POLITICKÉ VEDY / POLITICAL SCIENCES

Časopis pre politológiu, najnovšie dejiny, medzinárodné vzťahy, bezpečnostné štúdiá / Journal for Political Sciences, Modern History, International Relations, security studies

URL of the journal / **URL časopisu**: https://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk

Author(s) / Autor(i): Vitaliy S. Lytvyn – Anatoliy S. Romanyuk
Article / Článok: Essence and Relevance of "Small" Parties: Problems of Conceptualisation
Publisher / Vydavateľ: **Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov** – UMB Banská Bystrica / Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations – UMB Banská Bystrica
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2023.26.2.75-113

Recommended form for quotation of the article / Odporúčaná forma citácie článku:

LYTVYN, V. S. – ROMANYUK, A. S. 2023. Essence and Relevance of "Small" Parties: Problems of Conceptualisation. In *Politické Vedy*. Vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 75-113. ISSN 1335 – 2741. Available at: https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2023.26.2.75-113

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ESSENCE AND RELEVANCE OF "SMALL" PARTIES: PROBLEMS OF CONCEPTUALISATION

Vitaliy S. Lytvyn – Anatoliy S. Romanyuk*

ABSTRACT
The issues of "small" parties have been quite intensively and extensively studied in Political Science over the past few decades. However, researchers have not yet developed a consolidated position on what "small" parties are or are not. Hence, the objective of the present study was to assess and even question the essence, relevance and utility of distinguishing "small" parties. Given this, the article systematically overviewed, explored and synthesised the concept of "small" parties over the past half a century of Political Science development. It began with an examination of the historiography and research problems related to "small" parties, highlighting the various attempts to define them in different contexts. In this comprehensive analysis, the article distinguished several approaches (electoral, territorial, functional, ideological, organisational and strategic) for defining and understanding the essence of "small" parties. It also delved into the potential influence and relevance of "small" parties, including their functional, quantitative, dimensional, ideological and behavioural aspects, while acknowledging that "small" parties often appear to be irrelevant. Ultimately, the article questioned the categorical separation of "small" parties, recognising that the concept lacks a clear and unified definition in Political Science. Instead, it suggested that the analytical utility of this concept primarily serves electoral or comparative contexts. The study methodologically justified its approach through a systematic, critical and analytical review of the concept of "small" parties, drawing from other studies in the field. Consequently, the article contributed to a deeper understanding of the essence and relevance of "small" parties, as well as their limitations.

Key words: Party, "Small" Party, Relevance, Irrelevance, Party System

Introduction

The phenomenon, essence and possible relevance of the so-called "small"

* prof. Vitaliy S. Lytvyn, PhD., DSc. is a Professor at the Department of Political Science, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Universytetska St. 1, 79000 Lviv, Ukraine, e-mail: vitaliy.lytvyn@lnu.edu.ua.

* prof. Anatoliy S. Romanyuk, PhD., DSc. is a Professor at the Department of Political Science, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Universytetska St. 1, 79000 Lviv, Ukraine, e-mail: anatoliy.romanyuk@lnu.edu.ua.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2023.26.2.75-113

parties began to be talked about and discussed in political theory and practice in the 1970s, but further constantly expanding and intensifying this topic, even in the 2020s. The results of the whole recurring series of consecutive national (primarily parliamentary ones) and subnational (at any level of politics and governance, below national one) elections, including initially in some of the Scandinavian and the British Commonwealth countries and later in other countries of Europe and the world, became one of the most important spurs for detaching and theorising "small" parties at different periods of time. This was complemented by a causal and inertial change in the nature and essence of socio-political cleavages in different countries of the world at the turn of the 1970-1980s, particularly from the previously dominant materialist to constantly expanding and renewing postmaterialist ones. Nevertheless, as early as the 1990s, the so-called "small" parties began to be considered and determined not only electorally and nationally, but also functionally and subnationally, that is in reduced territorial and geographical (in particular, local, regional, etc.) space and scale. Accordingly, the so-called "small" parties at this time often began to be assessed as parties exclusively at the local level (particularly in regions, localities, cities, etc.) and/or as parties in the form of direct disadvantages of certain party systems at national and subnational levels of politics and governance. Moreover, all this took place in parallel with actualisation of the subnational (regional and local) political process, as well as subnational and functional issues in contemporary party theory and Political Science from the beginning of the 2000s.

As a result, in particular with the passage of time (for the half a century of development of political theory and practice), it is obvious that the so-called "small" parties have become inherent (theoretically and practically) for almost all European and many other countries. However, these parties and their theorising are consistently characterised by quite different etymologies and logics of separation, and thus are marked by a lack of holistic understanding and conceptualisation, especially on the background of the peculiarities of the political process in different countries. Moreover, some of the so-called "small" parties are interpreted as capable of structuring party systems of the entire countries (at different levels of politics and governance), but the other ones are not, since they constantly remain on the margins of the political process and are under the influence of the so-called "chauvinism" of mainstream parties (Mayer 1980, 345). Accordingly, some "small" parties are perceived as relevant, but the other ones are not at all, and this is even given to the fact that the so-called "small" parties are considered differently and heterogeneously. With this in mind, the goal of the study is to provide an overview and systematisation of different attempts, options and approaches to

understanding the essence of the so-called "small" parties, as well as to test the expediency of distinguishing and the existence of the general concept of "small" parties, but with a view to finding the most valid mechanism for verifying and assessing their relevance or irrelevance.

Solving this goal is ensured in several stages, which correspond to the tasks and, accordingly, the sections of the study. Therefore, this article is organised as follows. The first section surveys historiography, "waves" of development and the main research problems in the elaboration of the issues of the so-called "small" parties. The second section overview the essence of "small" parties and variants of its synonymising, definition and understanding. Then, the third section suggests and debates approaches to distinguishing, delineating and filling the essence of "small" parties. Finally, the fourth section outlines and discusses specificity and verification of the influence and relevance of the so-called "small" parties. Given these sections, the methodological approach of the article appears to be a systematic, critical and analytical review of the concept of "small" parties and a synthesis of the existing literature on "small" parties in Political Science research, in particular to question their categorical separation, define their relevance and analyse their influence. Such a methodological approach is fully justified as it combines the Structured Literature Overview mechanism consistently and parallelly within the proposed sections of the article. This method also allows for maximum systematisation and structuring of the issues related to the so-called "small" parties for the half a century of Political Science research. Therefore, the article is largely historiographical and overview-based one, although a separate section of the article is devoted to the state of research on the issues of "small" parties. Still, at the same time, it provides an analytical and systematic study of the topic.

1. Historiography, "waves" of development and the main research problems in the elaboration of the issues of "small" parties

The so-called "small" parties, both theoretically and on the example of different countries, not necessarily only the European ones, have long forced the entire groups of scientists to rethink and transform the theory of parties and party systems, as well as the outlines of real party systems in certain countries. These apply, among the other things, to the questions of relevance of parties, electoral volatility, fractionalisation or fragmentation, nationalisation or denationalisation,

polarisation and structuring of party systems in general, and so on. It is interesting in this context that the issues of the so-called "small" parties and the relevance of parties as whole (including "small" parties) are mutually related in time framework of the development of party theory and Political Science, since they were purposefully (outside of certain early and fragmentary elaborations) raised in the mid-1970s. However, the huge development of these issues over the past half a century has taken place in several stages or "waves" that still demonstrate the relative heterogeneity and non-consolidation of the topic of the so-called "small" parties.

Until the mid-1970s, "small" parties did not actually become the subject of specialised scientific research, but were a by-product of the already existing and even classical (at least in the contemporary view) theory of parties, party organisations and party systems developed by **Duverger** (1959), **Key** (1964), **La Palombara** and **Weiner** (1966), **Sartori** (1976), etc. Initial conceptual change took place during the mid-1970s and 1980s, when some researchers, in particular **White** (1973a), **Hammond** (1976), **Fisher** (1980), **Freie** (1982), **Pedersen** (1982), **Herzog** (1987), **Lawson** and **Merkl** (1988), purposefully began to appeal to the phenomenon of the so-called "small" or "minor" parties inside or outside certain party systems, including in the context of explaining and verifying the relevance or irrelevance of these parties. This was complemented by the study of individual cases of the so-called "small" parties, but in a limited number of countries, particularly in Australia (Reynolds 1977; Richmond 1978; Mayer 1980; Sharman 1986), Canada (Blais 1973), the United Kingdom (Grant 1971) and Germany (Fisher 1974). Some changes took place in the 1990s, when the so-called "small" parties, albeit mostly within the previous theoretical approaches, began to be studied on the example of a much wider range of countries, in particular as earlier in Australia (Marks & Bean 1992; Bean & Papadakis 1995; Papadakis & Bean 1995; Stone 1998; Young 1999) and Canada (Hackett 1991), as well as extending to the USA (Abramson et al. 1995; Gold 1995) and most of Western European countries (Mair 1990; Wolinetz 1990; Mair 1991; Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991; Smith 1991; Katz & Mair 1995), mainly to Belgium (Deschouwer 1991), Ireland (Coakley 1990) and the Netherlands (Lucardi 1991). In general, the trend of this period and the first "wave" of the study of the phenomenon of the so-called "small" parties was the gradual expansion of the scope and issues of their coverage, which continues up to nowadays. On the one hand, researchers had just begun to think about the separation, designation and positioning of the phenomenon and even synonyms of the so-called "small" parties and their diverse types at this period

of time, but, on the other hand, had hardly structured them and had not reduced them to certain systematic and complex comparisons (Muller-Rommel 1991, 1)

Instead, at the second "wave" of the elaboration of "small" parties, which began in the 2000s, these parties began to be studied in even more details, particularly not only electorally and nationally, but also functionally and subnationally. The main problems of understanding the so-called "small" parties were such issues as: influence of "small" parties on the structuring of party systems and their relevance or irrelevance (Hug 2001; Boix 2007; Tavits 2008; Clark 2010; Spoon 2011; Bolleyer 2013; Gherghina & Fagan 2021); the influence of "small" parties on the mainstream parties and inter-party differences or divergences (Adams & Merrill 2006; Adams et al. 2006; Copus et al. 2009); organisational structure, ideological profile, reasons for the formation and electoral/government success of "small" parties (Hug 2000; Gerring 2005; Van der Brug et al. 2005; Webb 2005; Bolleyer 2007; Deschouwer 2008; Adams et al. 2012; Baskaran & Lopes da Fonseca 2013; Gherghina & Jiglău 2016). These issues were mostly developed on the example of Western European or the EU countries (in particular, the Czech Republic (Novák & Cassling 2000), Germany (Bartels & Remke 2021), Ireland (Coakley 2010; McDaid & Rekawek 2010; O'Malley 2010; Weeks 2010b), the Netherlands (Boogers & Voerman 2010), Spain (Font 2001; Pineda et al. 2021)), countries of the British Commonwealth (in particular, Australia (Donovan 2000; Denemark & Bowler 2002; Goot 2004; Kefford 2017), Canada (Small 2008), New Zealand (Molineaux & Skilling 2014), the United Kingdom (Bochel & Denver 2008; Copus et al. 2008; Sloan 2011) or different countries in comparison (Bélanger 2004)) and the USA (Tamas 2002; Burden 2005). The manifestation of the second "wave" of the development of the problem of "small" parties was the fact that scientists began to further develop the achievements of the previous stage and even relatively systematise them. However, scholars have not yet been able to unanimously solve all the problems of structuring the phenomenon and varieties of the so-called "small" parties, since they have often even denied the expediency and validity of separation of such parties. Moreover, the issues of the so-called "small" parties remain almost unraised and unactualised in other countries of the world, but primarily in the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, even despite the fact that such parties quite often exist there and may be relevant ones. The exceptions are some studies, in particular by such scholars as **Moreno** (2001), **Birnir** (2004), **Madrid** (2005), **Van Cott** (2005), **Ufen** (2008), **Aidoo** and **Chamberlain** (2015), **Kwofie** and **Bob-Milliar** (2017), **Bob-Milliar** (2019), **Kernecker** and **Wagner** (2019), **Spoon** and **West** (2020), **Carlson** (2021),

Remmer (2021) and **Su** (2022), who actually, but mostly in passing appeal to the essence or optionality of the so-called "small" parties, nevertheless not necessarily naming them as "small" or "minor" ones.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the issue of "small" parties is not unified, unilateral and fully organised/systematised, but rather dispersed, heterogeneous and fragmented one in theoretical and practical contexts. This can be well understood from at least a partial list of basic tasks and problems of the study of the collective idea of the so-called "small" parties developed over the past half a century in Political Science, including the following ones: the essence and reasons for the definition as well as parameters and effects of positioning parties as "small" ones at different (both national and subnational) levels of politics, governance and the electoral process; organisational structure, strategy, tactics, ideology and membership in "small" parties; the capacity of "small" parties to perform alternative functions and to solve problems that are inherent in other parties at the national and subnational levels of politics, governance and the electoral process; the ability of mainstream parties to depreciate and level "small" parties by "hiring" their ideas within the framework of different strategies of inter-party interaction (cooperation or opposition) on elections and possible governance; varieties and territorial, functional or ideological groups of the so-called "small" parties, including in theoretical and practical meanings; the issues of the relationship between the development and number of the so-called "small" parties, on the one hand, and the level of democracy, citizen participation and parameters of institutional/political design and inter-institutional relations at different levels of politics and governance, on the other hand; the extent to which the number and strength of the so-called "small" parties are inherited from the parameters of party formation, financing and functioning and electoral systems; causes and consequences of formation, survival, stability or decline, number, successes and failures of the so-called "small" parties in different countries and contexts; relevance or irrelevance of "small" parties within different types of party systems; the possibility of turning the so-called "small" parties into strong or mainstream parties or conversely the option of their decline, marginalisation and collapse (Bolleyer 2010; Coakley 2010; O'Malley 2010; Weeks 2010a; Weeks 2010b). Such a variety of issues and tasks is reflected within the lack of regional (not to mention universal) comparisons in Political Science, but instead is manifested in the focus on the study of separate cases. That is why there is no widely accepted definition or consolidated theory of the so-called "small" parties, and the concept itself is not generally questioned in Political Science.

2. The essence of "small" parties and variants of its synonymising, definition and understanding

The problem of the absence of a consolidated definition and meaning of the so-called "small" parties can be demonstrated even in terms of ambiguity and synonymy regarding the conceptualisation of the phenomenon of "small" parties inherent in Political Science. Since there are lots of misunderstandings not so much about research and unambiguous meaning of the essence of "small" parties, but mainly about the designation of the so-called "small" parties with the help of different concepts and categories, by different scholars, in various contexts, frameworks and countries, etc. (Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991; Sloan 2011). For example, the most commonly used names and synonyms for the so-called "small" parties are such as actually "small" parties (Mair 1991; Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991; Smith 1991; Novák & Cassling 2000; Bolleyer 2007; Copus et al. 2008; Kefford 2017; Bartels & Remke 2021) and "minor" parties (Reynolds 1977; Fisher 1980; Mayer 1980; Pedersen 1982; Herzog 1987; Coakley 1990; Tamas 2002; Gerring 2005; Bochel & Denver 2008; Copus et al. 2009; Clark 2010; Coakley 2010; McDaid & Rekawek 2010; O'Malley 2010; Weeks 2010a; Weeks 2010b; Sloan 2011). Meanwhile, there are also used other (albeit less common) synonyms for "small" parties, such as "micro-parties" (Kelly 2016; Kefford 2017), "third" parties (Blais 1973; White 1973a; White 1973b; Eagles & Erfle 1993; Abramson et al. 1995; Gold 1995; Bélanger 2004), "independent" parties or even "independents" (Bochel & Denver 2008; Copus et al. 2009), "peripheral" parties (Kefford 2017), "pariah" parties (Downs 2001; van Spanje & Van Der Brug 2007; Minkenberg 2013; Akkerman & Rooduijn 2015; van Spanje & de Graaf 2018; Moffitt 2022), "protest" parties (Bolleyer 2010; Hutter & Vliegenthart 2018), "niche" parties (Adams et al. 2006; Adams et al. 2012; Wagner 2012; Meyer & Wagner 2013), "local" parties (Grant 1971), "alternative" parties or organisations (Lawson & Merkl 1988; Aars & Ringkjøb 2005), "personal" parties (Raniolo 2006), "electoralist" parties (Kefford 2017), etc.

On the other hand, these names are not always the direct synonyms of the so-called "small" parties (since they indicate other attributes of parties as such), but they very often refer to "small" parties. In addition, the mentioned synonymy of the so-called "small" parties seems to be an extremely great disadvantage, since many adjectives to denote such parties, including their size, organisational structure, ideologies, territoriality, etc., often intersect, but are not always exhaustive and one-sided. Especially given the fact that the most problematic

is that different scholars synonymise various naming and designations of the so-called "small" parties, thus not providing clarity and structure of Political Science knowledge. As a result, there is still no the unified theory and infrastructure for understanding the so-called "small" parties even over the past half a century in Political Science, but instead these issues are characterised by "conceptual stretching" (Sartori 1970, 1035; Gerring 1999, 367; Collier et al. 2012, 222; Kefford 2017). Given this, some scholars have previously considered and even still consider it inappropriate to analyse "small" parties in principle, in particular as "analytically useless concepts" (Key 1964, 254). This is even despite the fact that scholars turn to the topic of the so-called "small" parties, as mentioned above, relatively often, in particular on the example of countries of the British Commonwealth, Western European or the EU and the USA.

If one talks about this problem of Political Science in more details, it becomes even more obvious, since scientists use not only different denotations, definitions and synonyms for the so-called "small" parties, but also fill them with completely different meanings. In particular, it is possible to single out such the most well-known attempts to define (including in the framework of synonymy) "small" parties as: opportunistic parties that seek to play outside the framework and rules of political and party system (Kefford 2017); all existing parties, except the two largest, in countries with a majority (TRS) or plurality (FPTP) electoral system and a bipartisan/two-party system (Gerring 2005, 83); all "extra" parties within certain types of party systems (in particular, "fourth" parties in two-and-a-half-party systems, "fifth" parties in four-party systems, etc.) (Coakley 1990, 270; Bochel & Denver 2008, 579); parties that do not structure or institutionalise inter-party competition and party systems because of their irrelevance (Sartori 1976; Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991; Kefford 2017) or underrepresentation in the legislatures (Orr 2002, 576); ideologically diverse parties with national support at the level less than 2 percent of the electorate (Booysen 2006, 733); parties that represent an extreme/radical or non-centrist "niche" ideological position (Adams et al. 2006, 513; Adams et al. 2012); parties that gain less than 1–1,5% of the electorate as "micro-parties" and, accordingly, from 1–1,5 to 15% of the electorate (albeit for at least three elections) as "small" parties (Mair 1990; Mair 1991; Coakley 2010); parties that are in no way able to form cabinets and/or to be the main actors in political or parliamentary opposition (Fisher 1974); parties that are electorally unimportant and functionally problematic ones in obtaining proper information about them, and therefore generally dysfunctional and unable to influence the formation and implementation of government policies (Fisher

1974); parties with limited electoral support, which are able to obtain seats in the legislature solely due to "trade" in preferences and expectations (Gauja 2015, 26); non-parliamentary "ephemeral" parties that do not receive state support and financing (Orr 2002, 576); parties that mobilise both against a cabinet and the main opposition parties (Abramson et al. 1995), etc.

Given the above-mentioned synonyms and options for understanding the so-called "small" parties, it follows that their various definitions are often very ambiguous and voluntary ones, since the latter do not outline or offer a single, systematic and consolidated understanding of the essence of "small" parties as such. The situation is complicated by the probability of electoral failure of any mainstream party, which may become electorally "small" or irrelevant one over time. Therefore, it follows that a holistic concept of "small" parties has not been developed over the past half a century in Political Science and maybe it will never even be possible to do, but instead this category has become rather a collective notion that should be considered heterogeneously and even within certain approaches.

3. Approaches to distinguishing, delineating and filling the essence of "small" parties

The study is based on the idea that the analysed problem is not limited to various attempts to define and designate the so-called "small" parties, but also to the fact that it is appropriate to identify different approaches to understanding the essence of this extremely heterogeneous phenomenon. Based on systematisation of available academic studies, it is possible to allocate among them primarily such main theoretical and methodological approaches as: 1) territorial – on the basis of taking into account different levels of politics and governance and different roles of parties within them, in particular mainly at the levels below the national one (i.e., at subnational – regional, local, etc. – levels); 2) functional – on the basis of taking into account the fact of fulfilment or non-fulfilment the main functions and tasks by parties; 3) organisational – on the basis of taking into account the origins, causes, methods of formation, organisational structure and features of financing of parties; 4) ideological – due to the diversity of ideas, doctrines, policies and activities of parties; 5) strategic – on the basis of assessing the styles of party behaviour in the electoral market, in the course of governance and in the political system in general; 6) electoral – based on differences in the level of party success in elections, in governance and generally in the political process,

including regarding a relevance and/or status in power. However, the problem is complicated by the fact that these theoretical and methodological approaches can be applied both separately or alternatively, as well as pairing or combining them. At the same time, these approaches unequivocally and unconditionally blur the essence and framework of the so-called "small" parties as such (Coakley 2010). Even the fact that different approaches have their most common definitions and understandings of "small" parties does not help in this context. Nevertheless, it is still advisable to consider them consistently to shed even more light on the optional understanding of the collective notion of the so-called "small" parties in Political Science.

Thus, the so-called "small" parties within territorial theoretical and methodological approach are mainly understood as parties at subnational level of politics and governance of a certain country. It follows that "small" parties, even if they are formed nationally and at national level, operate exclusively at subnational (regional and local) level of politics and governance, since they do not enjoy constant and equal electoral support throughout the territory of a country. In other words, the so-called "small" parties are purely regional and local (generally subnational) parties in the field and territoriality of their activities, which are registered or not registered at national level of politics and governance of a country, but may or may not be represented at the centre of its political process (Copus et al. 2008). Accordingly, the so-called "small" subnational parties are actually and traditionally marginalised at national level of politics and governance, and therefore they are certainly not relevant ones in terms of national party systems (Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991). Instead, such parties are or may be influential and even dominant ones at any of subnational levels of politics and governance, displacing national-level parties, particularly due to the inability of the latter to recognise and respond to specific local circumstances. In view of this, the so-called "small" parties certainly provide new channels of citizen involvement, political activity and participation, as well as new ways of political responsibility, in particular at subnational level, although they focus primarily on governance a certain territory, rather than on representation of citizens (Copus 2004). Given this, "small" subnational parties may or may not be relevant or system-forming at subnational level of politics and governance, but they are necessarily formed and operate on the background of conflicts within the "centre-periphery" (national-subnational) line (Coakley 2008). With this in mind, it is clear that the so-called "small" parties at subnational level of politics and governance can be of two types, including subnational branches of "small" parties at national level

(typically with a narrow subnational agenda), as well as subnational centres or branches of "small" parties exclusively at subnational level (usually with a broad subnational agenda).

A somewhat different interpretation of "small" parties is inherent in the case of a combination of territorial, functional and electoral approaches to their understanding, in particular as parties representing exclusively different types of minorities. In this context, attention should be paid to those "small" parties, which highlight the characteristics of ethnic, regional, local and other socio-political cleavages incorporated within certain types of electoral and party systems at national and subnational levels of politics and governance. This is even despite the fact that taking into account such socio-political differences and cleavages through electoral systems at different levels does not affect the formation of the parameters of national party systems, governance and the political process. Therefore, minority parties are not relevant ones at any level of politics and governance. The exceptions are those localities (as in Italy or Slovenia) where such "small" parties are basic ones and even provided for by the relevant electoral or other legislation (Sartori 1966). However, it is noteworthy that some scholars (Ishiyama & Breuning 2011; Chandra 2013) call such "small" parties ethnic ones that is especially true when the latter manifest their functions mainly on the periphery (Coakley 2008; Gherghina & Fagan 2021). This is complemented by the fact that there is a little information about the internal structures, leadership, etymology, legacy and development trajectories of such "small" parties. On the other hand, such "small" parties are feasibly the most stable in electoral terms, although they attract a very small number of voters from the appropriate part of society (Gherghina 2014; Gherghina & Jiglau 2016).

In contrast, the combination of territorial, ideological and strategic approaches makes it possible to treat the so-called "small" parties as marginal parties and/or parties on the periphery of politics and governance (Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991; Kefford 2017). Political scientists have recently used such terms as "fringe parties" (literally "side", "limited" or "border" parties (Gherghina & Fagan 2021)) and "niche parties" (in other words, marginal or peripheral parties (Meguid 2005; Adams et al. 2006; Adams et al. 2012; Wagner 2012; Meyer & Wagner 2013; Bischof 2015; Meyer & Miller 2015; Lindstam 2019; Bartels & Remke 2021)) to partly refer to the so-called "small" parties. The former are primarily such "small" parties that take into account the values and interests of the administrative and territorial peripheries, and thus challenge (particularly ideologically) mainstream parties and politics or governance at national level in general (Rochon 1985, 421,

425–426; Kefford 2017; Gherghina & Fagan 2021). In this sense, "fringe parties", "niche parties" or marginal parties are traditionally characterised as: political and organisational threat or opposition to mainstream parties that embody a stable and strong locus of competition within party systems at national level of politics; political ideas, manifestos, programs and goals that are primarily related to specific (or even "appropriated") ideological positions, including specialised and different ones from such positions at national level of politics and governance or among mainstream parties (Köhler 2006; Bartels & Remke 2021; Gherghina & Fagan 2021). At the same time, it is noteworthy that "fringe parties", "niche parties" or marginal parties may seek to remain invariably peripheral ones or try to shift to the positions of mainstream parties. In view of this, they are treated as "small" parties as long as they are positioned as peripheral ones. Especially given that peripherality is a prerequisite for the electoral success of some subnational parties on the ground (Coakley 2008; Kefford 2017). At the same time, "fringe parties", "niche parties", marginal or peripheral parties ideologically are primarily anti-globalist, Eurosceptic, nationalist or anti-immigrant ones and are outlined in the so-called "anti-capitalist discourse" or, on the contrary, are openly populist ones. That is, peripheral or marginal ideological positioning is also inherent in the so-called "small" parties in this context (Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991).

The combination of territorial and organisational approaches is the basis for the interpretation of "small" parties as parties with a small number of members, weak organisational structure and finances (Becker & Cuperus 2004; van Biezen 2004). This means that the so-called "small" parties are parties that are characterised by limited or "impoverished" organisational structure and membership base and, as a result, by weak financial resources and independence. This is despite the fact that the financial costs of election campaigns are constantly growing nowadays, and therefore the so-called "small" parties are constantly facing a financial burden and organisational vacuum (van Biezen 2004). That is why "small" parties are typically new parties that do not have established interests and ties to affiliated organisations. This is especially true for subnational level of politics and governance, since it is "small" subnational parties that are accustomed to defects in membership, organisational structure and financing, including in the search for officials for representative positions (Koole 2002, 61). As a result, it often raises the question of how legitimate "small" parties are (Becker & Cuperus 2004). On the other hand, the dynamics of declining membership and quality of organisational structure of parties are more

common today in most countries in the world. That is why the so-called "small" parties in this sense are mainly characterised not by party membership, but by hiring professional politicians as "agents" of voters and "communicators" with voters, which is especially facilitated by the development of modern media. Therefore, the absence of a fixed electoral base becomes the norm for the so-called "small" parties. It follows that the "smaller" a party is, the more "pre-election" character it has. Given this, any election campaign is an ideal opportunity for innovations and inventions in the functioning of "small" parties. However, especially when electoral rules and procedures distribute financial resources among parties not only in proportion to their results, but also taking into account the interests of the so-called "small" parties themselves and the very fact of their participation in elections (i.e., when they motivate the so-called "small" parties) (Becker & Cuperus 2004).

In turn, the synthesis of strategic and electoral approaches gives grounds to treat the so-called "small" parties as those without real influence on the political process. The fact is that "small" parties are often referred to those parties that have representation in politics and the electoral sphere (regardless of their level – national or subnational one), but do not influence or determine the political consequences and results of governance, and therefore do not streamline the political agenda at all. Accordingly, the so-called "small" parties are parties represented in politics, but which have no real power. This is the norm primarily for the so-called "facade" democracies and autocracies. In other words, "small" parties are only conditionally or partially relevant, but they are characterised by inconsistencies in political and institutional design (Maghraoui 2020; Völkel 2020). It is noteworthy that this situation of designating "small" parties is parallel to complete or almost complete insignificance of party systems in certain cases. The fact is that party systems do formally exist and are even structured, in particular as multi-party ones, but they are irrelevant and completely under control. In other words, these are the situations when all or almost all parties are gradually losing their functional and systemic relevance and significance, since they are unable to determine the voting agenda within the political process. In this sense, the so-called "small" parties take place primarily in the conditions of weakness or decline of institutional design, in particular the lack of sufficient arenas for the functional activity of parties as such (Coakley 2010). Thus, the so-called "small" parties are "falsified" parties or parties that are not fully constructed in the institutional meaning.

A similar understanding of the so-called "small" parties is typical for a combination of electoral and strategic approaches, when the former mean new parties without representation by election results. In this sense, "small" parties are

exceptionally new parties that are unsuccessful in their strategies, representation and results during and after the elections (at different levels of politics and governance, but mainly at national one). That is, these are new parties that cannot change the structure of inter-party competition and party system of a country itself (therefore, they are expected to be irrelevant), including through participation in cabinet formation and determining the political agenda (Emanuele & Chiaramonte 2019). Accordingly, the organisational structure and finances of such "small" parties (they may even be developed ones) do not matter. Since the main reason is that "small" parties, intending to nominate or nominating their candidates for elected offices, do not get them, and therefore become an "ephemeral" minority (Coakley 1990). In view of this, "small" parties are often understood as "third" or "other" parties (Bélanger 2004, 1055), for example as literally third parties within "pure" two-party system, fourth parties within the framework of clear three-party or two-and-a-half-party systems, etc. (Blais 1973; White 1973b; Coakley 1990, 270; Eagles & Erfle 1993; Gerring 2005, 83; Bochel & Denver 2008, 579). "Third" parties are also often understood as parties that do not have a clear political positioning, status and role, since they mobilise both against a cabinet and the main opposition party (Abramson et al. 1995; Gold 1995). Therefore, it follows that the stronger mainstream parties are, the weaker "small" or "third" parties are and the less chance of structuring party systems the latter have. However, it is noteworthy that such "small" parties often proceed not from the desire to succeed and gain results in elections (although this is the most desirable expectation), but from the need to simply participate in elections and to be present in the electoral market/political space (Pedersen 1982, 5). Thus, "small" parties only partially change the political landscape, but significantly or partially modify the behaviour of mainstream parties and, as a result, even generate new models of political behaviour, discourse and debates (Herzog 1987; Maghraoui 2020; Völkel 2020). Therefore, such "small" parties are often perceived as mobilising (primarily ideologically), although not necessarily relevant actors (Clark 2010).

Finally, it is appropriate to define the so-called "small" parties within a purely electoral approach as new or established parties with low representation according to election results. It follows that "small" parties are those new or established parties that inevitably participate in elections (at different levels of politics and governance, but mainly at national one), but which can be relevant or irrelevant ones (for all possible approaches to interpretation of party relevance, which will be discussed below), since these parties are characterised by a low level of representation in elected institutions. Looking ahead, the relevance of parties can be defined functionally

(by means of the party potential for coalition or blackmail in the legislatures (Sartori 1976)) or dimensionally (given the number and size of parties; for example, when a party receives at least 3 percent of seats in the legislature (Rose & Urwin 1970; Ware 1996; Siaroff 2000) or at least 1 percent of votes and representation in the legislature (Döring 2016; Döring & Regel 2019)), but the emphasis is on separating "small" parties from independent politicians (Coakley 2010; Weeks 2010a). In addition, various researchers identify divergent upper limits for the size of representation of the so-called "small" parties in the legislatures, including from 2 to 15 percent depending on national specifics and types of party and electoral systems (Mair 1991; Clark 2010; Weeks 2010a). Thus, an attempt was made to grade or even classify "small" parties and separate them from mainstream parties (Clark 2010; McDaid & Rekawek 2010). Given this, the determining factor in this sense is that an electorally successful "small" party (if it is really treated as "small" one) cannot be a cabinet party, although it can try to participate in cabinet formation. In other words, this means that a "small" party is not relevant at the level of cabinet and governance. That is why "small" parties are often called those parties with representation in the legislatures, against which the so-called mainstream parties use the "cordon sanitaire" technique. This means that the latter formally or actually agree not to cooperate with the former, especially with regard to joint participation in the formation and functioning of cabinets. However, such strategies of mainstream parties are realised as their reactions to the relative successes of "small" parties, and therefore the latter are positioned as mobilising parties. In this sense, it is noteworthy that a party may have the status of a "small" one at national level, but at the same time the status of a mainstream party at any subnational (regional, local, etc.) level of politics and governance.

4. Outlining, specificity and verification of the influence and relevance of "small" parties

Complexity and versatility in understanding the phenomenon of the so-called "small" parties are diversified by the fact that different approaches offer various and unsystematised options and schemes for classifying "small" parties (Coakley 2010) (although the latter are not the subject of the study). Moreover, some scholars focus on the differences between the so-called "small" parties and something like "very small" (or "smaller") parties (Mair 1991; Novák & Cassling 2000), while the other scholars develop classifications and typologies by explaining the origins and reasons for the formation of "small" parties (Key 1964; Richmond

1978; Jaensch & Mathieson 1998; Weeks 2010a). Accordingly, diversity in the definition of the so-called "small" parties is contradictory in terms of their prospective effects on inter-party interaction and structuring party systems, since it leads to ambiguous conclusions. The reason is that some "small" parties (within one group of approaches) may be able to structure party systems of entire countries (i.e., at different levels of politics and governance), while the other "small" parties (within the same or different approaches) may not do this (Sartori 1976; Herzog 1987; Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991; Kefford 2017). Since the latter are not represented in the legislatures (Orr 2002, 576) or remain on the margins of party politics, initially forming, but soon disappearing under the influence of systemic or mainstream parties (Mayer 1980, 345). This raises the question of the relevance or irrelevance of the so-called "small" parties and of their ability to transform the theory and real shape of party systems at different levels of politics and governance (Weeks 2010a), especially given that different approaches to explaining the essence of the so-called "small" parties outline the phenomenon of relevance of such parties differently and depending on the context of understanding "small" parties. Thus, it follows that the relevance or irrelevance of the so-called "small" parties should be interpreted and verified both generally and within the theory of party systems, as well as based on various approaches to the definition of the so-called "small" parties discussed above.

The issue is compounded by the fact that some scholars (Pedersen 1982; Berrington 1985; Herzog 1987; Coakley 1990; Tamas 2002; Tavits 2006; Boix 2007; Tavits 2008; Coakley 2010; Sloan 2011) often think not so much about the relevance of the so-called "small" parties as about various barriers of power and influence of the latter. The first barrier is declarativity regarding the participation (as well as informing and notifying about it) of "small" parties in elections, as a result of which "small" parties electorally enter the "territory" or space of mainstream parties and encroach on their influence within the party system at some level of politics and governance, including national or subnational one. The second barrier is formalisation, since the so-called "small" parties must comply with a certain nationally determined legal basis for the functioning of parties as such in most countries of the world. As a result, the so-called "small" parties are formally perceived as parties by other political actors, at least unless otherwise provided. The third barrier is representativeness or, more precisely, the representation of "small" parties, in particular initially at subnational level and then possibly at national level of the electoral process and politics, including as a function of a particular electoral system in a country (Pedersen 1982). The fourth

barrier are the benefits of the expectations of the so-called "small" parties, since it is often a problem to form and support "small" parties with a relatively strong organisational structure, effective leadership and sufficient financial support, etc. (Berrington 1985, 443; Herzog 1987; Panebianco 1988; Tamas 2002; Boix 2007, 521; Tavits 2008). The fifth barrier is the problem of indirect influence of the so-called "small" parties on mainstream parties, in particular the influence of "small" parties (even through their participation in elections, but without electoral success) on the electoral behaviour of candidates from mainstream parties as well as on the political positions and reactions of the latter (Weeks 2010a). The sixth barrier is the stability of the so-called "small" parties or their ability not to fail, marginalise, disintegrate or join other parties and lose their unique attractiveness (of course, under the condition of incapacity to be mainstream parties). This is due to the fact that the adjective and status of the so-called "small" parties often have an individual rather than systematic significance in each country and at each level of politics and governance (Lucardi 1991, 123; Copus et al. 2008). Finally, the seventh barrier is the most important one, and it concerns precisely the relevance of the so-called "small" parties. This barrier typically appeals to the acquisition and demonstration by "small" parties of an influence on the political process, decision-making and conducting policy at various levels of governance and party systems. In other words, the most important question here is whether "small" parties can have the role and status of relevant parties in certain party systems at different levels of politics and governance (Lucardi 1991, 123; Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991, 7–13; Sloan 2011).

It is generally known that the relevance of parties can be considered both functionally (by means of a party's coalition or blackmail potential in the legislatures (Sartori 1976)) as well as dimensionally or quantitatively (i.e., given the number and size of parties in the legislatures or the electoral results of the former (Rose & Urwin 1970; Siaroff 2000; Ware 1996; Döring 2016; Döring & Regel 2019)). Functional approach means that party relevance is determined by coalition and/or blackmail potential of parties in the legislatures (no party can be identified as relevant one if it is not represented in the legislature), particularly on the formation and/or support or non-support of the executives/cabinets at different levels of governance (Sartori 1976, 122–123). Herewith, the coalition potential depends on whether a party has enough seats in the legislature to become cabinet/executive one (even within a coalition) or whether a party (which is therefore relevant one) is directly involved in cabinet formation or at least provides it support. In turn, the blackmail potential outlines a party's ability (only if it is

relevant one) to obstruct the formation of the executive/cabinet at a particular level of politics. Thus, it follows that a party is considered relevant one if it is able to change the direction of party competition and the essence of a party system (Wolinetz 2006). In contrast, quantitative or dimensional approach to the interpretation of party relevance is based on the success or failure of parties during elections or on party overcoming or failure to overcome the barrier of representation in the legislatures at a particular level of politics and governance. That is why some scholars consider relevant those political parties that receive at least 2,5–5 (but most often 3) percent of seats in the legislatures (Rose & Urwin 1970; Ware 1996, 148–149; Siaroff 2000), while the other scholars – those parties that receive at least 1 percent of the votes, but additionally any type of representation in the legislatures (Döring 2016, 538; Döring & Regel 2019).

Researchers (Coakley 2010; Weeks 2010a) often use one or the other approach to the relevance of parties, even including for delimitation of the so-called "small" parties. This is supplemented by the fact that the scholars (Mair 1991; Clark 2010; Weeks 2010a) sometimes use the concepts of party relevance to distinguish divergent upper limits of the representation size of the so-called "small" parties, including from 1,5 to 15 percent in the legislatures depending on national specifics and types of party or electoral systems. This, in turn, provides an attempt to define, grade or even classify the so-called "small" parties and separate them from mainstream parties in the legislatures (Clark 2010; McDaid & Rekawek 2010). However, the basic understanding traditionally indicates that "small" parties are those parties that are not positioned and perceived as the executive or cabinet ones at a particular (national or subnational) level of politics. Even though the former may aspire to the latter, but thus may or may not be electorally successful or represented in the legislatures (Fisher 1980, 609–610; Herzog 1987). In other words, the so-called "small" parties may or may not be relevant electorally and given their representation in the legislatures, but they may not be relevant ones at the executive/cabinet level.

However, scholars quite ambiguously interpret the essence and hypotheses of the relevance of the so-called "small" parties given that there are different approaches to the understanding of the latter developed over the past half a century in Political Science. For example, "small" (necessarily subnational) parties are traditionally marginalised at national level of politics or governance within territorial approach, and therefore they are certainly not relevant ones in the framework of national party systems (Fisher 1974, 6–8; Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991). Instead, "small" parties are or may be influential, relevant and even

dominant ones at subnational level of politics, thus displacing national-level parties to be irrelevant, particularly because of the inability of the latter to recognise and respond to subnational circumstances, as well as incapacity to function on the line of "centre-periphery" conflict (Coakley 2008). Similarly, "small" parties cannot be interpreted as relevant ones when they are understood as the parties representing exclusively different types of minorities. Nevertheless, with the exception of subnational entities, where the so-called "small" parties are basic ones and provided for by the relevant electoral legislation, etc.

The circumstances are more difficult if the so-called "small" parties are understood as those ones having no real influence on the political agenda and governance, even if the former are relatively electorally successful and represented in the legislatures. The fact is that such "small" parties are only provisionally relevant ones, in particular electorally, but not functionally, since they do not meet the established and customary political/institutional design (Maghraoui 2020; Völkel 2020). In addition, it is quite common for parties, especially in autocratic regimes, to be positioned as "small" and irrelevant ones when they are the symptoms or consequences of complete or almost complete insignificance or even absence of party systems. Since formally such parties do exist and even structure party systems, at least partially, but they are "under control" and function as dependent ones. Accordingly, such "small" parties are unable to determine the voting agenda in the political process and are subordinated to political regimes, thus being systemically irrelevant ones a priori as well as gradually losing their functionality and significance (Fisher 1974, 6–8; Reynolds 1977; Herzog 1987).

As an alternative, the situation is much easier when the so-called "small" parties are those parties that are new ones and have no representation by elections results. Since functionally and quantitatively such "small" parties are not relevant ones, because they are not able to change and structure inter-party competition and party systems at a particular level of politics and governance, including by participating in possible executive/cabinet formation and setting the political agenda (Emanuele & Chiaramonte 2019). Accordingly, the main indication of the irrelevance of such "small" parties is the fact that the latter are an "ephemeral" minority incapable of gaining electoral success and representation, even having relatively developed membership bases, organisational structures and financing (Coakley 1990). Although, it happens sometimes that the potential relevance of such "small" parties is used "for rent" or is automatically acquired by mainstream parties, which further mobilise, strengthen or at least test new forms and models of political behaviour, particularly responding to the risks of modifying political

competition and existing party systems (Herzog 1987; Clark 2010; Maghraoui 2020; Völkel 2020).

Nevertheless, the preliminary (following the theorisations provided above) conclusion about complete or almost complete irrelevance of the so-called "small" parties is not universal and absolute one. Since the analysed parties are often interpreted as new or established political actors, which may be insignificantly represented in the legislatures according to the elections results both at national or subnational levels of politics and governance. Accordingly, the so-called "small" parties can functionally and quantitatively be both relevant or irrelevant electorally and given their representation in the legislatures or other elected institutions, although the former may not be relevant at the level of involvement and status in the executive/cabinet. This is evident mainly in the framework of electoral approach to the understanding of the so-called "small" parties that takes into account the differences in the level of party success in elections, governance and the political process in general. In addition, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that the phenomenon and attributes of party relevance can serve as a barrier and probable basis for separation the so-called "small" parties. The reason is that the barrier of relevance of "small" parties traditionally concerns the demonstration of a certain influence of such parties on the political process, particularly on the executive and political decisions, as well as generally for conducting policy at various levels of governance. Therefore, the answer to the question of whether the so-called "small" parties can have a role and status of relevant ones in certain party systems at different levels of politics and governance or whether the former should be treated exclusively as irrelevant parties is of paramount importance (Sloan 2011).

The problem is also developed due to the fact that the so-called "small" parties do not fully and always fit into the theory of party systems, in particular due to the lack of unified definition of the former. Therefore, scholars give the phenomenon of the relevance of "small" parties quite different and even specific options. The fact is that the so-called "small" parties usually or often appear as irrelevant ones at a particular level of politics and governance within the classical theories and typologies of party systems. In contrast, "small" parties are frequently positioned and presented as relevant ones in the categories of the so-called "mobilisation potential". The latter is based on the ability of the so-called "small" parties to attract attention and challenge the inter-party status quo in a given case, as well as to act within new socio-political cleavages and express new political identities in certain conditions (Herzog 1987; Lucardi 1991, 123). It follows that some scholars

(Muller-Rommel & Pridham 1991, 7–13) shift the emphasis on the essence and content of the relevance of parties, because they explain the relevance of the so-called "small" parties not only functionally and quantitatively/dimensionally, but also ideologically, behaviourally and so on. There are good and sufficient reasons for this, since the relevance of parties can be outlined in relation to different dimensions of party systems and at each stage of the life-cycle of parties (Herzog 1987). Although, if a party fails to achieve its relevance or becomes irrelevant one, then the chances of the former to "survive" are significantly reduced (Pedersen 1982; Coakley 2010; O'Malley 2010; Bianco et al. 2014). This is reflected in the fact that a "small" party should be considered irrelevant one when it eventually remains a "superfluous" one in the sense that this party is not needed and will not be used for any possible coalition majority in the executive. On the contrary, even a "small" party is or may be relevant one when its appearance affects the tactics and direction of inter-party competition and the party system in general (Sartori 1976, 22–23). This is often due to the fact that the so-called "small" parties indicate the emerging drifts, processes and factors on the "boundaries" of certain party systems, especially if these parties do not structure party systems themselves. In turn, this means that the so-called "small" parties may not be directly positioned as relevant ones – neither functionally nor quantitatively, – but may have an indirect potential for the relevance. Even when such parties do not overcome the barrier of representation in the legislatures and other elected institutions, but determine, shape and manifest certain political, ideological and mobilising deviant alternatives for inter-party competition and party systems. Thus, it is sometimes even believed that the potential for relevance of the so-called "small" parties is due to the fact of their emergence, since this fact may force mainstream parties to change their behaviour, strategy and tactics (Herzog 1987).

In addition, the potential for relevance is inherent in the so-called "small" parties even when they affect the forced preservation of the status quo in party systems, in particular about certain ideological boundaries and rules of the "game" in the latter (Herzog 1987). Since they are "small" parties, even if they are not represented in the legislatures, that appear sometimes as "benchmarks" of the content and framework of political culture, which are taken or not taken into account in the programmatic and ideological profiles of parties structuring party systems. Accordingly, the so-called "small" parties may have the potential for relevance due to the fact that they have already existed or may become a kind of initiators, interpreters or promoters of political rules of the "game", which are not fully

adopted by mainstream parties. This is due to the fact that the so-called "small" parties often operate as "testing grounds" for new ideas, which are eventually adopted or transformed by mainstream parties (Key 1964, 286; Fisher 1974, 31–32; Hammond 1976), thus confirming the potential for relevance of the former (Herzog 1987).

Another specific manifestation of the potential for relevance of the so-called "small" parties is that they are perceived as "safety valves" for dissatisfied voters (Fisher 1974, 32), thus significantly regulating the external needs and framework of party systems. Since thanks to "small" parties it is possible to expand the electoral framework of inter-party and political competition. The reason is that party systems are not always and fully formed by involving all voters who vote for certain parties. Accordingly, the so-called "small" parties often appeal to voters, who are not involved in the formation of the existing party systems, or to political ideas, which are largely ignored by mainstream parties (Herzog 1987). Thus, the potential for relevance of the so-called "small" parties is manifested in the fact that the latter expand and update the electoral arenas and ideological/programmatic framework of party systems. Nevertheless, the relevance of parties varies depending on whose point of view is taken into account as a basic one both at the "centre" (at national level of politics) and at the "periphery" (at subnational level of politics) of the political system. As a result, the size and functionality of parties are not always directly proportional to their influence (although an ideal option is when differences in party size express differences in substance). Since the so-called "small" parties can play a disproportionately large role (Novák & Cassling 2000) even without being functionally or quantitatively/dimensionally relevant ones, but instead having only ideological, political, electoral or mobilising potential for their relevance. However, the status of a relevant party does not automatically mean that it is a "large" party, and the status of the so-called "small" party does not automatically mean that the latter cannot be relevant one, and so on (Siaroff 2003; Bolleyer 2007).

Conclusion

As a result, it is worth noting that it is not and perhaps never will be possible to solve various problems that have arisen regarding the separation, designation, definition and understanding of the so-called "small" parties over the past half a century of development of Political Science. Similarly, it is possible to draw a conclusion that the essence of the so-called "small" parties and the parameters,

features and scope of their relevance or irrelevance still have not been consistently structured in Political Science, since there is no and most likely cannot be a consolidated position on these issues. On the one hand, scholars point out that some "small" parties may be able to structure party systems of the entire countries or party systems at separate levels of their politics and governance, while the other "small" parties may not. It all depends on the context and approach used to define and identify "small" parties (electoral, territorial, functional, ideological, organisational, strategic one) and to understand the relevance of parties generally and the relevance of the so-called "small" parties particularly (functional, quantitative or dimensional, ideological, behavioural, etc.), as well as on the electoral success of "small" parties. On the other hand, scholars argue that the attribute of relevance may be a barrier and basis for the separation of the so-called "small" parties, although the latter do not fully and always fit into party systems theory. That is why the relevance or irrelevance of the so-called "small" parties (regardless of the approach to their understanding) should be defined not just as an attribute of a particular party system type, but also as a characteristic of party or even political system and separate parties at different stages of their life-cycle. Accordingly, the so-called "small" parties can be both relevant or irrelevant ones, but irrelevant "small" parties may still be endowed with the potential for relevance. Especially when the latter are able to mobilise an electorate for new socio-political cleavages and identities, and thus to adjust the behaviour and ideological/political positioning of all other parties (especially mainstream ones), i.e., the tactics and direction of inter-party competition in a party system.

In view of this, it is not entirely possible today to answer the question not only of what a the so-called "small" party is, but also of what it is not and cannot be. Since there are currently too many options for nomination and designation, as well as approaches and real cases of understanding "small" parties, and something must be sacrificed. On the other hand, it is not known how all the nominations and approaches to understanding "small" parties need to be considered in a combined and systematic way at different levels of "the ladder of abstraction". Nevertheless, the study found that the most common indicators of designation and separation of "small" parties are such attributes as: small, minor or minimal party membership; low or minimal support, non-support or even non-participation of parties in elections; low or minimal representation or even non-representation of parties in the legislatures at different levels of politics; narrow problematic, political and ideological party orientation. In this context, it is important that the more of the listed indicators or

attributes are true, the "smaller" is a particular party. As a result, other theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding the essence and relevance of the so-called "small" parties should be added to the previous conclusion. Therefore, it follows that it is better not to synthesise different approaches to understanding "small" parties and reduce them to a certain common denominator, but to use them separately and complementary, in particular as certain additional adjectives and attributes of territorial, functional, organisational, ideological, behavioural, strategic and electoral direction.

However, it is clear that the so-called "small" parties must be positioned as oppositional and politically dysfunctional ones, as well as having limited or no ability to influence the executive policy at various levels of politics and governance. The theoretical situation is also helped by the idea of dividing the so-called "small" parties (regardless of their ideologies, level, territoriality of operationalisation, etc.) into relevant and irrelevant ones or into represented and unrepresented in the legislatures at all or different levels of politics (depending on the level of comparative analysis). Purely theoretically, it follows that the issues of the so-called "small" parties in Political Science have certainly become significant ones, but mainly comparatively. Instead, the so-called "small" parties theoretically and empirically are unlikely to be the executive or cabinet ones, at least at national level of politics and governance. This means that the so-called "small" parties cannot determine the political agenda, even regardless of the level of politics in a particular comparative array. Given this remark, all other options and dimensions of nomination the so-called "small" parties can be imposed on the indicated understanding of the latter. Accordingly, the definitive basis of the so-called "small" parties should be electoral, and the substantive basis may be additionally territorial, functional, ideological, behavioural, organisational, strategic one, and so on.

In general, the conducted research shows that there are significant and even unresolved problems in conceptualisation of the so-called "small" parties, since there are no distinguishable attributes that can completely define the phenomenon of "small" parties. In addition, various adjectives listed to identify the so-called "small" parties by various scholars (for example, "independent", "peripheral", "pariah", "protest" and "niche" parties, etc.) are not necessarily the exact and full synonymous to "small" parties or to any general concept that can be identified with "small" parties, but often refer to other kinds of attributes of parties. In other words, the analysed phenomena of the so-called "small" parties identified by different approaches are heterogenous. That is why it is even difficult to argue that "small" parties are a specific phenomenon in political theory and practice that can be

conceptualised as such and even have some analytical utility and value. The main reason is that this phenomenon is excessively heterogeneous one, and therefore its heterogeneity should lead one to ask whether this diversity is not in fact the result of the phenomenon not existing as such, or whether it is not necessarily appropriate to encompass it within a general concept that refers to the party dimension (in organisational, electoral or parliamentary terms, etc.). A similar conclusion can be drawn in view of checking the relevance or irrelevance of the so-called "small" parties, because it is more interesting to talk about relevant or irrelevant parties than about "large" or mainstream parties and "small" parties. Thus, this argues that the existence of a general phenomenon and concept of "small" parties can be questioned, at least in the case when one tries to reduce it to a common analytical denominator, since the latter in such a case has almost no analytical significance and serves only as an additional factor for comparing parties and structuring party systems.

Therefore, the research finds that there is still a lack of consensus regarding the definition and understanding of "small" parties in Political Science. Even so, there are different approaches and attributes to identifying "small" parties, as well as their relevance or influence. Thus, it is not entirely possible to define "small" parties at various levels of governance using a single set of attributes, even their most common indicators such as minimal party membership, low support or non-participation in elections, as well as narrow problematic, political and ideological party orientation. However, the study's strongest points are that it: reveals significant and unresolved problems, issues, challenges and complexities in the conceptualisation and understanding of "small" parties; offers a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the concept of "small" parties; takes a multi-dimensional approach to analysing "small" parties. Thanks to this the article acknowledges the limitations and challenges in defining and identifying "small" parties, but presents a nuanced and complex understanding of the phenomenon. Instead, the study's obvious weaknesses are that it: relies heavily on theoretical analysis and academic discourse, but may lack empirical evidence, data or case studies to support its arguments and conclusions; still does not provide the absolute and undeniable recommendations or solutions for addressing the challenges and issues in definition and understanding of what a "small" party is or is not.

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