BUFFERING AND PERIPHERAL DYNAMICS IN THE MORPHOLOGY OF POLITICAL SPACE

Yuliia Uzun[1] , D.Sc. in Political Science; Svitlana Koch[1] , D.Sc. in Political Science
[1] I. I. Mechnikov Odesa National University, Odesa, Ukraine
Corresponding author: Svitlana Koch; E-mail: svkoch@onu.edu.ua

Abstract

The article is devoted to a systematic study of the spatial structures of political development through the analysis of center-periphery interactions, buffer zones, and borderlands as specific forms of political space organization. It demonstrates the evolution of concepts from imperial notions of territorial control to contemporary networked and cross-border models that reveal the changing role of peripheries in the global distribution of power. The theoretical foundation of the research combines world-systems, structural–morphological, and limological approaches. Peripherality is defined as a structured inequality in access to resources, security, and institutional influence; however, it is no longer interpreted as a passive "margin." Peripheries are understood as social fields in which alternative political interests, mobilization practices, and new formats of identity are formed. Particular emphasis is placed on buffer spaces as a special form of peripherality. They serve as 'shock absorbers' between competing centers of power while simultaneously using their 'in-between' position as a resource for foreign policy and strategic manoeuvring. The article distinguishes between passive and strategic buffers, as well as the variability of their status depending on the dynamics of the geo-economic environment and the balance of power. The second conceptual block focuses on the transformation of borders in the era of globalization. The state is losing its monopoly on spatial organization, while borderlands are turning into transit nodes of economic and political flows, where cross-border identities and new forms of political participation emerge. Thus, space is increasingly defined not by barriers, but by networked interaction and the density of connections. The development of the European political space is analyzed through the dialectic of integration and regionalization: the growth of local autonomy is combined with the strengthening of supranational governance, which creates conditions for the politicization of peripheries and their involvement in strategic decision-making. It is noted that the modern political space is shaped not only by the dominance of centers but also by the capacity of peripheral and buffer regions to act as autonomous actors whose agency determines the stability and transformation of the international system. This opens perspectives for further research into the adaptation strategies and subjectivity of such territories within a multipolar world.

Keywords: political space, peripherality, buffer zones, borderlands, cross-border interaction, regional agency, network configurations, territorial hierarchy, territorial politics, geopolitical stability.

Introduction

Borders emerge, disappear, and overlap, changing their very nature in accordance with historical and political transformations. They mark distinctions within the social and cultural environment, delineate the boundaries of power and political ambitions, and create the illusion of stability within the international

order. Space simultaneously serves as both an arena and a product of political technologies. It is political management that determines its functions, meanings, and configurations, turning territory into an instrument of strategic control and competition.

Despite the widespread rhetoric of the 'inviolability' and 'sovereignty' of borders, contemporary political processes reveal their high degree of dynamism and multidimensionality. Political science increasingly operates with such notions as buffer zones, neutral spaces, liminal territories, and walls – not only physical but also symbolic (Uzun & Koch, 2024). These concepts reflect the ongoing process of cleavaging of space under the influence of micro- and macro-political factors, social transformations, and technologies of geopolitical influence.

Borders are capable of outlasting civilizations and empires, persisting as mental projections that continue to shape social relations and political imaginaries. Their asymmetry functions both as a condition for development and as a mechanism for maintaining global dynamics: the overlapping of political, cultural, and civilizational boundaries generates adjacent spaces – peripheral and buffer ones – where different identities and interests collide or interpenetrate, thereby producing a potential for conflict.

Bufferhood, as an interdisciplinary concept, combines spatial, geopolitical, and social dimensions of interaction between systems, states, or communities. In limology, it denotes a territorial zone located between two or more political or civilizational areas that performs the functions of a spatial damper, a transit interface, and an environment of hybrid identities. Peripherality, by contrast, denotes the structural inequality of access to resources, power, and security within 'center–periphery' relations, which defines the ambivalent subjectivity of such territories.

Thus, the relevance of this research lies in the need for a scholarly interpretation of buffer and peripheral spaces as key parameters of political cleavage – both structural and substantive – that determine the dynamics of the international system, the intensity of regional conflicts, and the mechanisms of external influence.

The article aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical and methodological interpretation of bufferhood, peripherality, and borderlandness as interrelated parameters of political space; to trace their evolution from hierarchical–centric to networked–cross-border models; and to reveal their role in shaping conflict dynamics, stabilization mechanisms, and the agency of political actors within the modern international system.

Theoretical and methodological foundations of the research

The methodological foundation for analyzing the asymmetry of political spaces and the functioning of buffer and peripheral zones is formed by the structural–systemic, world-systems, and network–cross-border approaches, which allow political space to be viewed as a hierarchical yet dynamic configuration of power relations and flows.

Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis (Wallerstein, 2004, p. 67) defines *peripherality* as the result of uneven development in the global economy and politics, where buffer territories function as semi-peripheries, absorbing tensions between the core and the periphery.

Fernand Braudel's concept of the '*longue durée*' (Braudel, 1993, p. 733) emphasizes the historical depth and inertia of borders, which shape enduring spatial structures of conflict. Braudel interprets *space* as a *multilayered dimension of historical development*, within which economic cores and peripheries are formed.

In the politico-geographical dimension, the key analytical framework is provided by Stein Rokkan and Seymour Martin Lipset's center–periphery theory, which explains political cleavages through historically established territorial '*lines of division*' (Rokkan & Lipset, 1967).

The spatial-political dimension is further developed through Michel Foucher's limology, which conceptualizes borders as institutional technologies that order space and create a '*bounded political field*' (Foucher, 2007). Henri Lefebvre views space as a social construction of power that produces a *hierarchy of territories* – from dominant centers to subordinate peripheries (Lefebvre, 1991). Meanwhile, Peter Sloterdijk's spherological approach allows one to interpret the *buffer as a 'membrane'* between political worlds, through which risks, influences, and ideas circulate (Sloterdijk, 2004). Sloterdijk's ideas about the space of human relations are especially relevant in the context of buffer and peripheral spaces, which function as distinct structures that provide both connection and boundaries between different social and political units. These spaces have their own dynamics and organization, and, as the philosopher notes, 'one can call it… a living interweaving of living beings… where the human

is a genius of neighborhood – accessible to another and yet transcendent for them' (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 14). Buffer and peripheral spaces serve as networks of possibilities for interaction, ensuring both accessibility and protection, which explains the symbolic program of expansion unfolding from local communities to cities, empires, and onward to global space. In this process, the microsphere, as an element of buffer space, acts as a learning space with the capacity to grow; at the same time, 'countless smaller spheres burst and sometimes reassemble in larger formats.' Within it operates the law of inclusion through as similation: it is a hybrid-elastic space that responds to deformation not only with restoration but with expansion. Sloterdijk emphasizes that since there is a sense that 'in the greatest lies ultimate security,' the psyche seeks participation in the indestructible. Immersion in the final element occurs either 'in God' or 'in the world,' possibly in both at the same time. In this context, his famous formula 'Tell me what you are immersed in and I will tell you who you are' can be understood as a description of the interaction of individual, buffer, and peripheral spaces, where each unit finds its place and boundaries within the structure of a larger whole (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 17).

Within political geography, significant contributions come from Phil Kelly (2006), who highlights the role of *buffer regions in balancing global and local forces*, as well as Oskar Jasky (2012), who interprets the *border* as a *dynamic social process* rather than a static line.

A crucial contribution to the analysis of the status of buffer states is found in recent studies by Bibek Chand (Chand, 2023) and Lionel Beehner (Beehner, 2020), who argue that bufferization is not merely a geopolitical position between two powers but a conceptual mechanism of imposed vulnerability, in which external actors determine the limits of autonomy of such states. Their work also introduces the notion of productive bufferhood, whereby a state or region utilizes its "in-betweenness" to enhance its own agency, thereby avoiding the role of a mere object of external influence.

This perspective is complemented by David Newman's emphasis on the *social constructedness of borders* (Newman, 2006, p. 172) and Étienne Balibar's conception of borders as a '*diffused*' *phenomenon*, present within societies and political orders themselves (Balibar, 2009, p. 194).

Anssi Paasi's conceptualization of the processual nature of borders further underscores their continuous reproduction through institutions, discourses, and collective identities (Paasi, 1996; 2011).

The combination of these approaches forms the theoretical foundation for analyzing buffer and peripheral spaces as key parameters of political space cleavage, which determine: the configuration of security within regional subsystems; regimes of power control over transit flows; the formation of hybrid identities under competition among centers of power; and the dynamics of international accountability and agency of peripheral actors.

Analysis of the hierarchical system of center-periphery relations requires a structuralist approach. Its operational categories are binary pairs, which serve as a means of conceptualizing political space, where the center is the system's core and the periphery its margin. Conceptualization parameters are delineated by oppositions such as : 'internal' vs. 'external,' 'self' vs. 'other,' 'progressive' vs. 'backward,' 'cultural' vs. 'wild.' Binary pairs organize the structural axis of the semantic space of the socio-political system.

Within the social sciences, the ontological integrity of scholarly analysis manifests in the existence of conceptual theories that emphasize the qualities of territorial spaces and their hierarchical interdependence, including Pierre Bourdieu's theories of social topology and social space (Bourdieu, 1980), Walter Christaller's central place theory (Christaller, 1967), Torsten Hägerstrand's diffusion of innovations (Hägerstrand, 1967), and François Perroux's growth poles (Perroux, 1955). These authors investigated the factors of political and economic space cleavage within the center-periphery paradigm.

The typology of center-periphery approaches highlights the characteristics of organizing and implementing strategies of center dominance over the periphery. Territorial unevenness in the reproduction of innovations and the timing of their adoption became the subject of analysis in the diffusion of innovations theory. The periphery can thus be understood as a center of traditionalism and conservatism. The managerial concept presumes that governance is exercised unevenly across territory. Its formal structure is localized in administrative centers, delineating the boundaries of the center and periphery. The socio-economic concept posits that a developed center contrasts with a less developed periphery. Resource availability stimulates political ambitions and may manifest as dominance over the periphery or as secession. Territorial political hierarchy within a state is explained by the internal colonialism concept: the periphery produces raw materials and unskilled labor, while the center localizes technological production and specialist training. Peripheral separatism is therefore interpreted as a consequence of marginalization. Peripheries become loci of anti-systemic nationalist movements.

Center-periphery as ymmetry explains why political stability and democracy are concentrated in system cores, while the periphery experiences authoritarian cycles and conflicts. Simultaneously, a semi-periphery emerges as the politically most dynamic space, seeking integration with the center while avoiding marginalization. In limological terms, buffer states often coincide with the semi-periphery: they stabilize the system by preventing direct conflict between centers of power, while simultaneously forming zones of transit, compromise, and mixed identities.

The idea of a self-sufficient, independent space, in which internal connections and exchanges create an 'organic unity,' is presented in the works of Fernand Braudel (Brodie, 1979). In his view, the world consists of politico-cultural units – states, nations, peoples – each developing according to its own trajectory. Economic self-sufficiency and hierarchical structure create a system where the center accumulates resources and technologies, second-order regions – the 'shining others' – possess a portion of resources and opportunities, and peripheral regions, due to their archaic and underdeveloped state, become objects of exploitation.

The politically active space is the semi-periphery. It simultaneously seeks the center but fears marginalization. Semi-periphery can be as sociated with buffer states – they stabilize the system and prevent direct conflict among power centers. Braudel was the first to formulate the idea of a world-system economy, which develops not as a single global market but as a network of regional centers with their own spheres of influence. Braudel's world-system is a historically formed space of civilizational and economic gravity. Its structure is based on three interrelated levels reflecting the depth of historical time: 1) Geographical-structural level – sets the limits of developmental opportunities, shaping types of economies, communication methods, and settlement patterns. This level changes slowly over centuries or even millennia; 2) Socio-economic level – a network of economic interconnections forming the system's core, accumulating capital, technologies, and administrative resources, shaping structures of exchange and production: 3) Event (surface) level – the least stable, often masking deep processes occurring at the structural level, including political affairs, wars, dynastic conflicts, and diplomacy.

Research on the economic foundations of political events in the interpretation of regional and global processes laid the groundwork for world-systems analysis, which became the focus of the Fernand Braudel Center, established in 1979 by Immanuel Wallerstein at Binghamton University (USA). Unlike Braudel, Wallerstein's analysis centers on the global economy emerging in Western Europe after 1450, consisting of mini-systems, world empires, and world-economies. World-economies are not global economies but economies that constitute 'worlds.' He differentiates systems by the division of labor and the degree of cultural homogeneity.

Wallerstein analyzes the 20th-century world economy using Braudel's definitions, employing the concepts of core, semi-periphery, periphery, and external areas not included in the world-system. The distinction between periphery and core persists historically, although the content of these concepts evolves. States outside the core balance within its sphere of influence, and political borders lose their barrier function, becoming open and interactive. Unlike Braudel's historical multi-layeredness, Wallerstein identifies functional levels of the capitalist world, interconnected through unequal exchange. Unequal exchange between core and periphery generates tensions that drive system development.

Wallerstein emphasizes that the core cannot develop without the periphery. Core-periphery relations involve the accumulation of resources, the creation and transmission of innovations, and the redistribution of surplus generated in peripheral countries. The periphery loses profits, while its cultural content plays a passive role. The semi-periphery – buffer zones between core and periphery – plays a primarily political role, smoothing contradictions in the economy, politics, and ethno-national space, thus stabilizing the system. Semi-peripheries are the most dynamic elements in the hierarchy, facilitating spatial reorganization during crises. Buffer semi-peripheries remain underdeveloped but can, under certain conditions, serve as testing grounds for technologies and standards. Societal stagnation in the semi-periphery combines with elite attraction toward the center, particularly to achieve civilizational standards of living. This explains the absence of autonomous or regionally oriented social projects in this type of space. Unequal exchange between majority and minority in the world-system is ensured by the accumulation of military power and technical resources by the core, ideological support and legitimization by specialists, and the semi-periphery, which holds privileges relative to the periphery (Wallerstein, 2004).

A different logic of development applies to peripheries located in zones of competition between major geopolitical centers. Such territories experience uneven development, the emergence of infrastructural and socio-cultural 'enclaves of progress,' and the formation of local elite-lobbyists representing external actors. Therefore, peripheries become arenas for controlling flows of resources, loyalties, and identities.

In Wallerstein's world-systems analysis, peripherality is described as institutionalized inequality in the global division of labor, where the core accumulates capital and innovations, and the periphery provides labor and raw materials (Wallerstein, 2004). He demonstrated that internal political contradictions of states are inseparable from the global hierarchy, which determines the positionality of territories and their degree of dependence. Core-periphery inequality is neither accidental nor temporary; it is sustained by mechanisms of controlled modernization, unequal exchange, and political intervention.

If Braudel established the ontology of space – demonstrating that any historical space has a 'deep temporal structure' – Wallerstein created a sociological model of global hierarchy, in which regions occupy different but dynamic roles in the world-system. Combined, these approaches form an understanding of political space as a hierarchically structured field, where conflict and inequality are structural.

Building on this, scholars of dependent development – including Samir Amin (1976), Raúl Prebisch (1950), and André G. Frank (1966) – emphasized that core-periphery relations are a product of capitalism. Modernization theories, by contrast, erroneously as sumed linear and universal development, disregarding cultural specificity and regional resource dependence.

The empirical dimension of center-periphery interactions is illustrated in John Friedmann's classical *model of spatial polarization* (Friedmann, 1966), which defines the periphery as a structured space of inequality and subordination. He distinguishes between internal periphery – integrated via communications with the center – and external periphery – weakly connected to the core and vulnerable to external influences. This approach is grounded in economic studies of spatial polarization processes, through which disparities between core and periphery emerge. Friedmann's model allows the analysis of the periphery as a structured space marked by inequality, dependence, and functional subordination to the center.

These ideas were further developed by François Perroux with his *growth poles* (Perroux, 1955) and Torsten Hägerstrand with the *diffusion of innovations theory* (Hägerstrand, 1952), demonstrating that peripheral space is uneven and politically managed.

The modern era radically transformed the *functionality of space*: from an imperial centralized hierarchy to projects of homogenization – creating a uniform national territory. This led to methodological nationalism, the conceptualization of the state as the 'natural framework' of the social world (Smith, 1986). However, it was precisely the peripheries, with their cultural autonomies, that became centers of resistance to unification, forming alternative identities and regionalisms. Whereas for the modern state, the spheres of culture and religion have an instrumental character; for peripheral regions, culture and religion serve as fundamental social resources that sustain their agency. The actual spatial hierarchies of the modern era – social elevators, statuses, and regional power pyramids – became echoes of underlying power relations embedded in space.

This multidimensionality of peripheries was conceptualized by Stein Rokkan, who synchronized history and territory to develop a theory of Europe's macro-political development. He demonstrated that peripheries are not homogeneous; they can be subordinate, enclave-like, or cross-border, and they function as buffer layers, restraining the expansion of centers (Rokkan, 1975).

In Rokkan's approach, the periphery emerges as a morphologically differentiated zone with its own socio-political characteristics. When mapping Europe, he identified stable peripheral spaces, defining their functions and nature. A fundamental innovation of Rokkan's method was the division into '*subordinate peripheries*' (such as Wales or Scotland) and '*adjacent peripheries*' (such as Alsace or Luxembourg) (Rokkan, 1970). Subordinate peripheries, being within the center's zone of influence, essentially represented border territories. Rokkan categorized them as internal, external, enclave peripheries, and the peripheries of a 'failed' center.

Buffer Spaces and Modern Concepts of Peripheries

Peripheries were difficult to conquer and even harder to govern. Acting as external frontiers, these spaces became hubs of autonomist and separatist movements, served as buffer zones, and were often subjects of negotiation or political compromise. Located between major state-forming cores, buffer peripheries historically experienced the influence of multiple geopolitical actors. The primary examples of '*buffer peripheries*' in Europe are contact zones, including Alsace and Lorraine, Wales, Wallonia, Jura, Savoy, Valle d'Aosta, Nice, Tyrol, Silesia, Transylvania, Banat, Maramureş, Crişana, Dobruja, Bessarabia, Bukovina, Polesia, and others.

In Rokkan's framework, '*external peripheries*' refer to remote territories far from the center, such as Iceland and the Faroe Islands, while '*peripheries of a failed center*' are territories that attempted to become

state-forming centers, including Scotland, Catalonia, Aquitaine, and Bavaria. '*Enclave peripheries*' are areas entirely surrounded by a foreign cultural domain, such as the Romansh-speaking regions of Graubünden in Switzerland. '*Adjacent peripheries*' are cross-border systems where influences and interests of different centers and geopolitical actors intersect, and parallel economic, cultural, and memorial projects are implemented.

Rokkan refers to these peripheries as '*privileged borderland*s,' which can benefit from the competition among centers. They strategically choose modes of interaction with alternative centers, allowing them a degree of autonomy even under limited resources. In Western Europe, he identifies as privileged borderlands those countries that emerged between Protestant Northern Europe and Catholic Southern Europe. These areas relied on alliances among peripheral cities and provinces, eventually giving rise to small peripheral states that acquired disproportionate advantages over others. Examples include Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

For Rokkan, *peripheries* are not marginal territories but *active social fields* where resistance to centralization emerges, and new political identities are formed. At the same time, buffer spaces function within the political system as '*shock absorbers*' between competing centers of power: they reduce the likelihood of direct confrontation, creating space for interaction, trade, and compromise. As a *stabilizing mechanism*, *bufferhood* operates through three interrelated modes: 1) *Stratigraphic distancing* – formalization of a special status (neutrality, demilitarization) that reduces security threats; 2) *Institutional multivectoring* – a policy of maintaining multiple relationships and balancing influences, giving the buffer actor maneuvering space and access to resources from diverse sources; 3) *Socio-cultural hybridization* – development of cross-border networks and hybrid identities, making coercive reorganization of the space costly and unpredictable.

Despite its stabilizing function, bufferhood has limitations. First, it depends on the balance of power, and with increasing as ymmetry, the buffer may 'slide' into the sphere of influence of a stronger center. Second, buffer spaces often become arenas of proxy conflicts and semi-controlled zones, where external actions undermine local autonomy. Third, economic dependence on centers makes buffer spaces vulnerable to external shocks, while political institutions remain fragile.

Thus, bufferhood has a dual nature, being both an instrument of systemic stabilization and a source of instability. Analytically, this means that the as sessment of buffer spaces should combine structural (systemic balance), institutional (resilience of local mechanisms), and identitarian (socio-cultural networks) dimensions. This approach allows us to distinguish stabilizing bufferhood, where the space acts as a long-term equilibrium element, from transitional bufferhood, where the space is a temporary solution prone to regression or capitulation under the pressure of major actors.

The structural-functional analysis of peripheries by Stein Rokkan is complemented by the concept of the '*belt of cities,*' which represents this space from two perspectives, as a cross-border periphery between the dynastic centers of Europe and as the core of Western Europe that shaped its territorial structure. Rokkan emphasized the variability in understanding the category of 'center,' noting that strong empires often arose outside the 'belt of cities,' which had insulated itself from state power. The 'belt of cities' is characterized not only by a balance of power and the stability of territories over time, but also functions as a center of innovation that drives the economic engine. According to Rokkan, the 'belt of cities' is surrounded by buffer zones formed by ethnic and culturally specific enclaves that defined the borders of dynastic holdings, and the buffer peripheries provided their protection. The persistence of this spatial model of Europe has been confirmed over time. For instance, the area of highest economic development in Western Europe, known as the 'European megalopolis,' the 'European economic backbone,' the 'Blue Banana,' or the 'line of power in European space' (Roger Brunet, 1989; Andreas J. Hingel, 1995), practically mirrors Rokkan's 'belt of cities.'

Stein Rokkan demonstrated how individual centers that influence the same peripheries can dominate their territories in different dimensions, reproducing specific configurations of spatial influence. Analysis using Rokkan's categories highlights the specificity of interactions between centers competing for influence over adjacent peripheries, whether in border zones, in cross-border areas, or in neighboring territories beyond the immediate control of specific peripheries. Rokkan thus created a dynamic triangular model of political space in which the center serves as a source of unification, standardization, and control; the periphery acts as a source of identity, diversity, and resistance to centralization; and the buffer serves as a space for compromise where institutional and cultural differences find equilibrium. He described this process as '*institutional stitching of space*,' where the system becomes stable not through the elimination of peripheries, but through institutional integration of diversity.

Rokkan's theory laid the foundation for modern research on regionalism, federalism, and limology. His approach influenced subsequent models of place-based policy, which recognize the importance of local and buffer spaces in maintaining state stability. Contemporary interpretations of bufferhood as a form of '*soft sovereignty*' appear in the works of Michael Keating (2013) and Stefano Bartolini (2005), who view *buffer territories as intermediaries between local identities and supranational structures* such as the EU.

The evolution of spatial analysis within the center-periphery framework demonstrates a shift in the scope of key concepts. The center may be understood as a *territorial entity*, a specific region, or as a supraterritorial formation. The center-periphery approach emphasizes the importance of power relations between actors. Therefore, when characterizing relationships with border-type regions, terms such as '*periphery*,' '*province*,' and '*outlying area*' are used. As Randall Collins argues, a civilizational center requires loyalty within its space and defines its social identity, seeking to integrate more distant areas into its sphere of influence (Collins, 2001).

In liberal interpretations of center-periphery theories, the concept of '*borderlands*' is often used, understood as a space characterized by the interweaving of traditions, cultures, influences, and strategies. While peripheries turn to centers for symbolic meaning and build a shared identity, the border has an independent significance, and the actors located there seek the freedom to choose their identities, which are shaped by individual constructions of subjectivity. Recognizing these realities implies agreement with the notion of a diminishing role of the nation-state.

Within the center-periphery approach, the concept of 'borderlands' arises as a result of the activation of the 'postcolonial discourse.' An adapted version of this theory became the paradigm of 'borderlands as peripheries.' This paradigm reflects a worldview dichotomy: "the West and the rest of the world as its periphery." Tomasz Zarycki referred to this when studying borderlands in Eastern and Central Europe. He argued that borderland regions are mostly peripheral regions. Considering borderlands as a form of periphery, he noted that the pull toward centers articulating different values leads to the depopulation and depletion of borderlands (Zarycki, 2009). This perspective does not as cribe to borderlands the qualities of an autonomous space capable of choosing its own developmental trajectory.

It is important to note that political sovereignty does not remove a space from peripheral status if there are no changes in the economic or technological spheres. The center-periphery approach is applied by the European Union in the Eastern Partnership program, viewing the Eastern space as a conceptual '*creolization*' or '*locality*' – a form of local development with a dual nature. Critiques of the postcolonial discourse focus on arguments against the creation of new barrier borders in Europe. For example, Karolina Follis, studying the social and political consequences of the border regime in the EU after 2004, highlights the contradictory imperatives of EU border security (Follis, 2012). James Scott notes that the new boundary between '*Fortress Europe*' and '*non-Europe*' requires coordination at the level of supranational programs (Scott, Liikanen, 2010). Recognizing the geopolitical as ymmetry of border policies, these authors emphasize that populations in border regions can objectively be drawn to multiple centers, as in the cases of Zakarpattia or South Tyrol. Recognizing the polycentric interests of borderlands provides the advantage of acknowledging these spaces as actors in global socio-political processes and endows them with characteristics of transnationality.

Contemporary interpretations of the buffer state space in the works of Bibek Chand (Chand, 2023), Lionel Beehner, and Gustav Meibauer (Beehner & Meibauer, 2016) shift the focus from the structural to the agent-strategic dimension, emphasizing that *buffers act as liminal actors capable of maneuvering* between major powers, redefining their own status, and pursuing multi-vector balancing strategies. Whereas in Rokkan's framework bufferhood originates from historical borders of politico-cultural zones and represents a rather passive position within the system, in the Chand–Beehner–Meibauer approach, the *buffer state emerges as an active geopolitical playe*r that purposefully establishes a security regime, minimizes dependence on the center of power, and transforms peripherality into a diplomatic resource. Thus, the modern approach evolves from spatial-structural 'bufferhood' toward behavioral and institutional interpretations, opening a new logic for understanding buffer spaces in a multipolar world.

Bibek Chand argued that the concept of the buffer state requires '*reframing*.' Instead of a passive role in the contestation space, buffer states should be seen as agents with strategies for survival, maneuvering, and maximizing benefits in relations with major neighbors. This approach requires attention to internal factors, such as institutions, foreign policy, and elite choices, as well as to the dynamics of 'long' events, for example, shifts in the India–China balance.

Chand, developing the conceptual framework based on the case of Nepal, emphasizes not only the strategic utility of the buffer state but also its ability to balance between convergence and divergence

of influences. In the work Reframing the Buffer State in Contemporary International Relations: Nepal's Relations with India and China (Chand, 2023), he proposes shifting the focus from the buffer state as a passive spatial function to the buffer state as an active actor. A key feature of this approach is defining the buffer space as a political process agent with strategic options, including balancing, multi-vector diplomacy, selective neutrality, and the use of internal institutions and economic resources to maximize maneuvering. Chand introduces the idea that a buffer state's utility for its neighbors varies over time depending on power balances, infrastructure projects, foreign funding, and technology. He combines domestic political factors, such as institutions, elites, and the economy, with external political factors, integrating structure and agency.

A significant innovation in Chand's approach is the temporal and institutional dimension of buffer status. He incorporates temporal dynamics by defining when and to what extent a state is useful to its neighbors and also considers infrastructure and economic factors, such as roads, energy, and investments, which influence the buffer status.

The buffer state is presented in two types. Declarative or nominal buffers are formally neutral or demilitarized states but have limited reflective agency. Active or strategic buffers are states that actively maneuver between major actors.

According to Chand, buffer states have a wide range of available political action mechanisms. Balancing involves formal or informal cooperation with one major actor to counterbalance another. Multi-vector diplomacy refers to maintaining simultaneous relations with both neighbors to gain advantages. Neutrality or demilitarization reduces the risk of direct intervention but may limit autonomy. Economic maneuvering involves infrastructure agreements and investments to reduce vulnerability.

The approach of Lionel Beehner and Gustav Meibauer is presented in the article The Futility of Buffer Zones in International Politics (Beehner & Meibauer, 2016), where the authors return attention to *buffer zones as a tool for conflict management and spatial separation,* but they emphasize the limitations and '*futility*' of this instrument in many contemporary contexts. They review historical examples and theoretical approaches, making a series of arguments about when and why buffer zones or buffer states either fail to work or create new risks. The authors synthesize historical cases, such as demilitarized zones and 'neutral' political spaces, and formulate three fundamental arguments about the limitations of buffer zones as an instrument of foreign policy and security. Their approach focuses primarily on structural obstacles and the foreign-policy reactions of major powers.

If Chand shifts the focus from 'zone/instrument' to the actor, viewing the buffer state as an active agent, Beehner and Meibauer critically reassess the utilitarian belief in buffer zones as stabilizers, highlighting their systemic weaknesses. Therefore, the approaches complement each other: Chand shows how buffer states can play an active role within the constraints described by Beehner and Meibauer. Combining their findings encourages scholars and practitioners to consider both the internal dynamics of buffer states and the systemic limitations of buffer zones as an instrument, particularly when external powers or technologies make demarcation or neutralization ineffective.

A significant deepening of the buffer concept in the Eurasian political space was proposed by Zbigniew Brzezinski. In his work *The Grand Chessboard* (Brzezinski, 1997), he argued that states located between major centers of power play a decisive role in maintaining systemic balance. In his view, *buffer states* are not merely *'spaces of rivalry'* between imperial actors but act as *'key figures on the geopolitical chessboard,'* capable of shaping the configuration of the global balance of power.

Zbigniew Brzezinski emphasized that control or loss of control over buffer territories can determine the transformation of the entire regional order. He as signed particular significance to Eastern Europe, considering it not as a periphery of the European space but as a geopolitical center, the stability of which determines Europe's independence and the scope of influence of revisionist actors. In this logic, Ukraine functions not merely as a borderland but as a strategic buffer entity whose agency shapes the balance of power between the Euro-Atlantic center and Eurasian revisionism. Therefore, competition over control of the political trajectory of such states becomes a long-term factor in European security.

Brzezinski proposed a geostrategic reading of bufferhood, in which peripheral spaces gravitating toward different centers are capable of either restraining or catalyzing large-scale systemic shifts – from regional domino effects to changes in poles of influence in global politics.

Modern Network and Transnational Approaches to Peripheries and Border Spaces

The conceptualization of borderlands in a networked, non-territorial perspective of peripheral types occurs through comparison with centers as nodes of a networked system, which differ in density and activity

of actors. Multi-actor borderlands, synthesizing competing values from different centers, are able to generate actor creativity, develop unique social practices, and combine ideas and values. However, compared to conservative, hierarchical, and static centers, borderlands lack sufficient resources to consolidate their own innovative experiences. The predominance of weak ties and low-density networks makes it difficult to adopt not only shared values but also coordinated strategies. Consequently, the choice of a center does not receive a clear answer. The future status of borderlands remains uncertain, while elites representing strategies oriented toward different centers turn into opponents.

Such an ambivalent condition of borderlands represents a variant of the political development model of borderland states. Borderlands are presented as spaces where different socio-cultural contents meet with relatively low intensity of interaction, allowing compromises and management algorithms to emerge. Dual peripheral spaces function as arenas of communication and transit, as transborder zones. The networked-periphery concept confirms R. Collins' view that neither centers nor peripheries coincide with state borders (Collins, 2001).

Thus, in the modern era, socio-cultural differences and their boundaries are unable to achieve sufficient recognition or autonomy and are characterized by peripheral dependence on the center. Centripetal and centrifugal processes, as a dialectical unity, demonstrate the integrity of social processes occurring under the total influence of the center's logic.

The socio-cultural approach to analyzing borderlands fundamentally changes the evaluation of the center, depriving it of privileged status. Borderlands lose peripheral qualities and acquire features of an agent of socio-cultural processes, while the center emerges as a metropolis. Such borderlands are invisible to the center of the modern period, perceived only as the connection of two peripheries divided by a border.

The contemporary crisis of modernity has prompted the development of new methods of spatial analysis. The first approach stems from the recognition that the state has lost its perspective of territorial-political primacy within the system of global relations and is oriented toward transnational, post-state spaces such as subregions, regions, and integration systems. Regionalization and decentralization are understood as manifestations of the emancipation of national state structures. In this perspective, a decentralized state is considered more democratic than a centralized one.

In Europe, this approach relies on the European Union's policies toward regions, which aim to enhance the economic independence of regional structures and to develop their agency within the political space. Over the years, such policies have supported regional identity, which is reflected in the establishment of the institution of regional citizenship, existing alongside national citizenship.

Attention is shifting to a new vision of global development, which loses its hierarchical, center-oriented structure in favor of a networked system of relations among equal actors. Locality emerges as a form of global manifestation. The paradigm of '*glocalization*' employs a new structural format that functions through network connections and meaningful nodes. This alternative structure of globalization transforms the processes of homogenization and unification, aligning them with locality and regionalization, so that identity does not acquire a cosmopolitan character but, on the contrary, retains the relevance of local forms.

According to Manuel Castells, the new networked morphology of contemporary society is characterized by situational forms of organization. Each organizational structure is created to address a specific task and interacts in *two spaces: the 'vertical-hierarchical' and the 'horizontal-networked.'* A distinctive feature of social organization is that the generation, processing, and transmission of information have become fundamental sources of productivity and power. Castells does not call such a society 'informational' but 'informationalist,' emphasizing the triumph of 'informationalism' as a state (Castells, 1998). The founder of urban sociology identified a crisis of 'industrial statism' (Castells, 2010), which he explained by the fear of bureaucratic structures toward technology and the deliberate provocation of social crises.

In his view, the network logic of development is based on 'informationalism' as a new material-technological foundation for economic growth and social organization. Internationalization of economic activity and the growth of cross-border flows of people, goods, capital, and information play a significant role. Alongside these flows, actors in cross-border relations in various spheres – ethnosocial groups, social movements, business corporations, and non-governmental organizations – gain influence.

Under such conditions, the *barrier function of borders* loses its relevance. The ad hoc organization of regional systems leads to an objective reduction of state influence in the sphere of interregional and cross-border relations. The statist monopoly over control of the border system weakens as states transfer

their functions to regional and international organizations. While a modern-type state seeks to delineate and fortify borders, a networked cross-border system aims to establish transparency and permeability.

The concept of cross-border space replaces the traditional border, forming a transitional zone, smoothing boundaries, and creating a new reality in which territory (the locus) loses much of its mystical and mythologized character and acquires the characteristics of a developmental space. A decentralized network system represents the minimal level of organization. Its distinguishing feature is the absence of fixed structures, primarily a central authority. According to Kevin Kelly, the entire networked system consists of peripheries and is therefore open to any flows (Kelly, 2008).

A remarkable phenomenon in the networked cross-border system is the mobilization of local ethnocultural groups. R. Collins explains these processes as a result of the decline in prestige and effectiveness of the state. Using historical examples of autonomist movements in the EU – such as the Catalan movement in Spain, the Scottish and Welsh movements in the UK, and the Lombard movement in Italy – he emphasizes that their mobilization occurred at a time when states voluntarily transferred parts of their sovereignty to shared supranational institutions. These movements do not seek to establish a monopoly on power but aim to operate as "sub-states" under the 'umbrella' of higher-level institutions, such as the EU (Collins, 1999).

Thus, this restructuring mitigates the growth of ethno-nationalism in favor of creating networked socio-cultural systems at the supranational level. Collins notes that such regional movements may represent a transitional period when 'old' nation-states have already lost legitimacy, but the European federal state has not yet fully asserted itself.

In civilizational and center-periphery theories, borders were understood as limits defining spaces with specific social characteristics, while borderlands represented the areas adjacent to the border, as systems with distinctive social organization. As a developmental locus, the borderland transforms into a context for social processes, shaping their course.

A *new 'horizontal" understanding of the border* in the center-periphery system presents it as a formation with two sides: internal and external. Researchers prioritize one side or the other depending on the situation. If state influence is accompanied by weakening ties with the national space, there arises a threat of 'leakage' of regional or local spaces beyond the national territory.

The intensity of social processes in the last century exceeds the confines of internal borders; they extend beyond, connecting the local and the global. The glocal border, expanding, transforms into the Great Borderland. In networked and cross-border systems, internal and external contexts mix so that the center either disappears or shifts into an intermediate, contact zone.

Conclusions

Therefore, the research confirms that buffer and peripheral spaces are system-forming parameters of political space morphology. They determine the intensity of spatial cleavages, the level of conflict, and the adaptability of the international system in conditions of global instability. The periphery, while characterized by institutional vulnerability and unequal access to resources, is not a passive zone; it serves as a space for the formation of its own identities, mobilization practices, and alternative developmental paths.

Buffer spaces represent a particular configuration of peripherality – they simultaneously stabilize the system, reducing the risk of direct confrontation between centers of power, and may function as strategic political actors. However, their flexibility and maneuverability are accompanied by increased dependence on external influences, making them vulnerable to proxy conflicts, geopolitical pressure, and political fragmentation.

The transformation of territorial logic in politics under conditions of networked globalization leads to a shift toward 'informational spatiality,' in which significance is determined not so much by geographical boundaries as by the intensity of cross-border connections, institutional inclusion, technological interdependence, and capacity for self-organization. Borderlands transform into nodes of international interaction, and borders become flexible mechanisms for filtering influence.

In contemporary concepts, buffer and peripheral spaces should be viewed not as marginal 'excesses' of the world-system but as structurally necessary elements of the international order –arenas where civilizational rhythms, interests, and actor strategies compete. Their study allows us to understand the sources of spatial conflict and assess the potential of regions for autonomous political action.

to the editorial team of European Political and Law Discourse for their guidance and support throughout the publication process, ensuring a high standard of academic quality.

Conflict of Interest. None.

References:

Amin, S. (1976). *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism.* New York: Monthly Review Press.

Balibar, É. (2002). *Politics and the Other Scene.* London & New York: Verso.

Bartolini, S. (2005). *Restructuring Europe: Centre Formation, System Building, and Political Structuring Between the Nation State and the European Union.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Beehner, L., & Meibauer, G. (2016). The Futility of Buffer Zones in International Politics. *Orbis, 60(2)*, 248-265. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2016.01.004

Beehner, L., et al. (2020). *Buffer States in World Politics: Neutrality in the Age of Great Powers.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1980). *Questions de Sociologie* [Sociological Questions]. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit. [in French].

Braudel, F. (1993). *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XVe–XVIIIe siècles* [Material Civilization, Economy and Capitalism, 15th–18th Centuries]. Paris: Le Livre de Poche, *3*. [in French].

Brunet, R. (2002). Lignes de force de l'espace européen [Key Features of the European Space]. *Mappemonde* [World Map], *66(2)*, 14-19. [in French].

Brzezinski, Z. (1997). *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives.* New York: Basic Books.

Castells, M. (1996–1998). *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, *1-3*.

Castells, M. (2010). *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Chand, B. (2023). *Reframing the Buffer State in Contemporary International Relations: Nepal's Relations with India and China.* London: Routledge.

Christaller, W. (1967). *Central Places in Southern Germany*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Collins, R. (1999). "Balkanization" or "Americanization": A Geopolitical Theory of Ethnic Change. In: *Macrohistory: Essays in Sociology of the Long Run* (pp. 70–109). Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

Collins, R. (2001). Civilizations as Zones of prestige and social contact. *International Sociology, 16*(3), 421–437.

Follis, K. S. (2012). *Building fortress Europe: The Polish-Ukrainian Frontier.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Foucher, M. (2007). *L'obsession des frontières* [The Obsession with Borders]. Paris: Perrin. [in French].

Frank, A. G. (1966). The Development of Underdevelopment. *Monthly Review, 18(4)*, 17-31.

Friedmann, J. (1966). *Regional Development Policy: A Case Study of Venezuela.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hägerstrand, T. (1952). *The Propagation of Innovation Waves.* Lund: Royal University of Lund, Department of Geography.

Hägerstrand, T. (1967). *Innovation Diffusion as a Spatial Process.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hingel, A. J. (1995). Co-development Across the EC's External Borders. In: A. Kukliński (Ed.) *Baltic Europe in the Perspective of Global Change* (pp. 21–33). Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa Euroreg.

Jasky, O. (2012). Borderlands as Social Constructs. *Journal of Borderlands Studies, 27(3)*, 241-255.

Keating, M. (2013). *Rescaling the European State: The Making of Territory and the Rise of the Meso.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kelly, K. (2008). *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World.* New York: Basic Books.

Kelly, P. (2006). *Checkerboards & Shatterbelts: The Geopolitics of South Asia.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space.* Oxford & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Newman, D. (2006). The Lines that Continue to Separate Us: Borders in Our "Borderless" World. *Progress in Human Geography, 30(2)*, 143-161.

Paasi, A. (1996). *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border.* Chichester: Wiley.

Paasi, A. (2011). Border Studies Reanimated: Going Beyond the Territorial/Relational Divide. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 29(1)*, 56-69.

Perroux, F. (1955). Note sur la notion de 'pôle de croissance' [Note on the Concept of 'Growth Pole']. *Économie appliquée* [Applied Economics], *8(1-2)*, 307-320. [in French].

Prebisch, R. (1950). *The Economic Development of Latin America and its Principal Problems.* New York: United Nations.

Rokkan, S. (1970). *Citizens, Elections, Parties: Approaches to the Comparative Study of the Processes of Development.* Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Rokkan, S. (1975). Dimensions of State Formation and Nation-Building: A Possible Paradigm for Research on Variations Within Europe. In: C. Tilly (Ed.), *The Formation of National States in Europe* (pp. 562–600). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rokkan, S., & Lipset, S. M. (1967). *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments.* New York: The Free Press.

Scott, J., & Liikanen, I. (2010). Civil Society and the Neighbourhood – Reconciling Supranational, National and Local Agendas. *Journal of European Integration, 32(5)*, 423-438.

Sloterdijk, P. (2004). *Sphären III: Schäume* [Spheres III: Foams]. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Smith, A. (1979). *Nationalism in the Twentieth Century.* New York: New York University Press.

Uzun, Y., Koch, S. (2024). Spatial Imagination In Politics: the Strategic Role of Phantom Borders and Imaginary Territories. *Evropsky Politicky a Pravni Diskurz* [European Political and Law Discourse], *11(6)*, 5-12. https://doi.org/10.46340/eppd.2024.11.6.1

Wallerstein, I. (2004). *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction.* Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Zarycki, T. (2009). *Peryferie: Nowe ujęcia zależności centro-peryferyjnych* [Periphery: New Approaches to Center-Periphery Relationships]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar. [in Polish].