

# 3 Small states in the European Parliament

## Does size make a difference?

*Anna-Lena Högenauer*

### 3.1 Introduction

In the design of the European Parliament (EP), the size of the member states clearly matters. The EP is, and has always been, a body within which the residents of member states are represented according to the principle of degressive proportionality. In other words, larger member states have more seats than smaller member states, though not as many as they would have if proportionality were strictly applied. For example, the three smallest states, Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus, each have six seats, which represents 0.85 per cent of the total number of seats (705), despite the fact that each of their populations accounts for only 0.1–0.2 per cent of the total population of the EU.

Even though small states are mathematically overrepresented in the European Parliament, one could describe it as the most structurally challenging EU institution for small states: every member state sends a Commissioner to the European Commission. In the Council, some decisions are taken by unanimity, which gives each state veto power – at least in theory. While the literature acknowledges that small states are less likely to make use of the veto in order to maintain the goodwill of larger states, they can nevertheless use the threat of a veto to push for compromises (Mattila, 2004; similarly Slapin, 2011, on how the power to veto allows small states influence on Treaty negotiations). In cases where the Council decides by qualified majority, which requires the majority to represent 65 per cent of EU citizens and 55 per cent of EU states, the smallest of the small states are fairly irrelevant for the first criterion but have equal weight to all other states under the second criterion. In addition, the Council often decides by consensus in cases where it could use a qualified majority, which also gives small states room to negotiate. Thus, all things considered, plenary votes in the European Parliament, where small states hold as little as 0.85 per cent of seats, are the point in the decision-making process where they are at their weakest.

Of course, one of the questions in that regard is who or what MEPs represent: while the European Parliament was originally composed of delegations from national parliaments, MEPs decided almost immediately to organize themselves in political groups rather than by member states. While this gives the European Parliament a *supranational* dimension, the national dimension remains strong: more than 40 years after the introduction of direct elections to the EP in 1979,

European elections remain fragmented and are – in reality – the sum of simultaneously organized national contests. Candidates to EP elections are nominated by *national* parties. Overall, individual MEPs are not elected by ‘the European citizens’ but primarily by the citizens of the country in which they contest the election and in addition by some EU residents of that country who may also choose to cast their vote there. Even the electoral system varies across countries. As a result, MEPs see themselves sometimes as European representatives and sometimes as representatives of the citizens and residents of their country. This comes through both in the interviews for this chapter, where MEPs speak about the importance of checking the items of the voting lists from the perspective of their country and about key issues where they voted differently from their European party group, and in the wider literature on voting behaviour, which argues that both European party cohesion and national voting play a role (Cicchi, 2011; Finke, 2015). Similarly, Slapin and Proksch (2010) find evidence of dissenting MEPs using plenary debates to explain their national party’s stance. The interviews for this chapter show that government MEPs in particular feel that it would be awkward if they voted differently from the national government on issues that are nationally salient.

Beyond the problem of the votes, a low number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) raises other questions, such as the question of whether they can cover all policy areas. Fewer MEPs means not only fewer politicians but also fewer assistants. This can be seen as the EP equivalent of the challenge of small administrations and fewer financial resources that the literature has identified in the context of Council negotiations (Panke, 2010a). Fewer people mean a limited ability to produce expertise across a wide range of issues, which in turn jeopardizes the ability of MEPs to argue effectively and persuade others to join their cause (cf. Soetendorp and Hanf, 1998, on the importance of well-staffed ministries in the context of the Council; Laffan, 2006).

Despite these challenges, the small-state literature has barely touched the European Parliament to date, and we know almost nothing about what kind of challenges MEPs from small states encounter and how they affect their work. Authors like Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006), Björkdahl (2008), Haughton (2010) or Panke (2010a, 2011) have focused almost exclusively on the European Council, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission. In order to close this gap and line with the research questions set out in the introduction to this volume, this chapter thus aims to explore the specific challenges that small-state MEPs encounter and how these challenges affect their work (Högenauer and Mišik, 2024).

As this chapter focuses on the challenges and strategies of small states in the European Parliament, its definition of ‘small states’ follows the common approach of this volume and uses population size as the main reference point (Högenauer and Mišik, 2024). This measure is particularly relevant as it directly influences the number of MEPs who are sent to the European Parliament by the different states. It explores the question through eight qualitative in-depth interviews with MEPs from Malta and Luxembourg, the two smallest EU member states, which have a population of roughly 540,000 (Malta) and 660,000 (Luxembourg) and thus

together account for less than 0.3 per cent of the EU's total population (Eurostat, 2023). Together with Cyprus, the two countries are among the three member states with only six MEPs. However, while they are both small, they represent somewhat different cases, with Luxembourg having been part of European integration since the beginning, while Malta joined in 2004, and with Luxembourg being at the heart of Europe, while Malta is a remote island state. These two factors could potentially influence the length of travel to the EP, the perceived centrality of EU politics for the country and the experience of politicians in navigating EU institutions. Panke (2010a) also found in the context of the Council that some small states, like Denmark, Luxembourg, Belgium and Ireland, are far more active in deploying 'shaping strategies' than, for example, Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Malta and Bulgaria. This makes the pairing of Luxembourg and Malta also relevant.

In light of the lack of literature, the chapter will only briefly summarize the few studies that touch on the EP and some insights from the literature on the Council that could be relevant also to the EP. It will then discuss the main insights from the interviews with a view to understanding the effects of smallness in the case of the European Parliament. It will conclude with some reflections on the transferability of these insights to other small- and medium-sized states.

### **3.2 A gap in the literature**

Unfortunately, the small-state literature is primarily concerned with the security dilemmas of small states, their foreign policies and intergovernmental negotiation strategies. It thus focuses on their motivations for joining international organizations and – in an EU context – primarily on the Council and European Council as the key foreign and security policy actors. As a result, the dynamics in the European Parliament, which is an equal co-legislator in most policy areas, are usually (almost) completely left out. For instance, the work of Jakobsen (2009) on the Nordic influence on the civilian European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), Björkdahl (2008) on norm advocacy in the EU in the context of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and ESDP, Bailes and Thorhallsson (2013) on the security concerns in the context of the EU, Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006) on small states in the European Union, Panke (2010b) on the structural disadvantage of small states in the EU and Panke and Gurol (2018) on Council Presidencies completely blend out the parliamentary side of EU politics. The strong impact of the international relations and traditional security and defence policy perspective on small state studies in an EU context can also be seen in Wivel (2010), where treaty changes that impact small states are discussed but without any reference to the European Parliament. Scholars who work on what constitutes the bulk of EU policy-making – internal policies – might have reflected on the impact of the empowerment of the EP through various treaty changes, including, for example, the extension of the co-decision procedure, which is now the Ordinary Legislative Procedure, on small state influence. After all, while the Council still heavily relies on consensus and protects small member states to some extent even under qualified majority voting, individual small states have very little weight in the EP. In

addition, aside from the fact that many small states pursue important economic priorities in the EU, many of the new and soft security challenges would also fall under the Ordinary Legislative Procedure. Thus, the very narrow focus on the Council becomes increasingly problematic.

An exception is Panke (2010a), where the EP is mentioned in passing in the context of a study that focuses primarily on small states in the Council. Thus, she notes that not all member states lobby the European Parliament equally much, with Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Luxembourg being the most active countries (p. 131). She also finds that states that lobby the European Parliament and/or engage in general arguing and problem-solving are more likely to be successful in negotiations. However, the effectiveness of lobbying the EP does not depend on the number of seats a state has but on whether they target the relevant rapporteur and committee chair. The qualitative case studies in the book confirm these findings, but as they focus on how the *government* lobbied, they provide few insights into the work of small-state *MEPs*.

Beyond this, the literature on the Council argues that the limited bargaining capacities can be mitigated through several strategies. One of these is cooperation and coalition building with other states, either in an institutionalized manner like the BENELUX or in a more ad hoc manner (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006; Panke, 2010a). Second, small states can set narrower priorities in order to focus their limited resources on key issues. Thorhallsson and Wivel argue, for instance, that small states are more likely to ‘emphasize positive influence,’ i.e., they focus on obtaining key decisions and do not have the resources to block decisions ‘that are not directly in their favour’ (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006: 659; Panke, 2010a). The inability of small states to force through decisions and their tendency to try and obtain compromises through persuasion can be an advantage when it allows them to act as ‘honest broker’ (Harmsen and Högenauer, 2021).

From the literature, it is unclear whether and to what extent these strategies are relevant in the context of the European Parliament, so the interviews also looked at indications of what a small state strategy in the European Parliament could look like and whether these elements were part of it.

### **3.3 The effect of state size on MEPs**

In the absence of a body of literature on the effect of state size on the work of MEPs, the aim of this chapter is to present an exploratory study. The core of this study consists of eight qualitative in-depth interviews with five out of the six current Luxembourgish MEPs and three out of the six current Maltese MEPs. Originally the aim was to also interview MEPs from the previous term, but all of those either could not be contacted or declined. The Luxembourgish interviewees cover all four Luxembourgish parties that are represented in the EP. The Maltese MEPs are unfortunately all from the Socialist and Democrat (S&D) group, with the two EPP MEPs unavailable due to their busy schedules. However, despite these limitations, it should be noted that the responses of the different interviewees are relatively consistent within and across cases and that the final interviews largely confirmed and

further illustrated earlier responses. It is thus unlikely that additional interviews would have yielded substantially different responses. The main difference is that MEPs from government parties tend to be more aware of and inclined to represent the position of their government. However, opposition MEPs still consider the views of their national party and its interpretation of the interests of their country.

In addition to the interview data, the empirical analysis relies on data gathered from the official CVs of MEPs and data collection on the official website of the European Parliament. The interviews and data collection took place in the spring and early summer of 2023.

The interviews identified two core challenges for small-state MEPs: first, the difficulty of covering the work of the European Parliament with few people, and the related difficulty of covering all national priorities and of meeting the expectations of constituents with so few people, and second, the role of size in the distribution of post within party groups and the EP.

### ***3.3.1 So many policies, so few people***

The first and probably most fundamental impact of the size of the member state on the work of MEPs is felt already right after joining the European Parliament: as the new (or re-elected) MEPs enter parliament, they have to join committees as members and substitutes. At this point, it becomes obvious that the number of committees – currently 20 standing committees and four subcommittees – exceeds the number of MEPs from smaller states. As a result, there is yet another problem that makes the EP more challenging than the Council – member states are represented in all Council formations but not in all parliamentary committees. Of course, the same is even more true for national delegations (e.g. the Luxembourgish MEPs from a specific party), which are even smaller. Thus, one of the first questions is whether this affects how MEPs choose committees, and the second question would be whether they try to coordinate with all MEPs from their country, or at least with those from their own party, in order to ensure a good coverage of a range of topics. A third question is how it affects the work of MEPs once they have chosen their committees.

Both the Luxembourgish and Maltese MEPs indicated that the choice of committees was based on a combination of personal preferences, the priorities of the national party and some degree of coordination with MEPs from the same party (Malta) or at least similarly minded parties (e.g. government parties in Luxembourg). However, the exact motivation varies from MEP to MEP, especially in the case of Luxembourg where the delegations comprise only one to two people. Thus, one MEP felt that their national party relied on them to pick up the most relevant topics for the party, but at the same time you need the approval of the European party group. Coordination with other MEPs from Luxembourg was not important for them, because they felt that the priorities of their party were clear (Interview 4). Another long-standing MEP felt that the decision should be made based on personal expertise and passion (Interview 8).

However, most other MEPs coordinated at least a bit with party colleagues or colleagues from close parties (e.g. coalition partners at home). For example, one

Luxembourgish MEP joined the EP a little later as he replaced another MEP who left. But he then realized that there were other Luxembourgers in his committees, which annoyed him, as there were so few Luxembourgers to begin with. So he moved to the IMCO, which deals with the internal market and other crucial topics. He has the impression that the Permanent Representation also approved of this decision, which led to the coverage of another important policy area (Interview 5). Interviewees 6 and 7 also coordinated among themselves to cover different issues. Similarly, according to interviewee 2, ‘it was up to us to choose [the committees]. However, obviously, the direction is to try to be in as many committees as possible.’ Interviewee 1 pointed out the risk of some important policies getting left out, for example, agriculture in the current term:

You can’t cover everything with a small number of MEPs. What happens usually is that you get coordinating mechanisms at party level. And coordination with the government if the party is in government in Malta. So, what we did do was that we selected what the salient committees were, e.g. ECON, BUDGET for me, Social affairs, ITRE, Juri etc. on the legal side for other people.

Of course, having your ‘own’ committee can also be politically advantageous, especially if the topic is of interest to the domestic audience. You can then use your expertise to stand out and make yourself better known, which would be more difficult if there were several experts (Interview 5).

As Table 3.1 shows, Luxembourg’s six MEPs do indeed manage to cover 15/20 committees and 3/4 subcommittees. Among those areas that are not covered, some are clearly not among the priorities of an economically prosperous landlocked small state with currently peaceful neighbours, namely defence, fisheries and regional development. On the other hand, the one committee that three people chose as substitutes – Economic and Monetary Affairs – has an obvious relevance for a state with a strong financial sector. By contrast, the Maltese MEPs cover only 11 committees and one of the subcommittees. Of course, it has to be said that Roberta Metsola does not have a committee while she is serving as President of the European Parliament, and that Malta thus has only five MEPs who cover committee work. However, the main reason for the difference in coverage is that the Luxembourgish MEPs chose to become members of two to three committees and substitute of around two committees each, while the Maltese MEPs usually are members of only one committee and substitute for two committees.

There are different possible explanations for these different strategies. One could link this to the findings of Panke (2010) that suggest that Luxembourg is also more active in the Council due to its longer experience with EU politics and more specialized staff. However, the real explanation in this case is probably due to geography and electoral systems: First, Malta is very remote, which means that Maltese MEPs need more time to travel to Brussels and thus have less time to work. In addition, there are only a limited number of direct flights, and those are not always at a convenient time. Second, Malta uses a single transferable vote

Table 3.1 Committee coverage in 2023

Foreign Affairs	Luxembourg <b>Wiseler-Lima</b>	Malta
<i>Subcommittee Human Rights</i>	<b>Goerens, Wiseler-Lima</b>	
<i>Subcommittee Security and Defense</i>		
Development	<b>Goerens</b>	
International Trade	<b>Hansen</b>	
Budgets	Goerens	Sant
Budgetary Control		
Economic and Monetary Affairs	Semedo, Angel, Hansen	<b>Sant</b> , Casa
<i>Subcommittee Tax Matters</i>	<b>Hansen</b> , Semedo	Sant
Employment and Social Affairs	<b>Semedo, Angel</b>	<b>Casa</b> , Agius Saliba
Environment, Public Health and Food Safety	<b>Metz</b> , Hansen	<b>Engerer</b>
<i>Subcommittee Public Health</i>	<b>Metz</b>	
Industry, Research Energy	Wiseler-Lima	Agius Saliba, <b>Cutajar</b> <b>Agius Saliba</b>
Internal Market and Consumer Protection	Angel	
Transport and Tourism	<b>Metz</b>	Cutajar
Regional Development		Cutajar
Agriculture and Rural Development	Goerens, Metz	
Fisheries		
Culture and Education	<b>Semedo</b>	
Legal Affairs		
Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs	Wiseler-Lima	Engerer
Constitutional Affairs	<b>Goerens</b>	Engerer
Women's Rights and Gender Equality		
Petitions	<b>Angel</b>	<b>Sant, Agius Saliba</b>

This list only covers standing committees and subcommittees, not special committees or committees of inquiry. Names in bold are full members; the other names represent substitute members.

system, which means that candidates cannot rely on votes from a party list but must canvas votes for themselves. Several interviewees reported that they felt that there was a strong expectation from the voters that the MEPs should be close to the citizens, e.g., ‘the combination of our electoral system plus being in the periphery is very challenging. And I cannot afford to not go home, as there will be complaints in the papers’ (Interview 2). Similarly, Interviewee 3 reported that ‘the other challenge, however, of being an MEP is that I’m still expected to be quite close to my constituency even if I spend most of my time away.’ Thus, all three Maltese MEPs reported that they would fly to Brussels on Monday and then be available from the afternoon onwards, and that they would leave Brussels on Thursday, usually in the morning so that they could meet with people in Malta in the evening (Interview 1; Interview 2; Interview 3). This only gives them two and a half days in Brussels.

In comparison, Luxembourg is close to Brussels. MEPs can get there by train in three to four hours and by car in around two hours if the traffic is good. As a result, the Luxembourgish MEPs arrive earlier on Monday and usually spend at least part

of and often the whole of Thursday in Brussels. While Luxembourg has an open list system where a substantial proportion of voters also vote for candidates rather than parties, the pressure on individual candidates is not quite as high as there is a party vote that contributes to their success. In addition, the proximity makes it possible to maintain a relatively high level of presence in both Brussels (or Strasbourg) and Luxembourg (Interview 5; Interview 7). Christophe Hansen, for example, manages to combine his post of MEP with the role of Secretary-General of the CSV, Luxembourg's Christian Democrat party. He greatly benefits from the fact that he can attend meetings in the evening in Luxembourg if necessary and drive back and forth. Other MEPs have also reported being able to attend important gatherings with constituents during the week with only a marginal impact on their work in parliament.

However, another question that is raised by the choice of committee membership is whether there is much of a difference between member and substitute. In theory, the idea is that members should actively participate in the work of a committee, whereas substitutes are meant to be replacements for members who cannot attend. However, in the context of the European Parliament, substitute members can *de facto* also actively participate in the work of the committee. They can even be rapporteurs, i.e., be in charge of guiding key legislative files through the committee and parliament. The main difference is that substitutes cannot vote in the committee.

MEPs are of course not obliged to actively follow the work of committees for which they are substitutes. Interestingly, though, many interviewees reported that they did follow the work of all their committees either personally (for important issues) or via their assistants, who can listen in on committee meetings (but not participate). One MEP joked that he did not know if the members of one of his committees knew that he was only a substitute. For strategic reasons, he was very present in that committee and had been rapporteur for a file, because these issues mattered domestically (Interview 5). A number of MEPs pointed towards concrete work that they had done for the committees for which they were substitutes. One MEP reported that 'literally, there is no difference between where I am a full member and where I am a substitute. I give the same energy and time to all three committees I am in. In fact, some of the most important reports I have taken care of were not in my main committee, but in the LIBE and AFCO Committees.' Another example was a Luxembourgish MEP who got to work on the Farm to Fork Strategy in the Committee for Agriculture, for which she was only a substitute (Interview 4), and one who worked on the Drinking Water Directive and the strategy for the Common Agricultural Policy (Interview 7).

On the other hand, there were also MEPs who found it difficult to cover the additional committees and who relied primarily on their assistants for this, except for a very select number of files (Interview 6). Another MEP, who already was vice chair of one committee and coordinator of another, also had no time to personally follow other committees (Interview 8). The problem is also that some committee meetings will happen at the same time. For example, one MEP who had two main committees said that he asked his assistant to monitor the committee for which



he was a substitute, as he had to go to the two other ones in person as both were important (Interview 1).

Thus, while the literature on the Council pointed at ‘prioritization’ as a strategy for successful engagement with EU politics, Maltese and Luxembourgish MEPs generally felt that specialization was the privilege of MEPs from large states: large-state MEPs were generally perceived as focusing on their main committee, with a much lower likelihood and intensity of engagement in other committees. Some MEPs were even perceived as specializing on specific issues within their committee, as there were other MEPs from their country and party who could cover other aspects. For example, according to Interview 2, ‘I would also say that [. . .] in the ENVI Committee, where I am a full member, you get Germans focusing only on the ENVI Committee, but then each one of them focuses on a separate issue. For example, climate, waste, or health.’ Another MEP had the same impression for IMCO, where several Germans from the same party were dividing the work, whereas he got to speak on all issues and had more pressure to cover issues from several committees (Interview 5).

By contrast, the small-state MEPs all reported that they had to pick up issues from committees for which they were substitutes at least occasionally, because they were deemed relevant for their country, party and/or constituents. According to Interviewee 3:

it would mean that you won’t have a member in a lot of committees. Despite that there are issues that affect the country that you are coming from and files that are very important actually. So that would mean that sometimes you are asked to look into issues which are part of other committees’ work which we are not equipped well to have the knowledge on. And try to put the national points there too.

The voting sessions in the plenary are also a bigger challenge for small-state MEPs. The European party groups issue of course recommendations on which amendments to support. However, on some issues your national party has a different view, for example, on the nuclear energy or genetically modified organisms in the case of Luxembourg’s CSV (Interview 7). If you want to know how the amendments and proposals affect your country, you sometimes have only one to two MEPs from that national party, so coordination is easy, but the workload is high (Interview 6). You can still try to coordinate with MEPs from other parties from your country that you know have a similar position on these issues. MEPs from governing parties are under more pressure, as the opposition or the media might pick up on the fact that the MEPs from coalition parties voted differently on an important file (Interview 5). Interviewee 3 also pointed out this problem:

Coming from a small member state would mean that we would have a number of files across committees where Malta’s position will differ first of all due to limited resources, insularity, the limited market size, other aspects etc. Thus some rules that are meant for continental countries affect us in a

negative manner. And even when it comes to assessing how we vote at plenary stage, there are long voting lists, amendments coming up until the end of the day that we are voting on, and we sometimes have a limited capacity. Apart from the limited number of MEPs, which would mean that you would have to work more – in the sense of being spread more thinly.

And, finally, their constituents and the media expect them to be able to speak about current issues and issues that are deemed important irrespective of committee membership. It would be difficult to decline requests to comment especially if there is no other MEP from your country who you can name as specialist in that area (Interview 3). It should be noted that both the Luxembourgish MEPs who join more committees and the Maltese MEPs who join fewer committees agree on the need to be able to satisfy the expectations of the media and constituents on all topics and pointed to the difficulty of reconciling the work in the EP which requires specialization and expertise with the pressure to be able to speak about everything. For example, the Green MEP from Luxembourg felt that ‘as the only Green MEP for Luxembourg she could not allow herself to not be well-informed about a core Green issue. I am not a member of the energy etc. committee, but if somebody asks me about the new Directive, then I have to know about that’ (Interview 4). Another MEP pointed out the importance of being able to discuss all crises, which generally interested the voters (Interview 8).

Thus, a first major impact of smallness in the context of the EP is the pressure to cover more topics both within the European Parliament and in the relations with national media and constituents. There is also a greater need to coordinate at least a little bit to ensure that the most important issues are covered by the limited number of MEPs. And, last but not least, MEPs depend more on their assistants who need to help monitor the various committees, follow up on the many files that small-state MEPs handle simultaneously and assist with the analysis of amendments and voting lists.

### ***3.3.2 Securing positions of power in the EP***

A second area where smallness creates a challenge is in the distribution of posts both within the European Parliament in general and within the political groups. The reason is that many posts depend on the weight of the national delegation, i.e., the number of MEPs within a party group who come from a specific country. For other positions, the larger states control the votes: ‘They can gang up – two to three big guys [delegations] together, and they can control the cake’ (Interview 1). In other words, when several big delegations agree on a distribution of certain posts among themselves, it is extremely difficult to reverse this (Interview 5). For example, the vice presidency of one of the party groups in the EP was lost by Malta to another national delegation because of larger delegations agreeing to redistribute it. It took a lot of hard lobbying to gather enough votes to reverse that decision the next time the positions were distributed (Interview 1; Interview 6).

Indeed, the S&D was perceived as particularly difficult terrain by some of its MEPs who pointed out that the president of the S&D is almost always from the biggest delegation, i.e., German, Italian or Spanish. The EPP was perceived as more

open (Interview 2). Indeed, the EPP's support for Roberta Metsola as President of the European Parliament was perceived very positively even by interviewees from the other parties. On the other hand, there are sometimes opportunities opening up. For example, Mark Angel became S&D Vice-President following the corruption scandals of the party group. In the brief moment of chaos that followed a resignation, there were a lot of candidates for the position, but the large states refrained from putting forward their own candidates, and he managed to build a successful coalition. The small states were particularly supportive. An advantage may have been that small delegations cannot push through their own agendas and need to build large coalitions with other states. This idea of a vice-president who has to build compromises may have appealed to the other small delegations (Interview 5). However, the additional step to becoming president of a committee would be extremely difficult to achieve mathematically, as you really need the backing of a strong delegation.

One way to overcome smallness is to get 'adopted' by a larger delegation. Some one-(wo)man delegations join a different national delegation from their party group that tends to hold similar views. That way the bigger delegation gains more weight, and the individual MEP gets some back up (Interview 4). For one MEP that worked out quite well. She wanted to become chair of the committee of inquiry on animal transports and succeeded with the help of the French delegation that had 'adopted' her. Of course, this only works if this delegation does not have its own candidate for the position (Interview 4).

### *3.3.3 Strategies for coping with the effects of smallness*

In the case of the Council, coordination and coalition building were identified as important ways to mitigate smallness. In the European Parliament these elements are also present but used more selectively. The most important point of support is the Permanent Representation (PermRep) of the member state. Both Maltese and Luxembourgish interviewees highlighted the importance of the information received by the PermRep of their country. As noted previously, the small size of the national delegations means that a small number of people need to understand how all EP votes in all areas affect their member states. Even those MEPs who focus on the European level in their engagement feel that an understanding of the national context was important (Interview 5). Background information from the PermRep helps MEPs to accomplish that task. For the most part the PermRep would organize regular, often monthly meetings (Interview 2, Malta) or before the Strasbourg week (Interview 5, Luxembourg). Most of the time the assistants would attend these to receive background information on the current files and on how they might affect Malta or Luxembourg. However, 'if something big is going on, there is some kind of coordination with the ambassador directly. For example, when Malta had rule of law issues, we had to report back to the Ambassador directly what was being said in the EP' (Interview 1). In the case of Malta, there would often be two separate meetings, one for each of the two parties (Interview 2).

The PermRep would perform different functions: sometimes it would act as a post box that just transmits information between the EP and the Ministries.

Sometimes it would have desk officers who follow dossiers more proactively. MEPs generally appreciate the support. One MEP explained the importance of this support when you are a rapporteur: ‘I am at the moment rapporteur on the Listing Act. I consulted them to check, what their position on that one is. And that is happening all the time’ (Interview 1; also Interview 5). However, because of the smaller size and more limited resources of the PermRep, some interviewees were worried about receiving information on some files later than the MEPs from other states (Interview 3).

Whereas the MEPs from Luxembourg felt that the government was quite laid back and rarely asked them to defend a specific position (Interview 6; Interview 8), the Maltese Laburista MEPs, who are from the same party as their government, reported that they were often encouraged to represent the position of the government, especially on important issues (Interview 2). ‘They tell us what their views are on crucial votes in the plenary – what they like, dislike etc. Basically, when they tell us to lobby on an area, we do it’ (Interview 1). ‘We do have a specific system, where all six MEPs can ask the Maltese government to give us the government’s position on a specific file before a vote or an important debate, and that position is not only sent to the member who asks for it, but to the six MEPs’ (Interview 1). An example is the green taxes on airplane kerosine, which were seen to affect Malta as an island particularly negatively. In addition, there were concerns about competition from North Africa, as those airlines did not face the same taxes.

Some Luxembourgish MEPs also coordinate with the government ministers from their party, though. For example, one MEP said that she tries to participate in the meetings of her party group from the national parliament so that she is informed about their position and tries to follow the position of the minister from her party. If she does not know what the position of her party is, she will also contact the minister’s office and ask. On important issues, she might also ask the PermRep about the ministers of the other parties (Interview 4). Another government MEP also reported joining the meetings of his party’s national parliamentary group as well as the meetings of the European Affairs Committee of the national parliament (Interview 5). However, another government MEP said that the government did not contact him very proactively (Interview 8), and the opposition MEPs felt that the Luxembourgish government was not very active but also pointed out that there was no real tradition of sending detailed positions to MEPs. Other states were perceived as much pushier in that regard (Interview 7).

Cross-party coalitions of MEPs from the same state do exist but are rare. While MEPs for the most part vote with their party groups rather than their countries, there are exceptions where a national cross-party consensus exists on key files: for example, the issue of tax harmonization in the EU was pushed by the S&D but was disliked by all Maltese MEPs. Another example is the move towards more qualified majority voting in the Council, where there is quite a strong consensus in favour of QMV building up on the left and on the right, but the Maltese MEPs dislike it (Interview 1). Another MEP provided the example of the Mobility Package, where the EP was divided not between parties but central countries versus Eastern countries + Malta + Cyprus. As the Maltese industry was very concerned, she decided to

coordinate a common Maltese approach to the amendments in the EP. Essentially, the goal of the legislation was to introduce rest periods and the mandatory return of the trucks to their place of establishment. For Malta, the truck and driver would usually stay in Italy, and only the containers would be shipped on to Malta, which is far more practical than to ship entire trucks. The set of laws was adopted, but it remains controversial. These examples notwithstanding, it is relatively rare that the Maltese MEPs explicitly collaborate, as the two-party system tends to promote an adversarial spirit: ‘We do not meet as the six of us. Unfortunately, the political situation in Malta is very much divided, where there isn’t much communication between both sides’ (Interview 2). In the case of Luxembourg, there are also examples for cross-party cooperation, for example, on supporting Esch-sur-Alzette on the way to become a cultural capital of Europe. Similarly, they sometimes organize visits for students jointly.

### **3.3.4 *Does smallness have a sunny side?***

While smallness is undoubtedly a challenge that can only be addressed through a broader engagement with EU politics compared to large states, it also has pleasant side effects. Several interviewees from Malta and Luxembourg highlighted the ease with which delegations consisting of two to four people could coordinate their votes (Interviews 1; 6; 7). In addition, everybody knows everybody else, and people are more prone to talk to each other when they meet in the canteen, corridors or cafes. The cordial relationship further facilitates coordination. In the case of Luxembourg, for example, MEPs often talk informally, and the assistants of different MEPs also meet for dinner in Strasbourg, whereas MEPs from larger delegations sometimes have a more distanced relationship (Interview 5).

In addition, the hard work may well pay off. According to the EU Matrix, which measures influence in the EP, three Luxembourgers and two Maltese MEPs currently rank among the top 100 most influential MEPs (Eumatrix, 2023). President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola (Malta) is ranked second, Christophe Hansen (Luxembourg) 22nd, Alex Agius Saliba (Malta) 35th, Charles Goerens 63rd and Marc Angel 91st (both Luxembourg). As far as national delegations are concerned, once the study controls for size, Malta is the most influential delegation followed closely by Luxembourg. Both countries thus punch considerably above their weight, while many large countries are only moderately influential (Germany, Spain) or punch below their weight (France, Italy).

While not all small states do well (Cyprus underperforms, for example), the way the two states address the small state challenge might be part of the explanation for their success. Thus, the fact that the Maltese and Luxembourgish MEPs feel under pressure to cover files from multiple committees encourages a higher level of activity in general and forces them to network more. Those who are rapporteurs for files from two to three different committees in a parliamentary term have to engage with the MEPs who sit in those committees. This may later help them to obtain more easily and against the odds of their small national delegation. It is also difficult to hide behind the other MEPs when your country only has six in total. The presence

of some high-performing MEPs in a small group may further increase the pressure on others to also deliver a decent performance.

Another explanation might be the relatively high level of expertise of the MEPs. Thus, out of the six Luxembourgish MEPs, three had a relatively high level of experience in politics and/or the EU: one first entered the EP in 1982 and served several terms in the EP and several years as minister in the national government, one was a member of the national parliament and committee chair and delegate to a number of parliamentary assemblies and one previously worked for the PermRep and as advisor to an MEP. Two of the other three also had a slight advantage over other newcomers, in that one of them entered the EP already several months before the election as a replacement for an outgoing MEP and thus had time to adjust before the election, and one had several years of experience at the local level and held the office of deputy mayor of Luxembourg City. Among the Maltese MEPs, one had been prime minister, leader of the opposition and MP among other offices, one had been MEP since 2004, one had worked for the PermRep and had served several terms in the EP, one was the president of the Labour Party's youth branch and a member of the party's national executive committee for a number of years, one had been deputy mayor and advisor to several ministers and one had political experience at the local level and degrees in EU law. Thus, many of the MEPs were relatively well prepared for the work in the European Parliament.

The impact of experience is also illustrated by one of the interviewees, who submitted an amendment on his second day when he replaced an outgoing MEP and created an IT problem, because he was not yet fully registered in the system. Of course, this was only possible because he already knew the file, what he wanted to do and how the EP worked (Interview 7). Similarly, it helps if MEPs already understand the importance of different roles within the EP, which roles they can realistically aspire to and how they can get them. A firm procedural understanding can determine who gets to be coordinator of a committee or vice chair of a delegation. As the European Parliament usually has a high level of turnover at election time, any kind of experience with EU politics or previous work experience in relevant jobs can be a big advantage.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

One of the most obvious problems that MEPs from small states face is that the number of MEPs inevitably falls short of the number of committees – and the smaller the state the bigger the problem. When party politics is added to this, notably the fact that cooperation across the (national) government-opposition divide can be difficult, even the goal of covering the most important issues is a challenge. The interviews with Maltese and Luxembourgish MEPs show that the response of small-state MEPs has been to try and cover a wider range of committees per person and to focus on the most important issues within each of these committees rather than all the issues discussed in one single committee. In addition, the national public expects the MEPs to be able to discuss all important issues. These factors prevent small state MEPs from adopting a very narrow focus. In addition, MEPs from

small states have a harder time fighting for posts within the European Parliament, as a number of these are determined by delegation size or votes. Some political offices in the party groups are often de facto reserved by and for large delegations. MEPs from small states thus need a firm understanding of the functioning of the European Parliament and, ideally, previous experience to position themselves well.

However, despite these challenges small states are not necessarily doomed to fail. While size does inevitably play a big role in a parliament, the higher level of experience that MEPs from Malta and Luxembourg bring to the EP, the broader range of topics and committees they cover and their higher level of activity allow them to compensate a bit and to punch above their weight. What this means for specific policies and the ability of small states to influence the position of the European Parliament is a question that goes beyond this chapter but that merits further reflection in a small states literature that has so far focused primarily on the Council. In addition, as so-called ‘soft’ security threats in the field of IT and energy, for example, gain importance, the relevance of the European Parliament for small state studies is also on the rise.

## **Bibliography**

- Bailes, A. and Thorhallsson, B. (2013). Instrumentalizing the European Union in small state strategies. *Journal of European Integration* 35(2): 99–113.
- Björkdahl, A. (2008). Norm advocacy: A small state strategy to influence the EU. *Journal of European Public Policy* 15(1): 135–154.
- Cicchi, L. (2011). Party groups in the European parliament, cohesiveness and MEPs’ survey data: New evidence on voting behaviour from a new (simple) methodology? *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 1(2): 137–147.
- Eumatrix. (2023). Available at <https://eumatrix.eu/en/blog/mep-influence-index-2023-top-100-most-politically-influential-meps> (accessed 18 August 2023).
- Eurostat. (2023). Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00001/default/table?lang=en> (accessed 18 August 2023).
- Finke, D. (2015). Why do European political groups call the roll? *Party Politics* 21(5): 750–762.
- Harmsen, R. and Högenauer, A.L. (2021). Luxembourg and the European Union. In: F. Laurensen (ed.), *Encyclopedia of European Union Politics* (Oxford University Press: Oxford), pp. 1–26.
- Haughton, T. (2010). *Vulnerabilities, Accession Hangovers and the Presidency Role: Explaining New EU Member States’ Choices for Europe*. Center for European Studies Central and Eastern Europe Working Paper Series 68.
- Högenauer, A.L. and Mišík, M. (2024). Introduction: The challenges and opportunities of EU membership for small states. In: A.L. Högenauer and M. Mišík (eds.), *Small States in EU Policy-Making: Strategies, Challenges, Opportunities* (Routledge: Abingdon-on-Thames).
- Jakobsen, P.V. (2009). Small states, big influence: The overlooked Nordic influence on the civilian ESDP. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 47(1): 81–102.
- Laffan, B. (2006). Managing Europe from home in Dublin, Athens and Helsinki: A comparative analysis. *West European Politics* 29(4): 687–708.
- Mattila, M. (2004). Contested decisions: Empirical analysis of voting in the European Union council of ministers. *European Journal of Political Research* 43(1): 29–50.
- Panke, D. (2010a): *Small States in the European Union. Coping with Structural Disadvantages* (Ashgate: Farnham).

- Panke, D. (2010b). Small states in the European Union: Structural disadvantages in EU policy-making and counter-strategies. *Journal of European Public Policy* 17(6): 799–817.
- Panke, D. (2011). Small states in EU negotiations: Political dwarfs or power-brokers? *Cooperation and Conflict* 46(2): 123–143.
- Panke, D. and Gurol, J. (2018). Small states as agenda-setters? The council presidencies of Malta and Estonia. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56 (S1): 142–151.
- Slapin, J. (2011): *Veto Power: Institutional Design in the European Union* (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor).
- Slapin, J. and Proksch, S. (2010). Look who’s talking: Parliamentary debate in the European Union. *European Union Politics* 11(3): 333–357.
- Soetendorp, B. and Hanf, K. (1998). Conclusion: The nature of national adaptation to European integration. In: K. Hanf and B. Soetendorp (eds.), *Adapting to European Integration: Small States and the European Union* (Longman: London), pp. 186–194.
- Steinmetz, R. and Wivel, A. (2010): *Small States in Europe. Challenges and Opportunities* (Routledge: London).
- Thorhallsson, B. and Wivel, A. (2006). Small states in the European Union: What do we know and what would we like to know? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19(4): 651–668.
- Wivel, A. (2010). From small state to smart state: Devising a strategy for influence in the European Union. In: R. Steinmetz and A. Wivel (eds.), *Small States in Europe. Challenges and Opportunities* (Routledge: London), pp. 15–30.

## **Interviews.**

- Interview 1: Maltese MEP (4 July 2023).
- Interview 2: Maltese MEP (27 June 2023).
- Interview 3: Maltese MEP (4 July 2023).
- Interview 4: Luxembourgish MEP (9 July 2023).
- Interview 5: Luxembourgish MEP (14 July 2023).
- Interview 6: Luxembourgish MEP (30 June 2023).
- Interview 7: Luxembourgish MEP (7 June 2023).
- Interview 8: Luxembourgish MEP (7 June 2023).