces</b>	<b>Military budget</b>
<b>Kuwait (1990)</b>	4.1%	9.5%	10.2%	0.5%	n.d.
<b>Armenia (2020)</b>	34.4%	27.8%	29.6%	57.3%	28.3%
<b>Ukraine (2022)</b>	3.5%	30.5%	10.9%	20.5%	9.0%

Source: World Bank (2023).

*The analyses of strategic narratives: Official speeches at the UN*

In order to analyse the strategic narratives of the three states through the investigation of “state language” (O’Loughlin et al., 2017, p. 43), the speeches delivered by their representatives in the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council will be analysed during a two-year period for each case. Using these parameters, the research included 255 sessions in which representatives of the three countries delivered speeches during the analysed period – 88 for Kuwait, 60 for Armenia, and 107 for Ukraine (Table 3). These speech acts were analysed qualitatively using the complex, reflective communication approach of the study of strategic narratives (O’Loughlin et al., 2017, p.43), focusing on how the speakers identified their country and described the nature and causes of the conflict. In all cases, the English language transcripts will be used in order to better compare the various speeches delivered in multiple languages.

**Table 3. Number of sessions at UN when representatives of the three countries delivered at least one speech.**

Year	Kuwait		Armenia		Ukraine	
	1990	1991	2020	2021	2022	2023 (January – August)
General Assembly	34	31	28	29	21	1
Security Council	16	7	2	1	53	32
<b>Total</b>	88		60		107	

Source: UN Digital Library (2023).

*Case study 1: Kuwait and the Iraqi invasion (1990-1991)*

During and after the Iraqi attack on Kuwait, the diplomats representing the emirate often identified their country as small, connecting their size explicitly to the conflict. On the day of the invasion, August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1990, Ambassador Abdulhassan firmly argued:

Kuwait, a small country, draws its strength and support in international legitimacy, represented by the Security Council and its role in implementing the provisions of the Charter. This is a test for the responsibility of the Council vis-à-vis peace and security in that vital area of the world and towards all small nations that are defenceless and helpless (UNSC, 1990a, pp. 3-10).

In this way, Kuwait connected its smallness to the responsibility of the international community and its institutions to protect the country – if it does not receive help, then “no small nation anywhere in the world can feel safe or immune from such aggression” (UNSC, 1990b, p. 6). This attempt fits the general first function identified previously, with a communication strategy primarily aimed at states.

Calling the country small remained an important feature of the Kuwaiti identity narrative. The country was identified as “small and peaceful” (UNSC, 1990c, p. 5), or merely a “small country, both in size and population” (UNSC, 1990f, p. 13). After the conflict, the Kuwaiti ambassador plainly described its side in the conflict as the “side of right” (UNSC, 1994, p. 12). All these notions were explicitly connected to the above-mentioned strategy of acquiring international support, not necessarily from a specific country, but from the international society

as a whole. While the conflict was described as the stronger preying on the weaker, the international support received by Kuwait made it a “power that carries significant weight” (UNSC, 1990f, pp. 11-13).

In addition, a connection was constructed several times between the smallness of Kuwait, the defence provided by many states and institutions, and the general interests of the international society. By authorizing armed intervention, the UN Security Council proved that it “is an effective instrument for collective security ..., and that all states, large or small, can depend on the security guarantees afforded by the Charter” (UNSC, 1991, pp. 11-12). According to Kuwait, these steps prove to every small state that “it is safe from the law of the jungle,” and made all of them “more attached to the United Nations” (UNSC, 1994, p. 12).

Interestingly enough, most references to the smallness of Kuwait were made in speeches delivered to the UN Security Council. At the General Assembly, representatives of the country barely referred to state size at all during the analysed period. No unambiguous mention was found regarding an attempt to construct an identity narrative involving smallness, but there were a couple of mentions of size differences in connection with the war. On October 17th 1990, Ambassador Razzooqi stated that:

the regime of the dictator Saddam Hussein is learning lessons that it will never forget about how to respect international law ... through the honourable positions and unanimous positions taken by the international community in support of ... the rights of all countries and all peoples, whether small or large (UNGA, 1990b, p. 65).

Another time, the declaration was made that the “universal right of self-determination must not be denied to any people. The right to embark on the path of freedom and dignity must not be withheld under any pretext, be it the size of a Territory, its geographical location, or its economic, social, or political development” (UNGA, 1990d, p. 27). Despite the lack of explicit categorization of Kuwait, it is strongly suggested in the speeches that the diplomats are talking about the country. Such a difference between the communication at the UNSC and the UNGA suggests that Kuwaiti strategic narratives aimed at a specific group of countries which are seated in the Security Council, namely the big powers.

Besides the question of smallness, strategic narratives constructed in the UN General Assembly were quite similar to those in the UN Security Council from other perspectives. Kuwaiti diplomats wanted to emphasize that Iraqi actions threatened not just Kuwait but the international order as such, thus constructing the responsibility of the international community to defend the emirate (UNGA, 1990a, 1990b, 1990d). When it comes to identity narratives, Kuwait is depicted as a “peace-loving nation” (UNGA, 1990a, p. 46), whose struggles under Iraqi occupation were drawn in parallel with the struggles of the Palestinian people (UNGA, 1990c, pp. 7-8; UNGA, 1990e, pp. 102-106).

While the research focused on the period between 1990 and 1991, it is important to mention that size did appear in the identity narrative of the country even before the conflict. In the 1970s and 1980s, Kuwaiti diplomats described their country as “small” (UNSC, 1978, p. 5.), “poor” (UNSC, 1979, p. 4.), or “developing” (UNSC, 1984, p. 4.). Later, in 2015, the representative of the emirate also called for taking into account the interests of small states (UNSC, 2015, p. 97). In this regard, two observations could be made – first, there is a visible difference between the intensity of referring to smallness during 1990-1991 and other periods. Second, having said that, calling Kuwait small seems like inherently playing a role in not just the strategic narratives during the invasion period but in the general expressed identity of the country.



*Case study 2: Armenia and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh war (2020-2021)*

Smallness and size differences did not play a major role in the strategic narratives of representatives of Armenia in the UN. During the analysed period, there were 60 sessions of either the General Assembly or the Security Council in which Armenian diplomats actively participated, and there was only one occasion in which they referred to the country as small. In this case, the third function of projecting smallness, namely deflecting responsibility, was observable. Reacting to the claim of an Azerbaijani diplomat that Armenia provoked the conflict, Mher Margaryan, the country's permanent representative, highlighted the size difference between the populations of Armenia (3 million), Azerbaijan (10 million), and Turkey (80 million), adding that the "suggestion that the small country of Armenia would initiate unprovoked aggression against its much larger neighbours was ridiculous" (UNGA, 2020e, p. 17). In this case, smallness is cited merely as an attribute that makes it impossible for a state to attack bigger countries. Neither the conflict nor Armenia itself is constituted primarily through the lenses of size and size difference. The fact that reference to smallness only appeared in response to an Azerbaijani claim and not in the main speech of Margaryan raises the possibility that this argument was improvised and had not been necessarily constructed as a narrative strategy.

Besides this tangible reference, there was one other case in which Armenian representatives talked about state size. Commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the United Nations, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan delivered a (pre-recorded) speech on September 21<sup>st</sup> 2020, in which he declared that

Sovereignty of all states, no matter size and power, is better maintained, and national interests are better served in the current system, when there is respect for international law, including primarily the UN Charter (UNGA, 2020a, p. 171).

While Prime Minister Pashinyan constructed the differentiation between states on the basis of size and power, he did not make any reference to specific categories or where Armenia belongs.

In addition to the almost complete lack of framing of the conflict in terms of size differences, it seems that on a couple of occasions, Armenian representatives wanted even to question the military size difference between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Prime Minister Pashinyan argued that the battles taking place in July "shattered the myth of Azerbaijan's military superiority" (UNGA, 2020b, p. 58), a consequence of which, in his interpretation, is that Azerbaijan has to renounce the usage of force and turn to peaceful diplomatic ways. Putting the two countries on equal terms was manifested in another speech of Ambassador Margaryan – on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020, he proclaimed that Armenia, as "the guarantor of the physical security of the people of Artsakh ... is fully confident in its capacities to protect the right of the people of Nagorno Karabakh to self-determination" (UNGA, 2020c, p. 6). These examples indicate the previously identified consideration to avoid framing the other side as bigger and, potentially, stronger than the small states, fearing defeatism.

Lacking substantial references to smallness or size, the self-narrative of Armenian diplomats was characterized by other notions. Being a land-locked and developing country manifested itself implicitly twice (UNGA, 2020d, p. 5.; 2021c, p. 6). Being a member of the Non-Aligned Movement also played a role, when an Armenian representative argued that Azerbaijan tried to manipulate the platform created by the movement, going against one of its core values, namely respecting the right of self-determination (UNGA, 2021d, p. 16) Armenian diplomats also highlighted the rich cultural background of Armenia, arguing that the country is located "at the historical crossroads of different civilizations", and cherishes the "traditions of coexistence", and "protection of religious and ethnic groups" (UNGA, 2020g, p. 26), or its

“ancient Christian heritage” (UNGA, 2021a, p. 17). Hitting a more general tone, Prime Minister Pashinyan also described his country as a “responsible member of the international community and a reliable partner” (UNGA, 2021b, p. 56).

As stated above, the conflict with Azerbaijan was not narrated through the lenses of size difference; instead, the Armenian interpretation relied mainly on four frameworks, possibly to shape the international public opinion’s perception of the war. First of all, maybe the most important message of Armenian diplomats was that Azerbaijani actions were contradicting international law. According to this narrative, Baku fails to meet its obligations deriving from previous ceasefire agreements (UNGA, 2020c, p. 6; 2020f, p. 12), and general international legal norms, including the prohibition of aggression, indiscriminate attacks, and other rules of international humanitarian law (UNGA, 2020e, p. 6; 2021a, p. 17). In connection, there was a recurring claim that Turkey deployed foreign terrorist fighters from the Middle East to help the Azerbaijani offensive (UNGA, 2020c, p. 6; 2020f, p. 12; 2020g, p. 28).

Second, in many speeches, Armenian representatives constructed Azerbaijan as an authoritarian regime, which sharply contrasts with the democratic nature of Artsakh or Armenia. The state of democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan is basically mocked by Armenian diplomats (“We understand the frustration of the Azerbaijani side in relation to the definition of “elected representative. We do realize that when it comes to democracy and human rights, Azerbaijan’s leadership does not hold a candle to the authorities of Artsakh” (UNGA, 2020c, p. 5). A third narrative framing was connected to the Armenophobic nature of Azerbaijani attacks (UNGA, 2020c, p. 5), ethnic cleansing, or genocide (UNGA, 2020e, p. 6). In one speech, the claim was constructed that Azerbaijani authorities pursue the “total extermination of the Armenian people” (UNGA, 2020c, p. 4). The desire to eliminate Armenians is, in this narrative, “at the core of Azerbaijan’s modern State-building” (UNGA, 2020c, p. 4). Fourth, taking into account the timing of the escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian diplomats connected the military offensive to the COVID-19 pandemic. Diplomats described Azerbaijan’s actions as capitalizing on the health emergency and failing to react to the call of the UN General Secretary to a global ceasefire (UNGA, 2020c, pp. 5-6; 2020g, p. 12). While these narratives did not include any references to size, they possibly had an effect on how the international public perceived the conflict.

### *Case study 3: Ukraine and the Russian invasion*

Referring to the size of Ukraine and emphasizing that the country is smaller than Russia has been part of the Ukrainian state narrative from the first period of the war. On February 28th, 2022, Ambassador Kyslytsya interpreted the Russian attack as “a big, militarized power, seeking geopolitical greatness, has launched a full-fledged military offensive against a smaller neighbour” (UNGA, 2022b, p. 5). “If a bigger country attacks a smaller country”, goes the argument, “no one ... can feel secure”. (UNSC, 2023a, p. 20). President Zelensky argued at the General Assembly in 2022 that “every nation has the right to security guarantees. Not only the largest nations” (UNGA, 2022d, p. 54). In this narrative, Russia “feels like the colonizers of ancient times” (UNSC, 2022c, p. 9), a “predator” that attacks “those who are or appear to be weaker”; it is basically unable to refrain from such behaviour (UNSC, 2022d, pp. 27-28). It represents neocolonialism and the ambition to restore an empire (UNSC, 2023a, p. 20). These notions were possibly used to affect the perception of both other states and the general international public as well.

While this observation suggests a strong resemblance to the case of Kuwait, there was a visible difference regarding the weight given to smallness (and the question of size altogether) between the two cases. While projecting Kuwait as a small state played a central role in the strategic narratives of the emirate during 1990 and 1991, in the case of Ukraine, it did not

become dominant. Other discourses about both the conflict and Ukraine itself manifested in the strategic narratives of Ukraine, arguably with more emphasis, including those related to an autocratic country attacking a democracy (UNGA, 2022a, p. 4; 2022b, p. 7; UNSC, 2022a, p. 15; 2023a, p. 18), parallels with the Second World War and Nazi aggression (UNSC, 2022a, pp. 14-17; 2022d, pp. 25-28, 2023c, p. 21; 2023e, p. 19), and the humanitarian crisis caused by the illegal practices of Russia in Ukraine (UNGA, 2022c, pp. 16-17; UNGA, 2022d, p. 52; UNSC, 2023e, pp. 17-19). The devastating effects of the war on global health security, or even global efforts to combat climate change, were also highlighted several times (UNSC, 2023e, pp. 18-19; 2023f, p. 38). Besides being smaller than Russia, Ukraine has been constructed as a “responsible member of the international community” (UNSC, 2023d, p. 17). These emotional and normative notions are presumably more efficient in shaping the public opinion than to attract actual political and military support by state actors.

Moreover, similarly to the Armenian case, the narrative about smallness and size difference was constructed simultaneously with another narrative which aimed to prove the strength of Ukraine and the weakness of Russia. Addressing the General Assembly, President Zelensky argued in September, 2022, that “Ukraine showed strength on the battlefield”, which is why “no one will reproach us now or in the future with weakness or inability to fight for ourselves” (UNGA, 2022d, p. 50). According to Ukrainian representatives, if Moscow does not withdraw its troops, “military defeat is imminent” for them (UNSC, 2023b, p. 16), which will be followed by making the leaders accountable for their actions (UNSC, 2023c, p. 21). The narrative argues that as the war went on, “Russia has demonstrated its failure to prevail on the battlefield” (UNSC, 2023d, p. 16). Additionally, Ukrainian diplomats threatened Russia, maybe the most plainly in a speech delivered on May 18th, 2023: “Get your junk and sling your hook. Get back across the 1991 borders. Take your heels before we drop you to your knees”.

As discussed in the first part of the article, the desire to project certain victory serves the particular goal in the Ukrainian strategic narrative to convince the country’s partners that support is not a waste of resources and the country is not on a path of defeat. This goal explains why the discourse on size difference has not become paramount. Projecting smallness and military strength at the same time might lead to confusing messaging and could damage both goals at the same time. In the analysed period, narratives were constructed separately.

Interestingly enough, contrary to the Armenia case, Ukraine did not use smallness to counter various Russian claims. Addressing how Moscow accused Ukraine of provocation in February 2022, the Ukraine representative only described such statements as “absurd” and defy the logic and sequence of events (UNGA, 2022a, p. 3). Four months later, a Ukrainian diplomat cited the Russian claims about a genocide against Russians in Eastern Ukraine but only referred to the documentation regarding Russian crimes against humanity since the beginning of the invasion and the legal steps taken by the government (UNGA, 2022c, p. 15). Consequently, the third practical function of projecting smallness was not observable in the case of Ukraine.

Consequently, the Ukrainian strategic narrative about the war had more layers and might be considered more fragmented, its diverse topics serve a unified narrative purpose – to convince other states that it is not just Ukraine which is under attack, but basically the whole international society. The country is seen as being “at the centre of the largest security crisis in Europe since the Second World War”, in which Russia has not only attacked Ukraine but the “founding principles of international peace and security, the pillars of the United Nations” (UNGA, 2022a, p. 3). It is not only Ukraine that “needs peace”, but Europe and the world as well (UNSC, 2022c, p. 10). Russia “must be stopped by all of us”, or “the next war will be imminent” (UNSC, 2022d, p. 28). Moreover, the current conflict is constructed as the “end of the world order as we know it” (UNGA, 2022a, p. 3), basically connecting the country’s fate to that of the international system.

This discourse had a clear narrative goal, namely to convince members of the international community to provide help for Ukraine and to shape public perception. It is the “shared duty of the international community to stop the Russian murderers and terrorists by ... supporting Ukraine” (UNSC, 2022b, p. 16). According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, “Ukraine expects decisive, immediate and proportional action by the international community” (UNGA, 2022a, p. 4). In parallel, the responsibility of those remaining neutral has been raised several times (UNSC, 2022b, p. 16; UNGA, 2022d, p. 55). Due to these repetitions, the Ukrainian strategic narratives did not become too fragmented or contradictory.

### Interpreting research results and concluding remarks

The three case studies showed three different roles played by smallness in the strategic narratives of states. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the smallness and the size difference between the two countries played a central role in the official governmental rhetoric. Resisting the Russian attack against its territorial integrity, the small-large dichotomy was only one of several narratives expressed by Ukraine with a parallel discourse on the strength of the country. Lastly, facing an Azeri attack against its troops and its allies in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian diplomats avoided the self-description of being small.

Consequently, not just the intensity but the function of the usage of smallness differed in the three cases (Table 4). Both Kuwait and Ukraine used their smallness as an argument to gather support in the international community, with the Ukrainian strategic discourse focusing also on shaping the perception of the international public, especially by connecting size differences to imperialism and neo-colonialism. While Armenia did provide a narrative about the conflict, it did not use size differences in these discursive constructions. Lastly, when it comes to the third function, only Armenia used its size as an argument to deflect responsibility. In addition, questioning the other side’s power was present in the second and third case studies, which suggest that the fear of being considered the smaller and thus the loser side could be an important strategic consideration for small states.

**Table 4: The observable functions of the usage of smallness in the strategic narratives of Kuwait, Armenia and Ukraine.**

	Kuwait	Armenia	Ukraine
Gathering support in the international community	X		X
Shaping the perception of the international public			X
Deflecting responsibility		X	

These results show that using one’s small size as an argument to gather international support during wartime is an existing and available strategy, although not an automatic one. Consequently, the hypothesis of the research can be verified, although not as a general rule but rather as a possibility for smaller states. In the case of Kuwait, the concentrated effort to emphasize smallness for (primarily Western) great powers probably contributed to (or, at least, did not weaken) the military and political assistance provided by a number of countries. While it is too early to tell the successful nature of Ukrainian war efforts and public diplomacy, it

seems that referencing smallness and, in connection, the imperial or colonial nature of Russian behaviour, could have played a positive role in strengthening solidarity and the possible spill-over effects of the conflict. For Armenia, avoiding the smallness angle in the strategic narratives regarding the conflict in 2020 and 2021 coincided with a lack of international support against Azerbaijan. That being said, these three cases are too few to argue whether referencing smallness is a useful narrative tool or not.

Nevertheless, the differences between the three cases allow us to set up possible explanations about the causes of the rhetorical inclusion or exclusion of size difference and smallness in the strategic narratives during an armed conflict. The most convenient one, namely that the smaller the state the more likely it would include it in its discourses is not supported by the research. Both in absolute terms and regional comparison, Kuwait is the smallest and Ukraine is the largest, while their strategic narratives were closest to each other than to that of Armenia. The actual size difference between the belligerents has a stronger explanatory value, as the territory, economic output and military capacities of Azerbaijan and Armenia are closer to each other than Iraq and Kuwait, or Russia and Ukraine.

Another possible explanation for the alteration in strategic narratives is the target audience. Kuwait and Ukraine clearly aimed at Western elites, whereas Armenia had little hope of convincing them to support Artsakh against Azerbaijan, a regional power whose importance for Europe clearly strengthened in the last decade. Secondly, it is possible embracing and projecting smallness is not a result of explicit strategizing but implicit normative processes. Kuwait and Ukraine might have already had an identity of smallness, contrary to Armenia. While this hypothesis is extremely difficult to prove, the national security strategies in force during the analysed period do not necessarily support this idea – despite their different strategic narratives, neither the Ukrainian (Decree of the President of Ukraine, 2020) nor the Armenian one (NSS, 2020) refers to oneself as a small state (Kuwait did not have an official public security strategy in 1990). Moreover, the observable difference between the attempted functions of these strategic discourses suggests some kind of strategizing process.

Lastly, it is also possible that the timing of the conflicts played a role as well. At the beginning of the post-bipolar liberal order, projecting smallness was less costly as sovereign equality was stronger in the international society than in the early 2020s, amid the intensification of great power rivalry. This aspect could definitely have played a role, especially given that the strategic narratives of both Armenia and Ukraine contained elements of projecting power. Moreover, the more normative and emotional discourses of Armenia and Ukraine compared to those of Kuwait could also indicate changes in the communication environment. Nevertheless, in itself, timing does not provide a satisfactory explanation for all differences, especially since the Ukrainian and the Kuwaiti narratives were closer to each other than the Armenian and Ukrainian ones, regarding both the expression of smallness and its functions.

Besides its direct outcome, the research suggests two important general lessons for small state studies and conflict studies. First, smallness should not be seen solely as a source of inherent weakness. While limited capacities naturally have negative consequences, they can be used in both the political and communication strategies of states. Second, there is nothing automatic about how small states behave. Their strategies can vary to a great extent, which suggests that state size is not necessarily the most important independent variable when it comes to the foreign policy of states.

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