

Small States workshop in Cyprus: International Relations & Conflict Resolution

On 18/10/2019 The University of Nicosia hosted the fourth meeting on democracy and social life in small states in the Erasmus+ program. The workshop discussed the topic was International Relations & Conflict Resolution.

The project is coordinated by the Liechtenstein Institute. A comparison of European small states shows a big variety of how small states are organised, how they cooperate with neighbour states, how they manage economic, political and social challenges etc. However, small states are much less of a research topic than bigger states, and therefore teaching materials are largely missing. The project aims to develop such materials. This raises awareness of the existence and the special situation of small states, strengthens national identity in small states, and promotes understanding of the role and importance of small states.

The workshop examined aspects pertaining to how the various small states address International Relations (IR) and how they deal with conflicts they face developing Conflict Resolution (CR) mechanisms. Of course, different states have their own history and context. It is not surprising that we find important commonalities but also differences when comparing the IR and CR issues facing various small states. From the perspective of Cyprus, Andorra, Malta, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Iceland, San Marino, Estonia and Montenegro, which are small states participating in this project, the issues they face reflect their capacities, the balance of forces, their specificities and context. For instance, Cyprus, an island state, facing the Cyprus problem and de facto division, IR was always connected in different ways to the problem. Hence the conflict and conflict resolution is somehow deeply ingrained in the country's standing, social and political life and its external relations. This is not the same for other small states. Despite the diversity, it is important not to lose sight of the common themes and issues.

Thinking matters from the perspective of small states, which are polities reflecting realities small but quite sophisticated societies, the issue of 'scale' is played in different ways. Often this is depicted as a vulnerability, which reflects limited capacity for instance in having what is thought of as 'necessary critical mass' in diplomatic missions and representations abroad or expert and specialist capacities when compared to large states. However, this assumes that diplomacy is a quantifiable in a 'numbers game' competing over who will have more

diplomatic missions and personnel. This is a false assumption; whilst limited capacity is a real issue, manifested in the ways in which larger neighboring states of colonial power are pressuring them, the vulnerability issue is often conveniently played up or down, depending on the context and the audience. There are 'constructed' vulnerabilities and these are often connected to political contestations or expediencies, within and beyond the small states, and are media-related, accentuated and multiplied with the social media today. On the other hand, it was recognized that small states have strengths connected or counter-balancing to their very 'vulnerabilities': volatility of the global environment forces them to be quick and agile in making changes. There is this connected to specific features small states which are somehow commonly thought of as 'simplistic' or 'backward': small is not just beautiful but resilient and sophisticated too.

The issue of *who* decides and *how* in small states, particularly on foreign policy issue was discussed. Interestingly, many small states have traditions and mechanism of direct democracy utilizing mechanism and tools like referendums. This is in sharp contrast to methods of negotiation with larger states or multinational entities such as the EU or the UN, which are often marred in secret diplomacy, rather than transparency. The role of the media, particularly social media, and public opinion becomes more important.

The notions of 'conflict' are relevant to very different situations. Conflict was defined in broad terms and we saw how diverse the issues are when considering the domination 'conflict issue' at any given time. These are multiple, always evolving and changing. Various conflicts were mentioned: inter-state claims and fears over territory, ethnic conflict, power-sharing arrangements, minority and language and identity questions, social and political conflicts/disagreements; gender issues and rights of women like abortion rights; climate change and environment. These conflicts have spill-over effects and affect democratic life and the public sphere of small states; however, pressures and influences in different ways from outside larger states is a real issue that cannot be ignored.

Small states can develop capacities to operate as peace-makers, not just being 'buffer-state' but operating as bridges connecting countries, cultures and people, as some small states do.

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