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***PHD THESIS SUMMARY***

***MUTATIONS IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM  
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT.***

***POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR RESETTING THE  
POWER BALANCE.***

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## **Choice of topic, importance and novelty of research**

The PhD thesis “*Mutations in the international system in the context of the conflict in Syria. Possible power balance reset scenarios*” studies **perhaps the most important conflict of the 21st century and its effects on the balance between the Russian Federation and the USA**. After the tenth year, the multidimensional war in Syria proves to be the biggest and most complex challenge of the Arab Spring, as a result of an overlap of religious, ethnic, historical, but also geopolitical issues. In March 2011, peaceful protests organized by the Syrian democratic opposition against the autocratic regime led by Bashar al-Assad were seen as the culmination of a democratic wave that drove dictators away from Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. However, few international observers could have predicted the degeneration of these protests. Shia-Sunni tensions, the interests of Washington and Moscow, the aspirations of disruptive powers such as Turkey and Iran, the complex connections between the states of the Middle East are just some of the reasons why the stakes in this conflict have risen rapidly. From a military point of view, the conflict in Syria has attracted the direct involvement of five powerful armies (US, Russian Federation, Turkey, Iran and Israel), and politically requires the combined efforts of all international actors to identify peaceful solutions.

As of 2020, Syria is enjoying a relative calm following the ceasefire agreement in Idlib province, negotiated between the Russian Federation and Turkey. For more than a year, there have been no major changes in the military situation on the ground, but also no significant progress towards reaching a peace agreement. The situation is, however, particularly unstable, the calm period being used by the parties involved in the conflict to regenerate the forces in anticipation of the event that will relaunch the fighting.

### **The two main objectives of the paper are:**

1) studying the effects of the conflicts in Syria on the balance of power at regional and international level

and

2) anticipating the main scenarios for the evolution of the international relations system, highlighting **Romania's** role in the future security paradigm and how our country can capitalize on this situation to promote / defend its national interests in the region / internationally.

The paper highlights first of all the **major changes in the system of international relations**, in the medium and long term (due to the recalibration of the policy of some relevant international actors, such as the USA and the Russian Federation, towards the region), but also the **regional implications of the Syrian conflict**, with an emphasis on the spill-over effect in the Muslim area, which diverted the attention of Arab states from traditional disruptive factors such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict).

In my efforts to investigate the many implications and ramifications of this particularly complex conflict, which has succeeded in attracting the two great superpowers, affecting the stability of the entire region and emitting reverberations internationally, **I have consistently sought answers to four main sets of questions:**

**1. What are the causes of the power imbalance in the Middle East and how does the conflict in Syria influence the international system? Is the apparent state of chaos only an intermediate stage, but necessary to redefine the international security architecture?**

**2. What were the reasons why the US avoided decisive intervention in Syria? Is there a cause of US non-intervention in the state of distrust of the rules of the game, as a result of the consolidation of the Islamic State and the new Russian offensive?**

**3. Why did the Russian Federation decide to become fully involved in supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime and why did it start a real hybrid war whose real target is the USA?**

**4. What are the changes in the international balance of power and how do they affect the foreign policy strategy of the major players? How can Romania position itself to promote / defend its national interests?**

The first *working hypothesis* postulates that the **balance of power in the Middle East**, already affected by the US policy of force in the region (Bush

doctrine), respectively by the limiting of the presence of Washington (which characterized the Obama administration) was **completely changed by the war in Syria.**

Following the developments in the Syrian conflict and the actions taken by the multitude of actors involved both in the field struggles and in their efforts to resolve them peacefully, it is obvious that **the hegemonic rivalries brought to the surface in recent years will become more visible and shape the relations between states.** We can easily conclude that there are the premises for a return to a **state of latent conflict, with the USA and the Russian Federation at the forefront.** Despite apparent convergences, but also last-minute efforts to de-escalate, the interests of major players in Syria and the region differ fundamentally. While the **US wants to maintain the *status quo*,** even if this means a controlled withdrawal / limitation of presence in the region, which we can see in the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the **Russian Federation has launched a hybrid war** - effectively combining tactics such as information operations campaigns, disinformation campaigns, the deployment of special forces (not officially sanctioned) or private paramilitary groups, non-discriminatory airstrikes (often aimed at civilians, to demoralize the opponent), assassinations, stagings, sabotage, cyber attacks - **which aims to maximize aggression of power to the point of achieving regional supremacy and challenging US hegemony** or, at the very least, gaining a balance of power with like-minded regional partners (eg Iran).

My research also takes into account **the effect of non-state actors, focusing on the Islamic State strategy in Syria and Iraq.** Even if the terrorist group is generally called ISIS, ISIL or Daesh, for the noble purpose of not giving it legitimacy, it is useful to keep in mind that the name Islamic State, assumed and promoted by the leaders, fighters and subjects of this terrorist group, emphasizes both its long-term objectives, as well as the fact that **during the glory period it manifested some proto-state characteristics and constituted a “game-changer” in the region.** The tactics applied by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, essentially an effective but much more brutal application of the **hybrid warfare** manuals used by the Russian Federation, will produce **lasting effects,** affecting entire generations

in the region. Even if the Islamic State disappears in the next period, a scenario unlikely given that it has demonstrated a superior capacity for regrouping and reinvention, the hybrid action model promoted by the terrorist group will be adapted and perpetuated on a smaller or greater scale, continuing to create difficulties for relevant state actors.

At the same time, I followed the conduct of European states towards the conflict in Syria, the most *plausible working hypothesis* being the "pushing" of EU member states towards the edge of power, as a result of concentrating efforts on rethinking the European project and managing the effects of instability in the Middle East - influx of illegal migrants, terrorism, Islamic radicalization.

Although the subject of the conflict in Syria has obviously been extensively analyzed, **the present research is distinguished by a comprehensive approach to "up-to-date" developments.** Firstly, I considered the **influence of Trump's "doctrine"** on international change. The former US president has been a disruptor of international politics, his decisions generally having negative implications for regional stability and US strategic goals.

The paper also addresses ongoing issues, such as **the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the conflict.** The paper analyzes how the effects of the pandemic will shape the dynamics of the conflict and its future trajectory, but also the impact on the strategic interests of relevant actors (USA, Russian Federation, Iran, Turkey, but also the Damascus regime). Also, in the elaboration of the scenarios for the evolution of the balance of power, **I also analyzed the impact of the American presidency of Joe Biden.**

At the same time, in order to build an additional level of utility, the thesis is concerned with translating the **implications of the conflict for Romania,** as well as identifying recommendations for action, especially in the context of the **"triad" of US-EU-NATO national interests** (which underlies the conceptual approach in the National Defense Strategy for the period 2020-2024). Similar to other European countries, **Romania,** which has had a balanced approach to the Syrian conflict, **will have to reanalyze its policy of alliances to maximize its potential for influence in the Middle East and**

**internationally**. For **Romania**, the strategic partnership with the USA will continue to be essential. However, in order to ensure the long-term promotion of national interests and, implicitly, effectively calibrate the national policy towards the region, Romania **will need to conduct an analysis of the elements of convergence and divergence with the interests of key actors** (including regional) to the situation in Syria, the Middle East and North Africa in general.

## **The structure of the paper**

Chapter I - Theoretical and methodological framework. The validity of the realistic theory in explaining the situation in the Middle East

Starting from the conceptual parameters of **realism**, as the main theory, seconded by the concept of **balance of power**, the chapter highlights how each actor perceives the threat from others and the potential for coalition to restore balance, explaining the seemingly chaotic movements in the Middle East, the temporary unipolarism USA, the power imbalance and, implicitly, the rebalancing movements.

We have outlined two hypostases that explain the power games between the **USA** (power aimed at maintaining the *status quo*, with **defensive tendencies**) and the **Russian Federation** (revisionist, **offensive power**) in the theater of confrontation centered on Syria, as well as the movements of other relevant actors (such as Turkey, Iran, Israel) in the Middle East. We can say that the situation in the Middle East is characterized by an **unbalanced multipolarism**, the tendency of the system being to correct the imbalance (an incipient balance is already visible). Until the international system is re-established in a bipolarity, the risk of escalating the conflict to a state of war remains high.

To explain some aspects related to the role of international leaders in the war in Syria, I chose to sporadically use the **selectorate theory**, proposed by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita in "The Logic of Political Survival". The role of the selectorate theory is to explain the variations in power between the relevant state actors, interested in the situation in Syria, and why some of



them have demonstrated a much greater and much faster capacity for action, although their military, diplomatic and economic power is relatively equal.

## Chapter II - The Arab Spring and Syria

The second part of the dissertation aims to highlight the background on which the conflict in Syria began and is unfolding, because this confrontation that has lasted for ten years has not appeared in a vacuum. The Arab Spring was the "beginning of change" in the Middle East and North Africa, but this paper will show that, at least in the case of Syria, the causes of the conflict are much older. These revolutions ignited and were consumed according to unique patterns, which, however, at the same time, show some relevant similarities in the study of the case of Syria. If in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya the Arab Spring had as its outcome the removal of dictatorial regimes and the installation of pseudo-democratic regimes, **in Syria the popular revolution quickly failed**, turning into a civil conflict. The causes lie in a number of **factors that differentiate the situation and the historical course of Syria** from the past of the other states affected by the Arab Spring.

## Chapter III - The Great Powers and the Conflict in Syria

Starting from the conceptual parameters described in the previous chapters, this part analyzes the **US and Russian Federation's policies** in the conflict in Syria, focusing on the effects on the balance of power at regional and international level.

The *de facto unipolarism* of the **USA** in the Middle East, visible after the end of the Cold War, attracted the dissatisfaction of small state actors, subject to the will of the hegemon. Animos towards US policy in the region has peaked with military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, threatening even US internal security (eg terrorist attacks on US territory). Subsequent developments in the Arab Spring have shown that US attempts to redress regional instability by imposing its own models of democracy on Arab states have failed and have been perceived as aggressive movements.

Through its actions in Syria, the **Russian Federation** is positioning itself as a **revisionist power** - albeit cooperative at tactical times - and a particularly active geostrategic actor. Moscow has laid the foundations and continues to

develop a coalition of like-minded states with similar visions, the stake being to **bring together in a global revisionist project** the main international state actors interested in the conflict in Syria, in particular, and the developments in the Middle East and North Africa in general.

#### Chapter IV - Conclusions and premises for evolution

The last part of the paper aims to **anticipate the main evolutionary scenarios** and expected changes in the international relations system as a result of developments in the conflict in Syria and the consolidation of the status of non-state actors (focusing on Islamic State actions, considered a "game-changer"), respectively the analysis of the way in which the foreign policy strategies of the big actors will change.

An important part of the paper is the **calibration of the conclusions** stated in the previous chapters to the **specifics of our country** (strengths and weaknesses; specific and strategic interests in the region; strategic or conjunctural alliances), to analyze **how Romania can capitalize on possible circumstances in the Middle East**, to promote or defend its national interests, respectively to minimize certain risks and threats deriving from the recalibration of the balance of power in the region and at international level.

### **Research conclusions**

After the fall of the USSR, the international system was dominated by a single superpower - the USA, being few times when the other great powers tried to balance the USA by increasing military capabilities, establishing coalitions or supporting proxy states. Even if no country in the system was satisfied with the existing situation and US domination, the *tough balance* (strong, conflicting and long-lasting rivalries between two or more actors) was not visible primarily due to American pressure on other actors to rally one's own position. Washington's realist policy has hampered the emergence of protesters in the international system. The few times when the US was challenged proved to be miscalculations by opponents, who ignored their own vulnerabilities (often cynically exploited by Washington and allies) and overestimated their military, economic and diplomatic power. The Russian Federation and China have actively campaigned for the development of a

multipolar system, of course as a transitional phase towards their own domination of the system. Although they had to admit the strategic superiority of the USA, the two states acted perseveringly for repositioning as global powers.

The US doctrine of *isolating and discouraging* the emergence of contesting powers, prevalent during the Cold War, was never officially abandoned, but Washington's focus on the *war on terror* diverted attention from the games of the other major powers in the system, which used the respite period for internal consolidation and subsequently external assertion. The US belief that the Russian Federation is moving towards democracy and economic freedom and that there is no longer a risk of a military confrontation with the West has proved erroneous. US actions and conflicting developments in the Middle East (the outbreak of the Arab Spring) have led to **unbalanced multipolarism** - far too many actors with deeply divergent interests who have tried to regulate the system by force, not by identifying compromise solutions. The culmination of the imbalance was the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.

**George W. Bush**, who combined realist politics with an ideology centered around American exceptionalism and the divine mission to spread freedom and democracy around the globe, **accentuated US hegemonic tendencies**. The 9/11 attacks were the trigger for the US strategy *to redraw the world*, eliminating "bandit states" that allowed terrorist groups to emerge and proliferate. In Washington's view, this was to reduce security threats to the United States and at the same time strengthen American hegemony. **The Bush administration's interventionist and aggressive policy** has weakened Washington's image as an "honest broker" in the Middle East, turning the United States from a force of balance into a **part of the problem**.

**Barack Obama's** election victory in 2008 led to a more neoliberal than realistic policy, combining US military power previously manifested with soft power often uncharacteristic of hegemonic power. Barack Obama emphasized a leadership model based on consensus and partnership and a less aggressive policy. In the event of crises, the US was to resort to multilateralism, extensive consultations, information and public influence campaigns and agreements with partners. The US reaction to a controlled

withdrawal / limitation of presence in the Middle East, a move that can be attributed both to a neoliberal vision and to the realistic logic of ceding power as a way to ensure internal and external security, was largely justified, the US having a negative image in the Islamic world. The United States had lost the battle for "hearts and minds" in the Muslim world and was not advancing in the war on terrorism. On the contrary, military interventions had stimulated a form of Islamic renaissance that favored a more radical approach, in line with Islamist conservatism. The Arab Spring, which was seen by the United States as an opportune time for the establishment of democratic regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, **led to regional instability and a renewed struggle against Western interventionist policy and globalization**, the main exponent of which was considered to be the USA.

Obama's disappointment and reluctance to developments in the Middle East and the lack of involvement of states in the region in resolving their own issues have become most visible in **addressing the crisis in Syria**. Obama saw the role of the United States as a **remote supervisor and corrector of imbalances**. To counterbalance the negative perception of the United States, Barack Obama decided to **exercise power through proxy** actors, relying heavily on supporting Syrian opposition forces and multilateral solutions.

Washington would no longer be the gendarme intervening by force, in the sense that Obama chose to keep the US as far away from the conflict in Syria and push the states in the region to manage on their own. The attempt to create a credible and democratic opposition force in Syria has not yielded results, with the supply of weapons to resistance groups resulting in the destabilization of the situation and the fragmentation of ideological and ethnic lines. Similarly, Washington's efforts to involve Gulf monarchies in resolving the crisis fueled the Sunni sectarian conflict and stimulated the emergence of the Islamic State, an anti-system actor that took advantage of a lack of corrective power in the system to establish itself in Syria, Iraq and other states in the Middle East and Africa, with serious consequences for the security of Western states. Obama's decision not to involve the United States decisively in the war in Syria when Bashar al-Assad's regime violated the **red line** set by the US establishment (the use of chemical weapons against the civilian

population in August 2013) was a **"failure" of US** in crisis management with major repercussions on US status and national interests in the Middle East and the rest of the world. Wanting to maintain US power by limiting the inevitable "hemorrhages" caused by the war, **Obama has damaged the credibility of disproportionate power**, with Washington's inaction being an open invitation for other actors to usurp the US's role as hegemon. **The message of weakness was quickly received by the Russian Federation, Iran**, but also by other actors willing to easily balance the United States.

During the Trump presidency, the only constants in US foreign policy seemed to be uncertainty, indecision, irrationality, bewilderment, and repeated changes of direction. **The Trump administration has not articulated a concrete plan for Syria**, as any policy was affected by President Trump's frequent rethinking and improvisation. The US president had the opportunity for a moment of glory in April 2017 when he could prove political realism by reacting to the chemical weapons attack on the city of Khan Shaykhun. An uncompromising stance, taken in collaboration with international partners, could have changed the course of the conflict in Syria and could have sent a signal to the Russian Federation about US interests in the Middle East. The US president's reaction, the launch of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles to the Syrian air base Shayrat, was, however, only a "televised show", the main consequence of which was the **deepening of the US confidence deficit** as a guarantor of security in the Middle East.

The Islamic State has been largely eliminated, but this achievement was mainly due to the Obama administration's efforts to consolidate the Kurdish militia financially, militarily and administratively. Trump's abandonment of these forces and the cession of the US initiative in Syria to the Russian Federation, Turkey and Iran will have **multiple repercussions**.

Most importantly, the Russian Federation, Iran and Turkey have set themselves the goal of taking control of parts of Syria and gradually **expanding their influence throughout the Middle East**. If the Islamic State was relatively easily pulled out of the regional games by coagulating an international coalition and arming Kurdish militias, the Russian Federation, Iran and Turkey will prove to be much harder for the US to manage. In fact,

**Russia's confidence** in its own powers is visible in the **acceleration of the hybrid war against Western states**. Russian interference in the 2016 US elections, disinformation campaigns and cyber attacks on critical infrastructure in the US and European states are the direct result of the perception that **US power is declining**.

In the conflict in Syria, it is clear that the **main winner was the Russian Federation**. Since the mid-1990s, Moscow has made it a priority to re-establish ties with former allies in the Muslim world (Syria, Iran, Iraq and Libya), but until the war in Syria it did not have many incentives to engage them in an alliance involving a confrontation, even a tacit one, with the USA. Pragmatically, the Russian elite initiated a waiting game, based on sabotaging American efforts to stabilize the Middle East and North Africa, in fact the **first step in the hybrid war against the United States**. Moscow was sending the message that the only real solution was to ensure a **transition from a bipolar to a multipolar world**. The new Russian foreign policy doctrine, based on pragmatism, realism and national interest, allowed the Russian Federation to gradually rebuild its foreign power, with intervention in Syria being decided only when the **Kremlin was convinced of the success of the operation**.

Thus, if in the 1990s Moscow was slowly being pushed out of the Middle East by the disproportionate US power, the withdrawal of the Russian army at the "gates of Moscow" being a certainty, **now the Russian Federation's aspirations are curbed only by its own economic and political and military deficiencies**. The world's centers of power are in the process of moving east, to Moscow, Tehran and Beijing, the liberal Western system being in a vulnerable position that exposes it to Russian and Chinese attempts to rewrite international norms. The situation is all the worse because - at a time when the international community is relying on the US model to guide its own democratic energies and needs strong, decisive and consistent American leadership - the **Washington administration is still in the process of rebuilding**, both domestically and in terms of the international image, after four years in which it was dominated by a transactional vision, focused on short-term profit-making and in which old alliances were disregarded.

The pole achieved by the Russian Federation together with Iran and Syria in the Middle East has never been a major surprise and has the **potential to counterbalance the US military, economic and political power on a long-term**. Their ability to attract new actors in the US balancing exercise will have a major impact on the world order in the coming years. For the Russian Federation, in addition to the strategic advantages of involvement in Syria, the fighting in the Syrian theater has allowed the Russian army to **recover from the gap in experience in classical and urban combat** in relation to the US military and **refine its hybrid warfare tactics** in a conflict fundamentally different from that in Ukraine.

For Putin, Syria is just one stage in the great game he is playing with the United States in the Middle East, meaning that **maintaining a strong presence in Syria is more important than reaching a peace agreement**. It is possible that the Russian Federation, stimulated by the positions won in Syria, will try to **test Western states in other regions**, as Moscow's intention to play a greater role in Libya is already visible, by supporting General Khalifa Haftar against the National Accord Government (supported by the United States), as well as the support for the junta in Myanmar.

**The most likely evolutionary scenario: the US *resettlement* in the Middle East and the resurgence of the Russian Federation as a *power broker* in this area.**

Starting from the aspects analyzed and detailed in the previous chapters by implementing the method of analysis and extrapolation of trends **we can conclude that the most likely evolutionary scenario in the next 5-10 years** is the recalibration of US strategy in the Middle East and the resurgence of the Russian Federation as a power broker in the area. The scenario envisages **strengthening the position of the Russian Federation** in Syria as the US reposition itself in the area and, in extenso, the gradual expansion of Moscow's influence in the Middle East and North Africa. The **willingness of the US to invest time, resources and diplomatic effort in resolving the crisis in Syria will continue to decline**. The Russian Federation will

maintain some internal restrictions and will continue to face opposition from NATO member states. However, in the absence of an uncompromising position on the part of the USA, Moscow could emerge as a key player in the region, without which decisions with a geostrategic impact will not be possible. Such a position can facilitate the recruitment of state actors willing to balance the US, **strengthening the multipolar character of the international system.**

The scenario is based on the observation that **trends in the Middle East have been relatively stable in recent years**, with premises for them to be valid in the next 5-10 years.

Thus:

**a. The US will maintain a low appetite for new interventions in the Middle East**

Since **Barack Obama's** tenure, the United States has shown a steady trend of controlled withdrawal / limitation of presence in the Middle East and, by extension, North Africa. The Arab Spring and, subsequently, the conflict in Syria were managed through a **multilateral approach**. It is **unlikely that US priorities will change in the coming years**, meaning that Washington's willingness to engage in new adventures in the Middle East will continue to decline. **As for Syria**, US interests will not change, with Washington taking operational action to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State, limit Iran's regional influence, and protect regional allies, especially Israel, from Tehran's threats.

**b. The presence of the Russian Federation in Syria will be extended in the long run.**

Although the impact of the pandemic, especially falling oil prices and global demand, has exacerbated its economic difficulties, **Russia will maintain its goals in Syria** - preventing a Western-led regime change in Damascus and strengthening Moscow's "high power" role and of a key player in conflict resolution. For the Russian leadership, regaining the status of



regional power, achieved with the intervention in Syria (but also with the one in Ukraine), serves two **long-term strategic objectives**:

- i. using success in Syria to break out of the isolation in which it has been forced by Western states.
- ii. instrumenting military successes to strengthen internal legitimacy, both in the "eyes" of the population and the Russian elite.

**c. Regional actors will continue to be unable to articulate a coherent common position on the conflict in Syria.**

The only common point of the regional actors was the consensus on the need to remove Bashar al-Assad from power (a goal difficult to achieve once the Syrian president secured Moscow's active support). As for the peace process, Syria's neighbors will have only limited influence over opposition groups.

**Turkey will continue to act as a destabilizing force in Syria.** Even though Ankara has been affected by COVID-19, it is unlikely to limit its influence in Syria. In addition, Ankara's destabilizing efforts will be complemented by **Iran's growing ambitions.**

**d. In this picture, it is less and less likely to end the conflict in Syria with a solution involving the removal of the Bashar al-Assad regime.**

As time goes on, the chances of Bashar al-Assad being removed will decrease. The military involvement of the Russian Federation has stabilized the situation on the ground, with opposition forces being pushed out of the area considered "useful Syria" and isolated in the Idlib region. The UN has been working for more than nine years to find a political solution, but the rounds of negotiations in Geneva, aimed at generating a new constitution, are burdened both by the lack of interest of the Syrian regime (which is in a position of force) and by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Reserve scenario: Stabilize the regional balance of power and postpone the confrontation between Moscow and Washington.**

This scenario derives directly from the first and is essentially an **attenuated variant** of it, essentially a short break in the American-Russian confrontation in Syria. This scenario takes into account variables that may **affect the development of the first scenario** within previously defined parameters.

**The main variable is the winning of the 2020 US election by Joe Biden.** The installation of the Joe Biden administration will lead to a reanalysis of most of the decisions taken by his predecessor, Donald Trump. The Democratic president, contrary to Trump's approach, attaches great importance to countering the Russian threat. Although **the dual approach** (dialogue plus discouragement) to Russia - a rational option for managing the Kremlin's relationship - will be maintained, Biden is likely to insist on a much more **pragmatic and realistic "touch"** (in the sense of the concept of realpolitik) in relation to Moscow, taking into account the Russian interference in recent years in the electoral processes in democratic states and the belligerent style of foreign policy. At the same time, the election of Biden as president will mean a **return to the traditional US policy based on the solidity of the transatlantic relationship** and the protection of the Euro-Atlantic area by the Russian Federation.

Most likely, the efforts of the Russian Federation will focus on balancing the balance of power in the European theater, a context in which - amid relatively limited resources - Moscow could diminish its support (financial, military) for Russian projects in the Middle East. Even if the US does not significantly change its position vis-à-vis the Middle East, a **zero-sum game** in this area is foreseeable, which will **postpone any real confrontation** between the two powers and possibly facilitate the US maintaining its hegemonic role. another 5-10 years.

**Another variable is the Russian Federation reaching economic limits.** The costs of Russian intervention in Syria are difficult to estimate given that the Kremlin is not transparent on these issues. However, the data available in the media indicate a heavy burden on the Russian budget.

Increasing the ambitions of the Russian Federation in the Middle East will **involve allocating sums of money that are currently difficult to find** in the budget, without additional taxation of an already overworked and impatient population.

### **Romania in the Syrian equation. Relevant aspects of foreign policy**

Existing population-level connections between Romania and Syria and past political ties were among the main factors that led Bucharest to take a generally **reserved stance** on the conflict in Syria. **Romania** condemned Bashar al-Assad's human rights violations, but campaigned to maintain the Syrian state's territorial integrity and respect for its sovereignty. The Damascus embassy was kept operational even when rebel forces operated in the immediate vicinity of the Syrian capital, working for the benefit of other EU states that had severed diplomatic relations when Bashar al-Assad attacked his own population. We can consider that the **position of the Romanian authorities**, even if it was sometimes criticized both internally and externally, **was a pragmatic one, in a realistic logic.**

Romania's possibilities for action are limited in terms of membership of the European Union and NATO, but also of the strategic partnership with the USA (**the conceptual triad of our country's foreign policy strategy that will remain relevant in the 2020-2024 horizon**). However, Bucharest must not be marginalized, because it is not a simple outsider in this geopolitical game. Even in the scenario in which the US presence in the Middle East and North Africa continues to weaken, and the Russian Federation positions itself as a power broker, Romania can use its strengths in its relationship with Syria to obtain an advantageous position.

#### **Action options for Romania:**

- 1. Maintain contacts with the Damascus authorities and gradually normalize bilateral relations**, while respecting the EU's position of condemning the atrocities committed by Bashar al-Assad's regime.

- 2. Involvement in the reconstruction of Syria** by negotiating contracts and investments with the Damascus authorities. Reconstruction costs are

estimated at \$ 250-400 billion, given that Syria's total GDP is unlikely to reach \$ 20 billion. Financial efforts are far beyond the current capabilities of any state or non-state actor, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic will most likely lead to a global economic crisis. As a result, any state willing to invest in Syria can identify profitable opportunities.

3. The most important option, we could even say Romania's debt, is to continue the efforts to **bring to the attention of NATO and EU partners the danger represented by the Russian Federation** for international security and democratic values. Encouraging the reorientation of US policy towards limiting the harmful effects of Moscow's foreign policy in the Euro-Atlantic area will also indirectly reduce the Kremlin's aspirations in the Middle East.

For Romania, a much more traditional American policy towards the Russian Federation will bring at least two benefits:

- i. increasing NATO's military presence in Eastern Europe.
- ii. providing an opportunity for Romania to act as an "honest broker" between Bashar al-Assad's Syrian regime and the West.

## **Key concepts**

The conflict in Syria, the balance of power, the Russian Federation and the USA, evolution scenarios, the strategic partnership with the USA, options for Romania, Romania "honest broker".

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