

# Small powers as non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council: A case study of the Baltic States

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## Abstract

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*The main objective of this paper is to identify how small powers can make a difference by taking up a role at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as non-permanent members. This research takes a closer look at the Baltic states, Lithuania and Estonia, and give a perspective for Latvia too. This paper examines whether these states use strategies that have made other small powers successful at the Security Council. Most of the materials used were documents from foreign services and the UNSC, and the methods employed were qualitative document analysis and interview. Lithuania was successful at making resolutions and highlighted topics, such as small arms and protection of journalists, whereas Estonia was successful at agenda setting and highlighted cyber security and environment security. Small powers can successfully work at the UNSC by setting the agenda and working on resolutions. However, their time as part of the UNSC is limited and their abilities to solve military conflicts depend on the support of the great powers. The Baltic states used some strategies that other small powers have successfully used, although they lacked influence for mediation and coalition building.*

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## Keywords

United Nations, Security Council, Baltic states, small powers

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## Introduction

Small power research in international relations became important after the Second World War when many small powers became independent. Many of them achieved their independence through the decolonisation process in the 1950s and 1960s. The empires of the great powers changed their policies towards Asian and African nations, although some of them resisted this process. During the cold war period, a lot of new small and middle powers joined the post-war structure that was shaped by the United Nations (UN) and many more smaller powers became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The role of the UN initially was to prevent future wars and institutionalise the influence of the dominant powers. The UN created the Security Council and made it responsible for security. While according to UN principles, all states are equal, there are great powers with permanent seats and other powers with non-permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Non-permanent power seats were increased during the cold war due to more small powers joining the Council. Smaller powers now make up the largest group in the UN General Assembly (GA). The UN has a Forum of Small States (FOSS), a group aimed at small power cooperation. The more small powers get to the Security Council, the more they influence global security. However, their ability to work there is limited by many factors.

Non-permanent members only serve a term for 2 years, if they are elected. In order to be elected, a UN member has to garner the support of most of the members in the General Assembly and this takes a lot of effort. Even if elected, non-permanent members have to cooperate with other powers to influence security policy. They do not have the right to veto, and if elected, they also have to represent the interests of other powers that voted for them.

This research takes a closer look at Estonia and Lithuania, which have only been admitted to the UNSC on one occasion. Lithuania was elected as a member of the UNSC for one term (2014–2015) and Estonia similarly later (2020–2021). The paper gives some insight into the priorities and aims of Latvia if it gets a seat on the UNSC in 2026. For its candidacy to be serious and unique, it needs to assess experience of its neighbours – Lithuania and Estonia. This research aims to provide an important assessment of Latvia to understand what can be achieved and how ambitious it can be. The Baltic states have a similar history and they all regained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They are all small powers because they have small populations and little influence in the international system and they tend to protect international law more than the great powers and behave like small powers in other ways. Participation in international organisations is considered to be vital for these countries to survive in the international system and they all rely on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) for their security.

The aim of the research is to identify how small powers can make a difference by taking up a role at the UNSC as non-permanent members. It not concentrates on the biggest obstacles faced by small powers but takes a look at how small powers can work successfully in different areas. It also examines the main motivation for small powers to join the Council using English School theory. A lot of research in the field has been based on realism, liberalism, or colonialism theories. The English School theory consists of three main concepts, which are international system, international society, and world society. The main synthesis in the theory is between realism and liberalism (Buzan, 2004, pp. 6–9).

International society is a liberal concept of the theory, and it claims that states interact using common values, norms, and behaviour models. The world is not always anarchical and there are rules to follow (Linklater and Suganami, 2006, pp. 52–53). International society has institutionalised force differences between states in certain common global mechanisms (Clark, 2011, pp. 35) and such phenomena can be seen at the UNSC, where the great powers of the Second World War are dominant due to its structure.

Bull (2002, pp. 36–139) admits that states follow international rules as long as it is useful for them. The UN is an institution through which states can execute their interests and reduce threats created by anarchy in the international system. The international system concept is based on realism and claims that states behave according to existing relations that derive from force. States struggle for power in an anarchical environment where there are no rules. In English School theory, these two concepts make the core of the theory. States follow common rules and values, but at the same time they exist in an anarchical environment (Buzan, 2004, pp. 6–9). The first concept allows small powers to have greater influence on global security, but the second concept only makes it possible for the great powers. It may seem that the theory is controversial, but dual ontology should be seen as an opportunity to look at the motivation of the smaller powers on the Council from two perspectives at the same time.

The research cannot examine behind the scenes consultations and it does not have exclusive availability to classified information which deals with the foreign policy of the Baltic states; therefore, it is limited to publicly available policy planning documents and UN public documents. The research analyses some informal Arria formula meetings and their topics, but cannot examine how these states prepared for each meeting. As it is limited to the Baltic states, the conclusions cannot be identified and aligned with all small powers in the world and are therefore regional and not appropriate for every small power. The paper cannot evaluate the results of Latvia's participation in the Council because Latvia has not been a member of the Security Council yet.

Whether the Baltic states used strategies that have made other small powers successful at the Security Council is an issue that is also examined. In order to be effective at the UNSC, small powers have to be successful at many dimensions that they can influence. Apart from other things that small powers cannot influence, agenda setting is one of the areas where they have an opportunity to be successful and the agenda can be set for both their own regional security interests and international ones. The research evaluates if and how Baltic states engage with other powers to create resolutions. Cooperation on the Council also shows how they understand other members' interests, and the research also looks at this as well as testing the following hypothesis: (1) The Baltic states used niche diplomacy in order to set the agenda, rather than make new resolutions; (2) the Baltic states cooperated with other small powers more than they cooperated with large powers in order to set the agenda and achieve their national interests; (3) Latvia's candidacy concentrates on image-building as the norm setter, rather than be prestige-seeking at international level; and (4) the Baltic states' motives for playing a role on the Council is based on international society (common values and norms) more than on the international system (power maximisation).

The first paragraph looks at agenda setting at the UNSC, while the second one analyses the work on different UN resolutions. The third paragraph looks at how countries have achieved their previously planned aims and if their interests are met by the UNSC. To achieve these goals, two main methods are applied: qualitative document analysis and interview. Qualitative text analyses use coding that can be carried out according to the theory or according to the data available. In this research, there are three theoretical

categories in each paragraph according to which data was collected. An interview method is also qualitative and gathers additional information for the research. This research employs semi-structure interview, which means that the interviewer asks previously prepared questions and also asks additional questions depending on the answers given. An interview also means that information may partially be subjective and shaped by the interviewee's opinions. Oļegs Ilģis, Head of the International Organisations Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, was interviewed because the research needed additional information on the Latvian campaign as it has not been defined so much in written documents and the campaign is still in progress. Oļegs Ilģis has worked on the Latvian campaign and gathered experience from researching other small powers on the UNSC. The research is a case study as it explores three Baltic states, so it is important to highlight that its conclusions cannot be used to describe the overall situation of small powers in the world, but it can give insight on how Baltic states have overcome obstacles and what strategies have they used.

## Small power research and definition

There is no consensus in international relations about the definition of a small power, although the research field distinguishes small powers as different from great powers. Many authors in the field have tried to define what a small power is and this question can be viewed from different perspectives. Vital (2006, pp. 77–81) has used quantitative criteria and states that human resources differentiate great powers from small powers. Keohane (2006, pp. 55–61) identifies small powers by qualitative criteria. Smallness is when a small power cannot influence the international system on its own and can only influence the international system in cooperation with other powers. Hey (2003, pp. 2–4) is against strictly defining small power but admits that small powers have specific traits. Maas (2017, pp. 18–28) has indicated that smallness is a result of relative lack of influence in the international system and that precise definition can only limit the research, not accelerate it. Thorhallsson (2012, pp. 136–143) has pointed out that small power can be characterised and measured mainly using qualitative criteria. How successful is the power as a distributor and creator of international norms? How significant are the priorities set by leaders of a specific power in the international community? How successful is its international image? Thorhallsson (2012, pp. 136–143) says that qualitative criteria allow us to explain small power behaviour in international organisations. Quantitative theories do not take into account that state behaviour in the international system is not only influenced by numbers but also by international norms (Thorhallsson, 2012, pp. 136–143). Other authors also distinguish small powers by their behaviour, their foreign policy, and their need to be in international organisations to maximise their power (Archer *et al.*, 2014, pp. 5–9). There is also a structural approach which looks at how autonomous powers are. The security approach measures military power, and the comparison approach defines powers in comparison to other powers. Historically, small powers cannot influence security in the world but they can participate in coalitions and alliances. The UN is the only international organisation that offers involvement in the global security decision-making process and aims to maintain a rules-based international order where there are laws and norms, and the survival of small powers benefits from this.

According to Súilleabháin (2014), small powers have the following difficulties at the UNSC—information access, lack of capacity, and structural barriers to full participation. Small powers have limited ability to process information and get information, and the lack of capacity means that the mission is limited in size. Structural barriers include hard winning elections, almost no representation in UN structures, and other organs.

Transparency is an issue when small powers are not represented on bodies, such as the Security Council, and when the Council's decisions affect all members.

Small powers also have their advantages in the UN because their diplomacy is more agile. This means that they do not have large bureaucratic mechanisms. Diplomats from small powers take decisions without too much guidance and are more flexible, and they tend to be more qualified and there is much more continuity in their work. The other advantage is prioritisation and niche diplomacy, as small powers chose the priorities and niches they are good at and invest in them. They also help other small powers understand the priorities of the UNSC ([Súilleabháin, 2014](#)).

Recent research conducted by [Reire \(2021\)](#) suggests that the limitations of small powers on the UN Security Council are outweighed by the examples of Lithuania and Estonia on the UNSC which show that despite legal and procedural limitations, small powers can be successful at influencing the Council. This can be done setting clear foreign policy aims, strengthening the multilateral international order, and engaging in agenda setting and using informal consultation opportunities. This all can be achieved in a favourable international environment ([Reire, 2021](#)).

[Chowdhury \(2012\)](#) argues that small powers need to cooperate in international organisations in order to be more successful. Small powers lack economic influence and weight in diplomatic consultations and they are also constrained by being in other regional organisations and the fact that their policies are subordinated to great powers. Small powers can influence the international system by adding value to already existing international mechanisms and common norms.

The praxis shows that small powers can achieve a lot on the Security Council. During its presidency, Norway organised talks with the Taliban in 2022. Great powers, such as the United States, Great Britain, and France, participated in those talks. A humanitarian corridor in Syria was set up by Luxembourg, Jordan, and Australia in 2013, and this is another example of small and middle powers showing initiative on the Council. With regard to agenda setting, Sweden has been successful in implementing the “women, peace and security” agenda ([Kaufman and Mavris, 2022](#)).

Specific methods for small powers to influence the Security Council include coalition building, using the advantages of the presidency, organising side events and special events, and concentrating on specific topics. With regard to coalition building, EU member states and Nordic states are groups that often cooperate, and this proved important for both Norway and Estonia ([Haugevik \*et al.\*, 2021](#)).

Nordic states match reputation with influence and are often seen as creators of international norms. They have been active investors in various UN mechanisms and important contributors to UN peacekeeping missions. A country can be invited to a UNSC meeting, and some are invited because they are involved in conflict, such as Israel, while others because they have a good reputation. Neutrality in world conflicts can be beneficial to many small powers, although neutrality itself does not give influence right away. [Thorhallsson \(2012, pp. 136–143\)](#) argues that contributions to the UN do not always lead to influence, but examples show that expertise and knowledge are more important. Knowledge is not something that is achieved by a large territory or financial resources, because a small power can gain knowledge by gaining experience from other small powers, prioritising topics and by bringing new ideas to the table. Knowledge is also leadership, initiative, and coalition-building. Thorhallsson argues that neo-liberal institutionalists see security from international laws, norms, and treaties and that the two main factors that

allow small powers to influence the international system are administrative competence and country image.

## Agenda setting at the United Nations Security Council

Agenda is a part of every member's duty during presidency of the UNSC. Both Lithuania and Estonia were presiding countries on the Council twice for 1 month. Presiding members set the agenda for the UNSC and prioritise topics, which usually consist of planned topics and urgent topics that need special attention. Compared to permanent members, time is limited for non-permanent members. Permanent members also preside for 1 month, but they get the presidency often because they are full-time members of the Council. For a small power to get to the presidency, it also needs to be elected to the Council and this means preparing a big campaign.

### Lithuania

Lithuania's representative on the UNSC, Raimonda Murmokaitė, pointed out that civilian casualties caused by small arms have been fuelling terrorist and criminal activities, and she encouraged all states to ratify the Arms Trade Treaty, which was signed in 2014. The aim of the Lithuanian initiative was to prevent small arms coming into the hands of war criminals, terrorist organisations, and human rights abusers. Lithuania insisted that the UNSC should use embargo rights more extensively and contributes to the implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty and initiated discussion on small arms trade prevention, which included improving control of small arms in conflict de-escalation processes and cooperation between sanction committees and peacekeeping missions ([Security Council, 2015a](#)).

Lithuania also organised a meeting for interior ministers on the UNSC to discuss implementation of resolution 2179 on preventing the flow of terrorist fighters to and from conflict zones. During its term, Lithuania chaired the UNSC Counterterrorism Committee and the sanctions committees related to Yemen and the Central African Republic ([Permanent Mission of Lithuania to the United Nations in New York, 2014](#)). It actively contributed to improving the implementation of sanctions and the transparency of the work of sanction committees ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021](#)).

### Estonia

During its presidency in May 2020, Estonia organised the high-level Arria Formula meeting. Foreign ministers from over 50 states took part and discussed the lessons learned from the post-war situation and discussed how to prevent international war crimes in the future. This was also a practical challenge because this event had to be organised online because of COVID-19 ([Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020](#)).

Estonia organised a video conference to discuss the working methods of the UNSC, for which it prepared a concept note in which there were some suggestions regarding improvement of the [Security Council's \(2020a\)](#) work. It also organised a virtual meeting on cyber stability, conflict prevention, and capacity building which focused on international norms,

law and, stability in cyber space. Digital transformation and cyber security were the priority topics for Estonia at the UNSC and were even more so during the COVID-19 crises, which accelerated digital transformation globally. This event was organised with Belgium, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia, and Kenya, and representatives from different international organisations took part ([Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021](#)). Estonia believes that there should be international norms and international law in cyber space and that policy needs to be discussed in other international organisations as well as by the UN in order to shape cyber space and its norms ([Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023](#)). Estonia organised a video meeting regarding cooperation between the UN and regional organisations, in particular the EU. Matters regarding maintaining international peace and security were discussed in the context of the cooperation between two organisations and states discussed COVID-19 and environmental issues as well as other political topics ([Security Council, 2020b](#)).

Estonia showed initiative by organising a high-level, informal virtual meeting at the UNSC to discuss the situation in Belarus when protests erupted after the presidential election. It demonstrated that not only was it committed to its priorities, such as human rights and conflict resolution on the Council, but also was ready to take the initiative on urgent matters ([Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, 2021a](#)).

Research conducted by [Reire \(2021\)](#) also acknowledges that despite the limited opportunities of small powers to set the agenda at the Security Council, Lithuania and Estonia were successful at this because of national expertise in combination with clear priorities and flexibility that produced better results than predicted.

## Work on resolutions at United Nations Security Council

Both Lithuania and Estonia had to participate in votes and debates on the Council's resolutions and both had to deal with resolutions on specific conflicts in different regions of the world. Both countries had to deal with resolutions on the topics of non-proliferation, humanitarian assistance, and UN peace missions. Resolutions express the intention of the Council and are binding on all countries. Unlike non-permanent members, permanent members have the right to veto resolutions and the seven non-permanent members may cooperate to veto.

### Lithuania

In 2015, the UNSC adopted a new resolution on small arms initiated by Lithuania. It was adopted by nine votes in favour and six abstentions. Lithuania had numerous consultations with states at the bilateral level before putting the resolution to a vote. The resolution provided practical solutions for the [Security Council \(2015b\)](#) to help states manage small arms stockpiles, offered import control systems for small arms, and encouraged improvement of border security. It also dealt with countering terrorist activities, mercenaries, and organised crime. Lithuania supported resolution 2166, which condemned the downing of the civilian aircraft in the conflict of Ukraine. It was drafted by Malaysia, with China, Angola, and Venezuela abstaining in the vote ([Security Council, 2015e](#)). Lithuania also gave its support to resolution 2139, which demanded humanitarian aid access to the conflict zones in Syria and called for all parties to stop confrontation and sieges in civilian areas ([Security Council, 2014a](#)). Together with other states, it also drafted a resolution

which called on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to intervene in Syria and adjudicate on war crimes, but Russia and China used their veto rights to block the adoption of the resolution ([Security Council, 2014e](#)).

Another political conflict occurred in Afghanistan, and this also presented issues relating to conflict resolution, the state building process, and humanitarian situation. Lithuania voted for resolution along with other nations, which extended the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and affirmed previous resolutions and commitments to strengthen the state building process that included governance, economic, justice, social and peace development ([Security Council, 2014h](#)).

In 2015, Lithuania organised open debates on small arms and protection of journalists in conflicts as well as briefing on foreign terrorist fighters. Two of the debates resulted in resolutions ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021](#)). The second resolution initiated by Lithuania included the necessity for progress in protecting journalists in conflicts by arguing that they are essential for international peace and security as well as human rights. This was included in its successfully drafted resolution on protection of civilians in armed conflict ([Security Council, 2015c](#)). Debate on foreign terrorist fighters resulted in a presidential statement on intensified action against the threat of foreign terrorist fighters ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021](#)).

Lithuania also supported the adoption of a resolution on protection of children in armed conflicts ([Security Council, 2014c](#)). It supported resolution 2226 dealing with abductions in armed conflicts and Lithuanian representative, Raimonda Murmokaitė, recalled many instances from recent history on the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and on the African continent in which there were problems with the topic ([Security Council, 2015d](#)). Lithuania supported and voted for resolution 2225 that condemned recruitment of children, supported existing monitoring mechanisms, and strengthened protection of women and children in armed conflicts; no nation voted against the resolution ([Security Council, 2015f](#)). Lithuania voted in favour of two resolutions which extended the UN presence and increased the UN forces and police in South Sudan in order to preserve a secure situation for civilians, the monitoring of human rights, and implementing the previously signed peace agreement ([United Nations, 2015](#)).

Lithuania, as a small power on the UNSC, managed to set rules for the international system by initiating resolutions and cooperating with other states to adopt them in international society. It promoted its priorities and security interests by strengthening the rule of law and improving security in conflicts that threatened its interests in the region, such as the conflict in Ukraine, and this showed its commitment in supporting the priorities of its allies.

## Estonia

Estonia supported and voted for resolution 2508, in which the [Security Council \(2020f\)](#) called for foreign interference in the Libyan conflict to stop and the existing arms embargo to be complied with as well as inviting all parties to implement a ceasefire. Estonia voted in favour of a resolution regarding the peace process in Afghanistan that clearly showed not only peace-building commitments but also demonstrated a strategy shift towards dialogue, rather than a military solution that was accepted by the international society ([Security Council, 2020g](#)). Estonia also voted in favour of resolution 2517, in which the [Security Council \(2020h\)](#) supported the presence of African Union and United Nations troops in Darfur in order to maintain peace. It also supported resolution 2525 on South



Sudan in which it was determined that the main objective of the UN and African Union forces was to protect civilians in the conflict ([Security Council, 2020i](#)). Estonia supported resolution 2531, through which the [Security Council \(2020k\)](#) supported the peace process in Mali and disarmament of non-state military groups as well as important constitutional reforms; the resolution also extended the UN peace operation in Mali.

Estonia supported resolution 2529 on the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, through which the [Security Council \(2020j\)](#) reaffirmed its support for the mechanism and accepted necessary improvements in its work. This was designed for building a system where international war criminals could be brought to trial effectively. Estonia abstained in the vote regarding the resolution on Iran that was drafted by the United States along with ten other states, and this prevented the resolution from being adopted. Estonia voted in line with its EU allies. The resolution neglected the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that was the best tool for the EU to contain the nuclear non-proliferation regime in Iran ([Security Council, 2020c](#)). Estonia voted in favour of resolution regarding rehabilitation of terrorists and their family members, while some great powers were against it. This instance shows that a small power, such as Estonia, can sometimes support resolutions together with other smaller powers and their allies in the [Security Council \(2020d\)](#).

## Priorities and topics of national interest

During the candidacy campaign, every country places its aims and priorities at the UNSC. The aim of the procedure is not only to get elected but also to offer expertise and common value for international security. Small powers can usually be useful with expertise in a specific field or in mediation. Small powers rarely can put forward their national interests, although it can be done in cooperation with other powers and by offering solutions to common security problems.

### Lithuania

In 2014, Lithuania focused on the rule of law and protection of civilians and also strengthened cooperation between the UN and the EU. Lithuania supported UN work on protection of women and children in armed conflicts and condemned armed groups using children as soldiers in conflicts, and using schools as cover. It raised a topic regarding armed groups not following international law in armed conflicts ([Security Council, 2014f](#)).

The situation in Ukraine was also included on the agenda and Lithuania initiated eight meetings on this topic. Lithuania often drew attention to the human rights situation in Russian-annexed Crimea and it initiated a document that announced that the EU is a strategic partner of the UN which strengthened cooperation between international organisations in security and humanitarian and crisis management ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021](#)). During its term, Lithuania devoted much time to conflict prevention and participated in briefings devoted to crises in Ukraine. It called on international treaties and principles to be respected and referred to the Helsinki Final Act, the Budapest Memorandum, and the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Russia and Ukraine ([Security Council, 2014b](#)). Lithuania condemned Russia's veto on the draft resolution defining the occupation of Crimea, and it was important for Lithuania's security interests to defend Ukraine at the [Security Council's \(2014d\)](#) meetings. Lithuania's representative at the UNSC, Raimonda Murmokaitė, condemned Russia

for using its own observers to justify false elections in Crimea. Lithuania pointed out that Russia had neglected norms of the Geneva statement, the Berlin Joint Declaration, the Minsk Protocol and the Minsk Memorandum. Murmokaitė claimed that Russia was undermining the foundations of the UN itself ([Security Council, 2014g](#)). Interests of survival and preservation of the status quo were the basic motivation for taking a stand against Russia. Lithuania had great power allies in the Council that sided with Ukraine; thus, it was easier for Lithuania to take this stand.

[Reire \(2021\)](#) admits that Lithuania was focused on general topics in the UN, rather than bringing new topics to the table and explains that this supports the argument of vulnerability to power asymmetry. It can be agreed that Lithuania contributed to international stability, but its sticking to general topics rather derives from the fact that it understands its limitations in the UN and not because it cannot bring anything new to the table.

It seems that Lithuania had not defined its motivation for joining the UNSC, as it got the non-permanent seat because its competitor at the elections, Georgia, withdrew its candidacy just before the election. While it didn't get the seat by accident, it might have been much harder to get elected. From the perspective of international society, its motivation to play a role on the Council was based on improving global security and cooperation between the UN and the EU, which benefitted Lithuania as an EU member. From the perspective of the international system, it maximised its power against Russia by highlighting the conflict in Ukraine and did not let the focus of other great powers slip away. Playing a role on the UNSC is an opportunity for a small country like Lithuania to improve its survivability in the international system.

## Estonia

The main objective of Estonia at the Security Council was “to reinforce the security of Estonia and other countries of the world” ([Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023](#)). Its main priorities were the rule of international law, human rights, conflict prevention, ensuring cyber security, climate change, and international security as well as improving the methods of the UNSC.

Regarding international law, Estonia as a small power is interested in maintaining the rules-based international order and believes that it is important to stick to the principle of the equality of states and maintain the UN Charter and its principles, and, most importantly, prohibit the use of force by states against each other ([Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023](#)).

Estonia supports the position of international law in Ukraine and regards the annexation of Crimea as illegal. It believes that it is important to keep the Security Council focused on Ukraine and for Ukraine's territorial integrity to be guaranteed ([Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023](#)). Estonia criticised Russia over disregarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and also condemned the annexation of Crimea and the situation in the Donbas. It pointed out that Russia had violated UN Charter, paragraph 4 of article 2, and urged Russia to comply with international law in that particular conflict ([Security Council, 2020e](#)).

One of its priorities was climate issues and the environment and Estonia's permanent representative to the UN, Sven Jürgenson, participated in the Arria Formula meeting regarding climate and security risks. He acknowledged the security risks of climate change that pose threats to small island states and their existence ([Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, 2020a](#)).

Estonia took part in the UNSC high-level open debate on climate and security, and Estonia's minister of the environment, H.E Rene Kokk, suggested minimising climate change-related security risks by appointing a special representative for climate and security that would improve coordination at the UN on these questions. It also suggested investing in green and sustainable technologies that are important for a stable and peaceful security environment ([Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, 2020d](#)).

In a UNSC debate on security and environmental degradation, Estonia highlighted the link between climate change and peace. There are states that cannot cope with climate change-related security risks, especially the Sahel region in Africa. In fact, climate change in those areas threatens the economic activities of local populations that are affected by food insecurities. Estonia's mission emphasised that climate change security risks are not just local but a cross-border problem, and a solution should be found at multilateral and international level ([Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, 2020c](#)).

In the Council's Arria Formula meeting regarding UN working methods, Estonia expressed an opinion that the UNSC has not been effective enough as a mediator in military conflicts around the world. According to the UN Charter, various methods, including mediation, can be used; however, there are conflicts where mediation is not possible because some great powers of the UNSC do not support conflict resolution. Estonia recognised the importance of regional organisations in mediating conflicts and called for the UN to step in as a mediator wherever possible. Estonia expressed concerns about the limits of the UNSC's mediation capabilities, but it welcomed the Council's sanction policy, which has been an effective tool ([Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, 2020b](#)). It also thinks that the UNSC should reflect the present balance of power and the presence of small powers should be made more efficient. Their contribution to peace and security should be made effective and cooperation between the UN General Assembly and UNSC be improved. Information should be exchanged between the Human Rights Council and the UNSC. Estonia supported transparency in the veto procedure. As an Estonian's Ministry of Foreign Affairs puts it, "we support blocking or limiting veto rights on items that concern genocide or other crimes against humanity" ([Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023](#)).

During its presidency in 2021, Estonia prioritised emerging security threats, conflict prevention, the situation in Afghanistan, and regional security. It organised a discussion on cooperation between regional organisations and on the situation in Afghanistan, the protection of children in armed conflicts, and cyber security ([Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, 2021b](#)).

Successful small powers use coalition building and conflict resolution opportunities. Estonia turned to conflict resolution together with Norway ([Haugevik \*et al.\*, 2021](#)). Estonia's and even Lithuania's ability to mediate conflicts on their own is limited. In order to gain a reputation for mediating conflicts, time and more than one term at the Security Council is required. Norway may seem more neutral than the Baltic states, but it does not mean that they cannot succeed in mediation in the future.

There have been differences in approach. Estonia showed itself to be a newcomer and did not regard the Security Council as a top priority for its security. Meanwhile, Norway has traditionally relied on the UN and its strengthening ([Haugevik \*et al.\*, 2021](#)). As far as this research can draw conclusions, NATO and the EU are always a priority for the Baltic states. It is too early to claim that Norway could rely more on the UN than NATO as more research into Norway's foreign policy is necessary.

The main motivation for Estonia to be at the Council was to reinforce its security and to prioritise global topics that are priorities for other nations. From the perspective of the English School and, especially, the international society concept, Estonia was improving common laws and norms. It tried to be a norm setter and improve its survivability through international organisation and cooperation. Its motivation cannot be explained fully by the concept of international system, because realism cannot see any cooperation. However, this concept acknowledges that this UNSC membership was a short-lived cooperation that cannot fully resolve every global conflict, but may maximise a small nation's power and weight, which is the ultimate goal. Estonia tried to use the UNSC to highlight conflicts in Ukraine, Belarus, and Afghanistan, the solving of two of these would improve Estonia's security in the region.

## Latvia's perspective on membership of the United Nations Security Council

Latvia has not been a member of the UNSC but is planning to be a candidate in 2025 elections. After the election, Latvia could become a non-permanent member of the UNSC. The active campaign stage for Latvia started in 2023 but its candidacy process began in 2011, when its cabinet of ministers decided to pursue candidacy. It has also been a long-term aim of Latvia's policy and appears in the National Development Plan for 2027 (PKC Latvia, 2020).

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, several benefits are discovered for Latvia's membership of the Council. Firstly, Latvia's presence on the UNSC would allow it to strengthen multilateral diplomacy and help create a safe international environment for small powers. Secondly, Latvia could highlight security topics that are important for the Baltic region and Eastern Europe as Latvia's membership would benefit regional security. Thirdly, candidacy itself strengthens the popularity of the state at international level as it is possible to make contacts and improve relations with countries that are not on regular contact lists. Latvia could show the world that it is a worthy member that supports democracy, human rights, and peaceful conflict resolution. Fourthly, Latvia defends the interests of Nordic and Baltic states on the UNSC, demonstrating to its partners that it can represent the interests of its region. In 2020, the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia \(2021\)](#) created a working group for Latvia's candidacy, which consists of members from different institutions.

Recent research conducted by [Bukovskis \(2020\)](#) looks at how Latvia would benefit from being on the UNSC and taking part in decision-making. This would make Latvia visible and recognisable in the world and strengthen the statehood of Latvia at international level. For a small power to gain influence at the UNSC and to highlight its place in the international system, it needs knowledge, leading skills, initiative, coalition, and image-building skills. Latvia has an opportunity to continue to strengthen its partners policy in NATO and the EU using the UN as an additional resource, and improving its image would benefit its economic interests. This would allow Latvia to offer its products and advertise itself as trustful trade partner, as from a diplomatic perspective, membership of the UNSC would provide Latvia a new foreign policy challenge and diplomatic experience by working in such a high-level security format ([Bukovskis, 2020](#)).

Bukovskis (2020) admits that the experience of other states at the UNSC shows that they do not define their interests because specific state interests do not have to be defined and

states usually emphasise common values and global interests. He adds that small powers use international prestige as a norm setter, although international prestige has different functions. It is good for Latvia's security, because if Latvia gains an international reputation and sympathies in other regions, it is more likely that powers in those regions would understand Latvia's security situation in a better manner. From his perspective, it is good to improve your reputation and recognisability through the UN.

Oļegs Ilģis, Head of the international organisations division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, said in an interview that if elected, the priorities of Latvia would be based on its existing international profile and would be adapted to global events and security challenges in the specific period when Latvia becomes a member of the UNSC. However, Ilģis also asserted that the main priority of Latvia's membership to the Council would be strengthening the rules-based international order, global security and the rule of law. At the same time, Latvia would focus on regional issues that are affected by the ongoing brutal aggression of sovereign UN member state Ukraine by the Russian Federation. In order to achieve these aims, Latvia would take part in the working of the UNSC committees and would propose its agenda during presidency of the Council. According to the provisional rules of the UNSC, each member state can hold Council presidency for 1 month on a rotation basis. Latvia might also use Arria Formula meetings to maintain a focus on important topics. Oļegs Ilģis states that Latvia is closely communicating with its regional and international partners in order to prepare its campaign and membership for the UNSC. The Estonian experience shows that Latvia has to make closer contacts with countries and faraway regions, and to achieve this, Latvia participates in summits of global and regional organisations in order to engage with countries that are more distantly located. Oļegs Ilģis added that Latvia does not distinguish between small powers and great powers, because according to the UN Charter, all states are considered equal and, therefore, Latvia would cooperate with all countries regardless of their size.

Oļegs Ilģis pointed out that the main gains from Latvia's candidacy and membership of the UNSC are (1) raising the profile of Latvia at both regional and global levels, (2) strengthening diplomatic relations with distant regions and countries, and (3) attempting to influence global processes and gain trust from the international community.

The international environment has changed since the creation of the UNSC and the UN itself. However, Oļegs Ilģis suggests that the UN is still the best mechanism for building and maintaining global peace and security. In order to face the challenges of the 21st century, meaningful reforms are needed and, in Latvia's view, the number of UNSC member states should be increased in both permanent and non-permanent categories. Latvia strongly believes that veto rights should not be used when topics of genocide, mass atrocities, and war crimes are discussed at the UNSC (Interview with Oļegs Ilģis, Head of International Organisations Division of the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2021](#)).

Latvia's motivation to play a role at the UNSC is mostly derived from the concept of international system as it thrives for prestige and economic power and political influence. Its campaign is more about status-building in faraway regions and improving economic relations as well as gaining diplomatic experience for its diplomats. From the perspective of the concept of international society, its aim is to cooperate with other powers to improve its security by being on the security decision-making body. However, its campaign offers less practical and new topics if we compare it with Estonia and Lithuania. Added value to global security may come in relation to the conflict in Ukraine; however, this conflict might be over when Latvia takes its seat.

According to Bukovskis (2020), international prestige is valuable for Latvia's economic and political influence, although the UNSC is an institution where added value is brought, not taken. Therefore, Latvia's diplomats have to think more about what to offer than what to take from being on the UNSC and its campaign needs to be more creative and show more initiative. It could be agreed that it needs to work on its image, not just to gain prestige but rather to give added value to global issues.

## Conclusions

Lithuania and Estonia proved that small powers can successfully take the presidency and set the agenda at the UNSC. Estonia was more successful at setting agenda and highlighted human rights, cyber security, and environment security issues and encouraged the UNSC to make improvement. It also aimed to improve the transparency of the Council's work. Estonia also brought about improvement of UN working methods and possible UNSC reform, and this was very beneficial not only for all small powers on the Council but also for the UN as an organisation.

Lithuania also tried to concentrate on niche topics, such as protection of journalists, trade in small arms, and weaker groups in conflicts, such as women, children, journalists, and civilians. Lithuania was more successful at working on resolutions and drafted two resolutions regarding the protection of civilians and small arms. It was less niche-orientated but showed success in other areas.

Both countries cooperated with other powers, for instance, in the EU format and with their great power allies, but they did not build coalitions by themselves. Both lacked political weight in coalition building and relied not only on their great power allies but also cooperated with EU members and aligned with EU position. Estonia inherited the Afghanistan issue together with Norway. There was also no sign of close cooperation on the FOSS format, and further research on this issue is necessary. Another way to influence UNSC is to organise side events and both countries did this, although side events were not a priority strategy. Estonia was more successful at coming up with new topics, such as cyber security, that previously were not the centre of attention at the UNSC. Estonia was more devoted to building up its state image and tried to present itself as a norm setter in new areas. It created an image of being an expert in digitalisation and other previously mentioned topics. Lithuania did not have any past image and it tried to adapt its strategy to the present international challenges.

Legal and procedural obstacles were no exception for Estonia and Lithuania. Non-permanent members' ability to influence the agenda is limited by the presidency lasting for only 1 month per year and its 2-year term overall; thus, they have to choose their priorities carefully. They also have limited administrative capacity and have to gain knowledge on topics that have not been on their national agenda. However, Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaida invested her time and political weight in Estonia's campaign. Regarding sanctions policy and UN missions, both countries had to cooperate with other powers.

Both countries lacked reputation to mediate in conflicts. Small powers can be mediators, but initiative and a certain amount of neutrality is required. Estonia and Lithuania are not perceived as neutral like Ireland or Switzerland; thus, they did not show any mediation initiatives. It would be correct to say that despite legal and procedural aspects, both countries successfully used their opportunities on the Council, although they did not have previous experience and the necessary reputation of some other Nordic states. The Baltic

states did not try to increase UN mission personnel as other Nordic states did but they in some way strengthened the multilateral international order, international norms and laws, and performed better than the average small power; however, due to their limited reputation before getting a permanent seat, they did not reach the level of some Nordic states and other more neutral states in the international system. Further research is necessary on how Estonia and Lithuania cooperated in different formats, for instance, the FOSS, EU, and Nordic formats. Further research is necessary into their behind-the-scenes negotiations with different coalitions.

Both countries highlighted the security situation in Ukraine as a priority or put it on their agendas because Russian support for the Donbass separatists and actions to intervene militarily in Ukraine threatened international norms and laws. Russian intervention in Ukraine threatened not only the security of Eastern Europe but also challenged the existing security architecture for the Baltic states. The conflict attracted the attention of NATO and the EU, which made them focus on reducing the consequences for their members, and NATO put an Enhanced Forward presence battle group in the Baltic states and the EU put sanctions on Russia.

The Baltic states did not work as mediators because they did not have a reputation of being neutral powers. They lacked political influence to build new coalitions, thus they relied on existing ones, for example, Finland, Sweden, and Norway are known to be mediators and contributors to UN missions, but the Baltic states lacked this initiative. The performance of the Baltic states at the Council was considered good; however, growth is still necessary if we compare their experience with Nordic states.

According to research conducted by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, small powers could use coalition building, organising special events, and taking the penholder role to successfully influence the Security Council. Agenda setting and work on resolutions are important, but there are other factors that could benefit small powers ([Haugevik \*et al.\*, 2021](#)).

From the perspective of the English School's concept of international society, Estonia's motivation was creating new norms by offering new topics for global security in order to strengthen its security in the international system. Lithuania's and Latvia's motivation is based more on power maximisation because they have less to offer for the agenda, but Lithuania still managed to draft resolutions and take practical steps to improve international law.

The first hypothesis, "The Baltic states used niche diplomacy in order to set agenda rather than make new resolutions," was partially confirmed. Estonia invested a lot to initiate new topics such as environment security and cyber security as small powers naturally have little options to make new resolutions. However, Lithuania showed that with good cooperation with other middle and large powers, there is possibility to draft resolutions and get positive outcome at the Council by adopting them.

The second hypothesis, "Baltic states cooperated with other small powers more than they cooperated with large powers in order to set the agenda and achieve their national interests," was not confirmed. In order to draft resolutions, small powers are by procedural means forced to cooperate with great powers that have veto rights. There were no indications that the Baltic states were active in the FOSS format or cooperated with other small powers and only in their campaign did they have to increase their contacts with small powers from other regions of the world.

The third hypothesis, “Latvia’s candidacy will concentrate on image building as the norm setter rather than be prestige seeking at international level,” was not confirmed. At the present stage, Latvia’s candidacy offers nothing new for the agenda and emphasises diplomatic gains for the diplomatic corps and country’s prestige.

The fourth hypothesis, “The Baltics states’ motives for playing a role on the Council is based on international society (common values and norms) more than on international system,” (power maximisation) was directly derived from the English School theory. This hypothesis was partially confirmed because the Baltic states not only aim for mutual gains, such as setting new norms and solving international conflicts, but also tried to maximise their benefit and power from participation on the Council. On the one hand, the Baltic states are interested in strengthening international security by setting new rules, but on the other hand, they are aware that this cooperation may be limited in time and thus try to maximise their gains.

Latvia’s main goals in their campaign for the UNSC would be to strengthen multilateralism and peaceful conflict resolution to secure the rules-based international environment. However, the UN is not the same organisation as it was at Latvia regaining its independence. While Latvia’s candidacy would definitely provide experience in diplomacy, its presence at the UNSC in the present international environment is overestimated from the perspective of the country’s security. Latvia’s security interests would not depend so much on the UNSC but more on its allies in NATO and the EU, which should remain the main priority for this country.

Latvia’s candidacy would definitely strengthen cooperation with remote regions, raise prestige, and show it as a worthy partner in trade relations. However, its campaign lacks originality and innovations. Estonia concentrated on environment security and cyber security. Lithuania was less niche-orientated but showed success in drafting a resolution on the protection of civilians in military conflict and resolution regarding the control of small arms. There is no sign that Latvia would be using niche diplomacy. It also lacks a sense of itself regionally and as a small power, and its identity is related to Northern and Eastern Europe and the EU, but not as a small power in the global international system because it aligns itself with some great powers.

While some non-permanent member seats were added during the Cold War era, the UNSC still does not reflect the reality of the 21st century. Its reform, if executed, should encourage countries to obey the system, not to resist it, and the reform should mean that the global governance regains its power to resolve conflicts. Small powers should also advocate UNSC reform to reduce structural obstacles, such as limited membership and the veto right for great powers being too extensive. The reform should also improve UNSC working methods. The UNSC may become less appealing for small powers if the UN itself does not change and is not be able to resolve conflicts in the future.

Research conducted by [Reire \(2021\)](#) similarly concludes that agenda setting is a key tool for small powers to influence the Security Council. She also emphasises setting clear priorities and national interests for small powers to be successful at the UN. However, her research concludes that there are constraints for small powers that can be only minimised in a favourable international environment. Her research does not come to any conclusions on the international environment, but the view is rather optimistic.

While the author of this research takes a similar view, it also explains why the international environment cannot always be favourable for small powers. The English School theory leads us to international society in which small powers can have some influence, but it is



limited to the international system in which there would always be power differences and competition.

Research accomplished by [Bukovskis \(2020\)](#) concludes that lobby and communication strategies should go hand in hand. That is a good strategy, although his focus is more on what Latvia can gain from the Security Council. The Estonian example shows that Estonia gained recognition by giving added value to the Council and global issues. From the theoretical perspective of this research, Latvia should think about how it could improve international society in order to reduce risks created by power differences in the international system.

[Chowdhury \(2012\)](#) is more pessimistic regarding small powers. He argues that small powers have more constraints than great powers and are constrained by the size of their missions. In this research, no indications were noticed that the size of the Baltic states diplomatic missions were considered an obstacle. It can be agreed with this author that small powers have smaller diplomatic missions than large powers; however, it is more a matter of quality not quantity. Diplomats from small powers have to be more qualified, and usually the staff of the foreign ministry helps with the coordination.

[Chowdhury \(2012\)](#) argues that Latvia could not act without the EU support at international level. While it is true that the EU is a top cooperation format at the UN too, Latvia also cooperates with Nordic states and its allies from NATO countries, for example, the United States.

The research conducted by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and Estonian Foreign Policy Institute suggests that for small powers, coalition building, using its presidency, organising special events, and assuming the penholder role are the key tools for influencing the Security Council ([Haugevik et al., 2021](#)). However, for the Baltic example, the present research concludes that agenda setting, work on resolutions, and achieving national interests are key for successful Security Council membership. Not all small powers can build coalitions and are accepted to assume the penholder role for a specific file, while agenda setting is available for everyone during their presidency.

[Kaufmann and Mavris \(2022\)](#) are optimistic regarding small powers at the Security Council and establish that there have been many successful examples. Small powers created the humanitarian corridor in Syria despite the opposition of China and Russia. However, according to this research and English School theory, international society norms work until interests of great powers are met. The Baltic states did not manage to be mediators in important conflicts and while they tried to emphasise the conflicts in Ukraine, Belarus, and Afghanistan, the outcomes of these cases are more dependent on the forces of the international system, rather than international society rules.

[Keohane \(2006, pp. 55–61\)](#) argues that the motivation of small powers to be in international organisations is based on the fact that international organisations restrain great powers and offer equality and potential security. This finding supports some of the conclusions of this research that small powers tend to increase their security by creating new norms and strengthening the equality of states in the international system. Keohane goes deeper by saying that international organisations restrain great powers. Other authors do not conclude that small powers can maximise power to strengthen the international system.

There are tendencies for authors in the field to be optimistic regarding the small powers in the UN and international relations. Most research in the field is optimistic due to its liberal approaches. Small power research can be achieved if we find something useful in it.

The perspective of English School offers a more balanced overall look at small powers. While the theory sees small power influence through international society, the main obstacle is the international system and its power politics, and not so much the legal constraints written in UN procedures. The UN has only institutionalised power politics. As this research shows, small powers can be successful norm setters and influence the global agenda, but it is international organisations that are unable and constrained to solve global conflicts.

Other authors found niches where small powers can be successful, similar to the present research; however, they rarely emphasised cooperation between small powers, and cooperation between small, middle, and great powers at the Security Council. This is a possible direction for further research in the field. Other authors in the field do not use specific theories to explain small power motivation and often do not dive deep into this particular subject, and they often see small powers as more neutral but ignore the fact that they are always linked to some other groups and interests.

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