

# **Distinctive Features of a City-State and a Microstate as Types of Small Polities**

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## **Abstract**

The article deals with various approaches towards special types of small polities on the international arena - microstates and city-states - highlighting their characteristics which constitute a departure from a traditional view on a territorial nation-state. It analyses parameters of modern microstates in an attempt to count how many of them are present nowadays and presents a classification of city-states in relation to sovereignty, interests and autonomy. Finally the article considers problematic areas of operations for both a microstate and a city-state which are crucially important for their survival.

**Keywords:** *city-state, microstate, small polity, territorial state*

Historically, people have been trying to find the best form of political and social accommodation while taking into account the basic survival necessities, need for proper communication and pressure from external factors including but not limited to the environment and the "others". This evolution could be seen in the subsequent change of the most dominant polity type present on the world stage - from tribes and chiefdoms through city-states, nomadic states and empires (both Medieval and Modern) to the modern nation-state which is widely considered to be one of the most stable and efficient form of polity<sup>1</sup>.

Modern states come in all shapes and sizes yet virtually all of them are considered to belong to the territorial state basket. However, certain entities constitute a departure from the traditional view on states as some are represented by a tiny territory with the only city which are called **city-states**, while others are simply distinguished by much smaller demographic and physical parameters than typical states - colloquially referred to as **microstates**. Both are challenged with the issue of efficient operation as they possess scarce resources and are expected to find an adequate way of utilizing them in order to survive.

## **Key parameters of a microstate**

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama. (2011) The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution // Farrar Straus Giroux

Microstate is a sovereign state which has a very small population or very small land area, which in some cases does not exceed 0,0001% of the whole planet's surface. Yet, this is the most unanimous agreement on what constitutes a microstate as there is heated debate on what additional parameters could be worked out. Some scholars believe those could include the geopolitical niche<sup>2</sup> of the state as well as its capacity to influence economic flows and political processes in the world. Another issue is the question if those polities whose sovereignty is not acknowledged worldwide should be considered microstates at all. Moreover, here on the map we have Singapore, which is considered to be the world's fourth most important financial centre<sup>3</sup> whose territory is as large as 710 m<sup>2</sup> and the like of Bhutan, which is deemed to be one of the most underdeveloped and poorest regions in the world - though the situation has dramatically improved there recently<sup>4</sup> - with the territory of 38.000 km<sup>2</sup> - are they both microstates and if so, are they equal? It should be mentioned that both of these countries lack political resources and cannot single-handedly influence the world's agenda.

Here arises the question of strict parameters and numbers used to determine the "smallness" of a state. Traditionally all states whose territory is smaller than Luxemburg (2.586,4 km<sup>2</sup>) are considered microstates, with the total of 27 independent countries, the UN member-states. On the basis of stricter numbers, there are 69 countries whose territory is smaller than 50.000 km<sup>2</sup> with Slovakia being the biggest of them. The number of those states smaller than 1.000 km<sup>2</sup> is 23 (and here Singapore is the biggest of them). Finally, there are only 16 countries with a territory being smaller than 500 km<sup>2</sup> and this time it is Andorra which is the biggest.

The demographic parameter should also be taken into account. There are 41 countries with a population smaller than 1.000.000 people, 29 states with less than 500.000 people and only 13 countries where the total population is smaller than 100.000 people. Thus, judging by what parameters are chosen, there are from 30 to 16 microstates in the world.

### **Multifaceted term of a city-state**

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Keohane. (1969) Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics // Washington Press

<sup>3</sup> Financial Centres of the World: Singapore // ECD Conference - Mode of access: <http://www.ecdconference.org/singapore.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Poorest Countries in the World 2019 // Global Finance - Mode of access: <https://www.gfmag.com/global-data/economic-data/the-poorest-countries-in-the-world>

Speaking of Singapore, it also manifests what is called a **city-state**. The modern notion of the city-state is a polity which consists of a sovereign city-proper and a certain area outside which is governed by and dependent on it. City-states are indeed sovereign states and in this regard are different from what is called megalopolises or global cities which are only a part of a sovereign state. Nowadays, city-states are rather an exception with Singapore being the near perfect model and the likes of Andorra, Malta and Vatican-City having certain reservations.

Nowadays the term “city-state” has limited application as it is used primarily for several independent political entities consisting of the only city proper and surrounding territories and as it was argued before only Singapore can fully suffice these criteria. Some scholars argue that it is a special type of its economic modernisation (being an Asiatic dragon or a tiger) and a major role in trade and financial processes that incentivised deeper inquiry into the perks and benefits of this political organization<sup>5</sup>.

Among types of the modern city-state that could be identified in literature are sovereign states, self-governed territories, autonomous territories and “city-microstates”.

Some scholars include special administrative regions of China - Hong Kong and Macau to the city-state basket as well as economically-potent Spanish Ceuta and Melilla - granted they are not fully sovereign, but have a certain degree of autonomy and are not controlled by the centre completely. Moreover, certain countries, even if they are not cities strictly speaking, have their attributes due to territorial cleavages and disproportions, namely Bahrain, San Marino, Qatar and the like. Finally, some cities could be found to have characteristics reminding of a city state from a behavioural point of view. Such cities may have salient, mainly economic, conflicting interests with the rest of their state - Moscow, London City, Canberra. However, these instances work better in the paradigm of global cities and global capitals rather than city-states.

Yet, with this approach the essence of a city-state as a historical term with a rich background is highly neglected. This approach may well be called modern as it depicts contemporary developments on the international arena. The modern or formal approach treats a city-state as a form of a nation-state while the civilization

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<sup>5</sup> Gobry Pascal-Emmanuel (2015) The man who built the modern city-state // The Week

approach looks at a city-state as a special form of spatial political and social community of people which is different from a nation-state. This approach refutes the unilateralist view on the territorial nation-state being the only supreme form of social and political organisation as it argues it came on top merely coincidentally<sup>6</sup>.

### **The problem of efficiency**

Certain problematic areas in the functioning of small polities could be identified since they all have scarce resources by definition. These are the key problems that a city-state or a microstate is expected to solve in order to ensure survival and development.

**Economic sphere** including small territory, low population rate, production forces and distribution institutions. With the advent of world economy and trade the dependence of small polities on the rest of the world has become apparent especially in ensuring internal stable development and survival as well as the necessity to diversify exports to phase in modernisation due to a tiny internal market.

**Military sector** with an insufficient level of security being the core problem. A microstate or a city-state alike is expected to have a developed defense system of guarantees with their neighbours or implement the so-called “bandwagon” strategy along the political course of neighbouring major powers. Moreover, such polity must possess an adequate level of military and police forces to ensure security.

**Political dimension** concerns an ability of small states to influence major foreign powers, to attain formal equality on the international arena on par with other states and to conduct foreign policy in an attempt to fulfill their own interests. All these problematic issues stem from the peripheral position of small states in the eyes of the world. International organisations as well as other instruments in world politics help small states increase their authority and attain certain ends.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, it could be seen that both a microstate and a city-state constitute a departure from a traditional view on a territorial state. On the one hand they are distinguished by scarce resources as well as certain, more salient interests on an international arena, which predetermines their concentration on ensuring their own

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<sup>6</sup> Spruyt (1996) - The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change // Princeton University Press

survival. Microstates and let alone city-states do no account for the majority of sovereign states in the world currently, but making inquiries and researching small polities and their strategies of operation pay greatly in ensuring deeper understanding of the state per se, as when certain political, economic and military dimensions are taken into account, it allows to understand the perks and downsides of such spatial organisation of people's accommodation better.

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