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DOCTORAL SCHOOL – POLITICAL SCIENCE

DOCTORAL THESIS

**Romania's relations with the states of Central Asia in European context:
The challenges and the perspectives of niche diplomacy**

SUMMARY

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SUMMARY

The doctoral thesis “Romania’s relations with the states of Central Asia in European context: The challenges and perspectives of niche diplomacy” represents an attempt to evaluate Romania’s place and role in the power hierarchy within the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. This study is placed in a research tradition that states the constant relevance of the concept of power for analysing the foreign policy of states, including in the context of the international system’ fragmentation following the Cold War and the assertion of the global, regional and national levels of analysis. The general objective of the present doctoral thesis is that of analysing the material and institutional capacity of Romania to represent a middle power on the European continent. The geographic position in the border region of the European Union close to the Russian Federation, the current challenges generated by the digital transition, climate emergency and enhanced by the Sars-Cov2 pandemic, represent factors that highlight the need for a comprehensive evaluation of Romania’s power.

The public discourse and the general orientation of Romania’s foreign policy corresponds to a great extent to the definitional profile of a middle power. The question which started this study was whether indeed Romania has the material capabilities of a middle power and, in an affirmative case, whether through its foreign policy actions it can be place within this category in a consistent and coherent manner following the European Union accession.

The scientific curiosity for pursuing this study was determined by several public declarations of the Romanian political elite regarding Romania’s potential to embody a “voice” at the European level. Shortly after the EU accession, the then prime-minister of Romania, Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, stated that “Romania must exploit its natural potential. I believe that Romania can set its goal to become the 7th power within the EU” (Mediafax 2008b). In 2016, during a conference which took stock of the changes at the level of the international system and their impact on Romania, the former Presidential Advisor for national security between 2009-2014, Iulian Fota, highlighted the need that Romania’s foreign policy to adapt institutionally in order to be able to respond to these evolutions. Another idea presented during the conference by the former Foreign Affairs minister (2008-2009, 2012), Cristian Diaconescu, was that Romania can become “broker of international relations” in Middle East (Bratu and Pele 2016). At the same event, former diplomat and analyst Valentin Naumescu showed that Romania’s foreign policy actions were “under-representative (...) compared to the political share of the country” (Naumescu 2016). A public opinion survey presented in 2020, in which 80 experts and practitioners in the field of international relations took part, showed that “Romania, member state with share [s.n.] within the

European Union (EU) and NATO, represents a balanced pillar and with *an important potential, insufficiently exploited [s.n.]*”, and one of the identified risks was “the lack of notable initiatives which could lead to Romania’s isolation within the European Union” (Caba-Maria 2020).

This short overview displays a public discourse based on the unrealised potential of Romania within the European Union and the necessity of domestic and foreign policy actions for asserting a status for Romania which is compatible with the resources possessed. At the same time, various academic researches tried to evaluate Romania’s role in the wider Black Sea area in the period following the accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures. Nevertheless, the researches were focused mostly on a qualitative analysis of foreign and security policy initiatives in the regional context and less on correlating the hierarchy of power on the European continent with the political goals assumed by Romania. A strictly statistical perspective on Romania’s power is not enough for discussing its relevance within the Euro-Atlantic structures, as an exclusive qualitative analysis is insufficient for placing Romania on a hierarchy of European powers which are influential at the continental level.

In this context, the research questions which I addressed through this doctoral thesis are: (1) *is Romania a middle power from the point of view of its material capabilities?* and (2) *are the foreign policy goals of Romania correlated with the behaviours and functions specific to middle powers?*

My intention to analyse Romania’s capacity to represent a middle power in the European context led me to choose a theoretical framework from the realist family, because power remains a central element of the state’s interests. Neoclassical realism represents however a more suited approach for analysing Romania’s foreign policy, because this theoretical framework can offer a clearer image on the factors determining the differences between Romania’s position and those other Central and Eastern European states, such as Poland and Hungary, which are similarly placed from the point of view of the systemic pressures, but adopt a different foreign policy. Starting from the structural premises of neorealism, neoclassical realism introduces the domestic variables, which give a better understanding of the states’ actions which do not exactly follow the behaviours prescribed by the systemic pressures. Neoclassical realism shows that foreign policy can be affected by leaders’ perceptions on the changes in the distribution of capabilities or other structural factors, which lead them to decide to adapt their national policies.

For the analysis of Romania’s foreign policy, I used the resource-extractive state model, proposed by Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, in which the systemic constraints determine the states to enhance their competitive advantage in order to increase their chances of survival. Their options are to maintain the existing political-military strategies, to emulate the political-military strategies adopted by the successful states in the international system or to innovate. The last two strategies are more costly, because they involve institutional adaptation and mobilization of domestic support. The model proposed by Taliaferro

is a synthesis and has the advantage of operationalizing the variables at the level of the state, through which we can explain the variations in internal balancing and the differences between the institutional options regarding both the content and the implementation capacity.

The hierarchy of states based on the quantitative analysis of power offers insights regarding their status and the possible foreign policy actions. Usually, the discussions concern superpowers, systemic or regional great powers, which are considered to be the most influential, as well as small or minor powers, which have a significantly lower impact. However, in the foreign policy analyses, as well as the ones regarding the international system, we distinguish either explicitly – that is specifically defined – or implicitly – through certain types of actions – the category of middle powers, those states that do not have sufficient capabilities to significantly impact the systemic power dynamics, but which are nevertheless quite active at diplomatic level. Regardless of the modalities of defining the middle power, it has associated a series of specific behaviours which allow for its identification. The analysts and practitioners recognize niche diplomacy as the preferred instrument of middle powers to promote their interests in foreign policy. The relevance of niche diplomacy was boosted by the international dynamic following the Cold War, because the dismissal of the two superpowers' competition elevated the importance of low politics areas, while the structure of the international system favoured the proliferation of multilateral initiatives. The conceptual analysis pursued in this study revealed that, in order for a state to be considered a middle power, it is not enough to have average capabilities, but to also adopt certain behaviours and to fulfil specific functions within the system, all of these being rather social constructs based on the foreign policy decisions of the political elite, as stated by the neoclassical realism as well.

The present study focuses mainly on the period following Romania's accession to the European Union (2007) until 2019, because of several methodological arguments. On the one hand, the indexes used to measure the material power of Romania include complete data until 2019, while the scores for 2020 were not fully available. Moreover, regarding the qualitative analysis, at the EU level the year 2019 marked the adoption of a series of regional cooperation strategies, which guide the goals of the foreign policy, thus ending a strategic cycle. Additionally, the Sars-Cov2 pandemic, started in 2020 and still unfolding at the moment of the writing, had significant effects on the international relations, which are still visible. The analytical demarche regarding Romania's status in the European context could not be validated by including the 2020 events in this analysis, because there are no complete data regarding the impact on the foreign policy of the measures adopted by Romania during the crisis.

The first hypothesis of the study, related to the first research question, is that *Romania has the capabilities of a middle power*. In order to validate this hypothesis, I did a quantitative analysis, comparing the power hierarchies for the European continent resulted from measuring three indexes. First of all, I

used the Composite Index of National Capabilities – CINC, developed within the *Correlates of War* project. CINC uses six variables which can be grouped on three dimensions: demography (total population and urban population), industry (iron and steel production and energy consumption) and military (military personnel and military expenditures). Because CINC has a preponderantly industrial perspective, the analysis is completed by the study of the power hierarchy resulted from the measurement of the Global Power Index (GPI), developed by the National Intelligence Council of the United States, as well as the one based on the State Power Index (SPI), developed by In.Europa Institute of Poland. Both GPI and SPI take into account the technological evolutions and the economic globalisation in analysing the material capabilities of the states, focusing on more elements than CINC, by including the production and sell of weapons, the share of military expenditures in national GDP and the ownership of nuclear weapons. Unlike GPI, the methodology for SPI includes more aspects regarding the perceptions on economic power of states (country ratings and the number of richest citizens), as well as the projection of power in international organisations (the membership of the UN Security Council, membership or the presidency of international organisations). For GPI, technology and innovation are measured through research and development spending, as well as through the investments in information and communication technologies, while for SPI these are measured through the number of patents registered at the World Intellectual Property Organisation, the number of universities in the Shanghai ranking (one of the most prestigious rankings based on innovation and knowledge production), as well as the income from extraction of raw materials in relation to the national GDP. Finally, another significant difference between GPI and SPI is the inclusion of a variable based on the country surface in the SPI, so that bigger states would have a higher SPI.

In order to evaluate whether Romania is a middle power in European context, I compared the power indexes for Romania with those of the EU and/or NATO member states: Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom (34 countries in total). By including both the EU and NATO member states, I intended to perform a comparative analysis on Romania's power within the wider institutional architecture of the European system. Moreover, this analysis offers a more comprehensive view of the wider Black Sea area, through the inclusion of Turkey, a strategic partner of Romania and an important regional actor.

Taking into consideration the quantitative analysis of the capabilities based on the three indexes, we can conclude that Romania is a middle power in the European power hierarchy, which includes 34 member states of EU and/or NATO. However, we can observe variations based on the type of analysis. If

we take into consideration the CINC measurements, which are more industrial focused, Romania is better placed, occupying a position in the upper third of the ranking (positions 9-11, most frequently being on the 9th place). On the other hand, the analysis based on GPI, which includes aspects taking into account post-industrialists technological developments, as well as the economic and innovative components of state power, Romania is placed in the lower tier of the second third of the ranking (positions 18-20, most frequently being on the 19th place). Finally, based on SPI, which includes more relational aspects (active participation in international organisations) and perceptions (country ratings), generates important fluctuations in Romania's power placement (between the position 12 and 21). Romania is generally placed in the second third of the ranking during the entire period of analysis, but most frequently it is placed in the lower half of this category. All three rankings identify as great powers Germany, France, United Kingdom and Italy, at a substantial distance from the other countries, while countries such as Spain, Turkey, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Denmark or Austria keep their middle positions regardless of the ranking used. We can consider that Romania is a middle power, firstly in terms of its resources and capabilities, but because of its actions, it does not fully manifest its potential, being placed rather in the category of weak middle powers.

The above mentioned indexes offer only a partial image on Romania's power, therefore I included in this analysis the Elcano Index of Global Presence (El.GPI), developed by the Royal Institute Elcano from Spain, which evaluates the global presence of the states based on three dimensions: economy, defence and soft presence. The dimension of soft presence of this study is the best available resource for measuring soft power in terms of inclusivity of countries which are of interest for the present study, compared to other soft power indexes. Based on the hierarchy resulted from El.GPI, correlated with its limited version focusing on the EU member states, we observe that the first 7 countries clearly differentiate themselves from the others during the entire period of study. Thus we are able to name them as great powers of the European continent: United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Turkey, Spain and the Netherlands for the period of 2014-2019. The difference between middle powers and small powers is more difficult to observe only based on the values of the index, but the data provided by El.GPI show that Romania is placed at a significant distance from the great powers. Depending on the quantitative definition of middle power according to El.GPI, Romania is either a lower tier middle power or a higher tier small power. A similar conclusion can be drawn based on the data of the European Presence Index for the EU member states. Although there is an increase of the soft power index, overall this increase is at a much smaller pace than that of the other analysed states. These evolutions show in fact a relative stagnation in terms of Romania's soft power, both at the global level, and the European level, considering that all analysed states recorded a constant increase in soft power in absolute terms, with some minor exceptions.

The second goal of the thesis focused on analysing Romania's foreign policy, by using the framework proposed by neoclassical realism, in order to identify the behaviours and functions specific to middle powers. The middle power status of a EU member state should be validated first and foremost in relation to its place and role in the European internal decision-making process, but the principle guiding the management of Romania's member status states that European policies are internal policies. Based on this idea, the focus of the present doctoral thesis towards foreign policy is justified, and the case study for testing the hypothesis is analysing the relations between Romania and the states of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The motivation for choosing Central Asia as the main region of study was justified by its geographical position in relation to the European Union. On the one hand, it is sufficiently close to it in order to determine the existence of security interdependencies, especially in the field of energy. On the other hand, it is far enough in order not to generate expectations regarding a possible EU accession. Moreover, Central Asia is a region which has certain historical, political and institutional similitudes with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, thus explaining a potential mutual foreign policy interest. Additionally, considering the use of the study case for demonstrating the middle power status of Romania, it is relevant to note the observation from the literature regarding specialisation of middle powers on diplomatic and regional niches, as well as the efforts to focus their foreign policies beyond their own interest and geographic proximity.

In order to respond to the second research question of this doctoral thesis, I pursued an analysis of the structural and domestic levels, considering the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism. The structural level aims to evaluate the interdependencies between the European Union and Central Asia through the regional security complex theory and linkages and leverages theory. The hypothesis which was tested at this level was that, *even though there is a regional security supercomplex generated by the security interdependencies between the EU and Russia, the interdependencies between the European Union and Central Asia are limited*. This structural context is the one creating the framework for the Romanian foreign policy decision-makers to evaluate the threats and opportunities within the international system and to set goals and strategies of action. The analysis at the domestic level focuses on validating or invalidating the following hypothesis: *Romania has a limited internal resource mobilisation and extraction capacity, which reduces the capacity to implement the goals of the Romanian foreign policy in relation with Central Asia*. An increase in the capacity to implement the goals of the foreign policy would translate into clearer behaviours and functions specific to middle powers.

The theoretical framework used for the structural level included the regional security complex theory and linkages and leverages theory. The regional security complex theory, proposed by Barry Buzan

and Ole Waever, has an increased relevance in the context of EU-Russia interactions within the shared neighbourhood, as well as for the study of the relations between Central Asia and Russia. The linkages and leverages theory, developed by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, is a structural theory which explains the lack of democratisation progress, despite a complex agenda of the external actor with influence, as it was the case of the European Union, and the potential of certain security interdependencies between the two regions considering the relations with the Russian Federation.

The interaction between the European Union and Russian Federation in the border region and, implicitly, of the two regional security complexes centred around them, represents a continuation of the extended history of amity and enmity between the two. Therefore, the security interdependencies between the two actors led to the emergence of a regional security supercomplex between Europe and the post-Soviet space. Even though the EU as a unitary actor was not always a dialogue partner and in confrontation with Russia, the security interdependencies Russia- Europe were displayed through the relations between Russia with the great European powers, such as France, Germany, the United Kingdom, as well as with the Central and Eastern European states that were part of its sphere of influence during the Cold War. That is why the enlargement of the European Union and NATO to the East has been considered a security issue, leading to clashes between Western and Russian views on the shared neighbourhood. Although until 2008, the security interdependence between the EU and Russia was not perceived in an explicitly negative way, the deterioration of relations between the two led to the securitization of the actions of the other and the escalation of the security dilemma. The interconnection between the EU and Russia determines the relational analysis of the security issues between the two complexes, impossible to separate, so that an osmosis process takes place, confirming the appearance of an “all European” regional security supercomplex.

With the completion of the Eastern enlargement, the European Union has defined a more consistent policy towards the states of the former Soviet space. Thus, in 2007, following a bilateral cooperation focused mainly on development assistance goals, at the initiative of Germany, the EU adopted a Strategy for Cooperation with Central Asian Countries – the *Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia*. This was the first structured approach to the EU-Central Asia inter-regional cooperation and identified a number of general objectives to guide the EU's political, economic and social measures in relation to the five states. As evidenced by the formulation of official strategies, speeches and actions by Central Asian governments, the role of the EU is predominantly perceived by its potential as a market for local products. At the same time, the EU's image as a donor provides local governments with a legitimizing tool for the enabling civil society to work, although the impact of the EU remains limited, primarily due to the small-scale projects it funds directly in society. At the same time, the influence of EU leverage has

been significantly reduced by the existence of alternative regional powers, which have not only provided cooperation without imposing a political cost of reform, but have also provided security guarantees for regional and national stability. Although national elites are trying to maintain a balance between Russia, China and the West, especially as they do not fully trust the good intentions of Russia and China, the Central Asian states remain militarily and economically dependent on these two regional powers. In order to contextualize the security interdependencies between the European Union and Central Asia, I also took into account the particular interests of other major actors in the region (United States, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, India, etc.), referring them to the European agenda and their potential to consolidate or obstruct it.

The research showed that relations between the European Union and Central Asia are mediated by the Russian influence, to which Central Asia remains strongly connected in all areas of security analyzed (military, political, economic, societal). The existing securitization and desecuritization processes in the relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation also influence the relations between the European Union and Central Asia, leading to a limitation of the impact of the normative agenda and the potential of levers and inter-regional linkages. In this way, the second hypothesis of the study on the low level of security interdependencies between the European Union and Central Asia was validated, despite belonging to the same all European regional security supercomplex.

In the context of these limited security interdependencies, the potential for action of a middle power could be in identifying specific niches for cooperation to support the consolidation and recognition of the European Union as a relevant political actor in Central Asia. The positioning at the Eastern border of the EU and on the shores of the Black Sea, place Romania in a favorable context for advancing the European agenda in relation to the Central Asian countries beyond the energy dimension.

At the internal level of analysis, the study focused on assessing the behavioral dimension (specific foreign policy initiatives) and the functional one (objectives proposed to achieve these initiatives) of the middle power in relation to Romania's actions. In this sense, I made an analysis on the main themes of Romanian foreign policy in the post-communist period. I noticed that, in the period before joining the Euro-Atlantic structures, Romania focused its foreign policy for achieving this goal, especially after the Snagov Declaration of 1995. During the transition period, although from the point of view of material capabilities Romania would have fallen into the category of middle powers, its behavior did not indicate the capacity of middle power, because the foreign policy decisions were rather the result of systemic forces' influence on the Euro-Atlantic institutional structure and were not determined by an unequivocal decision at the internal level. In general, the middle powers adopt an entrepreneurial diplomatic approach, thus trying to innovate and create specific niches for their foreign policy. From this point of view,

Romania's foreign policy focused exclusively on creating a favorable image among the European partners that would favor its EU and NATO integration.

The research conducted within this doctoral thesis revealed that, following the EU accession in 2007, Romania focused primarily on the energy sector and the promotion of freight corridors. Even so, Romania's foreign policy is primarily focused on the Eastern Partnership countries, correlated with the wider Black Sea region and the Western Balkans, both bilaterally and multilaterally. As it results from the qualitative analysis on foreign policy initiatives, Romania acts as a middle power in the wider Black Sea region, given the entrepreneurial policies adopted in the region, generally in the field of conflict management and promoting the normative agenda, placing Romania on the list of relevant actors in the field of security between EU and NATO members. Moreover, by adopting a moralistic position in foreign policy, as a promoter of the interests of global hegemon and positioning itself as a strategic partner of the US in the wider Black Sea region, to promote the expansion of the model of liberal democracy, Romania strengthens its status as a middle power on the behavioural dimension. Romania's relations with the Republic of Moldova, currently used as a tool to measure the success of Romanian foreign policy, are analyzed in the broader framework of the wider Black Sea region, which leads to the assessment of the real impact of Romanian foreign policy compared to the power dynamics at the structural level between the EU-Russia relations.

From the functional perspective on middle powers, it can be observed that the Romanian political elite adopted an activist approach to obtain the support of the other EU and NATO member states in order to adopt decisions that also served the national interest. However, the tense strategic environment in the region bordering Russia has already been a significant systemic pressure factor for greater involvement of the EU and NATO, which is also in the interests of the major Euro-Atlantic powers. Despite the Romanian initiatives and the lobby for decisions on the region, we note the limited success of the specific actions promoted by Romania and therefore the absence of a clear function, specific to a middle power, which Romania could have developed at European level in relation with the Black Sea area. The analysis also showed that the internal factors prevented political elites from effectively assessing the pressures of the international system, especially the political fragmentation that led to conflicting interests in the efficient allocation of resources, generating a decrease in the credibility of Romania's commitments, based on the internal instability.

Relations between the European Union and Central Asia are based on the duality between the security interests, both energy and military, focused on preventing a possible destabilization that could have repercussions on Europe, and the normative intentions to promote democracy and the market economy. With strict reference to the bilateral or regional initiatives launched by Romania to connect with

Central Asia, the analysis highlighted that Romania deemed a priority to increase its regional role at the Black Sea, either as a "regional energy hub" or as a space for exchanges between the European Union and external partners.

The study validated the third research hypothesis, showing that, although at national level Romania has positioned itself in the category of states with an Eastern-oriented foreign policy identity, inefficient allocation of available bureaucratic resources, limited coordination of efforts made by some national entrepreneurs with economic ties in the region and insufficient communication with potential partners in Central and Eastern Europe led to a limited, quasi-invisible presence of Romania in Central Asia. Niche diplomacy opportunities have focused exclusively on strengthening Romania's partnerships in securing infrastructure and trade in the energy sector, an area dominated by the systemic interests of major players. Romania has adopted an important entrepreneurial role for the Nabucco pipeline, but the failure of this project was an element that demonstrated Romania's inability to act as a middle power at the regional level and to prevent this outcome. Although it has built stable political relations with the Central Asian authorities, especially those in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, they have not been used to strengthen an equal partnership. The rhetorical and political advantages of belonging to the European Union and NATO were not used in relations with Central Asian countries, Romania having a low participation in inter-regional dialogue platforms in specific areas outside security (energy or terrorism), although the European agenda is varied enough to offer activism opportunities to Romanian foreign policy makers.

The methodology of study included the comparative analysis of statistical data resulting from the analysis of power indicators (Composite Index of National Capabilities – CINC, Global Power Index – GPI, State Power Index – SPI, respectively Elcano Index of Global Presence, Soft Presence Index – EI.GPI). Also, to assess the security interdependencies between the European Union and the Russian Federation, the Russian Federation and Central Asia, and the European Union and Central Asia I used document analysis, both primary sources in English and Romanian, as well as translations made by specialized programs of primary sources in Russian for official documents (foreign policy strategies, bilateral treaties, press releases, speeches and interviews of officials). Secondary sources were also analyzed primarily in English and translations through specialized programs in Russian, as well as secondary sources in Romanian and French, especially for European policy issues.

The study of primary and secondary sources was complemented by qualitative research on the EU agenda in relation to Central Asia, which was also analyzed through research interviews and participatory observations conducted during an Erasmus+ mobility at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, during the academic year 2019-2020. The qualitative research was conducted in the city of Bishkek, in the form of semi-structured interviews, in English, with over 70 requests sent to diplomatic missions,

offices of international governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as government institutions from all 5 states in Central Asia. The interview guide included questions on perceptions of the status and role of the European Union in Central Asia, prospects for areas of success, activism of some Member States, relations with the international donor community, as well as the Russian Federation and China. The Sars-Cov2 pandemic, which led to lockdown measures in Kyrgyzstan as well, limited direct interactions and placed other priorities at the top of the activities carried out by the institutions of interest to the detriment of research. As a result of this approach, I was able to conduct 9 research interviews, in which I agreed with the participants aspects related to the way in which their answers will be cited in the research. Interviews were conducted with representatives of international organizations (International Monetary Fund, European Union, an international development assistance organization), as well as states (Germany – the embassy and GiZ, another state outside the European Union), as well as representatives of academia and civil society (Soros Foundation, a researcher from Central Asia, a team leader in a project funded by European funds in the field of education). Also, upon my return to Romania, I organized an online semi-structured interview with a Lithuanian researcher (July 2019).

The limits of the research generally concern the methodological aspects: the absence of a specialized statistical analysis program for testing different hypotheses and correlations between variables, the absence of access to primary sources among foreign policy makers in Romania, the European Union (both at the European External Action Service, as well as among other Member States) and Central Asia, as well as limited knowledge of Russian language and lack of knowledge of local languages in Central Asia to deepen research and identify specific nuances of political language at internal and regional level.

The doctoral thesis is divided into four chapters, which follow the analytical structure of the research. Thus, the first chapter reviews the conceptual and methodological framework of the theories used in the context of the analysis: neoclassical realism, theoretical perspectives on power, theorizations of middle power and niche diplomacy, regional security complex theory and leverage and the linkages theory and impact of gatekeeper elites.

The second chapter comprises an analysis of the evolution and the objectives of the European Union's foreign policy in relation to the Eastern Neighborhood, referring to the perspectives of the Russian Federation on this area. This approach has the role of defining the structural and regional context of Romania's foreign policy.

The third chapter is an in-depth study of the post-Soviet evolution of Central Asia and the relations of the five states in the region with the global power dynamics. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the national foreign policy priorities of the Central Asian states, as well as the objectives of the great

powers towards them, highlighting security interdependencies, as well as leverages and linkages that can facilitate or hinder the success of the European Union agenda at the regional level.

The fourth chapter is the one that includes the quantitative analysis of Romania's power in the European hierarchy, related to the three indexes for material capabilities, as well as to the index of soft power. At the same time, the chapter includes a section dedicated to the institutional evolution and the resource-extractive capacity of Romania to fulfil its foreign policy objectives in the post-communist period. The relations between the European Union and Central Asia are analyzed from the perspective of the theory of leverages and linkages, with a reference to their inclusion in the all European regional security supercomplex, formed by the EU and the post-Soviet space. This section includes both an analysis of Europe's strategic vision for the region and a comprehensive analysis of Member States' objectives in relation to Central Asia. In this way, the study gives a context to the analysis regarding Romania's relations with the Central Asian countries and their evolution in the period 1991-2019.

The research findings show that Romania could use its experience as a coordinator in the Working Group for Eastern Europe and Central Asia of the European Union Water Initiative in order to mobilize Central Asian states to implement an agenda appropriate to climate commitments and to mobilize the necessary financial support.

At the same time, Romania has experience in enrolling foreign students in Romanian higher education institutions, including those from Central Asia, as shown by the increase in the number of students in Turkmenistan, so it could, on the one hand, offer an integrated scholarship package for Central Asian countries and, on the other hand, use its relations with the graduates to strengthen economic and cultural connections with these countries.

Another area of cooperation that can be explored in relations with Central Asia is cross-border cooperation, an area that can help identify long-term solutions to common problems (especially common water resources management and transport infrastructure issues), thus supporting the resolution of border conflicts that are very common in Central Asia. Romania has experience in cross-border cooperation both with EU states (Hungary and Bulgaria), but also with non-EU states, with experience of political and economic transition (Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Serbia). They have not implemented all the specific European regulations, and Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova have the experience of the post-Soviet transition as a common element with the Central Asian states, and thus can be examples of good practice for them. Romania can become a promoter of this type of cooperation together with the states in its immediate vicinity.

Based on the research carried out in this doctoral thesis, we can conclude that it is necessary to explore and deepen research on Romania's foreign policy in certain thematic areas, as well as in relation

to non-European geographical areas. The growing role of China and the reorientation of the main systemic dynamics on the Asian continent are drawing the attention towards all the states in this area, including the states of Central Asia as a transit region to Europe. The Romanian research focus on Southeast Asia and the Middle East must be complemented both with new perspectives on Romania's potential to act as a middle power in these specific regions, and with studies dedicated to concrete ways in which Romania can identify certain niches to be exploited in relations with the countries of Central Asia, but also in other regions.

The dynamics of the international system that resonates also in the wider Black Sea region in strong connection with the Caspian Sea basin, prevents the manifestation of a more ambitious role of Romania as a state that can significantly influence the relations between the European Union and NATO on the one hand, and the Russian Federation on the other hand. For this reason, the results of Romania's foreign policy cannot be accounted for as the causes that determined a consolidation of the Eastern orientation of the two organizations. The causal relationship is rather the opposite: these subsystemic changes have strengthened Romania's security concerns, which has used its EU and NATO membership to ensure that its national interests are protected through multilateral action, given its inability to ensure security in a sustainable way.

Based on all the theoretical and empirical elements presented in this doctoral thesis, it can be stated that the decision to specialize in foreign policy and to use the approach of diplomatic niches involves a process of institutional adaptation to ensure the efficiency of allocation and distribution of resources. The use of diplomatic niches, especially in regional cooperation, is a rational approach given the pressures of the system and the limited resources available to states with average capabilities, such as Romania.

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