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**Similarities and Differences in the Geopolitical Strategies of
In-Between Europe**

THESIS BOOKLET OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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I. Research Background and Rationale for the Topic

1. Research Problem and Relevance

The doctoral dissertation examines the geopolitical position of a European area that classical geopolitical theories placed between the German, Russian and Turkish spheres of power, yet which still lacks a single, generally accepted name and geographical definition. In both Hungarian and international literature, the term In-Between Europe appears alongside several partially overlapping regional concepts, including Mitteleuropa, Zwischeneuropa, East-Central Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, the Intermarium, and various interpretations of peripheral zones and buffer zones. This conceptual plurality is not merely a terminological problem: it also indicates that the position, extent and geopolitical function of the area have changed over time and that different actors may interpret it according to different spatial logics.

The relevance of the topic derives from the post-Cold War transformation of the international system and, in particular, the security-policy shifts of the past decade and a half. China's growing global economic and political weight, the geo-economic networks associated with the Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's destabilising activities in Ukraine after 2014 and the war launched in 2022, as well as changes in NATO's and the European Union's eastern and southeastern neighbourhoods, have all increased the strategic significance of the area under study. Alongside the renewed importance of military deterrence and defence, energy security, critical infrastructure, cybersecurity, supply chains, migration and societal resilience have also become defining elements of the geopolitical environment.

A significant share of the countries of In-Between Europe are now members of the European Union and NATO and therefore, in the classical sense, can no longer simply be regarded as a passive buffer zone between Western and Eastern centres of power. Their geographical in-betweenness, however, has not disappeared. The area lies at the intersection of the Russia-Ukraine war, the security systems of the Baltic and Black Seas, the integration processes of the Western Balkans, Turkey's regional presence, and German, European and transatlantic economic and security relations. This duality - enduring geographical exposure and transformed institutional embeddedness - justifies a contemporary reassessment of the geopolitical position of In-Between Europe.

The significance of the area under study is further enhanced by the transformation of the classical meaning of its in-between position during the post-Cold War period. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Eastern Bloc, a large share of the In-Between European states gradually integrated into Euro-Atlantic institutions, while conflict zones, frozen conflicts and divergent geopolitical orientations persisted along the eastern and

southeastern peripheries. The Russia-Ukraine war, which escalated in 2022, made this structural duality particularly visible: the region is simultaneously an integrated part of the European Union and NATO and a point of intersection for several external power, security and geo-economic pressures originating from its eastern and southeastern neighbourhoods. This warrants examining the area not only as a historical region but also as a contemporary geopolitical space with changing functions.

2. Research Background and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical base of the research is multidisciplinary. Rather than relying exclusively on a single school of geopolitics, it combines complementary approaches to the relationship between geographical space and political power. Through the work of Ratzel and Kjellén, classical geopolitics highlights the interrelationships among space, the state and power; Mackinder's and Spykman's geostrategic theories emphasise continental, rimland and strategic-access logics; military geography focuses on the military-strategic utilisation of space; the security studies literature on the expanding scope of threats and security; and geo-economics on the strategic use of economic instruments and dependencies.

Additionally, the dissertation draws on the literature on grand strategy and small-state strategic adaptation, as well as the perspectives of critical and neoclassical geopolitics. Grand strategy draws attention to the long-term coordination of state objectives and the various resources available, while the small-state literature presents adaptation options for states with limited resources, including the logics of balancing, bandwagoning, hedging, shelter and niche diplomacy. Critical geopolitics highlights that geopolitical space is not merely an objective given, but is also constructed in political texts and discourses. This makes the examination of official strategic documents particularly important, as they also reflect the publicly communicated spatial perceptions and threat perceptions of state and institutional actors.

The historical and geopolitical literature related to In-Between Europe is extensive. Penck's concept of *Zwischeneuropa*, Naumann's *Mitteleuropa* concept, Mackinder's and Spykman's strategic spatial theories, Halecki's interpretation of East-Central Europe, the various *Intermarium* concepts, and later civilisational and neo-Eurasian approaches all, in different ways but recurrently, attribute a special position to the European zone between the German, Russian and Turkish spheres of power. In the Hungarian literature, the works of Bibó, Romsics, Bernek and other authors likewise draw attention to the area's small-state fragmentation, external power exposure, and opportunities for cooperation and connectivity.

On the basis of the literature review, the use of the term In-Between-Europe must therefore be distinguished at two levels. The first is the analytical level: at this level, the area can be

interpreted as a distinct framework of analysis on the basis of its historical and geopolitical position between the German, Russian and Turkish spheres of power. The second is the actor level, that is, the spatial concepts through which the states concerned and external powers themselves describe their geopolitical environment. The dissertation does not seek to create a universal or consensual regional definition. The analytical delimitation applied in the research treats as its framework of analysis the European space extending from Finland through the Baltic region, Central Europe and the Balkans to Greece and Cyprus, and including Belarus and Ukraine in the east. The explanatory power of this delimitation rests not on a unified regional identity, but on relations with larger geopolitical spheres of power, historical exposure, and strategic opportunities and constraints.

3. Research Gap and Scientific Objective of the Dissertation

Despite the substantial historical and geopolitical literature on the topic, less explored is the question of the spatial categories, threat perceptions and priorities through which the states of the region and the external actors shaping their geopolitical environment interpret this same space in their current official strategic documents. Previous research typically examines regional concepts, great-power aspirations, the foreign and security policy characteristics of individual countries, or the problems of particular subregions (e.g. the Baltic region or the Balkans) separately. The dissertation's added value lies in connecting these approaches: after the conceptual and historical interpretation of space, it compares the strategic documents of internal and external actors within a common analytical framework.

The research therefore pursues two interrelated objectives. First, based on a synthesis of the relevant geopolitical theories, it develops a contemporary analytical delimitation that enables the examination of the European area between the German, Russian and Turkish geopolitical spheres of power. Second, it explores how this area, its subregions, states and major geopolitical challenges appear in the official strategic documents of the relevant internal and external actors. The research does not seek to construct a universal concept of the region that all actors should accept; rather, it establishes an analytical framework and then empirically examines the extent to which the actors' own spatial perceptions correspond to it.

Accordingly, the research gap is not found in examining the security policies of individual countries or the region's historical geopolitical position in isolation. Its added value lies in connecting the historical-conceptual interpretation of space and the analysis of current strategic documents within a unified comparative framework. This makes it possible to examine simultaneously which spatial constructions of In-Between Europe have been produced by the literature, which subregions and strategic directions external geopolitical actors consider

important, and how the states of the area perceive their own security environment and their relations with one another. Through this, the research also examines the contemporary empirical content of the concept of In-Between Europe.

4. Research Questions

(K1) What concepts and geopolitical interpretations have been used to name and geographically delimit the In-Between European space up to the present?

(K2) What overarching geographical spatial concepts appear in the strategic documents examined of the countries of the region and the relevant external geopolitical actors?

(K3) Which geopolitical risks and trends shape the evolution of the security situation, and how do they appear in the documents examined?

(K4) What geopolitical perceptions, strategic objectives and priorities characterise the states of In-Between Europe, and on this basis, what similarities and differences can be identified in the strategic responses they formulate?

5. Hypotheses

(H1) Despite its distinctive characteristics, In-Between Europe does not constitute a uniformly defined geopolitical region either in the relevant literature or in the strategic documents examined; instead, the area is interpreted through partially overlapping spatial concepts of differing geographical extent and function.

(H2) In the documents of the In-Between European states examined, threat perceptions and security-policy priorities display territorially differentiated patterns despite similar socio-economic structures and historical development paths. These patterns can be interpreted by jointly considering geographical relations to conflict zones, external centres of power and strategic routes, as well as institutional embeddedness.

(H3) The strategic perceptions and responses of the In-Between European states examined do not form a single pattern characteristic of the region as a whole, but rather partially overlapping subregional strategic patterns that can be interpreted along geographical and institutional factors.

6. Levels of Analysis

The research employed three interrelated levels of analysis. The first examined the conceptual and geographical interpretation of In-Between Europe: what names and geopolitical concepts exist in the literature and what overarching or subregional categories appear in strategic documents. This level related to research questions K1-K2 and hypothesis H1.

The second level of analysis examined geopolitical and security challenges and their territorial differentiation. It sought to determine the geographical patterns formed by different threats and how these relate to external spheres of power, conflict zones, strategic routes and the institutional embeddedness of states. This was the empirical level of analysis for K3 and H2.

The third level compared the geopolitical perceptions, strategic objectives, priorities and responses of the In-Between European states. The aim was not merely to list similarities and differences between pairs of countries, but to determine whether geographically and institutionally interpretable, partially overlapping strategic patterns emerge. This level related to question K4 and hypothesis H3.

II. Methods Used

1. Basic Logic of the Document Analysis

The dissertation combines two main methodological pillars: a review of the literature and structured comparative document analysis. The purpose of the literature review was to systematise the conceptual and historical delimitations of the area under study, the related geopolitical theories, and the interpretive categories of the research. The empirical analysis built on this foundation by comparing the publicly articulated conceptions of security space, threat perceptions, partnership logics and strategic priorities in relevant state and institutional strategic documents.

Within the framework of document analysis, the empirical procedure applied qualitative content analysis supplemented by a standardised keyword search. The keyword search did not function as an independent analytical method but as a quantifying and comparative tool supporting the qualitative analysis. Raw hit counts do not automatically imply that a given topic is more important: each occurrence could be included in the analysis only after examination of its immediate textual context. The numerical data therefore support comparability and transparency, while meaning is provided by qualitative interpretation.

2. Selection of Actors and Documents Examined

Based on the delimitation established in the literature review, the geographical framework of the research comprises 24 In-Between European states: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Ukraine, Romania, Moldova, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Greece and Cyprus. The research identifies the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, Turkey and China as external actors shaping the geopolitical environment of the region, along with the European Union and NATO as institutional actors.

The main criteria for selecting documents were recency, validity, public and English-language accessibility, and functional comparability. The genre of strategic documents differs across countries; therefore, inclusion was based not on formal identity of document titles but on substantive function: the research examined national security, defence, military, foreign

policy or similar policy documents and source materials containing official statements on the actor's international environment, geographical orientation, security perceptions, strategic priorities or objectives for action.

The principal cut-off date for the document list was 31 December 2024. The research sought to include for each actor the most recent document available and in force by that date that met the sampling criteria. Two methodologically justified exceptions were made. In the case of Turkey, in the absence of a suitable unified strategy, the set of thematic foreign-policy materials published on the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs constituted the source unit. In the case of China, the appropriate official document became available only after the sample had been closed; therefore, the 2026 publication *More Just and Equitable Global Governance: China's Principles, Proposals and Actions* was included. Consequently, the Chinese results must be interpreted with a temporal asymmetry.

Among the 24 geographically defined internal actors, in seven cases - Belarus, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia, Greece and Cyprus - no current, public, English-language document meeting the sampling criteria could be identified. The actual empirical sample therefore comprised 17 internal actors and 9 external actors, a total of 26 source units. For each included actor, one document or source unit selected in a comparable manner formed the basis of the analysis.

The sampling deliberately examines a corpus of documents fixed at a particular point in time. The principal cut-off date of 31 December 2024 is particularly relevant because strategies adopted or in force after 2022 already reflect the narratives of a fundamentally changed European security environment. However, national strategy-making cycles differ, so it was not realistic to include the same type of document adopted in the same year in every case. Functional comparability therefore took precedence over formal uniformity. The subsequent inclusion of the 2026 Chinese document creates a temporal asymmetry; findings derived from it are therefore compared only to a limited extent with the sample closed in 2024. The methodological advantage of this decision, however, is that the source material underpinning the analysis can be clearly identified for every actor.

3. Coding, Keyword Search and Qualitative Evaluation

The analytical categories were derived from the research questions and the literature review. The predefined English keywords for analysing spatial perceptions were Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, In-between-Europe, Balkan(s), Baltic(s), Carpathian Basin, Visegrad, Three Seas/3SI and Geography. As new relevant categories emerged during the qualitative analysis, the list was expanded to include Eurasia, Southeastern Europe and Western Balkans, after which these were checked consistently across all documents.

In analysing the geopolitical and security environment, the standardised search terms included Environment, Threat, Cooperation and Migration. In addition to these keywords, qualitative content analysis made it possible to identify recurring topics that were not necessarily formulated using the predefined words, including climate change, biodiversity, food security, pandemics, frozen conflicts, proxy wars, hybrid and cyber warfare, space warfare, terrorism, defence expenditure, illegal migration, financial instability, socio-economic disparities, and security issues related to ethnic and religious minorities.

The coding procedure applied deliberate hit-cleaning rules. Occurrences on covers, in tables of contents, chapter and subchapter titles, figure and table captions, appendices, bibliographic references or source indications were excluded from the numerical results. Mere repetition of a word within a single unit of meaning was likewise not counted as a new hit if it contained no new substantive element. An occurrence was counted as a new hit if it linked a new actor, geographical space, threat, strategic function, form of cooperation or different assessment to the concept in question. Ambiguous keywords were included in the quantitative analysis only when the textual context clearly confirmed a geopolitical or security-policy meaning.

The keyword search and qualitative content analysis functioned as complementary but separate operations. Numerical hit counts cannot be regarded as direct measures of the strategic importance of a topic; their role is to support comparability. Frequent occurrence of a term does not in itself demonstrate greater strategic weight, so the immediate textual context of every relevant hit also had to be examined. Ambiguous occurrences were included in the quantified data only when their geopolitical or security-policy meaning was clear from the context. At the same time, the preliminary category system did not remain entirely closed: if the qualitative review identified a new spatial category relevant to the research questions, its presence was checked consistently across all documents. This is how Eurasia, Southeastern Europe and the Western Balkans, for example, were included as separate categories.

4. Methodological Limitations

The document analysis does not examine the actors' full, actual foreign and security policy behaviour, but the officially approved strategic narratives intended for public consumption. Strategic texts are politically edited and often compromise-based documents; they therefore cannot be treated as precise reflections of decision-makers' hidden intentions or future behaviour. They are, however, suitable for examining self-understanding, threat perceptions, priorities and declared spatial conceptions.

Further limitations include differences among document types, the exclusion of seven internal countries, the temporal difference of the Chinese source, and the fact that only one

document or source unit per actor was included in the analysis. For this reason, the research does not attempt to reconstruct complete national grand strategies, which would require the combined examination of military, foreign policy, economic, energy and other sectoral policy documents. For the same reason, small-state adaptation categories were not treated as independent coding variables: reliably identifying balancing, hedging, shelter or other strategic behaviour would require a longer-term examination of actual state decisions beyond declared document content.

III. Scientific Results of the Dissertation

1. Summary Evaluation of the Hypotheses

- H1 was confirmed. Neither the literature nor the strategic documents examined reveal a single, consensually delimited In-Between Europe. The term itself does not appear in the current documents; instead, strategic spatial perceptions are organised around overlapping geographical, institutional and functional spatial categories.
- H2 was confirmed. Threat perceptions and security-policy priorities are territorially differentiated and can be related to proximity to conflict zones, external centres of power and strategic routes. The influence of geography is not deterministic, however, but operates together with institutional, historical, alliance-related and economic factors.
- H3 was partially confirmed. Three particularly distinct strategic relationships can be identified in the northern part of NATO's Eastern Flank, the broader Black Sea region and the Western Balkans, but these do not constitute rigid, mutually exclusive subregions. The patterns overlap, and several states are simultaneously linked to multiple networks of relations.

2. Scientific Results

The main results of the dissertation can be summarised as follows:

- 1. One of the main scientific results of the research is the distinction between the analytical and actor-level interpretations of In-Between Europe.** Based on the synthesis of the literature, In-Between Europe can be justified as a distinct geopolitical framework of analysis, while the document analysis showed that the strategic spatial perceptions of the states concerned are organised not around a commonly used concept of an In-Between European region, but along multiple, partially intersecting regional, institutional and functional spatial categories.

2. **The research integrates the geopolitical spatial perceptions of the region's states and the external actors shaping their geopolitical environment within a unified document-analysis framework.** The combined application of qualitative content analysis and standardised keyword searches made it possible to compare geographical spatial concepts, the appearance of external and internal actors, and perceptions of the geopolitical and security environment according to the same analytical criteria. The empirical novelty of the study therefore lies not in the analysis of individual documents as such, but in making them comparable through a unified set of criteria. This made it possible to compare geopolitical problems previously examined primarily as separate country or regional cases within a common analytical framework.
3. **The document analysis empirically demonstrates that In-Between Europe, as conceptualised in the literature, does not appear as an independent and commonly used geopolitical spatial category in the official strategic documents of the actors examined.** Instead, strategic spatial perceptions are organised around smaller, functional and partly institutionalised areas. The Baltic region, the Black Sea, NATO's Eastern Flank and the Western Balkans become strategically visible because they are linked to specific security challenges, military tasks, integration processes or systems of cooperation. Consequently, one important theoretical result of the research is that the contemporary geopolitical relevance of In-Between Europe cannot be derived from the existence of a unified regional identity or a commonly used spatial concept. Instead of a static interpretation of the region, the research supports the applicability of a functional spatial approach.
4. **The research demonstrates that one of the most important determinants of the current geopolitical position of the In-Between European states is the combined effect of Euro-Atlantic institutional embeddedness and the security relationship with Russia.** Based on the strategic documents examined, the geopolitical structure of the region differs significantly from the historical situation in which In-Between Europe was primarily interpreted as a buffer zone located between directly competing German, Russian and Turkish imperial spheres of power. A significant share of the states examined is now embedded in the institutional systems of the European Union and NATO, fundamentally altering the classical in-between position. The dominant presence of the European Union and NATO creates strong institutional convergence among a significant share of the states examined, while Russia appears as the most

important negative state-level geopolitical reference point. This general structure is nevertheless territorially differentiated and does not eliminate strategic differences within the region.

5. **The study identifies three distinct but non-exclusive subregional strategic patterns: strategic relationships associated with the northern part of NATO's Eastern Flank, the broader Black Sea region, and the Western Balkans.** The patterns show that similarities in the strategic perceptions of In-Between European states are not random but relate to their geographical position, institutional embeddedness and immediate security environment. At the same time, some of the region's central states lie at the intersection of several networks of relations, which precludes a rigid subregional division.
6. **The research findings show that the relationship between geographical position and strategic perceptions is not deterministic.** Geographical proximity to conflict zones, external spheres of power and strategic routes influences threat perceptions and strategic priorities, but this effect operates in interaction with institutional embeddedness, alliance relationships, historical experience and economic dependencies.
7. **The analysis of how countries appear in one another's strategic documents shows that the In-Between European network of relations is not organised around a general sense of regional belonging.** The density of document-level relationships is determined primarily by the war in Ukraine, immediate neighbourhood, regional defence cooperation, integration processes, and territorial, historical and national-policy conflicts. The internal structure of the region therefore consists of several parallel and partially overlapping geopolitical, security-policy and institutional networks of relations.
8. **The research findings also demonstrate the broadening of the concept of security.** Alongside the renewed importance of military threats and classical military defence, strategic documents also treat economic dependencies, energy supply, critical infrastructure, technological and cybersecurity, supply chains, societal resilience, illegal migration and climate change as integral parts of the geopolitical environment. The region's strategic exposure is consequently military, political, economic, social and technological at the same time. The contemporary geopolitical exposure of In-Between Europe therefore cannot be reduced solely to classical military-geographical conditions.

The findings set out in points 1-8 also provide an opportunity for a dynamic and functional geopolitical interpretation of In-Between Europe, viewing the area not as a homogeneous and static region but as a system of interconnected elements performing different roles. The Blue Spearhead concept developed in the Discussion section of the doctoral dissertation represents a theoretical extension of this approach and can be interpreted as an original geopolitical spatial model developed by the author and based on the empirical findings of the research.

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V. List of the Author's and Co-authored Publications Related to the Topic

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