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Small European Countries in International Organisations: A Perspective on the Small-State Question

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Theories of small states differ between various fields of research. In political science, security and survival are the point of departure and these problems were particularly pressing in the 1930s and 40s. In later decades, they have not been as urgent as before for European countries while many microstates feel so, often for physical reasons. Still, however, security problems are important. This way of approaching the small countries has led to definitions being based on their acting in international situations and organisations, i.e. how these countries consider themselves and how they are conceived by other (large) countries. In economic sciences, small-state theories emphasise trade and dependence. Definitions are often based on population, surface area, and total production. However, this is not enough since a definition should be dependent on the problem discussed and thus a number of important characteristics should be considered; it should be an analytical definition. One important – some would say obvious – point has to be added. If the concept of smallness is to have an analytical meaning it should be regarded in a comparative setting.

In this paper, the small-state problem is seen in a historical perspective. Its importance has differed over time. An economic internationalisation process has been going on for centuries. In the last decades this seems to have intensified and now it is known as globalisation. This development has meant changes over time, which are roughly periodised on the basis of the export shares for Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Before c. 1850, the status as a small country did not play a major role economically. Then, up to around 1910 the dependence of small countries on the world economy increased and there were clear tendencies towards activities in international economic co-operation. From the 1910s to the 1960s-1970s, the long-run changes were small in international dependence. In this period international co-operation increased and the small countries were very active in these endeavours. In connection with the globalisation process from the 1970s there was a rise in the degree of the international dependence of small countries. An important element in the process of change in the postwar period has been democratic corporatism, which varied in degree and characteristics between different small countries. There were also differences due to various positions in relation to the super powers. In the 1990s after the termination of the Soviet Union things changed and this also influenced the small countries' activities in international organisations. The possibilities of accommodation policy due to the globalisation process differed with different traditions. The small countries' activities in international organisations can be seen in connection with the changing economic dependence. Interest and activities in international co-operation have increased and so has adaptation to changing conditions. However, activities in international organisations and the adaptation processes had diverse shapes in various countries due to varying institutions (traditions). An example of this is the different behaviour by Finland and Sweden in the EU.