

# **Conceptualizing “In-Betweenness”: Post-Soviet States as Objects of a Contest Among Outside Powers**

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10,333 words

Submitted to  
Central European University  
Department of International Relations

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts in International Relations (1 year)

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Vienna, Austria  
2022

## **ABSTRACT**

The end of the Cold War has resulted in significant changes in interstate relations and security architecture on the European continent. Newly emerged states in Eastern Europe have found themselves in-between the West and Russia — two bigger powers with a great distrust for each other. Present thesis advances a new theoretical category — an “in-between state”.

Through comparative analysis, the thesis has demonstrated that none of the existing categories such as “small state” and “buffer state” can explain the specificity of international position of post-soviet Eastern European states. Instead, the term “in-between state”, currently used exclusively in policy publications, should be introduced to international relations scholarship. The key element of an in-between state is its status of an object of contest among bigger neighboring powers. In the post-soviet space, it is the West and Russia that have no consensus on geopolitical affiliation of an in-between state.

Present research has used role theory to explain the specific constraints and opportunities that in-between states face in the foreign policy field. While in-between states have very limited choice of national role conceptions, they also face a “three-level role conflict”: they face two different expectations about its role from two more powerful neighbors, while attempting to advance its own role conception.

The thesis has introduced a classification of in-between states and argued that “in-betweenness” of a state can be located on a spectrum. The spectrum varies from a “faithful ally” of the West to a “faithful ally” of Russia, with neutrality being on the center of the spectrum. The Belarus case study demonstrates that one state can change degrees of its “in-betweenness” over time, based on changes in national role conception amid favorable external environment. However, role performance can be unsuccessful due to dissatisfaction with the role from the surrounding bigger powers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Geopolitical transformations that resulted from the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union have had a significant impact on international dynamics and security architecture on the European continent. Instead of a unified political actor — the USSR — European politics has faced fifteen newly emerged republics with different foreign policy ambitions. Consequently, new forms of small state foreign policy have emerged, leading to changes not only in international dynamics, but in the international relations theory.

Over the past three decades, a significant amount of scholarly works has been published on small states, their foreign policy, and their position in the international order. The post-soviet space did not become an exception: international relations scholarship has attempted to address the change, and different concepts started to emerge to denote these newly emerged independent states. Such notions as “post-Soviet West”, “shared neighborhood”, “new Eastern Europe” have been used to describe “non-integrated states in the European and Caucasian part of the post-Soviet space”.<sup>1</sup>

However, one of the terms used to describe these states has been overlooked by academic community. Policy world has introduced a concept of an “in-between” state that is typically used to describe several, or all the six following countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. These states, as is evident from world-changing events of the past decades, have a significant influence on the security architecture in the European region, being able to serve both peace-preserving and conflict-provoking roles. There is a certain specificity to their position in international affairs, and the term “in-between state”, as will be argued in the present work, shades a light on this specificity.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurečić Petar, Kozina Goran, and Kokotović Filip, “Revisiting the Definition of Small State through the Use of Relational and Quantitative Criteria,” 2017, 15, p. 8.

The origin of this term is hard to track. It is argued that the term “in-between zone” was used for the first time in late 1950s by George Kennan,<sup>2</sup> who was referring to Central Europe and its possible neutral status.<sup>3</sup> Current publications that deal with the concept of “in-betweenness” come solely from policy world. RAND Corporation has drastically advanced the term in their several publications from late 2010s.

The main goal of the present work is to demonstrate distinctiveness and theoretical value of a concept of an “in-between state”. I will argue that the concept encompasses very specific international dynamics surrounding the state and specific limitations and opportunities in their foreign policy. This work will demonstrate the following: (1) the concept of an in-between state significantly differs from existing theoretical categories, and serves as a better tool for small state scholarship; (2) the concept encompasses specific foreign policy limitations and opportunities that can be explained through the prism of the role theory; (3) the “in-betweenness” of a state comes in degrees and can be presented as a spectrum, as it is fluid and can be changing over time.

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<sup>2</sup> Heinz Gärtner, “Austrian Neutrality as a Model for the New Eastern Europe?” (International Institute for Peace, 2018), <https://www.iipvienna.com/news-reports-publications/2018/11/27/austrian-neutrality-as-a-model-for-the-new-eastern-europe>.

<sup>3</sup> George Frost Kennan, Hainer Kober, and George Frost Kennan, *Im Schatten der Atombombe: eine Analyse der amerikanisch-sowjetischen Beziehungen von 1947 bis heute*, KiWi 18 (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1982). p. 21.

## PRESENTATION OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The present work will conceptualize the term “in-between state” using several methodological frameworks. Firstly, a literature analysis will be conducted in order to prove an existence of the gap in the literature. Over the course of the first section, literature on small states, buffer states, and, to an extent, on intermediary states will be reviewed. Role theory will be introduced in the first chapter as well, since it will be argued that “buffer states” represent one of the roles a state can choose to perform.

Secondly, the main components of the concept of an “in-between state” will be determined through the comparative analysis with other theoretical categories, and through the current use of the term in several policy publications of RAND Corporation. Role theory will be used to demonstrate distinctiveness of the “in-betweenness”. It will be argued that in-between states have a specific range of roles to choose from, as their identities are closely linked to their smallness and geopolitical position. The main scholarly work that this part of the research will rely on is “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy” by Kalevi Holsti.<sup>4</sup> Using his study and wider literature, several role conceptions will be sorted out as suitable for in-between states.

Thirdly, a classification of “in-betweenness” of a state will be proposed. The classification will be based on a limited comparative case study of six “in-between” states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The factor that unites these countries, apart from their “in-between” position, is their participation in the European Union Eastern Partnership Program. Even though Belarus has withdrawn its participation in the Program in 2021,<sup>5</sup> in the

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<sup>4</sup> K. J. Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (September 1970): 233, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3013584>.

<sup>5</sup> “EU Relations with Belarus,” *European Council, Council of the European Union*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/>.

present work I will refer to the six countries as the “Eastern Partnership” countries, omitting this recent change.

Fourthly, for the better conceptualization of “in-betweenness”, a case study of Belarus will be conducted. This study has an aim to demonstrate that “in-betweenness” comes in degrees, while these degrees can be fluid within single state foreign policy over time. For the purposes of the case study, methods of discourse analysis and event analysis will be used.



## SECTION 1: SMALL STATES AND ROLE THEORY

### 1.1 Small States

It is a widely accepted fact that the importance of small states in international relations and international relations scholarship has grown over the past decades, especially since the rise in the number of small states on the Eurasian continent after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, research on small states in international relations has become more relevant as the world order is becoming more unstable and uncertain.

#### 1.1.1 Definition

There is a large scholarly debate on a definition of a small state or characteristics that are small state-specific. One of the new approaches to the small state foreign policy analysis suggested by Tom Long in 2017 encompasses that instead of focusing on defining and re-defining smallness of a state, more attention should be paid to dynamics of the relationships in which small states are engaged and their relative position in international relations.<sup>7</sup> In that manner, the definition provided by David Vital back in 1967 is quite encompassing “a small state is more vulnerable to pressure, more likely to give way under stress, more limited in respect of the political options open to it” than a great power.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars claim that the position of small states in international relations is characterized by two trends: (i) conduct of independent foreign policy for small states is becoming more difficult and

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<sup>6</sup> Miriam Fendius Elman, “The Foreign Policies of Small States: Challenging Neorealism in Its Own Backyard,” *British Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 2 (April 1995): 171–217, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400007146>; Andrey Skriba, “Realizm i Politika Malykh Gosudarstv v XXI v. [Realism and the Politics of Small States in the 21st Century],” *Politika i Obshestvo*, no. 3 (2014): 347–57, <https://doi.org/10.7256/1812-8696.2014.3.9508>; Irina Kudryashova, “Legko Li Byt’ Srednevelikim [Is It Easy to Be Average?],” *Mezhdunarodnyye Protsessy* 6, no. 3 (18) (2008): 78–83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123400007146>.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Long, “It’s Not the Size, It’s the Relationship: From ‘Small States’ to Asymmetry,” *International Politics* 54, no. 2 (March 2017): 144–60, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0028-x>.

<sup>8</sup> Annette Baker Fox and David Vital, “The Inequality of States: A Study of the Small Power in International Relations,” *International Journal* 23, no. 4 (1968): 623, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40199928>, p.3.

constrained, and (ii) small states maneuvering between bigger powers is becoming more difficult amid rising tensions between them.<sup>9</sup> Thus, “[s]mall states are not just large states writ small: their objectives, means, and systemic functions are qualitatively different”<sup>10</sup>, as the environment they exist in is perceived from a completely different angle.

### 1.1.2 Small States in the International System

The realist school of International Relations has largely ignored, or, at least, underemphasized small states as international actors. However, neorealist and neoclassical realist scholars created a framework for explaining small state behavior through power relativity. As suggested by Schweller, small states are concerned solely with maintaining their independence and existence, as they are situated in a vulnerable position in relation to the bigger powers.<sup>11</sup>

An interesting, and a very much overlooked fact is that foreign policy options of great powers are limited by external factors as much as they are for small states. While it is, typically, an incentive of a small state to escape a great power competition and retain some level of autonomy, great powers struggle to escape the competition where they are one of the sides. Participation in the formation of polarity mode can hardly be avoided by a great power with a certain foreign policy strategy. Some ‘exit options’ are, in fact, available for small states.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mammadov, Farhad, and Fuad Chiragov, “A Small State’s Worldview,” *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 11 (2018): 170–77, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573504>.

<sup>10</sup> Efraim Inbar and Gabriel Sheffer, eds., “Small States: Persisting Despite Doubts,” in *The National Security of Small States in a Changing World*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2013), 49–84, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315036748-8>. in Ksenia Efremova, “Small States in Great Power Politics: Understanding the ‘Buffer Effect,’” *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 13, no. 1 (March 22, 2019): 100–121, <https://doi.org/10.51870/CEJISS.A130102>, p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> Randall L. Schweller, “New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Waltz’s Balancing Proposition,” *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 927–30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952176> in Efremova, “Small States in Great Power Politics.”

<sup>12</sup> G. J. Ikenberry, “Power and Liberal Order: America’s Postwar World Order in Transition,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 5, no. 2 (September 16, 2005): 133–52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lci112>, p.44.

At the same time, there has been considerable attention in the international relations scholarship to the ways small states can retain certain foreign policy independence and/or autonomy from the bigger powers.<sup>13</sup> There are plenty of established small states foreign policy strategies, with the main being hedging, balancing and bandwagoning, and additional strategies of hiding, binding, and “virtual enlargement”.<sup>14</sup> Small countries can speculate on the insecurities of bigger states, receiving certain economic and political benefits from the chosen strategy.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.1.3 Level of Analysis

One of the debates within the realist tradition and in the International Relations theory in general is a debate on the level of analysis. This debate exists in analyzing state behavior yet has specificities when it comes to small state foreign policy behavior. Michael Handel suggests that small states are “continually preoccupied with the question of survival”,<sup>16</sup> while great powers face fewer external threats and thus have more foreign policy options. In line with that, the level of analysis for explaining foreign-policy choices of small states should concentrate on international, not domestic level,<sup>17</sup> while both levels are equally important for bigger powers.

This approach is considered to be outdated, while more scholars suggest that greater attention should be paid to domestic factors in analyzing small state foreign policy. This has been a central argument of scholarly work of Miriam Fendius Elman in 1995, who also contests a common assumption that “neorealism has the home-court advantage in explaining small state behavior” in terms of focusing on external structural factors.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, neoclassical

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<sup>13</sup> Long, “It’s Not the Size, It’s the Relationship.”

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Skriba, “Realizm i Politika Malykh Gosudarstv v XXI v. [Realism and the Politics of Small States in the 21st Century].”

<sup>16</sup> Michael I. Handel, *Weak States in the International System*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315035468>, p.36.

<sup>17</sup> Elman, “The Foreign Policies of Small States.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

realist scholars suggest that the foreign policy goals of a small state are not solely the protection from external threats, but also the realization of national interest, that are based on internal rather than international political environment.<sup>19</sup>

Evidently, small state is a broad theoretical category that resembles many qualities of an “in-between state”. However, as will be demonstrated in the Section 2, not all the foreign policy opportunities available for a small state are equally available for an in-between state. The number of external limitations, caused by being stuck between two bigger rivalry powers, results in an in-between state being unable to adhere to certain strategies. It will also become evident that for an in-between states structural factors have power over domestic ones: it is international environment that limits the options of domestic actors, not the other way around.

## **1.2 Role Theory**

Role theory has emerged in the field of foreign policy analysis, starting with the most prominent work published by Kalevi Jaakko Holsti in 1970 titled “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy”. This work investigates role conceptions adapted by state decision makers and their influence on foreign policy behavior. Holsti suggests a detailed typology of role conceptions and lists various examples of states executing them. Marijke Breuning characterizes Holsti’s approach as being “ahead of its time”.<sup>20</sup> Breuning, following Holsti’s scholarly advance, points out a phenomenal capability of role theory in “marrying” levels of analysis of agency and structure. In his paper “Role Theory in Politics and International Relations” Breuning affirms that “[r]ole theory posits that theoretical models must

<sup>19</sup> Skriba, “Realizm i Politika Malykh Gosudarstv v XXI v. [Realism and the Politics of Small States in the 21st Century].” Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 144–72, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100007814>.

<sup>20</sup> Marijke Breuning, “Role Theory in Foreign Policy,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, by Marijke Breuning (Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.334>.

simultaneously take into account the state's material capabilities and the perceptions of decision-makers, who bring their own biases and ideas (or maybe ideals) to the task of shaping foreign policy".<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, role theory has a great theoretical value in explaining the foreign policy behavior of a wide range of states and small states in particular. This framework allows scholars and practitioners to depart from narrow focus on great powers, while still paying due attention to structural international factors in the foreign policy of a state.

A great academic advancement in applying role theory to the study of small states' foreign policy has been made by Victor Gingleux in his work "Explaining the diversity of small states' foreign policies through role theory"<sup>22</sup> In his article he suggests that role theory "is better suited to account for variations in small states' foreign policy behavior than conventional IR perspectives". Expanding on role theory and small states, Gingleux highlights that role theory pays greater attention to the social position of a state, which depends upon its material capabilities and various structural factors. The main observation of Gingleux, that is of a great importance to the present research, is that there is a "range of acceptability" of roles a state can choose from, and this range depends on state capabilities. In essence, the more capabilities state possesses, the wider is the range of the roles it can choose from. Thus, role theory, in Gingleux words, "it affords the structure some explanatory weight; a significant and unavoidable level of analysis when examining these actors".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Victor Gingleux, "Explaining the Diversity of Small States' Foreign Policies through Role Theory," *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 1, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 27–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2016.1184585>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Another scholarly work that can provide tremendous support to present research is “The Application of Role Theory in Explaining the Policies of Small States” chapter by Maciej Herbut, published in 2017 book “Georgia and Moldova in the Context of Russian Imperialistic Foreign Policy”. Herbut shares a range of valuable ideas on small state self-positioning – a choice of their national role conceptions –amid external structural factors. He rightly underlines: “[S]mall states do not have the luxury of remaining docile in a multipolar world. They have to actively adopt such strategies that allow them to make best use of both their existing geopolitical situation as well as the resources that they have at their disposal”.<sup>24</sup>

The main advance of Herbut is his proposal of a scheme of role theory “on practice”. Role performance, as was previously proposed by international relations scholars, combines two factors: internal (ego) and external (alter). Ego is represented by an internal assignment of a role. We refer to it as a “role perception” of a “self-defined” national role conception. This part of the role is determined by values and attitudes of a particular national actor. Alter is represented by the external factor of “role prescriptions” – expectations of others regarding a role of a state. As a result of combination of both internal and external factors, a state has a “role performance” that “can manifest itself in the form of foreign policy outcomes that can either be successful or not.”<sup>25</sup>

In his scheme, Herbut includes an element of national role contestation. This category of a “role contestation” was firstly introduced by Cantir & Kaarbo.<sup>26</sup> A role of a state can be contested on internal level and on a both internal and external level. Internal contestation, *i.e.* in the domestic

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<sup>24</sup> Andrzej Czajkowski, Maciej Herbut, and Renata Kunert-Milcarz, eds., *Georgia and Moldova in the Context of Russian Imperialistic Foreign Policy: Domestic and Geopolitical Implications*, Ed. by , Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2017, Ss. 205 (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2017), <https://www.ejournals.eu/Wschodnioznawstwo/2020/Tom-14/art/18889/>, p.161.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>26</sup> Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo, eds., *Domestic Role Contestation, Foreign Policy, and International Relations*, Role Theory and International Relations 7 (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

political arena, happens whenever “actors with various role conceptions interact in the foreign policy-making process” within a state.<sup>27</sup> However, a role contestation of a greater importance to the study of in-between states is the contestation occurring as a “disagreement between ego conceptions and alter expectations”.<sup>28</sup> It entails for a disagreement regarding the role of a state occurring between “role perception” (internal view of a role) and “role prescriptions” (external expectations regarding the role). Such clash can result in problematic and even unsuccessful role performance of the in-between state. More detailed overview of role contestation with regards to in-between states will be provided in section “In-between states and role theory”.

When applying role theory to the study of small states, external factors play greater role in the formation of role performance. Limited power resources and vulnerable position in the international arena significantly limit opportunities of small states when it comes to their choice of the role. Especially when the environment a state exists in is unstable, tense, and unfavorable regional security architecture, small states are being put “in the position of ‘consumers’ of security rather than its ‘architects’”.<sup>29</sup> This finding will be especially relevant for the study of in-between states through the prism of the role theory. Much more than other small states, in-between states are dependent on external environment when it comes to their choice of a national role conception.

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<sup>27</sup> Czajkowski, Herbut, and Kunert-Milcarz, *Georgia and Moldova in the Context of Russian Imperialistic Foreign Policy.*, p. 164.

<sup>28</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo, *Domestic Role Contestation, Foreign Policy, and International Relations.*, p.5.

<sup>29</sup> Czajkowski, Herbut, and Kunert-Milcarz, *Georgia and Moldova in the Context of Russian Imperialistic Foreign Policy.* p. 166.

## 1.3 Buffer States

### 1.3.1 Buffer States in International Relations Literature

Buffer states has a long history in academia: first descriptions of buffer states and buffer systems can be seen as early as 1910,<sup>30</sup> while the pique of buffer states studies in international relations academia happened approximately in the 1980s.<sup>31</sup> After that decade, the concept of a buffer state of a buffer system had had limited lifespan. Such decline in buffer state studies can be connected to general decline of realism as an international relations theory and consequent departure from analyzing small state policy solely through the prism of great power competition.

Regardless of the lack of contemporary presence of buffer state scholarship, this body of literature has an important place in defining “in-between states” through comparative analysis of adjacent categories.

A buffer state, according to the base definition, is a small independent state geographically located between two recently warring rivals or two states with hostile relations.<sup>32</sup> This definition intuitively seems to be overly inclusive, as it does not incorporate an essential element of a buffer itself – a barrier, a shield. Even the proponents of such a basic definition suggest there are buffer-state-specific threats and opportunities, such as likelihood of “state death”, that is justified by complex external environment surrounding the buffer.<sup>33</sup> Paul Poast, referring to

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Lyons, G. “Afghanistan: The Buffer State. Madras: Higgenbotham” (1910) in Michael Greenfield Partem, “The Buffer System in International Relations,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27, no. 1 (March 1983): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002783027001001>.

<sup>31</sup> Partem.; John Chay and Thomas E. Ross, eds., *Buffer States in World Politics*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429040658>.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Poast, “Can Issue Linkage Improve Treaty Credibility?: Buffer State Alliances as a ‘Hard Case,’” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 5 (October 2013): 739–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002712449323>, p.745; Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 312.

<sup>33</sup> Poast, “Can Issue Linkage Improve Treaty Credibility?”, p. 745.



Fazal in his 2007 work, underlines that “buffer states are especially prone to violent state death, which is “the formal loss of foreign policy control to another state” via military invasion.<sup>34</sup> Poast also highlights: “[t]hough maintaining the sovereignty of the buffer state is ideal for both rivals [...] each rival knows the other has an incentive to invade the buffer”.<sup>35</sup> It leads to a conclusion, that the definition of a buffer state must include the external element.

In line with that, the definition suggested by Chay and Ross sheds more light into the essence and the role of buffer states in the international system. Chay and Ross define buffer states as “countries geographically and/or politically situated between two or more large powers whose function is to maintain peace between the larger powers.”<sup>36</sup>

Other scholars, such as Michael Greenfield Partem disagree with including “function to maintain peace” as a key element of a buffer state. Instead, Partem claims that buffer states can choose from three basic foreign policy strategies: neutrality, leaning to one side, and the third-power strategy.<sup>37</sup> He describes neutrality as a most ordinary, yet not the easiest option for a buffer state to choose, primarily due to the pressure from the big powers. Leaning to one side is risky, as “[i]f the buffer state decides to rely totally on one side, it invites conflict”.<sup>38</sup> He emphasizes the utility of the “third-power option”, meaning involvement of another large power in the affairs of the buffer system.<sup>39</sup>

Variety of foreign policy options offered by Partem does not correspond with actual position of buffer states, but rather describes options of small states. A buffer state that clearly leans towards one of the powers logically can no longer serve as a buffer. Third-power option would

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Chay and Ross, *Buffer States in World Politics.*, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Partem, “The Buffer System in International Relations.”

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

change regional dynamics so much that bipolar rivalry will transform into a multipolar one. It seems like Partem's work managed to capture specificities of small state policies in Europe of 20th century yet did not manage to create timeless formulas for buffer state behavior and role in their respective regions.

Partem's an approach resembles another concept: "intermediate powers" or "intermediary states" which was well elaborated by Paul Schroeder. Schroeder describes the intermediary states as being intermediary between great powers. According to Schroeder, intermediaries can act as buffers between great powers, separating great powers and keeping them from interaction, or, on the other hand, facilitating their interaction and serving as a link between them. Their functions are not limited to these of a buffer: they can serve as a distractor from a rivalry.<sup>40</sup> A wide range of purposes that intermediary powers can have on global and regional arenas leads to the similarity of this concept to the one of an "in-between state". However, there are two main problems with an intermediary as a theoretical category. Firstly, its position is analyzed solely through the prism of a great power interaction, while ignoring domestic factors that influence foreign policy action, as well as disregarding the agency. Secondly, the term is simply inconvenient to use. The term "intermediary state" and "intermediary power" is widely used in business and natural sciences, as well as political science when referring to domestic policy actors.

### 1.3.2 Buffer as a Role

Holsti in his 1970 study of national role conceptions refers to "buffer" when talking about "national roles that are implied, suggested, or discussed in the disparate writings of the field". According to him, "buffer" is a role that a state can perform with a view of separating bloc

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<sup>40</sup> Paul W. Schroeder, "The Lost Intermediaries: The Impact of 1870 on the European System," *The International History Review* 6, no. 1 (February 1984): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.1984.9640331>.

leaders or major powers. Holsti suggests that a buffer is a suitable role for a state that has insufficient capabilities and specific geographical location.

Buffer, as a role conception, has strong ties with the policy of neutrality. As suggested by Herbut, “[n]eutrality can be [...] be concluded in an agreement between greater powers that aim to create “buffer states” (Belgium)”. Indeed, this approach seems to shed light on geopolitical processes surrounding buffer states: both the buffer state, and the rivalry powers surrounding it, have a strong interest to have a neutral buffer zone in-between the latter. Once there are military or political preferences expressed by a buffer state towards one of the other bigger powers, its neutrality is at stake and the delicate equilibrium is disrupted and the buffer can no longer serve its purpose.

Another reason to consider “buffer” purely as a role, rather than an overarching state type, is the consideration of domestic factors in the role theory. Literature on buffer states often operates the categories such as “a buffer state is created” or “a buffer zone should be established”.<sup>41</sup> This approach clearly denies any agency of a buffer state itself, paying attention to such structural factors as geopolitical endeavors of bigger powers. However, there is more to the buffer state than an outside decision about its status. Role theory highlights the importance of the combination of domestic and structural factors: role performance can be successful given that role conception (self-defined, national) is in line with role perceptions (expectations of other subjects of international relations) and vice versa. In that manner, a state can decide to serve a buffer role, while the external agreement will help to sustain that role.

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<sup>41</sup> National Research University “Higher School of Economics” and Zihao Zhang, “The Role of Buffer States in International Relations Regulation: A New Approach to Establishing Functions,” *The Bulletin of Irkutsk State University. Series Political Science and Religion Studies* 32 (2020): 52–58, <https://doi.org/10.26516/2073-3380.2020.32.52>.

When comparing a category of a “buffer state” as a role and a broader concept of in-between states, it is possible to conclude that every buffer state is an “in-between” state, but not every “in-between” state is a buffer state.

## SECTION 2: IN-BETWEEN STATES

The concept of an “in-between state” is a newly emerged one: it is not featured in any academic publication as a distinct theoretical category, while the body of policy publications dealing with “in-betweenness” is extremely narrow. The only known primary source that refers to some of the six post-soviet states— Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine – as “in-between states” is a short series of publications by RAND Corporation.

The first publication, “Getting Out from "In-Between": Perspectives on the Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia” (2018), is so far the most comprehensive one. It classifies five states as in-between: Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. It has also attempted to conceptualize “in-betweenness” in Chapter “Defining ‘In-Between’” by Oleksandr Chalyi.

The basic definition of an in-between state implies for OSCE countries that are neither formally aligned with the “collective West” (i.e., the United States and EU) nor Russia. In other words, in-between states do not belong to NATO, the CSTO, the EU, or the EAEU.<sup>42</sup> Chalyi, however, suggests a stricter definition to those states “subject to the confrontation between the West and Russia.” There are suggestions to limit it to states that are physically located between them; or to states that are formally non-allied with any sides.

The second publication is “A Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia” (2019).<sup>43</sup> Authors define an in-between state as physically located Russia and the West, over which two global actors are contesting influence. These states are “faced

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<sup>42</sup> Samuel Charap, Jeremy Shapiro, and Alyssa Demus, eds., *Getting out from In-between: Perspectives on the Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018).

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Charap, Jeremy Shapiro, and Alyssa Demus, eds., *A Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2019).

with an either-or dilemma, and economic ties between those states and one or the other bloc have degraded as a result.” The paper also introduces a short SWOT analysis to demonstrate the position of in-between states. Still, it mostly concentrates on policy recommendations for European security architecture.

The third publication, “Rethinking the Regional Order for Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia” (2018),<sup>44</sup> essentially confirms the existing, within RAND corporation, approach to defining “in-betweenness.”

Following introduction of these category in the RAND Corporation publications, several political analysts, who were co-authors of the abovementioned chapters, have incorporated the term “in-between” into their publications. All the political scientists who use the term use it in reference to post-soviet space. For example, “in-betweenness” is mentioned in Maria Shagina’s “In the Crossfire: The Impact of West-Russia Tensions on Post-Soviet States”.<sup>45</sup> Zach Paikin has referred to the term in his publications,<sup>46</sup> while Yauheni Preiherman devotes a special role to this term in variety of his comments and policy papers.<sup>47</sup>

However, the term has not found its place in international relations academia. The main reason for it is inconsistent and, sometimes, arbitrary use of the term, as well as general lack of its conceptualization. Consequently, the present work is aimed at resolving this issue by introducing a conceptualized understanding of “in-betweenness”.

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<sup>44</sup> Samuel Charap, Jeremy Shapiro, and Alyssa Demus, “Rethinking the Regional Order for Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia” (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Maria Shagina, “In the Crossfire: The Impact of West-Russia Tensions on Post-Soviet States” (The Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2019).

<sup>46</sup> Zachary Paikin and Yauheni Preiherman, “Canada Should Look to Belarus for Strategic Partnership,” *Policy Options, Institute for Research on Public Policy*, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> E.g. Yauheni Preiherman, “Overcoming Geostrategic Asymmetries: Foreign Policy Hedging in Small in-between States (the Case of Belarus)” (COMPASS Work in Progress Seminars 2019 – 2020, GCRF Compass (University of Kent), 2020).

### ***2.1. In-Between States as a Distinct Theoretical Category***

Having discussed the categories of small states and buffer states, it is clear that both are not sufficient to the specificity of position of small states caught in between two conflicting bigger powers.

While small state literature does answer some question regarding the in-between states' international status, threats, and opportunities, it cannot, and frankly should not address all the specific issues that are exclusive to "in-betweeners".

At the same time, being a "buffer" is just one of the functions or qualities and in-between state can possess, as buffers are, typically, located between bigger powers, as are in-between states. Yet, buffer state literature uses more old-school realist and even militarist prism to shed light on states trapped between bigger powers. Thus, it is reasonable to limit the concept of a "buffer" to a role, or a national role conception, that can be, if the structure allows, performed by an in-between state.

Thus, the term "in-between state" has the potential to become a distinct descriptive category in international relations theory.

As was noted above, this term has not been used in academia and has very limited use in the policy world. Still, policy publications that can give us the starting point for conceptualizing in-betweenness. So far, the main contributor to the life of the "in-between" concept is Samuel Charap – a political analyst of the RAND Corporation – who has been leading research on post-soviet space in RAND Corporation.

All the above-mentioned publications edited by Charap, were aimed at re-thinking regional order in Europe and Eurasia to reduce tensions between the EU and Russia. A big role in this transformative regional process is given to “in-between” states, a wider list of which includes Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The core quality of all these states is that they are “objects of a contest among outside powers”, namely among “Russia and the West”.<sup>48</sup>

Even within the existing body of literature there are disagreements with regards to the definition of the in-between state and, accordingly, the list of states that are to be considered in-between. The basic definition suggested by RAND implies “states [that] are OSCE [members] that are neither formally aligned with the “collective West” (i.e., the United States and EU) nor Russia”.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, in-between states are ones that “do not belong to NATO, the CSTO, the EU, or the EAEU”.<sup>50</sup> Since that definition would become useless, as it would include “nearly all European OSCE member states that are members of neither Western nor Russian alliances”<sup>51</sup>, it is suggested to limit these states to “those states subject to the confrontation between the West and Russia”<sup>52</sup> as they have options of future membership in either West-led or Russian-led alliances.

Experts also note the importance of the factor of geographic location, that is commonly used when conceptualizing buffer states. In this manner, in-between states must be located with a “proximity to both blocs”: just like Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova are

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<sup>48</sup> Charap, Shapiro, and Demus, *Getting out from In-Between*, p. iii (preface).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



“located in a space that physically divides Russia and the West”. Such approach excludes states such as Serbia from being considered as “in-between”.<sup>53</sup>

Some political scientists suggest that states such as Belarus and Armenia cannot be considered “in-between states” together with Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan. The main reason behind that is that Belarus and Armenia have entered formal alliance with Russia (CSTO, CIS, EAEU), thus has made a clear geopolitical choice in favor of Kremlin. However, it is important to note that Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have legal and institutional arrangements that formally tie them to the other side – the EU and NATO. In fact, all of them have applied for the EU membership in 2022 after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February. The only completely non-aligned state, according to this approach, is thus Azerbaijan.

I argue that exclusion of Belarus and Armenia, or any of the EU-leaning states mentioned above, from “in-between” states list is illogical and unreasonable. If one of the most important factors of an in-between state to be considered as such, is it being a “subject to the confrontation between the West and Russia”, then, regardless of formal affiliation, a state is “in-between” as long as there is no consensus on its status among between bigger powers. As underlined by the RAND Corporation report itself, “states like Switzerland can thus be excluded given that there is a broader consensus between the West and Russia on their status”.<sup>54</sup>

Regardless of the formal affiliations of these states, their status is still contested from time to time and the external consensus on their geopolitical affiliation does not exist. Indeed, in the past 30 years there were points in foreign policy of Belarus and Armenia, when closer formal partnership with the EU has been pursued. At the end of the day, their “pivot” towards the West

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

has never been completely off the table. As underlined in the RAND report “Nonetheless, some Western diplomats and experts do not exclude, especially after 2014, the possibility of their geopolitical re-orientation and therefore pursue certain activities to this end.”<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, countries like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have proclaimed their ambitions to become a part of the EU and NATO. However, the consensus on this decision has never been achieved due to Kremlin’s contestation of its “area of vital interest”.

Perhaps, the only example of in-between states “getting out” of their in-between position are the Baltic states, that were a part of the Soviet Union and thus, after its dissolution, were considered by Russia as undeniable area of influence. However, with admission of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the EU and NATO, Russia has stopped contesting Western ambitions and the consensus has appeared. Such a consensus has been relatively stable, as it has been existing for decades. Yet, these developments did not (yet) take place in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

Accordingly, in-between states can have “a variety of different levels of ambition for the relationship with NATO and the EU” or Russia.<sup>56</sup> The main factor that remains here is the lack of consensus between two bigger powers on the matter. This idea can be confirmed and advanced by applying role theory to study of in-between states, as will be done in the next section.

Thus, it's possible to determine the main distinctive qualities of in-between states:

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

1. Are geographically located between two bigger outside powers.
2. Seen as objects of a contest among these powers:
  - a. The consensus among these powers on the geopolitical orientation of a state in question does not exist.
  - b. Each of the two outside powers would prefer the state in question choosing a geopolitical orientation in their favor.
  - c. A pivot towards one or the other bigger power is considered possible.
3. Can have a lack of domestic consensus on their geopolitical orientation and/or changing internal political environment that leads to instability of their foreign policy preferences.

## ***2.2. In-Between States and Role Theory***

### **2.2.1 National Role Conceptions for In-Between States**

Role theory conveniently combines elements of domestic role conceptions and external role perceptions. Thus, successful role performance depends on a way two factors interplay with each other. The starting point of determining the role one state can assign to itself and decide to perform is a set of objective factors and qualities of the state in question. In that manner, Holsti creates a category of “primary role sources” – qualities of a state such as its size, historical position, societal composition, location, sufficiency of capabilities.

In-between states have similar role sources, that are, at the same time, very specific to this category of states. As has been determined in the previous section, “in-betweeners” have specific location – in-between bigger powers – and a lack of capabilities due to their smallness. Specific geopolitical position in-between two competing bigger powers limits the role

conceptions in-between states can choose from. This is especially evident when comparing possible role conceptions of small states and in-between states.

Holsti, in his 1970 work, provides two lists of role conceptions: “National Roles in International Relations Literature” and “Some Sources of National Role Conceptions” – a wider list of role conceptions with their sources and examples.

The first list enshrines role conceptions that are mentioned, in one way or the other, in a wider literature body of international relations.<sup>57</sup> Among eight options provided by Holsti, only several seem to be feasible and suitable for in-between states. An in-between state can adopt a role of a “block member/ally”, a “mediator”, “non-aligned” and a “buffer”.

The second list provided by Holsti–“Some Sources of National Role Conceptions”–features a bigger variety of role conceptions, while also repeating ones that have been already mentioned.<sup>58</sup> A significant amount of work was done by Herbut, who narrowed down Holsti’s list of “national role conceptions” to these applicable to small states. He suggests that a small state can adapt a role of a: mediator-integrator, developer, bridge, faithful ally, independent, isolate, protectee.<sup>59</sup>

It appears that some roles would be suitable for small, but not in-between states. In that manner, “developer” – a role that aims at overcoming smallness by assisting underdeveloped countries - is too complex to perform amid difficulties to maintain foreign policy in between two centers of power. Resources, that are in possession of an in-between state are not sufficient to diversify,

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<sup>57</sup> Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy”, p. 255.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 296-297.

<sup>59</sup> Czajkowski, Herbut, and Kunert-Milcarz, *Georgia and Moldova in the Context of Russian Imperialistic Foreign Policy*.

as they are all directed to ensure careful positioning between bigger powers. “Independent” is not a feasible role either. It implies for making policy decisions according “to the state’s own interests rather than support the objectives of other states”.<sup>60</sup> Performance of this role is incredibly restricted for an in-between state: role perceptions, *i.e.*, expectations about the role from external actors, that are projected on an in-between state are too strong, as they are coming from more powerful neighboring countries. In addition to that, these expectations are too conflicting between two external actors. For an in-between state, not supporting objective of one bigger power automatically implies for supporting objective of the other. Role of “isolate” requires more stable and non-conflictual regional dynamics as well, since it “demands a minimum of external contacts of whatever variety”.<sup>61</sup>

With due reservations, in-between states seem to be capable of performing roles of mediator-integrator and a bridge, or a faithful ally, and a protectee. In essence, these options create dichotomic choice: either fully commit to one party or attempt to “get out of in-between” by non-alignment.

### 2.2.2 Role Combination

As discussed previously, these roles can be successfully combined with each other. For example, a non-aligned state can simultaneously serve as a buffer and/or as a mediator.

Typically, one state can perform different roles with regards to different global actors— other states, supranational and international organizations. This is the case for in-between states as well: as an example, Georgia had a role of a “neutral” and a “mediator” in the Nagorno-

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Georgia<sup>62</sup>, while leaning towards having a role of an “ally” of the West, thus protecting itself from Russian power. However, combining several roles seem to be a challenge for in-between states, due to overwhelming pressure from the bigger power’s rivalry surrounding them. As will be evident from Belarusian case in the last chapter, attempts to combine or switch between several roles that are directed into the same subjects of world politics requires not only tremendous effort from the government, but also fortunate circumstances. Generally, however, roles of in-between states are focused on finding their position in the rivalry of two bigger neighboring powers, and these roles are the main focus of the present work.

### 2.2.3 Role Contestation

One of the most important factors for an in-between state to be considered as such is the lack of consensus of external powers on its geopolitical affiliation. Such lack of consensus can be seen on the domestic level in an in-between state as well: post-soviet states, having quite a young statehood and foreign policy strategy, are prone to have unstable political environment and internal disagreements about their foreign policy course. This element of the “lack of consensus” or “disagreement” is mirrored in the role theory in the form of “role conflict” or “role contestation”.

According to Cantir and Kaarbo, role conflict can manifest itself in a clash:

1. between domestically defined national role conceptions (ego) and externally defined role expectations (alter).
2. between two role prescriptions for the same situation.
3. between elements of the same role.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Buchsbaum, Yauheni Preiherman, and Alisiya Ivanova, eds., *The Neutrality Option for In-Between States* (Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations, 2021).

<sup>63</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo, *Domestic Role Contestation, Foreign Policy, and International Relations*, p. 5.

Cantir and Kaarbo introduce a notion of “role contestation” that “examines the process by which domestic actors with various role conceptions interact in the foreign policy-making process”.<sup>64</sup>

In the case of in-between states, their various national actors tend to have different ideas about role conceptions of their state. However, what is necessary to focus on when examining in-between states through the prism of the role theory is another level of a role conflict, namely one between internal “ego” role conceptions and external “alter” role perceptions.

As evident from 30 years of history of independent post-soviet states, there was hardly any agreement between Russia and the West regarding what role these small states should adhere to in their foreign policy. While some roles were carefully designed and presented to the world community, they were never unanimously accepted by all the interested parties.

As we have seen, roles that are available to an in-between state are quite limited: they can either have a role of a “faithful ally” to one party or another, or try to perform a role of a neutral, a bridge or a buffer. Meanwhile, the defining structural factor for an in-between state is a competition over it. Thus, is evident that each of the bigger powers – Russia or the West – would expect, ideally, the in-between state to be a faithful ally to them, not the other party. Role of a neutral or a bridge would serve as a compromise between what is desired by Russia and the West. However, such compromise is not easily achieved considering overall tensions in relations between two bigger powers.

Thus, an in-between state is essentially facing not one, but two “alter expectations” about its role performance that are, in most cases, contradictory. It creates a three-level role conflict:

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

between ego and first alter, between ego and second alter, and between two alters. Such a conflict is, in essence, what keeps an in-between state “in-between”: once a conflict between two alters is resolved, a state can attempt to reconcile its role conception with role perceptions and thus “get out of in-between”.

Such a recipe for success is expressed, though without reference to role theory, in numerous policy publications that deal with post-soviet space. For example, the RAND Corporation recommendations include the following: “As a next step, the West and Russia, together with all the states in between, should immediately start a comprehensive discussion in the framework of the OSCE to agree on a geopolitical and geoeconomic status for the in-betweens that would be acceptable for parties.”<sup>65</sup> Another recommendation suggests that “the states in between can and should undertake obligations to conduct their own foreign and security policies on the basis of the principles of neutrality or nonalignment. In other words, they should maintain equal distance from both Russia and the West”, while neutrality, to be effective, needs to be duly recognized and accepted, and supported by the surrounding bigger powers.<sup>66</sup> Even when it comes to in-between states involved in war with one of the bigger powers, the universal advice remains the same: “The West and Russia should take responsibility for not reaching a consensus on a mutually acceptable security arrangement for Ukraine.”<sup>67</sup>

### **2.3 Classification of In-Between States**

One of the ideas expressed in the RAND corporation publication is that countries, such as Belarus and Armenia cannot be considered as “in-between” due to their formal alignment with Russia through various international structures such as the CSTO, CIS and EAEU. However,

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<sup>65</sup> Charap, Shapiro, and Demus, *Getting out from In-Between*, p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.



as was discussed in previous chapters, such an approach is overly limiting and scrutinizes the main element of in-betweenness: lack of consensus on a geopolitical status or a role of a state, that is located “in-between” two bigger powers.

As underlined by Jeremy Shapiro, “Today, the in-between states have differing security arrangements and ambitions, though all are suffering—to varying degrees—from the shortcomings of the status quo”.<sup>68</sup> Even though the source of in-between countries challenges is largely the same – geopolitical environment on the European continent, their ways of dealing with them are drastically different. That allows us to classify them depending on the policy they choose and the role they commit to perform.

RAND corporation gives a simple classification of in-between states. They separate them into three categories: Russia-allied, West-leaning, and non-aligned. Accordingly, non-aligned countries, as for 2019, are Azerbaijan and Moldova, who “pursue relations with both [Russia and the West], even if they occasionally tilt in one direction or the other”.<sup>69</sup> Russian aligned countries are Belarus and Armenia, and Western-leaning are Ukraine and Georgia, as they “seek — but have not achieved — alliance with the West”.<sup>70</sup>

Another way to look at it is by a factor of formal agreements. Countries, having formal agreements with Western structures, but not with Russia, are Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Russian aligned countries, Armenia and Belarus, will remain as such due to their formal agreements with Russia, as well as Azerbaijan is still to be considered neutral due to a lack of any formal agreements with either of the sides. Accordingly, by the intensity of their formal

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<sup>68</sup> Charap, Shapiro, and Demus, *A Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia*, p. 12.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

affiliation with one side or another (classifying by the highest attained level of cooperation as for June 2022), in-between state affiliation spectrum, from Western to Russian affiliation, can look as follows:

*Table 1. Formal geopolitical affiliations of in-between states*

	<b>1. Ukraine</b>	<b>2. Georgia</b>	<b>3. Moldova</b>
<b>EU</b>	Association agreement; Application to join the EU	Association agreement; Application to join the EU	Association agreement; Application to join the EU
<b>NATO</b>	NATO-Ukraine Commission; Charter on a Distinctive Partnership	NATO-Georgia Commission; NATO-Georgia Package	Individual Partnership Action plan
<b>Russia</b>			Agreement on Russian military formations located on the territory of Moldova (withdrawal demanded)
<b>Neutrality</b>			Permanent neutrality proclaimed in the Constitution
	<b>4. Azerbaijan</b>	<b>5. Armenia</b>	<b>6. Belarus</b>
<b>EU</b>	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement	
<b>NATO</b>	Individual Partnership Action Plan	Individual Partnership Action Plan	Individual Partnership Action Plan
<b>Russia</b>	Declaration of Allied Interaction	Membership in the CSTO, EAEU, CIS	Union State; Membership in CSTO, EAEU, CIS
<b>Neutrality</b>	Member of the Non-Alignment Movement		

However, the closer look at the foreign policy of in-between states demonstrates, that their “geopolitical preference”, as well as a role they were trying to play were changing drastically over their 30-year history as independent states.

For example, Georgia has been “accommodating Russian political needs”, such as troop deployment, in exchange to Moscow’s assistance with internal ethnic conflicts. Prior to 2008 war, ideas of Georgia “returning to Europe” were arising in Georgian society. The “final”

geopolitical re-orientation towards the West has happened after Russian military actions on Georgian territory.<sup>71</sup>

Ukraine in 1990 was leaning towards neutrality, even having relevant legal provisions enshrined into national acts. The course was changed in 2014, when legal acts such as the Law “On the Fundamentals of Domestic and Foreign Policy” was changed as to include Ukraine’s ambitions to join to EU and NATO.

Azerbaijan has not always played a role of a neutral. In the “National Security Concept” from 2007, Azerbaijan had proclaimed integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic political, security, economic and other institutions as the strategic goal. Only in 2011 Azerbaijan became a member of the Non-Alignment Movement.

In case of Armenia, it is not the timeline, but perceptions that result in different understanding of country’s role and affiliation. While RAND Corporation puts the country into a strict “Russia-aligned” category, Anahit Nalbandyan suggests that “having strategically allied relations with Russia on the basis of interdependence and forming part of the Eurasian Union, Armenia signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the European Union in 2017, thus becoming a link between the West and the East”.<sup>72</sup> Armenia is also a unique case of a CSTO country that has established military-political cooperation with NATO.

Consequently, “in-between” states are located on the spectrum between two bigger powers, while their position on this spectrum is (1) changing over the time, and (2) subject to debate. In the middle of this spectrum is, undoubtedly, neutrality and non-alignment. The spectrum

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<sup>71</sup> Buchsbaum, Preiherman, and Ivanova, *The Neutrality Option for In-Between States.*, p. 69.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

between the West on one hand, with the EU and NATO as leading institutions, and Russia on the other, with neutrality located in the middle, can look as follows:

*Table 2. Alignment spectrum*

Countries having formal alignment with the West	West-leaning countries	Non-aligned countries/Neutrals	Russia-leaning countries	Countries having formal alignment with Russia

To the present date, June 2022, the 2009 Eastern Partnership countries can be positioned on this spectrum as follows:

*Table 3. The 2009 EU's Eastern Partnership countries on the alignment spectrum*

Countries having formal alignment with the West		West-leaning countries	Non-aligned countries/Neutrals	Russia-leaning countries	Countries having formal alignment with Russia	
Ukraine	Georgia	Moldova	Azerbaijan		Armenia	Belarus

Adding role theory to the picture, *i.e.*, the range of roles these in-between states are capable of performing in the given geopolitical environment, the spectrum can look as follows:

*Table 4. Available role conceptions for the 2009 EU's Eastern Partnership countries*

Faithful ally		Mediator			Faithful ally	
		Bridge				
			Neutral			
Countries having formal alignment with the West		West-leaning countries	Non-aligned countries/Neutrals	Russia-leaning countries	Countries having formal alignment with Russia	
Ukraine	Georgia	Moldova	Azerbaijan		Armenia	Belarus

## SECTION 3: CASE OF BELARUS

Belarus is, perhaps, the most controversial “in-between” state. It has a long history of formal alliance with Russia and questionable reputation in Europe due to authoritarian regime and undemocratic practices. However, Belarus serves as an interesting case-study of “in-betweenness”: over the course of last three decades, Belarus has never departed from being Russia’s “small brother” yet has made several interesting foreign policy decisions that were connecting it to or distancing it from the West. The case of Belarus is especially interesting because, unlike other “in-between” states of the Eastern Partnership, Belarus has had the same person in power for over 26 years. Thus, this case study will demonstrate how an in-between state can attempt to change roles over time, and why these attempts happen to be unsuccessful. As the main transformative processes for the role of Belarus in the international arena were taking place from 2014 to 2020, this time period will be analyzed in the present chapter.

### ***3.1 Belarus: Changing Roles of an In-Between State***

From the very moment of dissolution of the Soviet Union, Belarus has chosen its geopolitical affiliation. Unlike, for example, Baltic States, it has never been an option for Belarus to cut all its ties in Russia. Undoubtedly, the logic behind that is not only geographical proximity to Russia and strong economic ties between two countries. An important factor in Belarus-Russia relations is their strong historical, linguistic, and cultural connections. Accordingly, Belarus has been a “faithful ally” to Russia on every step: from creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 1992, and to various economic integration projects from 2000 Economic Community to Eurasian Economic Union in 2014.

Of course, over the course of three decades Belarus-Russia relations has its drawbacks. Most of them were connected to unfavorable economic conditions created by Russia or demands of Kremlin to demonstrate political commitments that Belarus was not ready for. One of the low points of Belarus-Russia relations were 2009 “Milk Wars”, when Russia attempted to privatize Belarusian milk industry, and Belarus responded with attempts to sell dairy products to the EU instead. Russian officials decided to ban the import of Belarusian milk as a countermeasure. Discourse analysis demonstrates that it was one of the most “heated” conflicts between two countries: several wider political questions were involved, such as recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Belarusian Sovereignty, Russian relations with NATO. Traditionally, Belarusian president was making very emotional statements, such as “Do you think we will forget this attitude from Russia towards us? No. I'll get through this, okay. But people won't forget”.<sup>73</sup>

On the other hand, relations with the EU have been going through cycles from good to non-existent depending on Presidential and, sometimes, parliamentary elections. Considering the human rights record of Belarus, it comes as no surprise that after yet another undemocratic election, the EU must express their disapproval and impose a new package of sanctions against Belarusian high official and industries.

An interesting twist has happened in 2014, when Russia has annexed Crimea and started a military operation in Eastern Ukraine. It was expected that Belarus, a “faithful ally” of Russia, would unconditionally support its foreign action. Yet, Russian expectations were not met: Belarusian president has refused to recognize independence of Donetsk and Lugansk Peoples Republics and stated, “We would not want the destruction of the Ukrainian state”.<sup>74</sup> He has also

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<sup>73</sup> “Aleksandr Lukashenko razzhegsya na moloke [Alexander Lukashenko fired up on milk],” *Kommersant*, 2009, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1184909>.

<sup>74</sup> “Lukashenko otkazalsya priznavat' LNR i DNR ‘kak chelovek i prezident’ [Lukashenka refused to recognize the LPR and DPR ‘as a person and president’],” *MK.RU*, 2014,

expressed a will to support Ukraine,<sup>75</sup> while general discourse about Belarus-Russia relations was negative and implied for disappointment with Russian foreign policy.<sup>76</sup>

This is not to say Belarus has taken anti-Russian position. Instead, Belarus decided to adhere to so-called “situational neutrality”. Belarus has become a venue for peace talks, including ones in the Normandy format, that included Germany, Russia, Ukraine, and France, as well as Ukraine. Appreciation of Belarusian effort and satisfaction from the results of the negotiations was expressed even by Vladimir Putin.<sup>77</sup>

Following these initiative, numerous statements were made by the leaders of European countries, hinting at “giving Belarus a second chance” due to its successful, at a time, efforts in playing a role of “mediator” or a “bridge”. For example, Latvia’s Foreign Minister claimed: “We’d like to do all we can to give a new momentum to relations with Belarus.” Others claimed that “[t]here are growing signs that Belarus is opening up to Europe.” and that “[m]ember states are discussing whether the EU should unfreeze relations with Belarus.”<sup>78</sup>

In this overall positive environment surrounding Belarus-EU relations, even 2015 Presidential Elections have not met that much criticism from Belarus’ Western neighbors. Prior to the

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<https://www.mk.ru/politics/2014/10/03/lukashenko-otkazalsya-priznavat-lnr-dnr-i-prisoedinenie-kryma-k-rossii.html>.

<sup>75</sup> “Lukashenko poobeshchal Ukraine pomoshch’ [Lukashenka promised Ukraine help],” *Deutsche Welle in Russian*, 2014,

<https://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%BB%D1%83%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B5%D1%89%D0%B0%D0%BB-%D1%83%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%BE%D1%89%D1%8C/a-18144989>.

<sup>76</sup> “Lukashenko v Poslanii k Natsii Vystupil Za Yedinuyu Ukrainu [Lukashenka Advocated United Ukraine in His Message to the Nation],” *BBC*, 2014,

[https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2014/04/140422\\_belarus\\_lukashenko\\_ukraine\\_view](https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2014/04/140422_belarus_lukashenko_ukraine_view).

<sup>77</sup> “Peregovory v Minske. Onlayn [Negotiations in Minsk. Online],” *Korrespondent.Net*, 2015, <https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/politics/3478030-perehovory-v-mynske-onlain>.

<sup>78</sup> “Brussels Makes Moves to Bring ‘Europe’s Last Dictator’ in from the Cold,” *The Guardian*, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/20/brussels-belarus-europe-last-dictator-from-cold>.

elections, Belarusian president has pardoned six political prisoners, which was marked as “important progress towards the improvement of relations between the EU and Belarus” by the EU officials.<sup>79</sup> A significant number of sanctions has been lifted in response to that event, while in 2016 these sanctions were not re-imposed.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, Belarus-NATO relations have progressed to a new stage: new Individual Partnership Action Plan was adopted in 2017 and, at some point the number of joint events with NATO has increased so much that it has exceeded the number of such events with Russia.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, economic dimension has been evolving as well: in 2016 Belarus has introduced “30-30-30” export formula, as to diversify its exports and reduce economic dependency on Russia.<sup>82</sup> Series of high-profile meetings, such as with the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz,<sup>83</sup> and the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.<sup>84</sup>

### **3.2 Belarus: No Way Out of In-Between**

All these developments were closely tied to a new role conception Belarus has decided to undertake once the Ukraine conflict has erupted. Belarus has presented its new foreign policy concept as “multilateralism”, while the main initiative Belarus was “selling” abroad was “Helsinki-2”. Helsinki-2 initiative on overarching peace talks in Europe was well-received by

<sup>79</sup> “Belarus President Lukashenko Pardons Six Jailed Opposition Figures,” *The Guardian*, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/24/belarus-president-lukashenko-pardons-six-jailed-opposition-figures>.

<sup>80</sup> “Belarus Sanctions: EU Delists 170 People, 3 Companies; Prolongs Arms Embargo,” Press Release (Council of the European Union, February 25, 2016), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/02/25/belarus-sanctions/>.

<sup>81</sup> Alisiya Ivanova, “Belarus between NATO and CSTO. Law and Geopolitics,” Belarus and Global Politics (Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies, 2019).

<sup>82</sup> “Natsional’naya Programma podderzhki i razvitiya eksporta Respubliki Belarus’ na 2016 – 2020 gody [National Program for Support and Development of Exports of the Republic of Belarus for 2016-2020]” (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, 2016), <http://www.government.by/upload/docs/fileaff83a3fc04eb9c0.PDF>.

<sup>83</sup> “Lukashenko, Kurz Discuss Belarus-Austria Relations, OSCE Agenda,” *Belarus.by, Official Website of the Republic of Belarus*, 2017, [https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/news/lukashenko-kurz-discuss-belarus-austria-relations-osce-agenda\\_i\\_60145.html](https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/news/lukashenko-kurz-discuss-belarus-austria-relations-osce-agenda_i_60145.html).

<sup>84</sup> “Secretary Pompeo’s Meeting with Belarusian President Lukashenko,” *U.S. Embassy in Belarus*, 2020, <https://by.usembassy.gov/secretary-pompeos-meeting-with-belarusian-president-lukashenko/>.



the OSCE, although never implemented.<sup>85</sup> Minsk was trying to serve as a dialogue facilitator. When the conflict in Ukraine was in its active phase, the role Minsk was playing a “mediator-integrator” role, trying to “reconcile conflicts between other states or groups of states”,<sup>86</sup> namely between the West and Ukraine on one side, and Russia on the other side. Once the conflict in Ukraine became frozen, Belarus has decided to stick to the role, transforming it to a role of a “bridge”. A bridge as a national form conception, in contrast with a mediator, “often appears in vague form, and the policies deriving from it, if any, do not seem apparent”. and “is much more ephemeral”.<sup>87</sup> Vague and ephemeral is exactly how the famous concept of Helsinki-2 was introduced: it was not introduced as a specific conflict-resolution platform, but rather as an overarching “trust building talks” that could have had a positive impact on the security architecture in the European region.

Perhaps, the pique, and, at the same time, final point of Belarus positioning itself as a “bridge” was 2018-2019: statements from Minsk regarding Helsinki-2 initiative were still frequent,<sup>88</sup> political analysts were holding positive opinions about new Belarusian role conception,<sup>89</sup> meetings on a high level with Western officials were still on their way to become a “new normal”. At the same time, some analysts expressed skepticism about Belarusian positioning as a “peacemaker”, a “neutral platform”, claiming that “attempts to exploit mutually exclusive opportunities failed and led to opposite effects”.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>85</sup> “Gensek OBSE Ob”yasnil Nevozmozhnost’ Zapuska Initsiativy ‘Khel’sinki-2’ [OSCE Secretary General Explained the Impossibility of Launching the Helsinki-2 Initiative],” *Interfax*, 2018, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/632622>.

<sup>86</sup> Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy”, p. 265.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>88</sup> “Lukashenko o ‘Khel’sinki-2’: Zdes’ Ne Rvanesh’, Nado Idti Poshagovo [Lukashenka on Helsinki-2: You Can’t Rush Here, You Have to Go Step by Step],” *BELTA*, 2019, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-o-helsinki-2-zdes-ne-rvanesh-nado-idti-poshagovo-338557-2019/>.

<sup>89</sup> Artyom Shraibman, “Belarus, the Tactical Peacemaker,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Eurasia in Transition* (2018), <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/76615>.

<sup>90</sup> Senior Researcher in the EU’s Neighbourhood and Russia Programme, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Finland and Ryhor Nizhnikau, “Playing the Enemies: Belarus Finds in between EU and Russian

However, enthusiasm with Belarus' new role conception has been steadily declining: conflict in Ukraine was no longer occupying headlines of international media, and attention to Belarus as a peacemaker was no longer required. Yet, the turning point in Belarus' role failure was tied to its domestic politics. 2020 Presidential elections were characterized by unprecedented peaceful protest, demanding political and electoral freedoms, while the government has responded with unprecedented violence and oppression. Negative reaction from the EU, decisive sanctions packages and immediate deterioration of Belarus-EU relations came as no surprise. After 2020 events, Belarus could no longer position itself as a "bridge" and a "peacemaker", while the atrocities happening in its prisons were reported daily. However, one of the factors that took Belarus even more far from being a "bridge" is its immediate, almost reflex, call for help from Kremlin. When Moscow supported Belarusian regime in its struggle against opposition, it automatically became a "kingmaker" of Belarusian foreign policy. It was almost as if Russian government was expecting internal disruptions in Belarus to obtain more leverage over a weaker country. It was a final point of Belarus' attempts of performing a role of a "bridge".

Domestic factors were not the only reason the "bridge" role performance of Belarus has not been successful. As was discussed in pervious chapters, in-between states struggle with a three-level role conflict: between ego and first alter, between ego and second alter, and between two alters. Beyond role theory, the same issue can be presented as simply the lack of consensus between the West and Russia regarding the status of Belarus.

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Sanctions Regimes," *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, no. 125 (October 21, 2020): 113–38, <https://doi.org/10.24241/rcai.2020.125.2.113/en>.

Analysis of events, that took place between 2014 and 2020, leads to several findings. Firstly, Belarus has been successfully performing the role of a “mediator-integrator” during active stages of Russia-Ukraine conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The performance of this role was successful due to several factors:

1. Performance of this role was achieving practical results, such as peace agreements Minsk-1 and Minsk-2;
2. This role had valid national role sources: geographic location between Russia, EU, and Ukraine, as well as previously friendly relations with both parties to military conflict (Ukraine and Russia);
3. There was a consensus, an agreement between Russia and the West regarding Belarus’ role as a mediator. Both parties were interested in Belarus serving such a role at the time of a crisis.

The third factor is, undoubtedly, a decisive one. It is evident from analysis of Belarus’ role performance post-2016. When the active phase of the conflict was over, Belarus was still attempting to “bridge” the West in Russia, now with a view of facilitating more general security talks. However, neither the West, nor Russia were interested in this role enough to concede on what they viewed as ideal Belarus’s role.

In that manner, Belarus’ role conception was “bridge”, while specific foreign policy steps undertaken were ranging from proposing diplomatic initiatives to refusing the deployment of Russian aviation base in Belarus. Various smaller foreign policy actions were designed as to move towards a more neutral stance between the West and Russia.

Role perceptions, however, did not align with this role conception. Russia have always been expecting Belarus to be a “faithful ally”, and these expectations followed from a “grand deal” informally concluded between Russia and Belarus in the 1990s. The “grand deal” implied for “geopolitical loyalty in exchange for economic benefits” for Belarus and has been essential for both weak Belarusian economy and insecure Russian western flank. Thus, Russia had no interest in Belarus becoming a “neutral bridge”. For Russia, even Belarusian “flirtation” with ideas of non-alignment has crossed the line.

For the EU, Belarus as a “bridge” would be, perhaps, an ideal situation on paper. However, the amount of progress Belarus was having was not sufficient for the EU to consider its role seriously. The EU, being a normative power, was not satisfied with the lack of democratic practices in Belarus, and mere statements about re-building relations with the West were not enough. Thus, the EU had more expectations from the “bridge” role than Belarus could perform. At the same time, these expectations were drastically different from these of Russia.

As a result, in a “moment of weakness” – a political crisis – Belarus has chosen an easiest option to turn back to Russia and to its “faithful ally” role. Belarus as a case study demonstrates that in-between states can attempt to move across the role spectrum, given the political will and favorable environment. However, it is nearly impossible for bigger powers to have a stable, long-lasting consensus over the role of an in-between state. And this impossibility is what keeps a state “in-between”.

## CONCLUSION

The present study has attempted to create a link between policy world and academic field of International Relations by conceptualizing the term “in-between state” through the academic prism of comparative analysis, role theory, and a case study.

Conclusions of the thesis demonstrate that the term “in-between state” encompasses specific foreign policy limitations and opportunities, that are not highlighted by existing terms, such as “small state” and “buffer state”. An in-between state is a state that is (1) geographically located between two bigger outside powers; (2) seen as an object of a contest among these powers, and (3) tends to have a high level of fluidity regarding its geopolitical orientation. The main element of an in-between state is a contestation over its geopolitical affiliation among bigger neighboring powers. Consequently, there is no consensus among these powers on foreign policy choices of an in-between state. At the same time, both outside powers expect the state in question to “pivot” towards them at some point of time.

This element of “lack of consensus” or “contestation” is evident within the framework of the role theory. In-between states, generally, have a very limited amount of national role conceptions to choose from due to external structural constraints. Analysis of existing role conceptions has demonstrated that an in-between state can, in essence, perform roles of mediator-integrator and a bridge, or a faithful ally, and a protectee. This range of options creates a dichotomic choice for an in-between state. It can either commit to one party or attempt to take up a neutral, non-aligned position. However, regardless of the role an in-between state chooses to perform, this role is unlikely to be accepted by both the competing bigger powers. While some role theory scholars describe cases of internal and external “role conflict” and “role

contestation”, the present paper introduces a concept of a “three-level role conflict”. This conflict is a key element of in-betweenness: an in-between state faces two different expectations about its role from two more powerful neighbors, while having its own role conception. A state can “get out of in-between” only if this conflict is resolved and the element of consensus appears.

While the consensus does not exist, in-between states can “float” between role conceptions and geopolitical preferences, while still being located on the spectrum. In case of EU’s Eastern Partnership “in-betweeners”, the spectrum varies from a “faithful ally” of the West to a “faithful ally” of Russia, with neutrality being on the center of the spectrum.

The case study of Belarus demonstrates a possibility of changing role conceptions over time, with no change of government (*i.e.* domestic factors) required. At the same time, the case study demonstrates the failure of role performance due to disagreement, lack of interest, and even dissatisfaction with the role from the surrounding bigger powers. Hypothetically, if the role of the “bridge” that Minsk was trying to perform was agreed upon by the EU and Russia, and this agreement has been a long-lasting one, Belarus could “get out of in-between” and prosper as a neutral of the region. Yet, the structural constraints that are rooted in the Cold War do not allow such an easy “way out” for in-between states.

Present work has attempted to highlight several critical factors that influence foreign policy performance of small Eastern European post-soviet states. The main factor that significantly constraints any policy action of in-between states is the lack of consensus on their role and affiliation among bigger powers. Regardless of careful design of role conceptions, its domestic rationale, and diplomatic efforts, the lack of agreement between, in this case, the West and

Russia, will always impose an immense constraint on in-between states. This finding can have important policy implications for governments of in-between states, while such states might exist outside the post-soviet space.

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