# Ireland's Small State Diplomacy

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***How has a small state like Ireland effectively contributed to the EU and global diplomacy in an increasingly multi-polar world?***

*Introduction*

In international relations, small states are typically defined not solely by their physical size or population, but by their relative capacity to influence international outcomes compared to larger powers. A "small state", according to the United Nations, is generally considered to be a sovereign country with a population of under 10 million people, often facing unique vulnerabilities and engaging actively in multilateral diplomacy to protect its interests. (Súilleabháin, 2014). For this report, the small state definition must be expanded to include how small states can exert influence through

strategic engagement in multilateral institutions, normative leadership, and diplomatic specialisation (Katzenstein, 1985; Thorhallsson, 2012).

Given the return of great power competition and rising multipolarity, **the role of small states deserves renewed attention.** Despite its modest demographic and military size, Ireland has demonstrated a consistent commitment to multilateralism, international law, and human rights, while maintaining an active diplomatic presence both within the European Union (EU) and globally. Scholars such as Katzenstein (1985) and Thorhallsson (2012) identify three main strategies by which small states can be influential. Firstly, strategic engagement in multilateral institutions by embedding themselves in rule-based global and regional institutions to gain influence through norms and processes rather than raw power. Secondly, a normative leadership role by taking principled stances on human rights, international law, and multilateral cooperation can amplify moral authority. Finally, a diplomatic specialisation by investing in diplomacy and foreign policy expertise, developing niche capacities. This is especially evident during the Brexit negotiations from 2016 to 2019, which will highlight the highly effective contribution of Ireland towards a suitable solution for both its EU partners and the United Kingdom.

Ireland joined the European Communities in 1973 and remains one of the EU's five 'neutral states', that is, it is not a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (European Commission). Academic scholarship on small state behaviour in international institutions, particularly the work of Peter Katzenstein (1985), posits that **small states can maximise their influence by embedding themselves in rule-based international structures.** Ireland has done precisely this within the EU, leveraging its status as a diplomatically active and normatively consistent small state to exert disproportionate influence as this report intends to highlight. A few recent examples of Ireland's contribution to EU policy and global diplomacy are its leadership during its presidency of the Council of the EU in 2013, where it played a pivotal role in advancing the EU's trade agenda, notably concluding a trade agreement with Singapore. Ireland also oversaw negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), demonstrating its capacity to broker consensus among larger and more divergent member states. Additionally, Ireland's term on the United Nations Security Council (2021–2022) exemplified its global diplomatic reach. During this tenure, Ireland co-chaired the negotiations on the Syrian humanitarian resolution and advocated strongly for the protection of civilians in conflict zones, illustrating how EU membership can amplify the global voice of a small state through coherence between national and Union-level foreign policy. In November 2022, Ireland's Tánaiste led a trade mission to Singapore, promoting Ireland's fintech and health-tech sectors. Over 100 Enterprise Ireland-supported companies export to Singapore; across ASEAN, this rises to 300 (Enterprise Ireland, 2023). This mission shows how Ireland uses its diplomatic structure to enable non-EU market access. These examples

show how Ireland uses institutional embedding (in EU trade policy), normative consistency such as upholding rules and standards in trade agreements, and diplomatic specialisation through targeted trade missions to exert influence far beyond what its size might suggest.

However, there have been some limitations to small state diplomacy, specifically during times of crises. This is because small states tend not to possess the material capabilities or bargaining power that realists would argue is central to the exertion of influence in the international system. Professor Ben Tonra illustrate this using the Euro-Zone crisis from 2008-2014. Ireland, when confronted with a major economic contraction, was forced to reimagine its diplomatic priorities. Tonra analyses to what extent EU foreign policy coordination through the European External Action Service and the Lisbon Treaty played a role in Ireland's diplomacy during the crisis (Tonra, 2015,). This crisis demonstrated that EU-level coordination was slow, resulting in a more national strategy for Ireland to navigate the crisis. Ireland acted via its bilateral relations or directly with multilateral institutions rather than a coordinated EU policy approach. **Ireland's experience confirms that, during high-stakes moments, small states must retain the capacity for independent diplomatic initiative**. Therefore, for small states, national capacity remains essential and diplomatic strategy must be dual level. For Ireland, and small states more broadly, this dual strategy remains essential for navigating an increasingly complex and multipolar international system.

In the final section of this argument, I build the case for Ireland's autonomous role against the backdrop of the Brexit referendum in 2016 and its high-level coordination with the EU in the negotiation process. This case study presents a strong argument that refutes the claim that there are limits to small state diplomacy during crises.

*2. Ireland as a Small State Success Story in the EU*

The decision for Britain to leave the European Union in 2016 triggered a diplomatic, economic and arguably social crisis for Ireland, their nearest neighbour. **The argument that follows is a comparison with the Euro-Zone crisis and illustrates Ireland's strategic use of its small state capacity to protect its interests.** Given this, it provides a crucial case study in the strength, influence and importance of small states in the EU. Ireland pursued a robust, highly effective policy to ensure that Brexit would not result in Irish isolationism at the EU level. It is crucial to note that Ireland pursued a dual strategy of '**seeking shelter'** and **'hedging'** (Murphy, 2022, p593). The latter involved the 'development and prioritisation' of Irish relations with Germany and France (Murphy, 2022, p594). However, it was also helpful that Ireland's case aligned with what the EU wished to demonstrate to the UK: there was a difference between non-membership. As such, the solidarity between Ireland and the EU on this issue sent a very powerful message to other small states in the EU: membership matters no matter your size or material capabilities. The concerns of the Irish border were adopted

by the EU 26 as a 'European issue', solidifying the collective response to this unprecedented occurrence (Laffan, 2019, p13). This was followed by rhetoric on a European and national level within Ireland. This can be summarised by the President of the EU Council, **Donald Tusk comments in relation to the hard border issue: "Let me say very clearly: If the UK offer is unacceptable for Ireland, it will also be unacceptable for the EU"** (Tusk, 2017).

Furthermore, the rhetoric from Irish politicians has also followed this trend of exercising strength during this crisis. The Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney, characterised **Ireland as a rule-maker rather than a rule-taker in Brussels.** Given this, Ireland strengthened its diplomatic agenda and presence within the EU framework regardless of its 'small state capacity'. Additionally, the Irish Permanent Representation to the EU is the country's largest overseas mission (O'Donoghue, 2025). As such, Ireland seeks to influence predominantly through diplomatic efforts to make up for its limited material capabilities.

The advent of the Brexit referendum in 2016 signalled Ireland's reliance on the EU for protecting its economic, security and societal interests (Murphy, 2023). The "seeking shelter" narrative discussed by Wivel and Thorallsson in the 'face of a multi-dimensional threat' can be applied to Ireland in this situation (Murphy, 2023, p. 594). **Ireland's response to Brexit demonstrated its commitment and loyalty to the EU in a resolute recognition that Ireland's future lay within the EU**. This case study offers a unique example of how Ireland mobilised its negotiating leverage in Brussels in what was described as an 'unparalleled diplomatic effort' from the Irish government (O'Brennan, 2019, p. 5). Murphy argues that Brexit 'effectively persuaded the Irish government that small states can influence EU policies and decisions' (Murphy, 2023, p. 599). This was largely due to the readiness and multi-pronged approach by the Irish government to place its interests at the centre of the issue from the very beginning. This was displayed by the reactive measures by the Irish government, as one day after the referendum on June 24th, 2016, they published **'An Initial Brexit contingency framework'**. This document included a list of key actions, an immediate priority for Ireland, which included the reassurance to other EU member states that 'there is no ambiguity in relation to Ireland's status and ongoing commitment as a Member of the EU' (Contingency Action Plan Update, 2019, p. 3) through extensive communication measures in Ireland's embassies across Europe.

Ireland's actions during the Brexit crisis, in comparison to the Euro-Zone crisis, build on Tonra's description of the Europeanisation of Irish foreign policy (Tonra, 2015). He defines it as a transformation in the way in which national foreign policies are constructed; professional roles are defined and pursued, and in the consequent internalisation of norms and expectations arising from a complex system of collective European policy making (Tonra, 2000). Given this, it helps us to understand how a common

European framework was adopted in response to the Brexit crisis with Ireland. Building on the effects of the financial crisis, Ireland was adopting a more muscular national economic policy in Europe, which required a deeper understanding of Irish foreign policy. Therefore, **'The Global Island: Ireland's Foreign Policy for a Changing World'** by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2015, was published alongside the expansion of the diplomatic ecosystem to deal with the threat of Brexit by exerting Irish interests across the EU, as a committed member state. Murphy argues that Ireland, in the aftermath of Brexit, had to reposition itself as a 'good European' to effectively manage the fallout from Brexit (Murphy, 2023, p. 3). To do this, **Ireland strengthened its position through the 'Global Ireland' strategy**, launched in 2018. It aimed at deepening Ireland's diplomatic, trade and cultural presence on the European and international stage. This has warranted increasing economic success for Ireland within the EU. In 2024, they currently rank second for GDP per capita, with a 111% above the EU average (Eurostat, June 2025 Data). Notably, Luxembourg recorded the highest level of GDP among other small states, indicating that this is a positive trend of its capacity to exceed economic expectations.

*3. Ireland's Future Role*

Ireland is set to take the Presidency of the Council of the EU in July 2026 for the eighth time. This role will allow Ireland to chair over 170 Council preparatory bodies and committees, host over 230 Presidency events, and influence agenda formation. It comes at a time when the geopolitical context is constantly changing, and the European role has been called into question in the global role. **This is an opportunity for Ireland, as a small state, to utilise its soft power levers and diplomacy to bolster the EU in international affairs.** The role of the presidency brings politicians and civil servants from EU member states into the heart of the Union's politics, allowing them to shape policy throughout the six-month tenure. Interestingly, there is no distinction made between larger and smaller state presidencies. However, the capacity of small states has been called into question, emphasising the lack of administrative resources and diplomatic reach to run the presidency properly, but there is no evidence to support this claim (Laffan, 1997). The opportunity to have a rotating presidency every six months validates the contribution that small states make within the EU and their effectiveness.

In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and negotiations that Ireland has managed to deal with this historic change relatively well. **Importantly, Northern Ireland voted by 56 per cent to Remain in the EU** (Directorate General for Internal Policies, 2017, p. 9). The EU played a key role in resolving the Irish border issue through the Northern Ireland Protocol. This allowed for Northern Ireland, which is on the island of Ireland, to remain in the EU Single Market and Customs Union, avoiding the return to the hard border in Ireland. This report could be further strengthened by a deep analysis of the implications of Brexit on the Good Friday Agreement of 1998

to emphasise that when Irish interests were directly threatened, its government strongly responded both at a national level and with its EU partners.

*4. Conclusion*

In conclusion, Ireland has been a committed member-state throughout its 50-year membership. Going forward, the Irish presidency of the EU Council in 2026 will be a critical test of how far small states can shape EU policy agendas. Future research should assess the outcomes of this presidency, especially examining whether Ireland can leverage it to advance both its national goals and the broader EU commitment to multilateralism and values.

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