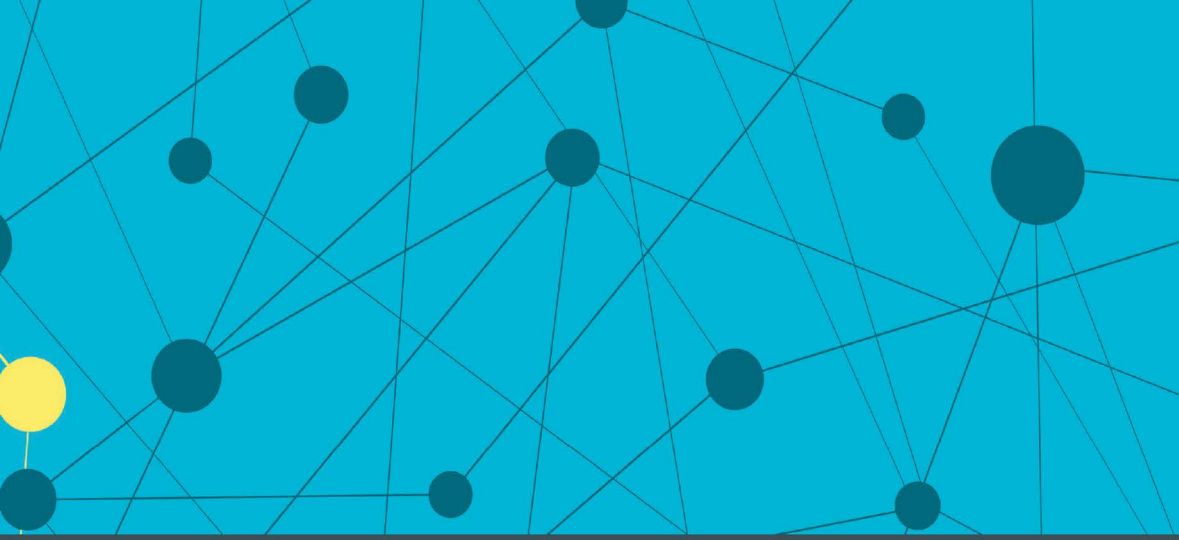
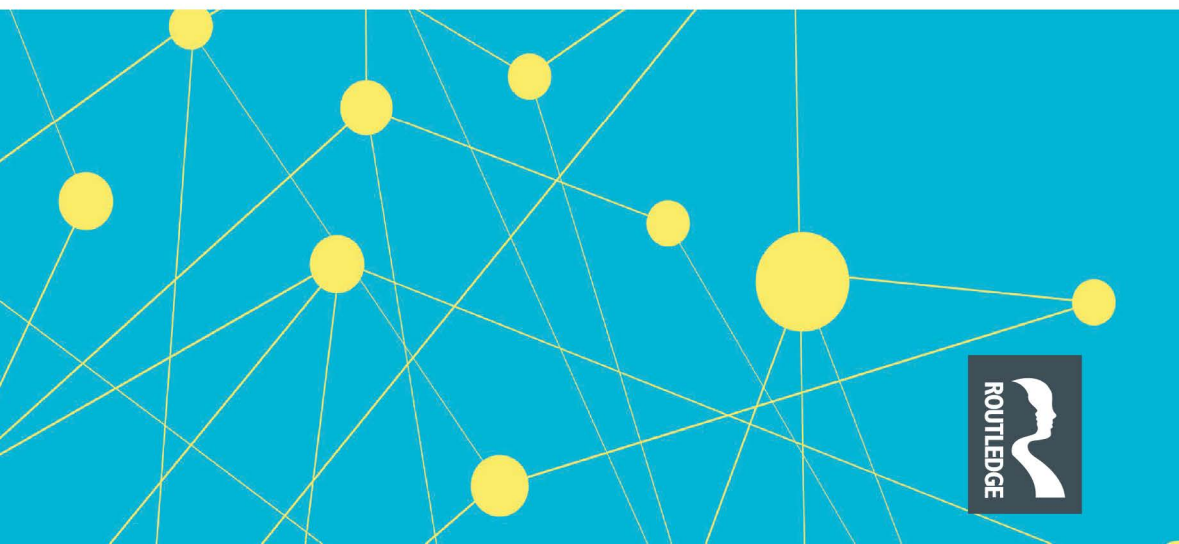


Small State Studies

THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT AND SMALL STATES IN EUROPE

CHALLENGES, THREATS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Edited by
Viktorija Car and Marta Zorko



The Digital Environment and Small States in Europe

The Digital Environment and Small States in Europe delves into how the digital revolution intersects with global security dynamics and reshapes the geopolitical landscape. It sheds light on the geopolitical complexities inherent in the border regions of the European continent and proposes frameworks to better understand and engage with small state dynamics in international affairs.

At the heart of this book is an examination of the transformative power of digitalization and virtualization, particularly pronounced in the context of small states. Traditionally, power was synonymous with territorial control, but in today's world, influence extends into the virtual realm. Small states, despite their physical limitations, can leverage this virtual extension of territory to their advantage. However, realizing and strategically utilizing these advantages are essential for capitalizing on the opportunities presented. Conversely, small states lacking digital capabilities find themselves increasingly vulnerable in the virtual sphere, facing heightened security threats and challenges. Through a series of theoretical and case study-based chapters, this book offers insights into the strategies employed by small states to navigate these complexities and assert their influence on the global stage. Key themes explored include the impact of digitalization on geopolitical dynamics, the role of cybersecurity in safeguarding national interests, and the emergence of digital diplomacy as a tool for statecraft.

The Digital Environment and Small States in Europe will be of great interest to scholars and students of international relations, geopolitics, and political science, as well as security, media, and communication studies. Additionally, policymakers and analysts involved in foreign policy and security affairs may find valuable insights in the book's exploration of small state strategies and vulnerabilities.

Viktorija Car, PhD, is Full Professor and Head of Communication and Media Studies at the University of Split. The focus of her scientific research includes digital media and society, digital activism, visual culture and visual media, media narratives, media and gender, and minority studies.

Marta Zorko, PhD, is Full Professor at Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, and Head of the undergraduate program Military Leadership and Management. Her scientific interest is oriented towards political geography, geopolitics, and border studies with a strong emphasis on concepts of territoriality and space/place creation.

Small State Studies

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Half the world's sovereign states have populations of less than 5.3 million, and over 30 have populations of less than ONE million. Clearly, there is scope to consider the impact that small size and scale (of population, civil service, expertise, talent pools, ambassadorial ranks, service providers, and so on) could have on the nature of governance, politics, international relations, economic development, climate action, transportation, etc.

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Challenges, Threats, and Opportunities

Edited by Viktorija Car and Marta Zorko

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1 Introduction

Marta Zorko and Viktorija Car

Geopolitical reality of small states and evolving concept of territoriality

In its broadest sense, geopolitics studies and elucidates the relationships between territory, population, and power (O Tuathail et al., 2003). In classical geopolitical thought, the territory was the core of state power and its multiplication was an indicator of strength (Ratzel, 1897; Mackinder, 1904, 1943; Haushofer, 1942; Spykman, 1938). Nowadays, the discipline of geopolitics considers state power in a broader sense than solely the size of the territory (Walton, 2007; Morgado, 2023) and thus may offer a comprehensive measuring framework for comparison of state power and defining *the scale* of states. For instance, small states are in a particular situation – with a lack in size of territory and population, they still have chances for gaining power in other domains, for example, the economic field or leading in research and development of new technologies, ideas, or even regulations. We believe that new, rapidly developing field of virtual space offers a new arena of chances for small states in gaining state power and overcoming its geographical handicap in size. Nevertheless, virtual space enforces a new set of challenges as well. Although small states were already recognized in the literature as special category for action(s) in international arena (Baldacchino, 2023) and especially in virtual (international) space (Brunn & Cottle, 1997), we believe further research of such capabilities is more than welcome. This book offers insights into practical case studies as well as introduces theoretical background for re-thinking small states, its capabilities, and assets through a geopolitical lens. This book brings a novelty in methodological approach by developing the Geopolitical Power Index (GPI) – framework for defining state *smallness*. The potential power and power-related influence in international relations (IR) have always been a challenge to measure. GPI offers four power categories and frame for comparison for usually-hard-to-generalize case studies of state power in a specific time context while fifth, potential category – cyberpower – is being tested through case studies presented in this edited volume.

In contemporary terms, territory can be viewed through two prisms. The first relates to location and all the characteristics it carries, while the second pertains to

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space and the contents it creates (Zorko, 2018). Bearing in mind a lack of physical in the process of digitalization and in the existence of cybersphere, it is evident that the creation of spaces must be *guiding light* for re-thinking the concept of territoriality in contemporary IR. Such creation of spaces could be positive one, neutral, and even negative one. The content and meaning follow the definitions of virtual space and cyberspace as well. As Alix Desforges (2014) recognized in state-of-the-art related literature on cyberspace:

> [T]o some, cyberspace represents a dematerialized, borderless, and anonymous virtual "world" of freedom, exchange, and communication. To others, it represents a dangerous and nebulous "space" where behaviours repressed in society are unleashed. Some view it as a vector of democracy, economic progress, and peace while others see it as a means of mass surveillance, the ultimate Big Brother, and a tool for controlling and manipulating the masses.
>
> (p. 68)

The growing importance of virtual worlds as a topic of geographical analysis is discussed thoroughly by Johnatan Taylor (1997, p. 189), who argues that a connection between virtual and physical spheres is in human action "something beyond technology itself is holding them together. I believe that what unites them is an expansionist tendency: the wish to find, to occupy, to produce, and to utilize new spaces." Therefore, the action of states in the virtual sphere seen through such expansionist theory lenses is indeed the ratio for involving the geopolitical perspective.

At the same time, existence and non-existence of the place/space continuum related to cyberspace accelerates ambiguity in definitions, meaning and its importance. Both location (critical infrastructure that provides a virtual world, from cables to satellites, devices, and platforms) and non-location (virtual world itself) of cyberspace open wide debate on potential dangers and potential added values of state power due to the different definitions and understanding of virtual space, cyberspace, and cybersecurity. However, both classical territoriality and virtual territoriality are highly interconnected – "the territoriality of virtual space may seem like an oxymoron, yet this dimension also encompasses all the elements of classical territoriality" (Zorko, 2018, p. 22). As Paul Starrs (1997) recognized

> [M]aps of cyberspace can be forged only with utmost difficulty, and it is best beloved and imagined in dense cyberpunk fiction. Part sacred space, part ethereal region, part digital fact, cyberspace involves a regional geography perhaps best captured in a coin: What is the place where everyone is, but nobody lives?
>
> (p. 193)

The best examples of the physical existence of virtual places are seen in critical infrastructure – wires and cables facilitating virtual reality pass through specific territories, and servers are located within certain states. Furthermore, there are boundaries in the form of various *firewalls* that filter communication, as well as

potential external breaches and internal censorship of some content. One must not forget disparities in both economic and technological areas that create differences in capabilities (to possess or to access – on both macro and micro levels: poor states and impoverished individuals in rich states). Finally, cyber warfare underscores the need for possession and control, introducing elements of geostrategy into this most contemporary understanding of territory and territoriality. Hence, elements of classical territorialization can be found in all the aspects of virtual, *non-territorial*, and alternative realities as well (Zorko, 2018). Moreover, virtual space, although a new domain in the theory of space, has its strong links with classical notions of territory and narratives in the physical form of existence. As Paul C. Adams (1997, p. 155) reveals "computer networks are often described in terms that imply a virtual space or place: electronic **frontier**, cyber**space**, and information super**highway**" (highlighted by Marta Zorko). Thus, Adam's "virtual-place metaphors indicate three broad metaphorical themes: virtual architecture, electronic frontier and cyberspace" (1997, p. 155). All three of those are deeply embedded in place-space discourses and narratives, core of geopolitical re-thinking of space (Lefebvre, 1974; Foucault, 1980; Gould & White, 1986; Soja, 1989; Gregory, 1994; Jameson, 1995; Elden, 2010; Storey, 2012), and constructivist lenses in IR theory (Wendt, 2003; Onuf, 2013).

Although geopolitical analyses in the past have primarily been focused on the study of state and state power or even the geographic basis of that power in the international community, the emergence of new subjects and actors in IR leads to innovations in both methodological and theoretical frameworks. The understanding of territory and territoriality thus changes rapidly, calling upon interdisciplinarity and new views in both methodological perspectives and theoretical conceptualization. That is as well the main idea of this book. Scholars form different disciplines, parts of the Europe, and from different national realities analyse changes from classical towards virtual world(s), the chances, opportunities, and security challenges such shift brings upon small states in IR and in selected case studies.

Small states were chosen on purpose – the change in power-territory to (virtual) space-power ratio is the most significant in the case of small states. Territory as a form of power in classical geopolitics is being replaced with a virtual extension of territory as a form of new space for competition. Such a virtual sphere gives small states the ability to overcome handicap in its territorial smallness, but, only in cases where such advantages are recognized, utilized, and turned into advantage. In all other cases, the virtual sphere multiplies challenges to which small states with no capacities (in the area of digitalization and virtualization) make even more vulnerable to security threats and issues. Because of such high influence, in both positive and negative ways onto international position and state power, small states are the best example for research of potential changes in state power due to the influence of novelties in the changing concept of territoriality.

From the perspective of other scientific disciplines, it has been researched how and proven why digital technology affects small states differently. For instance, from the perspective of economy, Phan Nhan Trung (2024, p. 3402) finds that "the digital economy not only creates new business and job opportunities but also

enhances national competitiveness and promotes sustainable development," thus small states are given multiple chances through the process of digital transformation. From the perspective of security and strategic studies, Francis C. Domingo (2022, p. 202) concludes that "idea that cyber-enabled technologies can empower weaker states to 'level the playing field' in strategic affairs is misleading," and while tending towards balance and out of the pure need small states

> have improved their capacity for cyber operations to enable them to cope with the impact of the uneven distribution of power in the region . . . structural conditions have compelled small states to develop cyber capabilities to support their self-reliance strategy for survival.

Furthermore, Giri Keshab (2022, p. 103) concludes that

> small states, by definition, often have limited resources and infrastructures to deal with these new vulnerabilities. Moreover, while all political systems are vulnerable to foreign intervention, liberal democracies are uniquely vulnerable to digital-era foreign interference, because information circulates freely. Freedom of information, communication and expression in liberal democracies also allows for disinformation and misinformation to proliferate largely unchecked.

This edited volume thus ties together aforementioned aspects of digitalization, cyberspace and its challenges, and potential advantages in the form of digital diplomacy and all its forms. Nevertheless, in this edited volume, we would like to find out whether small states other than having to "adapt to this predicament by developing their own cyber capabilities to protect their respective foreign policy interests" (Domingo, 2022, p. 170) have other comparative advantages in the digitalization process (i.e. small systems may faster transform to adapt) and its utilization for foreign policy goals. In this perspective, Stanley Brunn and Charles Cottle coined the term "cyberboosterism" trying to define small states' comparative advantages in cyberspace. They found out that small states (in particular, Singapore, Slovenia, Western Samoa, and Costa Rica) successfully boosted their online image in relation with tourist promotion. Therefore, digital capacities could be turned into an advantage, but the question remaining is whether such an advantage could be used to boost national power as well? Geopolitical perspective and this edited volume add a missing link in such direction.

Geopolitics provides a comprehensive lens for analysing the interactions between states, considering geographical factors such as location, resources, and physical boundaries. Small states often have specific geopolitical position and face unique challenges due to their limited territorial size and resources. Understanding how these states navigate in changing territorial dynamics provides insights into the complexities of modern geopolitics, where traditional notions of territory and power are evolving. The opportunities coming from the "extension of territory" to cyber sphere bring both chances and challenges for small states. However, small

states are often disproportionately affected by changes in global geopolitical order. Their vulnerability to external threats highlights the importance of studying how shifts in territoriality impact their security strategies and alliances as well. However, due to the differences in recognized advantages, and in "capabilities and intent" in cyberspace (Voo et al., 2020), the methodology design of single case studies seems the most appropriate approach, along with interdisciplinary perspective on crucial issues, and geopolitical framework that offers tools for scaling power in contemporary IR adding a comparative touch.

Geopolitical framework as a measuring tool: how much is power worth these days?

Geopolitical analysis allows for the examination of how small states strategically position themselves in alternative spaces and digital-related practices. Is cyberspace extension of so-needed territory or extension of some random space filled with security threats? How does sovereignty echo in virtual spaces? Does cyber dimension offer chances or bring challenges in context of small states? All these questions include considerations of alliances, potential partnerships, and development of diplomatic manoeuvres to enhance both their influence and security in the digital domain as well as developing new agendas and possibilities in digital sphere. But when analysing power and power relations, one must include a layered and comprehensive geopolitical perspective and some kind of power indexation.

The World Power Index (Morales Ruvalcaba, 2024) developed in the book *The International Geostructure of Power: A Trans-Structural Approach* (Morales Ruvalcaba & Valencia Rocha, 2024) integrates material and non-material dimensions of power, thus offering a comprehensive approach to the state's capabilities related to its power. Editors developed new system-based power theory by analysing and pondering power in three previous IR theories. Although they are offering "the accurate determination of the position that each state occupies in the international geostructure based on precise, differentiated, and complex reading of its national power" (2024, p. 71), it is hard not to mention that IR theories have their serious limitations in acknowledging new subjectivity and power-fragmentation in both classical and non-classical spaces. John Agnew (1994) recognized such shortcomings in a form of *territorial trap* – assumption that the world is neatly divided into sovereign, territorially bounded states. Although Agnew's theory does not explicitly mention cyber or other alternative spaces derived in the new millennium, his concern that IR theories see state territoriality as a static container can be transported in virtual spheres as well. Moreover, the Geopolitical Power Index developed for the purpose of this book applies solely to small states. We do not stream to measure world power or positioning in the world power system of a particular state but rather see small states as new actors in IR (along with other non-state subjects) and this is the first step towards acknowledging their existence and importance in the area of geopolitics. *the Great Game*, as classical geopolitics is often referred to is all about great powers and their rivalry (Kennedy, 2017) while neglecting the power potential other state and non-state actors may play in it.

Geopolitical analysis of power that includes a variety of factors might offer answers and ease the classification of small states for the purpose of including them as a new actor in IR and geopolitics. Croatian author Petar Vučić (1995, pp. 271–272), who developed the framework for rating states in geopolitical perspective, defined factors of state power as "the size of state territory; size of population; economy, especially technology power; the quality of the people; vitality of nation; and military power strong enough to impose political will onto others." Combining those factors, we recognize five contemporary categories for the analysis of geopolitical power in small states' research – geographical power; social and political power; economy power; military power; and cyber-power potential. While the first factor is rather easy to present, later four should be represented by the combination of existing indexes and qualitative interpretation of open-source data and indicators. The intent of our Index is to present framework for defining small states as actors in IR and geopolitics, not to serve as a measuring tool for power or power potential assessments.

In the area of political geography, states are being divided in five categories: micro-states, small states, middle-sized states, big states, and super-powers (Pavić, 1973; Berridge, 1997). Nevertheless, the subjectivity of interpretation and the combination of aforementioned factors still enable extensive debate on which countries should be labelled as small states. The definition of small states in IR is being academically controversial – it partially depends on subjective perception of a researcher, space-time perspective (Thorhallsson & Wivel, 2006; Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020), and there is no consensus on characteristics or factors that definition should rely upon (Crowards, 2002; Maass, 2009). There is also no consensus on "definition of small states and the borderlines between such categories as 'micro-state', 'small state' and 'middle power' are usually blurred and arbitrary" (Wivel & Mouritzen, 2004; Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020, p. 3). Geographically, the task is a bit easier, small states are defined by the size of their territory, but then again, geopolitically the equation includes population and state power as well. The power of a state, due to its different aspects, is debatable and subjective category. To overcome this gap, potential solution might be offered in a wider geopolitical framework and in respecting different categories of power (Mann, 2012, 2013) as well as aspects of taking actions in IR.

Geographically small states are considered those under 60,000 square kilometres (Pavić, 1973). But other than size, disadvantages in geographical position or resource scarcity might influence one's position in global power distribution, thus its importance and position in international community. That size does matter in Europe shows the voting system and relevance in the EU – which for small states might present a structural problem. Diana Panke and Julia Gurol (2019, p. 1) see the compensation for such problem in the use of imaginative strategies that "does not require much material power as persuasion, framing and coalition-building, as well as the Council Presidency as a window of opportunity to influence the agenda." They also point out that the length of membership or the time spent in association/integration matters (Panke & Gurol, 2019, p. 1). Therefore, geographical power

alone is not enough for the country to be considered a powerful state. The utilization of its position and exploitation of its potentials with social and political power lead towards wealth that could be defined as economy power. With positive economic and technical conditions, depending onto its geographical position as well as ideology state invest (or not) in its military power. This closes the full circle of state power forms and their interdependence and encloses the nuances of positioning and validating states in IR.

The Geopolitical Power Index thus consists of four categories of classical state power: (1) geographical power (size, position, and resources); (2) social and political power (population, demography, ideology, public diplomacy); (3) economy power; and (4) military power while testing the importance of fifth category in IR and Geopolitics – cyber-power. Cyber-power is in state-centric analysis strictly linked to and considered a subcategory of military power. However, nowadays with growing non-state actors' ability to act in cyberspace and in international arena in general, it should be considered as a separate category of power potential. Especially if capabilities of different actors, in our case, small states are being tested as it is the purpose of this edited volume as well.

Geographical power is consisted of geographical parameters including the size of territory, states position, and natural resources. Social and political power is consisted of demographic statistics and political prerequisites for stability. The size of the population is most frequently being used as a factor for definition of small states. But regarding the visibility in IR and importance, there have already been developed numerous indicators and indexes for measuring potential power and positioning in social and political compartments. For instance, *Human Development Index* compiles data on life expectancy, education, and per capita income to assess the quality of life and development within a country (UNDP, 2024) or *Fragile States Index* (FSI, 2024) ranks countries based on indicators of instability, risk, and governance challenges, useful in understanding regions prone to conflict or collapse. *Social Futuring Index* and *Future Potential Index* (Future Potentials Observatory, 2024) indicate social potential, *Corruption Perception Index* (Transparency International, 2023) tracks perceived levels of corruption in different states, impacting governance, foreign investment, and diplomatic relationships, and *Global Peace Index* (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024) shows the level of peacefulness in nations based on factors like internal conflict, militarization, and relations with neighbouring states. When analysing existing indexes for the measurement of power, there are several oriented towards the global world order as already mentioned in *the World Power Index* (Morales Ruvalcaba, 2024) or *Global Soft Power Index* (Brand Finance, 2023; Jagodzinski, 2024). Each of the aforementioned index is specialized for specific purpose and should be carefully included in the Geopolitical Power Index Framework when analysing specific small state or considering comparison a criterion for further analysis.

Next part of the puzzle is economy and aspect of economic power. This category is rather specific in the context of small states. A great number of small states are being the richest ones according to various indexes measuring wealth and

economic power making them *not so small* at all. Matthias Maass (2008) even suggests new terminology and distinction between small country and little state – first referring to quantitative, and latter to qualitative *smallness*. But one must be careful when estimating this economic criterion since there is a huge difference between GDP,[1] GDP per capita, GDP per capita (PPP),[2] GDP PPP,[3] GNI,[4] or GNI per capita.[5] Each of these comparative measurements analyses different aspects of the economy power. According to the WorldAtlas.com:

> [G]olden palaces on public display are not always the full story behind a country's financial worth. Thanks to the digital age, the accuracy of modern economic data can now reveal whether nations are a financial success or a disaster in disguise.
>
> (www.worldatlas.com, March 27, 2023)

There are also developed indexes for different aspects of economy and prosperity. Other than country indices in wealth there are those that measure potential, development, and future. For instance, Global Competitiveness Report shows the path towards recovery (World Economic Forum, 2020), or Future Possibilities Index, which measures the capacity to leverage possibilities in trends of future economic growth and societal wellbeing (Futures Possibility Index, 2024). Finally, fourth, military power, which is not unitary or one-dimensional component as well.

As Ulrike Franke (2023) states, "military power is notoriously hard to measure, and yet it is one of the areas of state power in which measurements are the most prevalent and sought after." Combining different indicators for fire power, army strength and military capacities one might frame this aspect of state power more closely. Military power, although closely connected with economic, technical, and industrial capabilities, form a separate indicator in geopolitical analysis. For an example, Josip Lučev (2014) developed *Current capacity indicator* while analysing superpowers and their military capacities. CCI is very useful when comparing superpowers since it indicates their potential combining economy and military power indicators. But it presumes their *will* for military development and global involvement. On the contrary, small states are usually military weak, choosing a neutral path, or being dependent on big alliances or even import/export military force. Military power in the case of small states which could make them important *world players* is usually negative one – possession of nuclear power and the will to use it for negotiating. Example of such positioning is North Korea (Wang, 2014).

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) follows military expenditures from 1949 onwards. Information from the database shows the percentage of GDP used for military spending (www.milex.sipri.org/sipri, March 27, 2023). This data could show the intent and importance of military segment for the state in question, but military expenditure alone does not show the whole picture of military power. *Global Fire Power Index* shows overall military capabilities "to determine a given nation's PowerIndex ('PwrIndx') score with categories ranging from quantity of military units and financial standing to logistical capabilities and

geography" (www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php, March 27, 2023). Yet, even such wide analysis through over 60 categories does not include some subjective (geopolitical and geostrategic) subset. Franke (2023) concludes that "military capability consists of not only an intricate network of hard power, but also softer elements such as alliances, readiness, and the ability to act – and can be deeply affected by technological developments." In the area of technical development, there are space control, artificial intelligence, unmanned weapons (drones), and cyber capabilities, especially highlighted by Franke (2023). Cyber-space although deeply changed the subjectivity of actors still is considered to be a part of state power, or as Franke defines cyber

> is another area widely expected to upend traditional power balances, with the proverbial teenager in their bedroom able to hack state institutions. Although such attacks are possible, most substantial cyber-power still lies with states, specifically those willing to invest resources in the requisite capabilities.

Lovy Institute, which developed Asia Power Index (2024), divides indices into two categories – resources and influence. Under resources, they measure economic and military capabilities, resilience, and future resources. Under influence, they consider economic relationship, defence networks, diplomatic influence, and cultural influence. Unfortunately, this comprehensive index is regionally oriented and does not comprehend cyber-power as a separate category.

The question that remains yet unanswered is whether cyber-power should be considered solely a part of military power and military capabilities or not. This brings us back to new forms of territoriality and the potential use of cyberspace for gaining *extra* power. Julia Voo with her colleagues developed *National Cyber Power Index Formula*. They suggest that in the area of intelligence and national power

> intent and capability parameters are multiplied against each other to obtain threat and power estimates. There is a dynamic relationship between capability and intent. If capability is taken as the base line ability to exercise cyber power, then a country's intent is its vector, i.e. it establishes both the magnitude and direction of travel of its cyber power.
>
> (Voo et al., 2020, p. 24)

Other than capabilities and intent, this group of authors also recognizes that there is no single measurement for cyber-power, rather it "is made up of multiple components and should be considered in the context of a country's national objectives" (Voo et al., 2020, p. 1).

On the more philosophical level, cyberspace is considered new subject rather than new space. The cyberspace goes over and beyond the concept of nation-state since it has as a *nationality on its own*, a space that has

> a population (Internet users) as well as its own mode of governance (self-regulation). In fact, this representation of cyberspace as a territory was

> first endorsed in the early 1990s by the pioneers of the Internet, who viewed it as an independent space untouched by the laws of the physical world.
>
> (Desforges, 2013, in 2014, p. 73)

As Desforges (2014) reminds us, there is even a document entitled *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, written in 1996 by John Perry Barlow. Nevertheless, geopolitical games that were played around concepts of understanding and regulation in cyberspace show that it is highly deputed and debated domain with strict sides with strong and opposite opinions.[6] Such national-embedded views and positions were strongly highlighted with a notion of cyberspace being "potential source of risks and threats, which explains governments' growing interest in this topic. From the late 1990s and especially from the mid-2000s, when cyberattacks attacks against countries increased, governments began viewing cyber-threats as a national security issue" (Desforges, 2014, p. 75). Therefore, the securitization of the cybersphere led to its re-rooting in national domain, moreover, the domain of national security which is leading towards possibilities of using cyberspace as a "geopolitical tool" (Desforges, 2014, p. 78) for competing in international arena. Furthermore, conflicts that Desforges (2014, p. 79) calls geopolitical and of which "cyberspace is both the object and the vector are real. They also reflect the rivalries between countries that exist outside the virtual world. In sum, cyberspace is a new medium for the expression of conflict." Therefore, cyberspace should be considered through at least two lenses – one of chances it offers, and the other of the challenges it implies. In the case of small states, as already mentioned, those chances are crucial, and challenges are multiplied. This is why this book offers some insights, solutions, and recommendations for how to govern, manage, and dominate the field, at the same time overseeing and directing the threats, especially through special links between digitalization, defining and understanding cyberspace, and utilizing it towards actions for enhancing state power potential tough visibility, promotion, public diplomacy in digital format, awareness, resilience, and uploading of foreign policy agendas. For small states as actors, this represents a new and undiscovered area for overcoming own geopolitical handicaps and positioning in IR if taken into strategical considerations. That is why the link between digitalization, recognition of cyberspace and the things it offers, and actions in IR are crucial in strategic development for small states.

Chances and challenges: digitalization, cybersecurity, promotion, and digital diplomacy

Geopolitics offers a comprehensive lens through which to analyse the evolving role of small states in the digital age, encompassing both traditional geopolitical dynamics and the unique challenges and opportunities presented by digitalization, digital diplomacy, cyber threats, and the concept of cyberspace in general. In the realm of the virtual sphere, cyber capabilities can potentially compensate for deficiencies in other aspects of state power. Indeed, cyberspace represents a novel arena where even small states can wield influence. It transcends traditional

boundaries and conventional definitions of power, offering a unique opportunity to offset shortcomings in traditional power metrics like geography or social influence. In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, cyberpower has emerged as a critical element of national power, rivalling and, in some respects, surpassing traditional military power. This shift necessitates the recognition of cyberpower as a distinct and crucial category within the broader framework of state capabilities. Several factors underscore the growing importance of cyberpower and justify its separate consideration. First, the strategic utility of cyberpower lies in its ability to disrupt, degrade, and manipulate the functions of adversaries without the need for physical confrontation. Cyberattacks can cripple essential services, steal sensitive information, and undermine public trust in government institutions. This form of power potential can achieve significant objectives with minimal risk of direct military retaliation, offering a potent alternative to conventional military strategies. Secondly, cyberpower enables states (and non-state actors) to engage in economic espionage, intellectual property theft, and the manipulation of financial markets – thus represent an area of economic power potential as well. These activities can yield substantial economic benefits and provide leverage in diplomatic negotiations. Additionally, the ability to influence public opinion and electoral processes through cyber operations grants states a powerful tool for shaping political outcomes in other countries and influencing the area of political power potential of a country. Misinformation and disinformation already present substantial risk for societies, and cyberspace enables a wider range of powerplay-related games in the area of information which brings us back to geopolitics. Third, developing and maintaining cyber capabilities are often more cost-effective than sustaining large conventional military forces. Cyber operations require relatively lower investment in terms of resources and personnel, making them an attractive option for states with limited military budgets. This cost-efficiency allows smaller states and non-state actors to exert disproportionate influence on the global stage. Finally, with digitalization, the yard for play in IR is widened and small states can gain extra recognition through promotion, public diplomacy, and agenda setting in virtual spaces, leading towards the final goal in practical state geopolitics – intentional change in foreign policy agenda(s), securitization of some issues (if needed), and change of own perception towards higher importance in world system's interplay of power.

Capabilities and intent as a key (Voo et al., 2020) for analysis should be taken into consideration when researching how small states engage in digital diplomacy to advance their interests on the global stage. This includes efforts to build alliances, promote international norms and standards, and leverage digital technologies for diplomatic communication and negotiation. The chances for small states could be found in several sets of advantages, for example, agility and flexibility to adapt; *niche expertise* and specialization; use of strategic partnerships; leading in innovation and R&D; adaptive diplomacy, digital diplomacy, and facilitation; and finally in regulations and data protection.

For instance, small states often have less bureaucratic red tape and can adapt more quickly to technological changes. This agility allows them to experiment

with innovative approaches to digital governance, cybersecurity, and technological adoption without being bogged down by bureaucratic inertia. This flexibility empowers specialization – small states may develop niche expertise in certain areas of digital technology or cybersecurity due to their focused resources and priorities. By specializing in specific niches, small states can carve out unique roles in the global digital ecosystem and establish themselves as leaders in particular fields. In the area of strategic partnerships and alliances, small states balance well with other countries, multinational organizations, and private sector entities to bolster their digital capabilities. By pooling resources and expertise with like-minded partners, small states can enhance their cybersecurity defences, access cutting-edge technologies, and amplify their influence in international digital governance forums.

Small states often lead in different types of innovation hubs and testbeds. They can position themselves as innovation hubs for emerging digital technologies and regulatory frameworks. By fostering a conducive environment for startups, research institutions, and technology companies, small states can attract investment, talent, and ideas, driving economic growth and technological innovation. Moreover, small states, particularly those with a reputation for neutrality and diplomacy, can play a valuable role as mediators and facilitators in international digital diplomacy efforts. By offering neutral ground for negotiations and dialogue, small states can help bridge divides between larger, more powerful states and facilitate consensus-building on complex digital governance issues.

Small states excel in diplomatic agility and adaptability overall that allows them to navigate shifting geopolitical dynamics and forge strategic partnerships based on mutual interests and values in the digital realm. By developing new types of diplomatic communication and by leveraging their diplomatic networks and soft power assets, small states can punch above their weight and exert influence on the global stage. Finally, small states are in a good position to set high standards in the area of regulation and data protection. They are in a position to prioritize digital sovereignty and data protection as core principles of their national policies, positioning themselves as champions of privacy, cybersecurity, and human rights in the digital age. By asserting control over their own data and digital infrastructure, small states can enhance their resilience against external threats and protect the rights of their citizens in the face of digital encroachments. These advantages highlight how small states can turn their size and agility into strengths in the digital realm, allowing them to carve out unique roles, foster innovation, and wield influence on the global stage despite their relative lack of resources and power compared to larger states.

On the other hand, in the digital realm, small states may face challenges related to power disparities, both in terms of their own capabilities and in their interactions with larger, more technologically advanced states, not to mention potential enemies. Such disparities could be found in economic; security; IR; data sovereignty and regulation areas. The economic realm is that small states may often lack the financial resources necessary to invest in advanced technologies and cyber defence infrastructure compared to larger states. This economic disadvantage can exacerbate power differentials and make it difficult for smaller states to compete on an equal footing. Moreover, small states are vulnerable in the area of cybersecurity

and cybersecurity threats. They often have limited cybersecurity expertise and resources, leaving them more vulnerable to cyberattacks from both state and non-state actors. This vulnerability can further widen the power gap between small and large states, as larger states possess greater capabilities to defend against and launch cyber offensives. For that reason, small states are often dependent on larger states for sharing critical digital infrastructure, such as Internet connectivity and telecommunications networks. This dependence can create vulnerabilities, as larger states could exploit their control over these infrastructure elements to exert influence or coercion over smaller states, thereby reinforcing power imbalances. In the area of data sovereignty and challenges it brings, small states may struggle to assert control over their own data due to the dominance of multinational tech corporations based in larger, more powerful states. This lack of control over data can limit small states' ability to leverage information for their own strategic interests, further exacerbating power differentials.

Although there are chances for small states in regulatory area, they may lack the regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms necessary to govern digital technologies effectively. This can lead to disparities in areas such as data privacy, intellectual property rights, and cybersecurity standards, placing small states at a disadvantage when negotiating with larger, more influential states on international digital governance issues. In the digital realm, power disparities can also manifest in terms of geopolitical influence and alliances. Larger states may use their technological superiority to exert influence over smaller states, shaping their foreign policies, economic ties, and strategic alignments to align with their own interests, thereby consolidating their power and limiting the agency of smaller states in global affairs.

There is a problem of a digital divide on global and national levels. Small states may also face challenges related to the digital divide, where certain segments of their population lack access to digital technologies and the Internet. This can intensify existing social and economic inequalities within small states, further limiting their ability to harness the full potential of digital technologies for development and security purposes. Acknowledging that this problem is more evident in larger developing countries, it should be mentioned as potential challenge for small states as well, particularly if they are not on the list of the world's richest countries. Finally, the geopolitical perspective highlights the security implications of digitalization for small states. This includes cybersecurity threats, the potential for cyber warfare, and the need for robust defence strategies to protect national interests in cyberspace in the future warfare (if any).

Furthermore, the contemporary digital information and communication environment imposed new user practices that led to a great fragmentation of the public. There are no longer mass media such as existed in the 20th century. Small, fragmented audiences are closed in groups on social networks, and they are informed only about those topics that interest them, and thus live in *filter bubbles*. Such audiences (fragmented groups of citizens) are easier to be manipulated in crisis situations, which leads to polarization in society (Car, 2023). A recent example was during the COVID-19 pandemic, when society became polarized to the extent

that protests were organized in cities – on the one side pro-vaccine citizens and on the other anti-vaccine. A polarized society, which is not homogeneous, is an easy target for provoking conflict. In addition, the American presidential campaign in 2016 showed how social networks were used for political manipulation with the purpose of increasing public trust in candidate Donald Trump (Car & Matas, 2021). The chain reaction of the unstoppable publication of so-called fake news demanded a response from supranational institutions. LSE Commission on Trust and Technology published the report (2018) and stated that the information crisis the world had faced was systemic, and it called for a coordinated long-term institutional response. Around the same time, the European Commission established a High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation and started shaping its policy against disinformation. The Expert Group's Report, published in 2018, advised the EC against simplistic solutions in tackling the phenomenon. The initial Commission's document (European Commission, 2018), setting the framework for responding to the problem of disinformation, acknowledged the complexity of the phenomenon and rapid developments in the digital environment, and thus announced comprehensive and adjustable policy solutions. One might conclude that both chances and challenges are similar and depend on whether (small) state recognizes its potential advantages in the process of digitalization, digital diplomacy, and use of cyberspace in general.

Ratio for selected case studies

From a geopolitical perspective, selected studies – Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Iceland, and Malta – contribute to the comparative methodological design of most similar cases. All of them, in both IR and geopolitics, belong to the category of small states, no matter already mentioned various definitions in different disciplines. All of them are indisputably and according to existing definitions in the category of small states. Regarding all the aspects of states power, they are fitting in all four categories of The Geopolitical Power Index, as well as being recognized as small states in international arena and in own strategic documents. Small by land and social power, middle- to small-sized economies and with no individual deviations in military power and capabilities that overcome their size. Moreover, geographically, all five cases are bordering states located on the peripheral parts of the European continent. Moreover, on the very edge of commonly defined European space of territory, belonging and common values. All case study countries have extremely complex geopolitical position reflected in their definition of belonging and towards Others and/or other states in the surroundings. Being *walls*, *peripheries*, and *tampon zones* whilst the same time being *bridges*, *contact points* and *gateways* towards European neighbourhood and not yet integrated spaces on the European continent, complex geopolitical position of selected countries vary due to the common chances and challenges. The temporally and spatially sensitive nature of the geopolitical position of our case studies renders them particularly susceptible to security threats originating from beyond the integrated space of the

EU, while concurrently navigating subjects in balancing nature of centre-periphery theory.

Although Cyprus, Malta, Croatia, and Estonia are part of the EU, while Iceland is not, as a member of the Schengen Agreement, Iceland belongs to the European sphere of mutually agreed and protected territoriality. Different degrees of integration into the European institutional system, rules, and values provide insight into the process and development of security considerations and challenges in these five countries, which are similar in terms of the complexity of their geopolitical positions. Cyprus and Malta are small Mediterranean island states at the very "doorstep of Europe"; moreover, Cyprus, although an EU member, geographically belongs to the Middle East region (the air distance from the nearest land – Israel – is only a couple of hundred kilometres).[7] Iceland, an island nation on the periphery of the (solely) defined European entity, balances the issue of non-membership and isolation while simultaneously promoting European values and sharing Europe's security challenges and the European definition of security. Estonia and Croatia, although located on the continental part of the European continent, are a kind of geopolitical bulwark for proclaimed European values and common definitions of security and security challenges. Both being *a double borderland countries* – both towards EU and spaces of prior integration – they balance (non)belonging, exclusion, and inclusion in their affiliation with the EU while leaving room for engagement with the close neighbourhood.

In the digital world, real territoriality loses importance in favour of proclaimed belonging and sharing of the same values and ideas. It is precisely in this sense that this book, through case studies, questions proclaimed values, as well as the adaptability to the new understanding of territoriality, and the potential opportunities that such a reality offers for small, bordering countries on the edges of the European integrated space.

The outline of the book and expected outcomes

The book is structured in two parts. The first part brings three chapters with theoretical concepts of digital information and communication environment, cybersecurity, and digital diplomacy. In Chapter 2, "Cybersecurity: Basic Concepts, Contemporary Security Challenges and Digital Technology," authored by Ružica Jakešević and Robert Mikac, the focus is completely on the phenomenon of cyberspace and cybersecurity. Authors claimed that cyberspace has become just as, if not more, important than the real material world because data and information have become one of the most valuable resources. Cyberspace as virtual digital space has become a battlefield where states, large corporations, multinational organizations, and various types of cybercriminals fight for the data and information. In the spectrum of attacks particularly dangerous are state-sponsored cyber-attacks that are thoroughly planned, advanced, and persistent (APT – Advanced Persistent Threat) and carried out in a way that leaves little space and the possibility of preventing them. This chapter elaborates on threats that small states are faced with.

In Chapter 3, "Digital Information and Communication Environment: Potentials for Country Promotion, Digital Propaganda, or Metaverse Threats," authors Viktorija Car, Hrvoje Jakopović, and Christopher Nehring elaborate on how the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) has changed the process of communicating political, social, economic, or military country's goals and the process of shaping the image of countries. They introduce readers with challenges of contemporary digital virtual spaces, mostly platforms, and the concept of digital propaganda and its threats to democracy. Social media and social networks, and generally platforms, turned to become virtual spaces flooded with disinformation, misinformation, aggression, and hostility. Elaborating the Metaverse, authors focus on the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms in shaping the country's image. Giving the framework for understanding the digital world of the 21st century.

Chapter 4, "Small States and Digitalization: Building a Theoretical Framework for Digital Diplomacy," is theoretical and focuses on opportunities. Authors of this chapter Đana Luša and Boško Picula provide a variety of definitions and theoretical approaches to digital diplomacy, which still is a rather new concept in International Relations and Diplomacy Studies. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to analysing communication and security dimensions of digital diplomacy by answering how digital diplomacy promotes two-way communication and thereby enables individuals to participate in creation of state's foreign policy, how it facilitates the inclusion of new actors in diplomatic communication, how digital diplomacy affects the increase in transparency of diplomatic communication and the usage of cyber-attacks as a foreign policy instrument, and a biggest weaknesses of digital diplomacy. The third part of the chapter addresses different dimensions in which the digitalization of diplomacy has affected the diplomatic practice, particularly diplomacy executives, those affected by diplomacy and the means of executing diplomacy.

As stated before, Part I serves as a theoretical framework for the main topic of the book and it proves the need for interdisciplinary approaches, from information and communication studies, political science, IR, and security studies. In Part II, previously defined terms and concepts are elaborated through country case studies or comparative studies. Part-opening Chapter 5, "European Security Space(s): Defining and Protecting Cyberspace in European Small States," by Marta Zorko and Ivana Cesarec, is focused on European security as a concept that includes security threats at several levels – local, national, and supranational. And while supranational one is created through EU documents, agendas, and strategies, local and national definitions differ due to the geopolitical context often visible in national security strategies. Authors applies the policy framework to concepts of cyberspace and cybersecurity to small European states, comparing definitions of cybersecurity and cyberspace in European small states and pin-pointing existing patterns and highlighting models due to the geopolitical background and political circumstances. The aim of this chapter is to find discrepancies and similarities in the definition of cybersecurity, its scope, and potential mentioning of cyberspace. It systematizes definitions and typologize mechanisms according to geographical

(positioning on the European continent) and political (membership, aspirations, and non-affiliation to EU integration) keys, with the intent to show similarities and differences in geopolitical positioning of small states and their level of EU integration. After presenting the broader European perspective, four country case studies follow. Chapter 6, "The Smaller the State the Bigger the Challenge: Estonia as the Digital State," by Jaanika Puusalu is on Estonia. This chapter investigates how the exponential growth of threats faced by digital environment users poses great challenges to Estonia's abilities to provide security to their subjects as well as maintain social cohesion. The concept of "digital state" is elaborated, where the use of digital services and devices is high, and online is widely accessible. Instead of focusing on extreme cases of online radicalization, the author rather elaborates the more subtle ways in which the multiplicity of information and views that are provided in a digital environment can seep into the individual's way of seeing the world as well as start informing public debate. These indirect ways in which digital environments inform the social world can serve as a tool to protect democracy and maintain social cohesion as the direct threats of cybercrime. An Estonian case study is followed by the case study from Cyprus, in Chapter 7, "Surveillance, De-democratization and the Digital States of Exception: Cyprus, a Small State Surveillance-Post," by Michaelangelo Anastasiou and Nicos Trimikliniotis. This chapter examines the threat of algorithmic digital surveillance (including AI) in Cyprus as a small state. Authors developed a theoretical and empirical framework that relates digital surveillance technologies with processes of power centralization, de-democratization, and the violation of civil rights in the context of debates pertaining to small states. They employ the notion of "digital states of exception" to designate technologies operating at the margins of legality or outside it, but that are nonetheless utilized by state or corporate actors for economic and political advantages. They relate these practices to the onslaught of AI technologies, which are increasingly fostering domains of automation, thus potentially proliferating the "digital states of exception." Third case study relates to Malta and is discussed in Chapter 8, "Hyperlocal and the Nation State: Malta's Complicated Media Ecosystem," by Alex Grech and Martin G. Debattista. Malta, the smallest member state of the EU, has a distinctive and complex hyperlocal media ecosystem. It makes for a compelling case for examining the dynamics of the digital society and its commercial and political ramifications, localized within the resilience of hegemonic power systems in small states. This chapter describes the complex relationship between state, state-controlled public broadcasting, and party-owned media outlets. Significant events, such as the murder of investigative journalist and blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia and shifts in voting patterns, have led to increasing pressure on Malta, from both European and domestic sources, to reform its media ecosystem. The chapter examines the resistance to these pressures and the implications for the private-public sphere. Authors propose a model to explain the operations of hyperlocal media ecosystems in small states and how content circulates, based on the affordances of Malta as an "island lab" and supported by local examples and case studies. And finally, the fourth small country-based case study is discussed in Chapter 9, "Icelandic Environmental Security Communication Strategies," by

Hrvoje Jakopović, Lidija Kos-Stanišić, and Dino Đula. We have been witnessing the long-term eruptions of volcanoes that were taking place in Iceland, what confirms the importance of environmental security and the threats of "environmental events." Authors focus on digital aspects of government and state institutions communications on advanced sustainable policies. They analyse communication strategies that are used to raise public awareness of the challenges and problems in the field of environmental security.

The book finishes with the only comparative Chapter 10, "Hybrid Threats as Challenges for the Protection of Critical Information Infrastructure in Cyberspace: A Comparative Analysis of Croatia and Estonia," authored by Robert Mikac, Ivana Cesarec, and Vladimir Sazonov. From the perspective of security studies, authors highlight critical infrastructure and critical information infrastructure as networks, facilities, and systems that are nationally important in the development, protection, and daily functioning of all key processes, measures and activities of society and state. Elaborating challenges, risks, and dangers as consequences of hybrid activities, authors address different trends in various forms of hybrid activities that aim to disable the operation of networks, facilities and systems that are designated as critical infrastructure and critical information infrastructure. Hybrid threats are activities conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine and harm regular and efficient operations, and affect the decision-making process, up to the destruction of those infrastructures. Comparing approaches to the protection of critical information infrastructure from hybrid threats in Croatia and Estonia, authors compare available response mechanisms in preventing and countering hybrid threats in these two countries.

Readers might be interested in what connected all the authors, how they all found themselves in this book. Since 2017, at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Zagreb, seven colleagues have been researchers in *Digital Data and Security Project*: Viktorija Car, Ružica Jakešević, Hrvoje Jakopović, Lidija Kos-Stanišić, Đana Luša, Robert Mikac, and Marta Zorko. The idea for this book developed through several years and was finally conceptualized in 2022 during the project field research in Iceland. Understanding the visible or invisible position of small states in weighing the forces of the great powers, we agreed that the topic is not elaborated enough or exhausted in European academic society. Although primarily situated within political science and international studies, without security studies insights, and media and communication studies perspectives, it would be impossible to encompass the topic as a whole. Therefore, we invited other colleagues to co-author some chapters, and especially experts from Cyprus, Estonia, and Malta to complete the book with country case studies chapters. This interdisciplinary approach proves how broad and complex the topic is and how there is still room for other discipline approaches from sociology, history, information science, and other. With the super-fast process of implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) into information and communication processes within and between countries, but also economy, trade and other fields, the challenges and chances in this area will continue to grow rapidly and change day-to-day basis. This is why we hope this book will open a broad interdisciplinary debate and set grounds for continuous

research of geopolitical reasoning of small states' role in changing and challenging digital environment.

Notes

1 Gross domestic product (GDP) is an annual measure of the market value of all the final goods and services produced and sold in a country (www.worldatlas.com, March 27, 2023).
2 GDP purchasing power parity (PPP) per capita is therefore found by dividing GDP by the total population after adjusting for PPP (www.worldatlas.com, March 27, 2023).
3 GDP PPP is a metric used to compare the buying power of different countries' currencies, measured by the price of certain goods in each country (www.worldatlas.com, March 27, 2023).
4 GNI is gross national income. This metric "is very similar to GDP in that it measures the total value of all the goods and services produced in a country – however, it also adds or subtracts the money coming into or out of the country through foreign businesses. This helps account for tax haven activity and gives an arguably more accurate measure of an economy's health and wealth" (www.worldatlas.com, March 27, 2023).
5 GNI per capita is the gross national income divided by population (www.worldatlas.com, March 27, 2023).
6 SAD and later Brazil, against Russia and China's view on freedom of the Internet and Internet regulation (see detailed debate in Desforges, 2014).
7 Distance between countries' centres (Straight line or Air distance) is 472.61 km, while closest distance between countries' borders (Straight line or Air distance) is 233 km. Distance Calculator, GlobeFeed.com. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from https://distancecalculator.globefeed.com/Distance_Between_Countries_Result.asp?fromplace=Cyprus&toplace=Israel

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