

Do Small States Wage Proxy Wars?: A Provocative Assessment of Lithuania's Military Aid to Ukraine

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Abstract

Proxy wars are an increasingly common feature of great power competition in the 21st century. In this context, the role of the small states has often been overlooked by both IR scholars and the general public. Ever since the days of the Cold War small states have often been chosen as battlegrounds for proxy wars and have regularly acted as proxies for the superpowers; however, under certain conditions they may also be capable of conducting proxy warfare themselves. Defining these conditions is exactly what this paper is set to do. After reviewing the literature on proxy wars and small state behaviour, it establishes a simple working hypothesis on *when* and *how* a small state can reasonably be expected to engage in proxy activities abroad. Whereas great powers can potentially bear the cost of 'hiring' and controlling an otherwise disinterested proxy (or even create one from scratch), it would be safe to assume that a small state will only get involved in a conflict beyond its own territory (directly or indirectly) *when* there is a conflict party with perfectly aligned interests already in fight. It will most likely provide only limited assistance to that party (as by definition small states have limited resources) which in turn will limit their say in how those resources are to be used. The alignment of interests facilitates the development of a principal-proxy relationship between a small state and its aid recipient, but at the same time the limited nature of that aid hinders this development. This hypothesis is 'tested' against the case of Lithuania's military aid to Ukraine which has been continuously flowing since 2015.

Since the start of the conflict in the Donbas region in 2014, Ukraine has experienced proxy interventions from many external actors that provided resources to both conflict parties, the post-Maidan government in Kiev and the Donbas separatists. One of the smallest states which was taking sides and actively trying to affect the course of this conflict was and is Lithuania; its support for the Ukrainian government has only grown after the outbreak of a full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. Drawing on documentary sources and semi-structured interviews with the security and defence policy-makers in Vilnius this paper aims to explain why Lithuania is risking retaliation and interfering in the Russo-Ukrainian war from backseat. The empirical evidence points to an almost perfect alignment of interests between the current governments in Kiev and Vilnius in that they both see Russia as their long-term 'enemy' which makes Ukraine a surprisingly suitable proxy for Lithuania to exploit. Even though this paper is limited to a case study of a single small state's policy-making, it opens up new avenues for future research which would involve cases beyond the post-Soviet region.