

**PhD thesis**

Doctoral School of Earth Sciences

**Theory and practice of conflict states with special reference to Ukraine**

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## **1. Introduction**

The ambitions of regional powers to supplant the unipolar world order with a new multipolar framework involve a reconfiguration of spheres of influence and the potential establishment and alteration of buffer zones.

Currently, Ukraine is embroiled in conflict, having served as a buffer state situated in the zone between Russian and Western power centres. However, given its energy resources and East-West trade capabilities, it possesses the theoretical potential to evolve into a transit country, thereby becoming a bridge state. Analysing Ukraine's status as a buffer state is particularly significant from a Hungarian perspective for two primary reasons. Firstly, as an eastern neighbour, Ukraine directly impacts Hungary's trade dynamics, political landscape, and the welfare of the substantial Hungarian minority residing in Transcarpathia. Secondly, Hungary, akin to Ukraine, is geopolitically positioned within the buffer zone of Central and Eastern Europe, straddling the divide between two major power centres. This context allows for the exploration of the potential shift from a buffer state to a bridge state, informed by the circumstances surrounding Ukraine.

## **2. Objectives**

The objective of this thesis is to investigate the buffer zone with the intention of uncovering its regularities and establishing overarching rules and behavioural patterns. In this context, the dissertation seeks to demonstrate that a small state situated within the buffer zone, compelled to assume the role of a buffer state during a military conflict, functions primarily as an instrument in the disputes among major powers. Consequently, the military confrontations occurring within the buffer zone are largely influenced by the interests of these great powers, thereby constituting a proxy war.

The initial research question of this thesis focuses on analysing the attributes of buffer states and buffer zones—geographical regions characterized by abundant mineral resources, extensive arable land, significant water reserves, or serving as transit routes for trade and military operations. A key aim of this research is to assess the extent to which these characteristics affect the buffer state's capacity to achieve a state of tranquillity, political neutrality, and economic progress following the resolution of conflicts involving major powers.

In relation to this, the second research question of the dissertation investigates whether a small state within the buffer zone, thrust into the role of a buffer state amid a military conflict, is merely a pawn in the disputes of great powers,

and whether these powers are indeed the driving force behind the military conflicts in the buffer zone, thereby indicating the presence of a proxy war.

To elucidate the context, the third research question of this dissertation investigates whether Ukraine holds systemic strategic significance, particularly in light of its evolving role as a buffer state between the superpower United States and the major power Russia. This transformation is posited to alter geopolitical dynamics at a systemic level. By analysing the case of Ukraine, the dissertation seeks to assess the prospects for a peaceful resolution between these superpowers under such circumstances.

The fourth research question builds upon this issue. The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, which has resulted in substantial material and human losses, appears to contradict Samuel P. Huntington's assertion that neighbouring nations do not engage in wars of mutual annihilation. Consequently, the conflict that erupted on February 24, 2022, presents a paradox that warrants exploration. Thus, the research questions of this dissertation aim to address this contradiction through the lens of the Ukrainian situation.

The fifth research question pertains to the influence of international law and organizations. Literature on buffer zones suggests that a crucial strategy for states within these regions is to enhance cooperation with international organizations and smaller powers, thereby enabling them to pursue their interests more effectively than they could independently. This thesis, therefore, emphasizes the potential ramifications of the military conflict between Ukraine and Russia, particularly given Ukraine's geopolitical position as a buffer state adjacent to our own country.

The dissertation proposes four hypotheses based on the research questions outlined:

Hypothesis 1: A small state, characterized by limited or negligible mineral resources, may attract the attention of major powers and subsequently serve as a buffer state if a supertransit state is established. (A supertransient state refers to a scenario where, due to the interplay of geographical and geopolitical factors at a specific time, a small state becomes an essential micro-level component within the buffer zone. Its significance is comparable to that of the mineral resources in the region, and gaining influence over its territory can facilitate control over the entire buffer zone.)

Hypothesis 2: The occurrence of proxy wars necessitates not only the involvement of small states engaged in conflict within the buffer zone but also the active participation of two or more major powers or alliances. One power acts as a belligerent while the other provides support in the conflict.

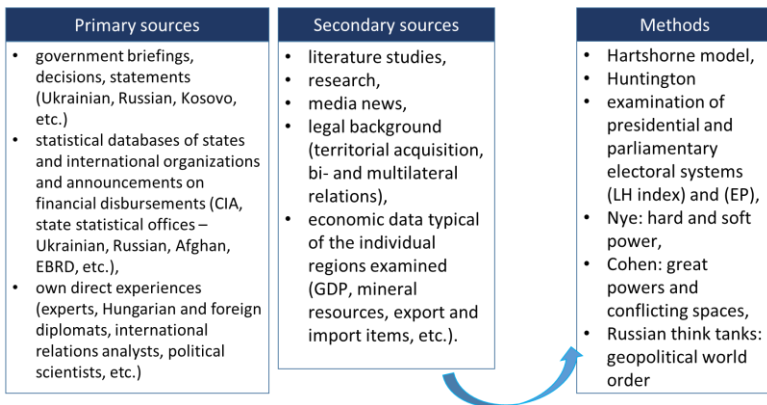
Hypothesis 3: A great power perceives the political and military tensions in the buffer zone adjacent to its borders as a security threat. Consequently, feeling endangered, the great power is likely to engage in a "preventive" war, pursuing self-defence until the conflict is resolved.

Hypothesis 4: In a buffer zone where competition manifests through the application of hard power, small states functioning as buffer states may transition to the role of bridge states only after the conflict has concluded, contingent upon the fulfilment of their external and internal conditions.

### 3. Research methods

I analysed the information bases built from primary and secondary sources using modern geopolitical methods (Figure 1).

#### 1. Figure. Research sources and methods



Source: self-made figure.

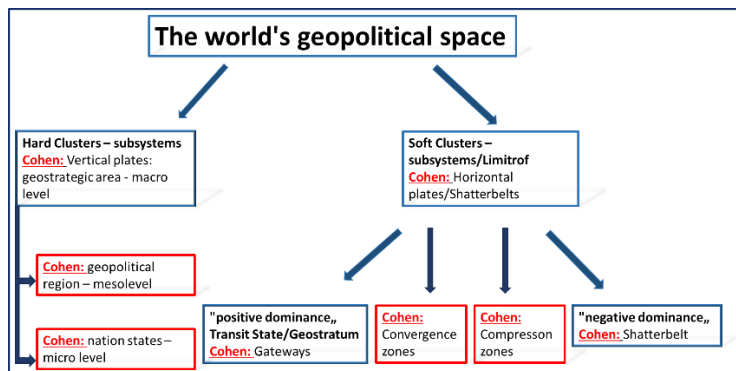
The primary sources utilized in this research comprised official government briefings and statistical data repositories. Additionally, my extensive experience as a diplomat, consul, and civil servant in cities such as Kiev, Beijing, Moscow, and Subotica over a span of more than 30 years significantly contributed to the knowledge acquired.

For the secondary sources of this dissertation, I conducted a thorough analysis of relevant literature and processed research to delineate the characteristics of buffer zones.

The constructed databases were examined using the methodologies illustrated in Figure 1. To achieve the research objectives, I systematically employed the framework of great powers and buffer zones as articulated by Saul Bernard

Cohen, a frequently referenced figure in the literature, and juxtaposed it with Russian theoretical perspectives (Figure 2).

## 2. Figure. Comparison of Western and Russian geopolitical theories



Source: self-made figure.

## 4. Summary of results

### First hypothesis:

This hypothesis was substantiated through an intricate examination of six buffer states across four distinct buffer zones, specifically focusing on Syria as a case study (see Figure 3).

The dissertation has elucidated the geopolitical characterization of a small state, defining it as a component of a horizontal geopolitical framework, where its influence on both its immediate surroundings and the broader global geopolitical landscape restricts its capacity for independent action. Furthermore, it identifies this small state as a subset of a power compelled to function as a buffer state due to the interests of larger powers within the buffer zone, with its status as a minor power likely to persist until the resolution of conflicts between competing powers.

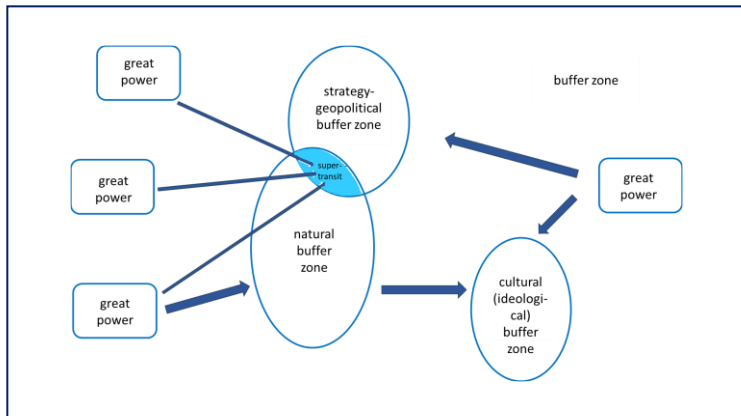
Investigations into the attributes of buffer states have culminated in the overarching assertion that small states frequently possess limited mineral resources, which are counterbalanced by their unique geographical and geopolitical transit advantages, rendering them vital conduits for trade or transportation within their respective regions.

**3. Figure. The conflict zones and conflict states examined in the dissertation**



Source: Self-edited map

**4. Figure. The process of formation of artificial buffer zones**



Source: self-made figure.

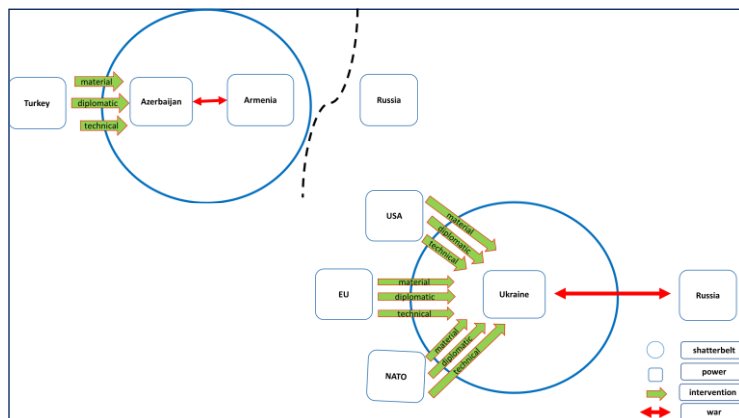
The significance of the transit role in this context lies in the fact that the region's mineral resources cannot be effectively integrated into the global economy and international trade without involving the small state. Therefore, the value of the transit capabilities of this minor power is commensurate with the value of the region's mineral resources.

In a typical scenario, transit capabilities and mineral resources represent distinct attributes; however, geographical factors can give rise to a 'supertransit' capability. This capability, while subject to modification through political shifts and advancements in science and technology, evolves gradually. The development of the supertransit zone has also illuminated the process of creating artificial buffer zones, which can be represented as illustrated in Figure 4.

**Second hypothesis:**

A specific instance was illustrated through a conflict occurring between two distinct horizontal plates, referred to as buffer zones (see Figure 5)

**5. Figure. Proxy war – the Azerbaijani-Armenian and Russian-Ukrainian wars**



Source: self-made figure.

The case study centered on Ukraine, which served as the primary focus of the dissertation. The ongoing military conflict with Russia, a significant power exerting influence in the Central and Eastern European region, emerged as a pertinent example during the research period. Additionally, the dissertation utilized the war between Azerbaijan and the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh - Armenia in the Transcaucasus as a comparative control case. The relevance of



this comparison was underscored by the characterization of both horizontal plates as buffer zones, as identified by both Western and Russian geopolitical analysts. These zones are perceived as 'negative dominance' limit trophies and are integral components of the Great Limit Trophies. Furthermore, both conflicts feature the active involvement of smaller states alongside major powers.

The findings of the dissertation substantiated the second hypothesis, positing that for a military conflict to be classified as a proxy war, it must exhibit the concurrent and active military engagement of at least two regional powers or alliances within a buffer zone, where the geopolitical equilibrium among the influencing powers is disrupted.

### **Third hypothesis:**

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict can be characterized as a proxy war situated in the western region of the Great Limitrof, a concept that Russia has ostensibly established. This buffer state is perceived by Russia as essential for preventing the likelihood of direct confrontations, whether overt or through proxies, with other major powers. The strategic significance of Ukraine is underscored by the transformation of its role as a buffer state, which has evolved from a Russian viewpoint due to its alignment with Western interests. This shift has systematically altered the geopolitical dynamics between the superpower United States and the great power Russia.

The findings of this thesis indicate that Russia has maintained a robust political influence in the Middle East, which serves as a fundamental aspect of its current policy framework.

Regarding the establishment of buffer zones along the extensive boundary of the Great Limit (refer to Figure 6), Russian influence remains unwavering, responding promptly and decisively to any political or military maneuvers by competing powers. This influence becomes increasingly inflexible and defensive when perceived threats arise. In summary, the third hypothesis has been substantiated.

**6. Figure. The Great Border Guard and the areas of Russian hard and soft power application** Source: self-made figure.



**Fourth hypothesis:**

The crux of this hypothesis lies in the analysis of both external and internal conditions. The findings of the dissertation indicate that during periods of armed conflict, a small state engaged as a belligerent has two potential pathways. It may choose to persist as a belligerent until the conflict concludes, or it may exacerbate its predicament by aligning with the interests of the anticipated victor, ultimately leading to its status as a satellite state. The possibility of extricating itself from this status is contingent upon the resolution of the conflict.

In the case of Ukraine, which has incurred significant losses during the war, the prospect of transitioning into a bridge state immediately following the conflict is unfeasible due to unmet internal and external conditions. The hypothesis regarding Ukraine did not substantiate its capacity to adopt the role of a bridge state post-conflict; rather, it merely identified the alteration of conditions as a theoretical possibility, given that the relevant events and processes were ongoing at the time of the thesis's completion. Consequently, the hypothesis presented in the thesis was only partially validated, indicating a need for further research in the future.

## 5. Further research directions

The findings of this thesis indicate potential avenues for future research, particularly regarding the effectiveness of cooperation frameworks such as the Visegrád Group (V-4) and the Three Seas Initiative. It is essential to investigate whether these collaborations can thrive when they involve states that are distinctly positioned within a buffer zone and are themselves recognized as buffer states. Additionally, one must consider whether the likelihood of establishing a bridge state or a gateway region is enhanced in the absence of any buffer states, as exemplified by the "Slavkov Triangle." This region could potentially evolve into a hub for economic and trade activities by incorporating Hungary, Slovenia, and Croatia.

The analysis presented in this thesis underscores the significance of foreign policy and economic relations with other smaller states or international organizations as crucial mechanisms for influencing the political and economic agendas of buffer states. By fostering closer ties with other minor powers, these states are more inclined to advance their interests collectively rather than independently. Building on the insights derived from this research, a pertinent question for further investigation is the examination of initiatives aimed at bolstering the role of international law and the authority of international organizations. This inquiry should also identify the necessary changes in power dynamics, particularly in light of the ongoing military conflict between Ukraine and Russia, which directly impacts our country and exists within a buffer zone.

Moreover, additional research is warranted concerning the fourth hypothesis, which explores the relationships between the attributes and patterns of bridge structures and bridge regions. Should the Russo-Ukrainian war reach a peaceful resolution, a unique historical context may emerge, wherein the establishment of geopolitical equilibrium fosters favorable external conditions. This scenario could lead to a transformation of great power rivalry into economic competition, thereby theoretically facilitating a transition towards a bridge state role.

### Publications on which this dissertation is based

#### Publications, studies, book chapters

1. **Andrékó G.** 2024: The question of the international isolation of the Russian Federation. - In: *Nemzetbiztonsági Szemle*, Budapest, 12. évf (under review, accepted) (**„B” kategóriás, országos folyóirat**)
2. **Andrékó G.** 2024: *Oroszország, Ukrajna és Belarusz választási rendszerének, parlamenti és elnökválasztásainak összehasonlító*

elemzése, 1994-2021. **Területi Statisztika**, Budapest, 2024, 64(2), pp. 236-267. (Q2 minősítésű folyóirat)

3. **Andrékó G.** 2024: *Introduction: Key Objectives and Main Conclusions of the Volume*, in: *2022 A World Ruled by Geopolitics. Facts, Doubts and Trends in an Uncertain World*. - In: Bernek, Ágnes; Andrékó, Gábor; Faust, Anita; Simon, László *2022 A World Ruled by Geopolitics. Facts, Doubts and Trends in an Uncertain World*, Budapest, Hungary: **Neumann Lapkiadó és Kommunikációs Kft.** 224 p. pp. 12-24.
4. **Andrékó G.** 2024: *Russia's Great Power Status and its Perception of World Order (2008-2022)*, in: *2022 A World Ruled by Geopolitics. Facts, Doubts and Trends in an Uncertain World*. - In: Bernek, Ágnes; Andrékó, Gábor; Faust, Anita; Simon, László *2022 A World Ruled by Geopolitics. Facts, Doubts and Trends in an Uncertain World*, Budapest, Hungary: **Neumann Lapkiadó és Kommunikációs Kft.** 224 p. pp. 100-130.
5. **Andrékó G.** 2024: *The Impact of Possible Outcomes of the Russia-Ukraine War on the New World Order*, in: *2022 A World Ruled by Geopolitics. Facts, Doubts and Trends in an Uncertain World*. - In: Bernek, Ágnes; Andrékó, Gábor; Faust, Anita; Simon, László *2022 A World Ruled by Geopolitics. Facts, Doubts and Trends in an Uncertain World*, Budapest, Hungary: **Neumann Lapkiadó és Kommunikációs Kft.** 224 p. pp. 200-209.
6. **Andrékó G.** 2023: *A területi diplomáciai hálózatok orosz nézőpontból.* – In: Bernek, Ágnes; Andrékó, Gábor; Faust, Anita; Simon, László *Hálózati diplomácia – a területi hálózatok fontossága a 21. századi diplomáciai kapcsolatokban*, **Eurázsia Szemle**, III. évf 4. sz. pp. 9-33. („D” kategóriás, országos folyóirat)
7. **Andrékó G.** 2023: *Az orosz-ukrán háború lehetséges kimeneteleinek hatása az új világrendre*, in: *2022 A geopolitika által uralt világ*. - In: Bernek, Ágnes; Andrékó, Gábor; Faust, Anita; Simon, László *2022 A geopolitika által uralt világ*, Budapest, Magyarország: **Neumann Lapkiadó és Kommunikációs Kft.** 192 p.
8. **Andrékó G.** 2023: *Oroszország nagyhatalmi státusza és világrend felfogása*, in: *2022 A geopolitika által uralt világ*. - In: Bernek, Ágnes; Andrékó, Gábor; Faust, Anita; Simon, László *2022 A geopolitika által uralt világ*, Budapest, Magyarország: **Neumann Lapkiadó és Kommunikációs Kft.** 192 p. pp. 164-176.
9. **Andrékó G.** 2023: *A koszovói válság kiújulása napjainkban.* - **Eurázsia Központ, Elemzések**, Budapest, 2023/37.

10. **Andrékó G.** 2023: *Oroszország helyzete a Wagner-lázadás után.* - **Eurázsia Központ, Elemzések**, Budapest 2023/36
11. **Andrékó G.** 2023: *A „visszafordíthatatlansági mutató” – a Krim integrációs folyamata kapcsán.* - **Eurázsia Központ, Elemzések**, Budapest 2023/2
12. **Andrékó G.** 2022: *Az orosz külpolitika főbb jellemzői a posztszovjet időben 2008-2022 között.* - **Eurázsia Központ, Elemzések**, Budapest 2022/40.
13. **Andrékó G.** 2022: *Az orosz világrend felfogás.* - **Eurázsia Központ, Elemzések**, Budapest 2022/24
14. **Andrékó G.** 2022: *Az orosz nagyhatalmi szerep támogatása hard és soft power eszközökkel 2008 és 2022 között.* - In: **Nemzetbiztonsági Szemle**, Budapest, 10. évf 2.sz. pp. 3-23. (**„B” kategóriás, országos folyóirat**)
15. **Andrékó G.** 2022: *Oroszország háborúja Ukrajnában – orosz érvek és orosz célok.* - **Eurázsia Központ, Elemzések**, Budapest 2022/12.
16. **Andrékó G.** 2022: *A Krim-félsziget annektálásának orosz költségei és a folyamat visszafordíthatóságának kérdése.* – In: **Külvügyi Szemle**, Budapest, 21. pp. 142-175. (**„A” kategóriás, országos folyóirat**)
17. **Andrékó G.** 2022: *A Krim-félsziget és Oroszország egyesülésének visszafordíthatatlansági mutatója.* - In: **MH Transzformációs Parancsnokság**, Honvéd Tudományos Kutatóhely (szerk.) A biztonsági környezet változásai, Budapest, Magyarország: Zrínyi Kiadó. 245 p. pp. 171-184.
18. **Andrékó G.** 2021: *A kelet-közép-európai térséget befolyásoló geopolitikai hatások.* - **Felderítő Szemle**, 20. évf 4. sz., Budapest pp. 5-29. (**„A” kategóriás, országos folyóirat**)
19. **Andrékó G.** (2021). *A TIBEK – mint fúziós információs központ – centripetális hatása a magyar kormányzati döntésekre, különös tekintettel az értékelés és a tájékoztatás szerepére.* – In: **Nemzetbiztonsági Szemle**, 9. évf 2. sz. Budapest pp. 29-43. (**„B” kategóriás, országos folyóirat**)
20. **Andrékó G.** 2020: *A 2015-ös migrációs mozgás második fázisa és hatása a vajdasági magyar közösségre.* – In: **Felderítő Szemle**, 19. évf 4. sz. Budapest pp. 102-149. (**„A” kategóriás, országos folyóirat**)
21. **Andrékó G.** 2020: *Az etnikai és a vallási tényezők centrifugális hatása a szerb- és az ukrán államra.* – In: **Felderítő Szemle**, 19. évf 3. sz. Budapest pp. 127-147. (**„A” kategóriás, országos folyóirat**)