

ERWIN METERA ▶▶

Political Science Alumni Association of the University of Warsaw

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9003-5810>

Systemic Geopolitical Analysis in the research of power distribution in Eastern Europe

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Abstract

The article presents Systemic Geopolitical Analysis, which as a scientific method can be an important tool for studying the distribution of power in Eastern Europe, supporting the assumptions of structural realism with an element of quantitative research. This region, as a place where spheres of influence and the ensuing economic and potentially military conflicts meet, is an area where the knowledge of the most precise distribution of power may be a crucial element in the analysis of the genesis of conflicts, the shifts in power distribution during their course, as well as in the prediction of future flashpoints. Being the first attempt to correlate Systemic Geopolitical Analysis with the issue of conflicts in Eastern Europe, the paper contains a hypothesis that Systemic Geopolitical Analysis is a research method that enables an effective analysis of the geopolitical reality in the region because of: 1) the conflicts occurring in the system due to differences in power distribution; 2) the nature of the components of power, measurable by the means of Systemic Geopolitical Analysis. Confirming the above hypothesis, the article points to the economic aspect, linked to the Russian natural gas exports, and the military aspect, by taking into account the characteristics of contemporary tensions in the region, which reduce the role of supra-systemic reserves.

Keywords: Systemic Geopolitical Analysis, Eastern Europe, geopolitics, methodology, international conflicts, structural realism

Системный Геополитический Анализ в исследовании распределения силы в Восточной Европе

Аннотация

В статье представлен Системный Геополитический Анализ, который может стать важным инструментом в качестве научного метода для изучения распределения силы в Восточной Европе, подкрепляя предположения структурного реализма элементом количественного исследования. Этот регион, как место соприкосновения сфер влияния и вытекающих из них экономических и потенциальных военных конфликтов, является областью, где знание наиболее точного распределения силы может стать решающим элементом в анализе генезиса конфликтов, сдвигов в распределении силы в их ходе, а также в прогнозировании будущих очагов напряженности. Будучи первой попыткой соотнести Системный Геополитический Анализ с проблемой конфликтов в Восточной Европе, статья содержит гипотезу о том, что Системный Геополитический Анализ является методом исследования, позволяющим эффективно анализировать геополитическую реальность в регионе вследствие: 1) конфликтов, возникающих в системе из-за различий в распределении силы; 2) природы компонентов силы, измеримых средствами системного геополитического анализа. С целью подтвердить вышеизложенную гипотезу, в статье обращается особое внимание на следующие аспекты: экономический аспект, связанный с экспортом российского природного газа, и военный аспект, учитывающий особенности современной напряженности в регионе, снижающий роль надсистемных резервов.

Ключевые слова: Системный Геополитический Анализ, Восточная Европа, геополитика, методология, международные конфликты, структурный реализм

The security structure of the present world, which is based since the beginning of the 1990s on the leading role of the USA as the state creating the foundation of the international order, is currently in transition. The predicted end of history has not come (Fukuyama, 1989), neither has the unquestionable dominance of the West, which was supposed to preserve the stability of the international order that has departed from the reality

of the bipolar rivalry of powers. At a time when China's global power and geopolitical position is growing, Russia, trying to redirect the course of the emerging world from the direction of a new bipolarism to a multipolarism, is attempting to increase its role in the security architecture by using the means of power projection available to it – energy resources and military force. The states of Eastern Europe, located in the soft underbelly of the Heartland (Mackinder, 1919), and thus an area of strategic importance for the geopolitics of the Russian state, are currently experiencing an active attempt at building a sphere of influence in this region by Moscow.

The following article, taking into consideration the fact of changes in the global, and thus also regional security architecture, resulting from the transition from the unipolar moment (Krauthammer, 1990) to a world with a visible and growing role of local powers, will contain an analysis of the research method of Systematic Geopolitical Analysis (SGA) as a potential tool for understanding the resulting conflicts. By examining the SGA method in the context of the distribution of power translated into the security structure, while supporting the assumptions of structural realism with an element of the quantitative methods, it will be possible to analyse whether the quantitative component is adequate for the study of the characteristics of conflicts existing in Eastern Europe.

This will make it possible to find the answer to the research problem – whether SGA is a scientific method that allows the analysis of the geopolitical structure of the Eastern European region in a way that supports the assumptions of neorealism with an element of precise representation of power distribution. The hypothesis of the study is that SGA is a research method that enables an effective analysis of the geopolitical reality in Eastern Europe because of: 1) the conflicts occurring in the system due to differences in power distribution; 2) the nature of the components of power, measurable by the means of SGA. In this paper, secondary analysis of qualitative existing data will be used to characterise both SGA and the existing conflicts in the Eastern European region, and then a correlation of the listed elements translating into the validity of the analysed method with its hypothetical object of study will be made.

Systemic Geopolitical Analysis methodology characteristics

Derived from structural realism, SGA is a research method that is used to analyse the issue of power, which indicates the possibility of the influence of a given entity in order to secure its own goals (Beckely, 2018), by directly focusing on its distribution in geographical terms. Based on the tenets of neorealism, this method assumes that the analysis of the geopolitical system allows for a better understanding of the reality which is a result of the inequality of power in the system and which influences the formation of relations between the subjects within its framework (Mazis, Troulis, 2019, p. 2). SGA, assuming the concept of the origin of conflicts based on inequalities of development and hegemonism, "(...) describes and predicts the attitudes and the consequences ensuing from relations between the opposing and distinct political practices for the redistribution of power as well as their ideological metaphysics, within the framework of the geographical complexes where these practices apply" (Mazis, Troulis, 2019, p. 2).

The framing factor of the SGA method is based on the Lakatosian structure, defining individual stages as: "(a) Decoding the title of the topic, (b) Identifying the boundaries of the Geopolitical Systems (Mazis, 2017, p. 667) under study, including their definition as systems, sub-systems and supra-systems, (c) Defining the fields of influence of the <geopolitical factor> including the identification of its function for the specific pillars of influence, (d) The Synthesis referring to <the procedure through which we can detect the Resultant Power Trend of the given Geopolitical factor on whichever final systemic scale (e.g. Sub-system, System or Supra-system level)> and (e) The Conclusions where the description of the geopolitical dynamics and trends take place" (Mazis, Troulis, 2019, p. 2).

SGA, as a method that refers to the fundamental tenets of structural realism and uses the range of concepts used in describing reality by this theory (i.e. the balance of power, security dilemmas, uneven growth, hegemonism, causes of war, Great Powers, or projections of power; Mazis, Troulis, 2019, p. 2), also focuses on the issue of anarchy in international relations. The lack of a supreme entity with real power, above states, defines the system and translates the power of the individual entities that it is made of into relations between them. Their structure is significantly based on a network

of particular interests and the potential for their realisation. Based on the assumptions of the main currents of structural realism – both the defensive (Waltz, 1979) and the offensive one (Mearsheimer, 2001) – the security dilemma is one of the factors creating conflicts between the subjects of a given system. This issue makes the power, and its geographical distribution, an important element in the analysis of the dynamics of relations, making the research tool for identifying the above an essential part of the attempt to present a picture of the reality which is being studied.

The key stage included in the SGA method, the measurement of a state's power, is based on the specification of the pillars of influence. By defining the scope of data within the framework of the created pillar, the researcher groups particular fragments of the analysed reality, creating a division of the quantitative research in the scope of, for example, economic or political pillars (Mazis et al., 2019a, p. 236). Having defined the object of research, analogous and quantifiable data of individual entities of the analysed system is compared. This makes it possible to describe the power of an entity within a given system, and consequently also its geographical distribution through states or other entities, of which it is a component (Mazis et al., 2019a, p. 237–290).

Despite being based on a geographical perspective, the framework included in the SGA method is not excluding the validity of using research methods implemented in e.g., the social sciences. In order to identify particular pillars of influence, while, for example, using a qualitative method, their complementarity can broaden the scope of understanding and thus improve the accuracy of the results in the SGA stage where the quantitative method is applied. By pinpointing the significance of a particular pillar of states' power as a measurable element of their position in the system, the researcher is not modifying the assumed structure of the SGA method, but deepening the study of both the subject and the individual components that shape it through the synergy of the methods.

In an attempt to answer the question of what reality looks like, SGA moves away from trying to determine how a given reality should look like and how individual actors should function in it (Mazis, Troulis, 2019, p. 2). By rejecting the approach of implementing geostrategic thinking in its assumptions, SGA focuses on learning the facts and, through the use of its

quantitative component, presenting a distribution of power and the resulting description of the observable dynamics of systemic relations (Mazis, Troulis, 2019, p. 2). This is assumed to exhaust the analysed formula of the research method by presenting a possibly objective reality of the studied system within the calculated factor translating into the real power of a given entity. However, the results of the research themselves can be further analysed from a geostrategic perspective, translating directly into the possibility of their subsequent implementation in the decisions of governments. The translatability of this method into decisions is due to the fact that SGA is a tool for studying not only historical changes in the distribution of the power of the analysed entities, or even its current shape, but also, through its proper application, the trends affecting the prospect of building possibly adequate forecasts of the future (Mazis et al., 2019b, p. 47).

Specifics of international relations in the Eastern European system

A characteristic feature of the system formed by the states in Eastern Europe¹ (United Nations Statistics Division, 2022) is a prolonged conflict with varying intensity, whose genesis as well as course, from the point of view of the tenets of neorealism, is fundamentally influenced by the difference in power of individual states, and especially the role of Russia, whose position makes it a regional hegemon. The shape of the system's structure determines the goals and security issues of its individual entities, providing a basis for the origin of regional tensions. The issue of rebuilding the sphere of influence raised by the Russian authorities is in itself the result of a power imbalance, where without a significant local advantage of power potential, Russia would not be able to project it in the area where it wants to determine the shape of the security structure. The apparent paradigm shift of the traditional supra-systemic actor – the United States – from Europe to the Indo-Pacific area (Biden, 2021), means that even in case of trying to achieve a balance of power, the Eastern European states that are part of NATO cannot treat

¹ According to the United Nations geoscheme – Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia.

the USA as the element that will ultimately guarantee a balanced regional distribution of power. The above issues determine the importance of analysis of the local distribution of power as part of understanding the factors that influence the foundation of relations between states in the region which is being studied.

Eastern Europe, which in the past used to be a region under the political control of the Soviet Union and which currently consists of states with significantly diverse security strategies, based on fundamentally mutually exclusive geopolitical blocs, is a place where structural conflicts exist. Today, the region is mainly divided into: the area of direct influence of the Russian decision-making centre², states that are part of NATO³, and Ukraine, which has had a very clear pro-Western stance (Dickinson, 2021) since 2014 but is not de jure anchored in the structure of the West, such as NATO or the European Union. This distribution makes Eastern Europe an area of simultaneous rivalry between NATO and Russia, as a supra-systemic rivalry, as well as the resulting inter-block tensions among the individual states of the region. Despite the fact that Ukraine does not officially belong to any of the regional blocs, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which had been observed up to the time of the analysis contained in this article, is a de facto proxy conflict between Russia and NATO for influence in this strategically important⁴ for the security structure of the region state (Masters, 2021). This makes it possible to notice a regional dichotomy and to systematise a clear division of geopolitical interests of individual blocks of states.

In addition to the military issue, there is also an economic aspect of the tensions between the actors that are being studied, which is Russia's natural gas export policy as an element of exerting political pressure and expanding its sphere of influence over the states of the region. The network

² The territory of the Russian Federation, Belarus, and territories under Russian/pro-Russian control in Moldova and Ukraine.

³ The Eastern European states that are a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, defined according to the formula "UNSD definition plus the Baltic States" – Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia.

⁴ The control of the Crimean Peninsula, support for separatists in the mining border region of Donbas and control of the Kerch Strait allow Russia to destabilize Ukraine and thus sabotage its attempts to join the EU or NATO, and to increase Russian control over the strategic areas of the Black Sea and the East European Plain.

of connections resulting from the geographical distribution of the energy transmission infrastructure defines the scope of the states' possibilities for action. The dependence of individual states on imports from Russia and Russia's dependence on the transmission of energy resources through countries such as Ukraine define the regional security architecture and limit the states' strategic flexibility. In this case, the role of projects such as Nord Stream becomes important. These projects change the rules of balancing the regional power by changing the geopolitical status quo and by partially excluding Eastern European states from the pan-European security system, which has a de-escalating effect by increasing the economic costs of possible aggression.

The tensions occurring in Eastern Europe, of both militaristic and economic nature, are characterised by the quantifiability of their individual components, making it possible to use them in calculating the current distribution of power and its real changes in terms of the entities forming the system. By adequately defining the individual pillars of influence, a researcher using the SGA method, by presenting a given part of geopolitical reality in a structured manner, is able to accurately depict the power relations in individual regional hotspots. This provides an opportunity to notice a possible emerging phenomenon of imbalance between actors, which may lead to an attempt at strategically exploiting it by the dominant state.

The example of Nord Stream, as an element of a shift in the balance of power in the regional rivalry, includes specific, measurable quantities that translate into a distribution of power. It should be assumed that natural gas exports are one of Russia's tools of influence in its foreign policy (Korteweg, 2018) and that Nord Stream itself structurally allows this tool to be used in a way that directly separates natural gas exports to Western Europe from its political use in a strategy to influence Eastern European states. In this case, as an example of quantifiable elements influencing the power of individual actors, such factors can be used as: a degree of dependence of one's own economy on natural gas imports, the scale of gas usage in the economy, or the role of Russian gas in the balance of the indicated imports. Treating the scale of natural gas imports from Russia as a gradual threat of political pressure, the researcher, by using the SGA method within the economic pillar, is able to present the distribution of the degree of dependence of individual countries

while indicating the vulnerability of a given entity to political pressure from Russia and thus potential future tensions in the region. The value of power, in this case, would be negative, reducing the total geopolitical influence capacity of the entities which are being studied.

Due to the return of the risk of using military force in an attempt to pressure another state in Eastern Europe, the role of adequate recognition of the ratio of military force potential in a given system increases. As a result of the US role in the global security architecture, as well as its individual geopolitical goals, there is a dispersion of its power in case of a local military conflict, e.g., in the region analysed in this paper. It means that only specific forces physically present in a given system would be a real factor in changing the balance of power. The Eastern European NATO states, following the above assumptions, are guided in their strategy by the fact that only when the US troops are stationed on their territory, a real deterrent effect on a potential aggressor exists. Russia, being in a similar situation due to the size of its territory, is forced to conduct a time-consuming process of dislocating its troops to a specific flashpoint area.

Taking the above-stated fact into consideration, it is possible to calculate the value of strength of individual actors in the region, in the form of a military pillar of a comprehensive study and translate it into actual military forces present in a given system, excluding supra-systemic reserves. This can have an impact on understanding the dynamics of changing relations between states in Eastern Europe and on seeing the potential need for changes in geostrategic planning. A direct example of how the observed changes in local military power potential affect the strategic need for competing actors to restore the balance is the issue of the concentration of a significant Russian military force near the Ukrainian border at the turn of 2021 and 2022 (Chance, Smith-Spark, 2022). Russia, without changing its overall military strength, but only by concentrating it, changed the local power ratio, thus forcing Ukraine, as well as the states supporting it (Beale, 2022), to try to eliminate the imbalance in power.

The examples of the above-mentioned aspects of conflict in Eastern Europe are not a closed set of potential subjects of research, but an attempt to indicate the possibilities of the scope of the SGA method at present, as well as, based on the disproportion of power and the structural conditions of the

system, possible conflicts in the future. The knowledge of the systemic reality in which individual states are embedded, depicted in the form of mutual power relations and, as a result, its translation into whether these relations may turn into possible conflict, is of fundamental importance for the Eastern European states. Despite the division of the region into geopolitical blocs, the role of particular states is still to try to individually ensure the local balance of power. The nature of relations between actors in the region can mean that, by failing to recognise changes in the distribution of the power factor, the speed of escalation of a potential conflict can be too high for multinational institutions, such as NATO. Understanding the precise distribution of power and its consequences can influence a state's strategy to make an independent attempt to adapt to a changing reality.

Conclusions

This study is the first attempt to correlate the SGA method with the shape of relations between individual states resulting from the power structure of the Eastern European system. It highlights the significant role of the disproportion of power potentials as a factor constituting the shape of this system. The above article points to two main areas of conflict in the region as the subject of the potential application of the SGA method in further research: 1) the economic aspect related to Russia's export of natural gas to European markets as a component of the risk of exerting political pressure by Russia; 2) the military aspect, which indicates the role of the local, inter-block disproportions of military forces in the region and the translation of this fact into international relations, taking into account the geopolitical aspect of military dislocation, which reduce the role of supra-systemic reserves. The above conclusions make it possible to state that, in accordance with the hypothesis of the research paper, SGA, by supporting the assumptions of structural realism regarding the meaning of the states' power with a tool that enables its real calculation and distribution on a geographical plane, allows for an effective analysis of geopolitical processes in Eastern Europe.

Considering the fact that policymakers make international policy decisions through their perception of the distribution of power in the system in which they operate, SGA can present this distribution of power in

a systematised manner, based on a transparent and precise methodology, thus enhance the understanding of geopolitical reality. This is intended to potentially increase the degree of objectivity in the decision-making process. This method, despite the rejection of the geostrategic element as contradictory to the ontological spirit that characterises it, may become, as a result of the fact of precise presentation of mechanisms shaping the system, a key factor, not only in understanding, but consequently also in shaping the geopolitics of the region.

ERWIN METERA, MA

Political Science Alumni Association of the University of Warsaw
erwin.metera@gmail.com

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