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NAVIGATING THROUGH THE WATERSHED

Explaining Georgia's and Moldova's Foreign Policy
from the Lens of Neoclassical Realism

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Abstract

The EU candidate countries and post-Soviet states, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, are in a watershed era. They navigate the international landscape that emerged on the day of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – in a world where the old order has died, and the new order has not yet been born. The turning point goes straight into their geographical position in the borderlands between the EU and Russia. This thesis examines why Georgia and the Republic of Moldova have adopted different foreign policy strategies since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It reveals that Georgia, once a leading EU partner, is now pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy, while Moldova seeks shelter-seeking towards the EU while maintaining military neutrality. The study addresses two research gaps by explaining these divergent policies and testing neoclassical realism through a comparative case study using Most Similar Systems Design. The neoclassical realist framework is refined by combining leader perceptions and strategic culture with factors from Cantir & Kennedy's (2015) multi-level framework: power disparity, intensity of external threat, permissiveness of the external environment, intensity of threat to elite survival, and permissiveness of the internal environment. Using a mixed-methods approach, including elite interviews and text analysis, findings confirm that international systemic incentives shape foreign policy options, while domestic factors modify the actual choices. Thus, this thesis provides new insights into how external and internal factors explain the foreign policy differences of small states in similar geopolitical contexts.

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1. Introduction

We are living through a watershed era. And that means that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before. The issue at the heart of this is whether power is allowed to prevail over the law. Whether we permit Putin to turn back the clock to the nineteenth century and the age of the great powers. Or whether we have it in us to keep warmongers like Putin in check.

– Olaf Scholz (27 February 2022, Bundestag)

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was, with the German Chancellor's words, a *Zeitenwende* – a watershed era. As he pointed out, it means that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as it was before. To highlight some of the most notable effects of this watershed era, Sweden and Finland abandoned their military non-alignment and applied for membership in NATO. Germany broke the taboo of sending weapons to conflict zones (Politico, 26 February 2022). French President Macron changed his attitude on enlargement in the East, now pushing for an intensification of the process (Le Monde, 29 June 2023). Beyond these changes in the EU capitals, the war has significantly impacted the foreign policies in the East (The Guardian, 8 November 2023). The post-Soviet states Georgia and the Republic of Moldova (hereafter entitled Moldova) have, just like Ukraine, applied for membership and become candidate countries for the European Union. In December 2023, the European Council opened formal negotiations with Moldova, while Georgia has lagged one step behind (European Council, 2023). Geographically, institutionally, and economically – they are at the epicentre of the EU's and Russia's ongoing geopolitical rivalry. As for the EU's member states, they cannot continue doing business as usual. I would argue that they are included in the watershed era in two ways. First, the EU has opened the door for a new enlargement, which makes EU accession a realistic alternative for the countries. Second, it became apparent that Russia could invade a sovereign country due to its Western integration despite the threat of Western sanctions. It became clear that Russia is not ready to lose its grip over the countries it views as belonging to its "sphere of influence" (Master, 2023). The combination of these two shifts puts the countries in a complicated situation with, at the same time, great opportunities and existential risks. It is time to contribute with new studies on post-Soviet states in this historical situation.

Georgia's and Moldova's trajectories since independence have both similarities and differences. After a problematic 90s characterised by civil war, corruption and crime, Georgia became, in the wake of the Rose Revolution in 2003, the star pupil in the group of countries¹ that has since 2009 constituted

¹ Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine.

the EU's Eastern Partnership (Meister, 2018, p. 304). Under the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili from 2004 to 2013, the country was modernised, corruption fought, and major steps towards EU and NATO membership taken (Gvalia et al., 2019, p. 22 & 30). In 2008, Russia invaded the country, resulting in the occupation of two regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which correspond to 20% of Georgian territory (Euractiv, 6 August 2021). The country has an overwhelmingly pro-European and pro-Western public opinion. At the end of 2023, a poll showed 86% *fully or somewhat positive* support for EU membership (IRI, 2023).

By contrast, Moldova, often regarded as the poorest country in Europe, has suffered from internal tensions between pro-European and pro-Russian elites, parties, and electorates (Rumer, 2017). The government in Chişinău has struggled with two pro-Russian autonomous regions, Transnistria in the East and Gagauzia in the South. In particular, Transnistria has been a complicated issue due to its breakaway status following a bloody civil war in 1992. Still today, the region hosts around 1500 Russian peacekeeping soldiers (Caşus, 2023a). Corruption has been widespread across the Moldovan elite and within society (Rumer, 2017). In 2014, some of the most powerful political figures in the country were involved in a bank fraud scandal, which included the theft of assets corresponding to 12% of the country's GDP (Reuters, 29 January 2024). The mastermind behind the fraud, Ilan Shor, is sentenced to 15 years in prison but lives in exile in Israel, from where he stages pro-Russian protests in Moldova against the incumbent pro-European government with the aim to overthrow it (Reuters, 29 January 2024).

Today, many of the attributes are still present, and Georgia scores overall better than Moldova when it comes to the technical aspects of EU integration, such as *the existence of a functioning market economy* (COM, 2023a, p. 54; COM, 2023b, p. 56). On the other hand, their roles on the international stage have changed significantly. Admittedly, the pro-European government in Chişinău still struggles with pro-Russian populations in the electorate, and in particular with Transnistria and Gagauzia. These tensions have only worsened since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Evans et al., 2024; Reuters, 21 April 2024). Meanwhile, Russia has done its best to destabilise Moldova through illegal funding of parties and hybrid attacks (Hedenskog, 2023). Nevertheless, the incumbent government appears to be the most pro-European and genuine reform-willing since independence. The country has taken bold steps towards the EU and has shown significant progress in the European Commission's latest report (COM, 2023b). The trade has been diversified away from Russia, and there is increasing alignment with Western sanctions (Caşus, 2023b; RFE/RL, 2 February 2024). By contrast, Georgia has pursued a more ambiguous foreign policy, characterised by the Georgian government as 'cautious', 'pragmatic', or 'practical' (Georgian Diplomat, Interview with the Author). Under the rule of the Georgian Dream party, which has governed since 2012, the country has taken several steps to normalise its relations

with Russia (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023, p. 680). The government has decided not to introduce Western sanctions since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (GPB, 28 February 2022). From the European side, there is a wonder if the Georgian application for membership really is genuine or if it is mainly a symbolic concession to the pro-European electorate in the country timely for the upcoming parliamentary election, which will take place in October 2024 (European Diplomat, Interview with the Author). While the country is still scoring high in many technical areas of the enlargement process, backlashes have been observed in critical areas such as the rule of law, democracy, and alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (COM, 2023a). Among the Georgian opposition, there is a strong sense of frustration at seeing the country fall behind Ukraine and Moldova, which were previously far behind Georgia in terms of EU accession (Georgian Former PM, Interview with the Author).

In the final weeks of my work on this thesis, the Georgian government's reintroduction of a Russian-inspired 'agent-law' has triggered a political crisis in the country. Almost every day, tens of thousands of Georgians in support of European integration have taken to the streets. Last year, the government withdrew its plans to introduce it due to the protests, but all indications from the steps taken in parliament suggest that it will be adopted this time (Euronews, 13 May 2024). Judging by the public fury and the EU's statements, it is not an exaggeration to say that the country is now at a historic crossroads (COM, 2024a).

If public opinion were the main driver for foreign policy formation in democracies, Georgia would be expected to conduct a more straightforward pro-European foreign policy than Moldova. The current situation, however, shows the contrary, with the consequence that public opinion cannot explain either Georgia's or Moldova's policy. The answer to these governments' navigation through the watershed era must be found elsewhere. As a result, the identified research problem of this thesis focuses on the underlying forces behind small states' foreign policy behaviour towards and between bigger neighbours, particularly for post-Soviet republics navigating between two distinct geopolitical poles. The definition of *small states* has been debated but is here constituted by two pillars. The first is the "limited capacity of their political, economic and administrative systems" (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020, p. 7). The second is more relative and concerns that they can be identified as "the weaker part in an asymmetric relationship, unable to change the nature or functioning of the relationship on [their] own" (Archer et al., 2014, p. 9).

While EU-centred examinations of general trends such as Europeanization in the Eastern neighbourhood have received attention in the EU literature for many years, less attention has been given to the external and internal forces impacting the foreign policy decisions of governments in these states (Hyde-Price, 2021, p. 153). Research on these forces and considerations deserves greater

attention from scholars within European Studies. This is especially true at a time when the EU does not act in a vacuum but in rivalry with other powers that are also trying to integrate these states into their spheres of influence. During a recent State Visit to the University of Gothenburg, Finnish President Alexander Stubb argued that the current state of global disorder might settle down within a decade (Länsstyrelsen Västra Götaland, 2024). No one knows what that order will look like, but even small steps can have long-term consequences. The EU's door for enlargement will likely not be open forever, while Russia's predominant external ambition is to regain control over its 'lost empire'. That is why several countries are straight in a watershed moment. As an examination of the drivers behind Georgia's and Moldova's foreign policies from the lens of neoclassical realism – using a mixed-methods approach of elite interviews, policy documents and secondary sources – this study represents a first step towards a greater understanding of the forces that impact the strategic considerations in post-Soviet states navigating between the West and the East. In the outskirts of Europe but at the epicentre of geopolitics.

1.2. Aim

This thesis aims to explain why Georgia and Moldova have conducted different foreign policies since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and to test the explanatory power of the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism. The cases of Georgia and Moldova are selected not only because of their political and empirical relevance but also because of the ambition that the comparison can shed light on the theory's usefulness in explaining foreign policy choices of small states in a context of great power rivalry. While neoclassical realists maintain the realist notion that external factors, such as the distribution of relative power, are most important for explaining states' behaviour in the international system, they argue that internal factors – such as leader perceptions, strategic culture, and state-society relations – can significantly delay and modify foreign policy decision-making and change. Derived from the aim, the research question is as follows: *What explains the foreign policy choices of Georgia and Moldova in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?*

2. Previous Research

This chapter addresses the previous research to identify the research problem concerning the foreign policy behaviour of small states towards more powerful neighbours, focusing on post-Soviet states navigating between the two rival systems of the EU and Russia. The chapter is divided into two subchapters, each covering a field of research: *Small State Studies* and *Foreign Policy Analysis of Post-Soviet States*. These elaborations identify valuable findings of relevance for this thesis. I will also specify the research gaps. The first gap is a lack of comparative case studies examining two cases from the same theoretical prism. The second is that most studies on Georgia and Moldova are several years old and that a lot has happened in the international landscape in recent years, most notably Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

To begin with, every study of foreign policy needs a definition of what foreign policy is. It has been debated how narrow or broad such a definition should be. For this thesis, I have decided to apply Hill's definition from 2003, whose approach is that foreign policy is not only conducted towards the external sphere but also to achieve various objectives at the domestic stage. This definition combines "the critical but intermittent problems of war and peace, autonomy and outside interference" with "modern concerns of welfare, prosperity and national identity" (Hill, 2003, p. 254).² Foreign policy concerns from this viewpoint the fundamental question of a state's orientation in the world. Hill's definition is helpful since it can be argued that Georgia's and Moldova's behaviour is not only a matter of foreign policy directed towards external actors but also how the countries position themselves between the EU's system and the Russian governance model. This orientation will shape the countries' future in its fundament. This is not least evident since deepening the partnership with either the EU or Russia also requires adaptation in terms of the domestic system in the country in question (Delcour, 2015, p. 316). Consequently, the analysis can be open to looking at both activities conducted by the foreign ministries and other issues that concern the countries' positioning in the world.

2.1. Why Study Small States?

The following subchapter starts with an explanation of the definition of small states. After that, the primary argument from small-state scholars will be presented in the sense of how the behaviour of small states differ from larger states and how this understanding can contribute to the disciplines of

² For a narrower definition, see Carlsnaes, W. (1987). *Ideology and Foreign Policy: Problems of Comparative Conceptualization*. Wiley-Blackwell.

International Relations (IR) and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). The review continues with a brief outlining of different foreign policy strategies that small states employ to manage their smallness, along with some cases that have been investigated. Finally, I point out the limits of Small State Studies and why an explanatory study of Georgia's and Moldova's foreign policy can contribute to the field. Here, I will highlight which findings can be valuable for my analysis.

As the thesis' introduction points out, scholars have debated how small states should be defined. This is an essential question since such a definition determines the very limits of the field. Different measurements, ranging from population to economic size or military capabilities, have been proposed, and it has also been debated whether absolute thresholds should be defined or not (Panke & Thorhallsson, 2024, p. 502). The definition I pointed out in the introduction is the most promising one as it rests on two pillars: one internal pillar concerning limited political, economic and administrative capabilities, and one relative/external pillar emphasising the asymmetrical relationship towards other states.

Despite the debate on definition, the main argument for the relevance of the field is somewhat unified. As Hill (2003, p. 254) points out in the context of his foreign policy definition, it is a fact that we live in a world where "many states are intensely vulnerable and others have global reach". Thus, one size cannot fit all regarding foreign policy behaviour. According to Hill, the implications "simply means that foreign policy tasks are relative to the situation faced. Carrying them out skilfully may be even more crucial to survival and prosperity for a small/and or poor state than for those with huge diplomatic networks and military resources". Small states can hence be compelled to be even more aware of their fragility and limits on the international arena than larger players. Jervis (1978, p. 172-173) stresses that "the security problems and foreign policy dilemmas of small states are different [...] because they have] smaller margin of time and error", a strong case for why this is important to consider in FPA. Such understanding can also "reveal deep-seated structural changes in the international system", why small states deserve increasing attention in IR (Heng, 2020, p. 1).

How can small states manage their relative fragility and increase their chances to security and prosperity? The answers have been provided by developing different approaches that describe strategies that small states tend to conduct, such as the shelter-seeking, neutrality, hedging, capacity-related and status-seeking approaches (Panke & Thorhallsson, 2024, p. 501-502). Shelter-seeking, neutrality, and hedging can be defined here as they will be used later in the thesis. Shelter-seeking is ascribed to states that seek international shelter, such as the EU and/or NATO, "as they need to compensate for their integral structural weaknesses" (Panke & Thorhallsson, 2024, p. 503) – both in terms of security and economic prosperity. Neutrality is to 'hide' from at least the military side of geopolitical tensions through military non-alignment (Panke & Thorhallsson, 2024, p. 505). Hedging is

to diversify its bets in terms of both security and economy through a ‘multi-vector foreign policy’, cooperating in both directions to achieve the best possible benefits (Panke & Thorhallsson, 2024, p. 502). In addition, the classic approaches of bandwagoning and balancing should be mentioned.

Bandwagoning is a strategy to handle the external threat from a greater power by aligning with it or at least facilitating its interests (Waltz, 1979, p. 118). On the contrary, balancing is to develop resilience through alternative coalitions or alliances to deter or contain the threat (Waltz, 1979, p. 126). All these different approaches have, to a different extent, been applied to small EU states, post-Soviet states, microstates in the Caribbean, Gulf States and Asian states (Braveboy-Wagner, 2010; Bueger & Wivel, 2018; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Kuik, 2008). Recently, the decisions of Finland and Sweden to abandon their non-alignment and apply for NATO membership have received significant scholarly attention, such as Thorhallsson & Vidal (2023) and Michalski et al. (2024).

An explanation of a small state’s employment of one or another of the strategies will naturally partly be dependent on the definition of a small state. In relation to the definition that I have proposed here, it is natural to look at both the political, economic, and administrative systems’ capacity and the relative power towards other actors in the international system. However, Small State Studies have not provided original theories that tell which hierarchical order these factors operate and through which causal mechanisms. Neither has it provided any theory on why a small state selects one foreign policy strategy instead of another alternative. For these two purposes, scholars are therefore employing approaches from IR to explain general trends in the international system and FPA to explain the foreign policy of single states. I would argue that the proposed definition of small states makes a strong case for using theories that integrate external and internal factors in the explanatory framework. Strikingly, this is also the general case in Small State Studies regardless of theoretical direction. For instance, neoclassical realism appears to be the most employed framework in the realist tradition, as it integrates both the international and domestic levels (Mouritzen & Wivel, 2012). Overall, there seems however to be a relative lack of previous studies in the field that have analysed differences between two cases, which is why an explanatory study of Georgia and Moldova can make a significant contribution.

Which approaches can be useful for my examination? First, Jervis’ suggestion that small states have a smaller margin of time and error can be a valuable clue in the study. Second, the different strategies can be used to pinpoint the dependent variable, namely the various foreign policy outcomes in the countries. In this regard, it appears that Georgian foreign policy is characterised by hedging since it is trying to maintain its relationship with both the EU and Russia. Simultaneously, Moldova is intensifying its European integration process, which appears as shelter-seeking. However, Moldova has not reconsidered its neutrality status so far, so it is still conducting a neutrality strategy when it

comes to military non-alignment. The fact that Moldova has combined shelter-seeking with neutrality aligns with Wivel's (2021, p. 8) finding that small states "rarely pursue balancing" as "their main motive is to use one or more great powers as a shield against threatening power(s), not to affect the balance of power and, by definition their limited capabilities that have little effect on the overall balance".

In conclusion, it can be argued that studying small states deepens our understanding of the international system and of the considerations that are typical for smaller states (a category that represents a considerable share of the world's sovereign states). Increasing the knowledge about the dynamics of Georgia and Moldova is also important since they will potentially be members of the European Union in a not-very-distant future. On the other hand, the field has not produced any comprehensive theory on explaining the variety of choices between small states.

2.2. Foreign Policy Analysis of Post-Soviet States

For this subchapter, I will first briefly connect Foreign Policy Analysis of Post-Soviet States with the small states literature to make the reader aware of possible overlaps. Second, I will highlight some of the questions the field is concerned with. Third, I will present some important observations that have been made about these questions. Fourth, I will highlight a few studies on Georgia and Moldova and specify the gap I intend to address.

With some exceptions (read Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan), post-Soviet states are also small states with around 10 million inhabitants or less. They are, by far, the weaker parts of the relationships with both the EU and Russia. In these cases, foreign policy analysis of post-Soviet states can be seen as a sub-category of the small states literature. Nevertheless, this field is concerned with its specific questions: What are the implications of Russia's continuing "security, energy, and cultural power" but decline in "trade and economic development" (Meister, 2018, p. 301)? Why and in which policy areas have the EU succeeded, respectively not succeeded, with its aims regarding Europeanization (Schimmelfennig, 2021, p. 124) and the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy (Hyde-Price, 2021, p. 157)? What are the dynamics between pro-European and pro-Russian forces in these countries? How can the foreign policies of the post-Soviet states be understood?

These questions have led scholars to several observations. One concerns the success or failure of pull factors for Europeanization which can be contrasted with Russian influence. In the context of Europeanization, Schimmelfennig (2021, p. 131) has found that the EU's promotion of democratic governance is more successful in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood when the external party is offered

“a credible offer of EU membership”, while its success in other cases is limited to specific policy areas. The credible membership prospect can now be applied to Georgia and Moldova, which opens for interesting testing of Schimmelfennig’s notion. Overall, the EU has also strongly influenced the economic sphere, as post-Soviet states have benefited considerably from trade agreements with the EU (Cantir & Kennedy, 2015, p. 407). On the other hand, Russian pull factors have been significant in some respects. Notwithstanding Russia’s employment of threats as a strategy to achieve its goals, countries such as Belarus and Armenia have been strongly dependent on Russia in terms of security and/or economy (Meister, 2018, p. 304). In sum, the states in question are experiencing pull factors from both directions: “while the EU tries to transform its Eastern neighbors through association and free trade agreements, Russia works to reintegrate these states in its security and economic institutions” (Meister, 2018, p. 310). For these states, the EU and Russia are clearly two rival systems.

A second observation stresses that the classic foreign policy strategies of *bandwagoning* and *balancing* seem to be exceptions rather than the rule among post-Soviet states. Instead, it is suggested that they have generally conducted a *multi-vector foreign policy* consisting of *hedging* and *wedging* strategies (Gnedina, 2015, p. 1007 & 1010; Preiherman, 2017, p. 4; Meister, 2018, p. 306). The multi-vector foreign policy aims to exploit the power relations between competing, more powerful actors to negotiate benefits. While hedging has been defined earlier, wedging means to internationalise a dispute (in case of a disagreement with Russia, involving the EU and vice versa), as these states can “threaten defection to an alternative camp, ‘trade’ loyalty and exploit information asymmetries” (Gnedina, 2015, p. 1013). The European post-Soviet states tend to navigate between Russia and the EU, while the states located in Central Asia play between Russia, the EU and China (Meister, 2018, p. 303). An important point put forward in these studies is that this policy is not necessarily in the countries’ interests but rather a strong incentive for post-Soviet elites “who are more focused on personal short-term benefits than their states’ sustainable development through reforms and modernization” (Meister, 2018, p. 309). Therefore, a multi-vector foreign policy can be expected in many cases since “any decision to integrate with one side would have detrimental implications for these elites: stronger integration with Russia would result in a loss of sovereignty and the redistribution of resources in favor of Russian elites; integrating with the EU would further challenge their power position and undermine rent-seeking options through increasing political competition, transparency, and rule of law” (Meister, 2018, p. 309-310). Elite interests can shape policy, and this is a factor that will be included in the analytical framework below. Multi-vector foreign policy appears as an even more suitable label for Georgia’s dependent variable than solely hedging because wedging adds to the bargaining aspect of the foreign policy which is apparent in Georgia’s ambiguity.

Regarding research on Georgia and Moldova, several studies have been conducted, most of them looking at both the international and domestic level of factors – a focus that, as we will see, is important when explaining single states' behaviour in the international system. The idea is that focusing solely on the international or domestic level cannot explain the foreign policy considerations of single states, an argument which will be further elaborated in the theoretical framework chapter below. Among them, we find, for instance, a neoclassical realist analysis of Georgia's intensification of a pro-European policy from 2003 and onward (Gvalia et al., 2019, p. 21), Georgia's turn towards a normalisation of relations with Russia from 2012 (Lebandize & Kakachia, 2023, p. 676), an explanation of Moldova's surprising and sudden turn away from Russia and towards the EU by a Communist government from 2003 (Cantir & Kennedy, 2015, p. 397) and analysis of Moldova's ambiguous foreign policy conducted by pro-European and pro-Russian governments between 2010 and 2019 (Morar & Dembińska, 2020). In addition, one comparative case study of both countries' security dilemmas can be found in Dinesen & Wivel (2014). While all these accounts are interesting, and Lebandize & Kakachia, as well as Gvalia et al., are using forms of neoclassical realism, Cantir & Kennedy's study can be mentioned in particular. They are namely inventing a promising multi-level analytical framework of five factors – three external and two domestic – that might be useful to explain foreign policy choices in post-Soviet countries (Cantir & Kennedy, 2015, p. 398). These factors are integrated into the neoclassical realist framework in this thesis and further explained in the theoretical chapter.

While the focus in studies on the foreign policy of post-Soviet states has been clear and fruitful, and the strategies often explained through a focus on both the states' position in the international system and domestic factors, there are except from Dinesen & Wivel (2014) just as in the small states literature a lack of comparative case studies which have investigated two post-Soviet states from the same theoretical lens. Comparative case studies can visualise the factors' real explanatory power (if one factor explains one case, it says not very much, but if it can explain the difference between two cases, it explains more). This is, therefore, the main gap that I will address. Like several other studies of post-Soviet states, I will employ the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism as it has previously been successful in shedding light on both the vulnerable position of post-Soviet states in the external environment and the dynamics in post-Soviet societies. However, the ambition is to further refine the neoclassical realist toolbox by integrating Cantir & Kennedy's multi-level analytical framework. Finally, a lot of water (Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine) has passed under the bridge since most of these studies were conducted. It is time to contribute with new studies on the dynamics in the post-Soviet states.

3. The Theoretical Framework of Neoclassical Realism

This thesis uses neoclassical realism as its theoretical framework. As mentioned above, neoclassical realism has previously been successful in explaining the foreign policy choices of Georgia (Gvalia et al., 2019; Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023), but there is a lack of theory-testing studies building on a comparative analysis where the same factors are applied on two cases. To this date, a uniform conceptual framework for neoclassical realism has not yet emerged that is always applied to empirical cases. The importance lies, as we will see, not in the exact formula of the factors but in the relationship between different levels of the framework. For this study, I will use concepts developed by two of the most influential scholars of the theory, Rose (1998) and Ripsman (2011), while including Cantir & Kennedy's (2015) multi-level analytical framework that was briefly presented in *Previous Research*.

The fundamental idea of neoclassical realism is to compensate for both the limits of neorealism and the shortcomings of *Innenpolitik* by incorporating “both external and internal variables” into a single framework for explaining foreign policy outcomes (Rose, 1998, p. 146). The idea of neorealism, which solely focuses on the helicopter perspective of single states' behaviour in the international system (therefore only on the external variables), was never to explain the foreign policy choices of single states (Rose, 1998, p. 145). Neither can *Innenpolitik*, which is an umbrella term for approaches “which explain foreign policy primarily in terms of internal characteristics of states, their domestic political processes and the individuals, parties, and coalitions that lead them” (Ripsman, 2011, p. 10). Neorealism and *Innenpolitik* struggle namely with the same but opposite problem: Neorealism cannot explain the *variety* of outcomes among countries with *similar* systemic incentives or *similar* outcomes among countries with *different* systemic incentives – while the same regards *Innenpolitik* when exchanging systemic to internal factors.

Considering neorealism, it can be said that “the influence of systemic factors may often be more apparent from a distance than from up close – for example, in significantly limiting the menu of foreign policy choices considered by a state's leaders at a particular time, rather than in forcing the selection of one particular item on that menu over another” (Rose, 1998, p. 147). The point put forward by neoclassical realists is that domestic and individual factors, in interaction with the systemic incentives, might explain that specific choice. In the following, the features of the theoretical framework will be outlined, first through the independent variable (external factors at the international level) and thereafter through the intervening variables (internal factors at the domestic level).

3.1. The Independent Variable: Systemic Incentives

As a *realist* theory, neoclassical realists maintain the fundamental realist notion that “the most powerful generalizable characteristic of a state in international relations is its relative position in the international system” (Zakaria, 1995, p. 482). This position is determined by power, which is defined as “the capabilities and resources [...] with which states can influence each other” (Wohlforth, 1993, p. 4). The emphasis on power prerequisites another realist understanding: that the international system is, at the end of the day, an anarchic realm where the ultimate agency is not possessed by international organisations but by states (Ripsman, 2011, p. 2). The distribution of relative power will shape a certain dynamic in this system, and the general trend will be that states adapt to this dynamic. As Ripsman (2011, p. 3) points out:

Since their very survival is at stake if they fail to secure themselves properly from without in an anarchic international system, where the slightest misstep could lead to defeat in war, the incentives are extremely high for states to focus on external stimuli and craft foreign policies to respond to them appropriately.

As can be read in the quote, neoclassical realists approach the external factors provided by the international system as *systemic incentives* for states. These systemic incentives are the independent variable that “shapes and shoves” (Waltz, 1997, p. 915), the room for manoeuvre for the single state – the *menu* as it was called above. While military power is the direct source of existential threats between states in the short run, the realist emphasis on capabilities and resources also means that economic power needs to be considered in a neoclassical realist analysis. As Ripsman (2011, p. 2) argues, “differential growth rates, which over time change the relative distribution of capabilities between states, are the driving forces of international politics”. It can consequently be expected that a state will be hesitant to make foreign policy choices that can undermine its economic opportunities. However, when faced with a direct and urgent threat, it would still be expected to sacrifice the economic interest on the altar to safeguard its security.

Notwithstanding the hierarchical predominance of systemic incentives located at the international level as the independent variable, neoclassical realists argue that it is essential to have an analytical order where the systemic incentives are analysed *before* the internal factors. This is because “the influence of structural factors such as relative power is not always obvious even to political actors themselves [...] and] analysts who do not begin by looking carefully for such influence may mistakenly attribute causal significance to other factors that are more visible but in reality are only epiphenomenal” (Rose, 1998, p. 151). While this point is important, it should, in my opinion, be a critical awareness even in the other direction. For instance, it is possible that a decisionmaker can motivate a choice with systemic incentives to obscure a personal preference or interests of a party-political or business nature. From the start, the investigation of external factors should hence be made

with proper source criticism, and findings from the later investigation of internal factors must be allowed to have a feedback effect on the findings on the external level.

While Rose (1998) and Ripsman (2011) focus on these dynamics of systemic incentives, they provide no specific guidelines of exactly which external factors should be analysed. Here, I will present the three external factors from Cantir & Kennedy's (2015) framework, which have been mentioned in *previous research*. These are military and economic *power disparity* (between the weaker and the more powerful state), *intensity of external threat* and *permissiveness of the external environment* (2015, p. 398). *Intensity of external threat* is defined by Cantir & Kennedy as "how threatening one country's actions are to another's security", but here I will also include the aspect of directness and urgency to capture the possibility of the more powerful state to threaten the survival of the weaker state 'now', 'tomorrow' or 'next year'. *Permissiveness of the external environment* is analysed "in terms of the amount of alternatives the weak state has with respect to limiting the hegemon's power over it". These three factors constitute together the systemic incentives, which function as the independent variable expected to at least decide the range of possible foreign policy outcomes (the dependent variable).

Georgia and Moldova will first be analysed using these three factors. If the countries differ considerably at the level of systemic incentives, the answer to the research question is relatively easy to conclude – and goes in line with not only neoclassical realist but also neorealist theoretical expectations. By contrast, if the difference at the external level is relatively modest – and several items at the respective country's menu of possible choices overlap – it is reasonable to believe that one or more intervening variables (internal factors at the domestic level) have impacted the foreign policy outcome.

3.2. The Intervening Variables: Internal Factors

The neoclassical realist inclusion of internal factors – opening the 'black box of state' – can be seen as a necessary complement to the analysis of external factors in two types of cases: 1) when a foreign policy response contradicts the neorealist expectation of rational behaviour, and 2) when the identification of systemic incentives engenders a broad menu of possible choices (Ripsman, 2011, p. 6-7). Which, if any, type this thesis regards should be possible to conclude after the investigation of the systemic incentives. Neoclassical realists would, however, find the occurrence of one of these types as *likely* since they see such complexity as the rule rather than the exception in the short term. As Rose (1998, p. 146) points out, "the impact of [...] power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit

level”. Consequently, systemic incentives have according to neoclassical realists not a *direct* effect, but an *indirect* effect on foreign policy outcomes. On that basis, it can be argued that an analysis of internal factors can be fruitful even when a foreign policy response complies with the systemic incentives over the long term – as it identifies eventual gravel in the machinery along the way.

It should be underlined again that internal factors cannot, from the neoclassical realist point of view, constitute the *independent variable*. Instead, they function as intervening variables, which all must relate to the independent variable. Consequently, in the case of Moldova and Georgia, the internal factors can impact the foreign policy outcomes, but these factors must have been shaped by systemic incentives. Thus, they can, for instance, have a conservative effect on the responsiveness of a state by representing previous – perhaps outdated – systemic incentives that have then been conserved at the domestic level in, for instance, the minds of policymakers, strategic documents and ‘ways of doing things’. In the following, I will point out several intervening variables, which are all internal factors located at the domestic (or individual) level. Neoclassical realism is, therefore, a multi-level theory.

Both Rose and Ripsman point out the first intervening variable as *leader perceptions*. The signals from the international system can be fuzzy, and the ‘rational’ systemic incentives are hard to discern. Thus, states “have a hard time seeing clearly whether security is plentiful *or* scarce, and must grope their way forward in twilight” (Rose, 1998, p. 152). Miscalculations are not uncommon. Second, foreign policy decisions are made by humans of flesh and blood who can make individual errors because of “systematic bias in a particular leader’s package of images and cognitions that comprise his or her cognitive filter, which is used to evaluate and process incoming information” (Ripsman, 2011, p. 3). Third, leaders can, despite having correct perceptions in terms of the international system and capacities, still act irrationally and against their states’ interests (Ripsman, 2011, p. 3). As a result, “analysts of foreign policy thus have no alternative but to explore in detail how each country’s policy makers actually understand their situation” (Rose, 1998, p. 158). Given the emphasis on perceptions, neoclassical realism is not only a middle way between neorealism and *Innenpolitik* but also between neorealism and constructivism with Wendt’s famous statement “Anarchy is what states make of it” (Rose, 1998, p. 152).

The second intervening variable is pointed out by Ripsman (2011, p. 8) and entitled *strategic culture*. Strategic culture reflects traditions of how the state has historically safeguarded its interests and can hence reflect conservations of old systemic incentives. It can also reflect an in advance decided policy which guidelines the state’s decision-making, for instance a national security strategy. Strategic culture can be expected to impact the leader perceptions or delay a response against contractionary or unexpected systemic incentives.

The third intervening variable is borrowed directly from Cantir & Kennedy (2015, p. 398), entitled *intensity of threat to elite survival*, and “based on how threatening the hegemon’s actions are to the continuing power of the ruling elites in the weaker state”. Here, I will also look at potential internal threats against elite survival, as they can pose the decision-maker with even more difficult choices. This intervening variable is included since I believe that realists do sometime take for granted the integrity of the state. It is not certain that the decision-makers, under all circumstances, are doing what is in the state’s best interest. In the post-Soviet states, there are reasons to believe that many decisions have been made by elites to protect their own power position in the country (see for instance the reasoning of Meister (2018) in *Previous Research*).

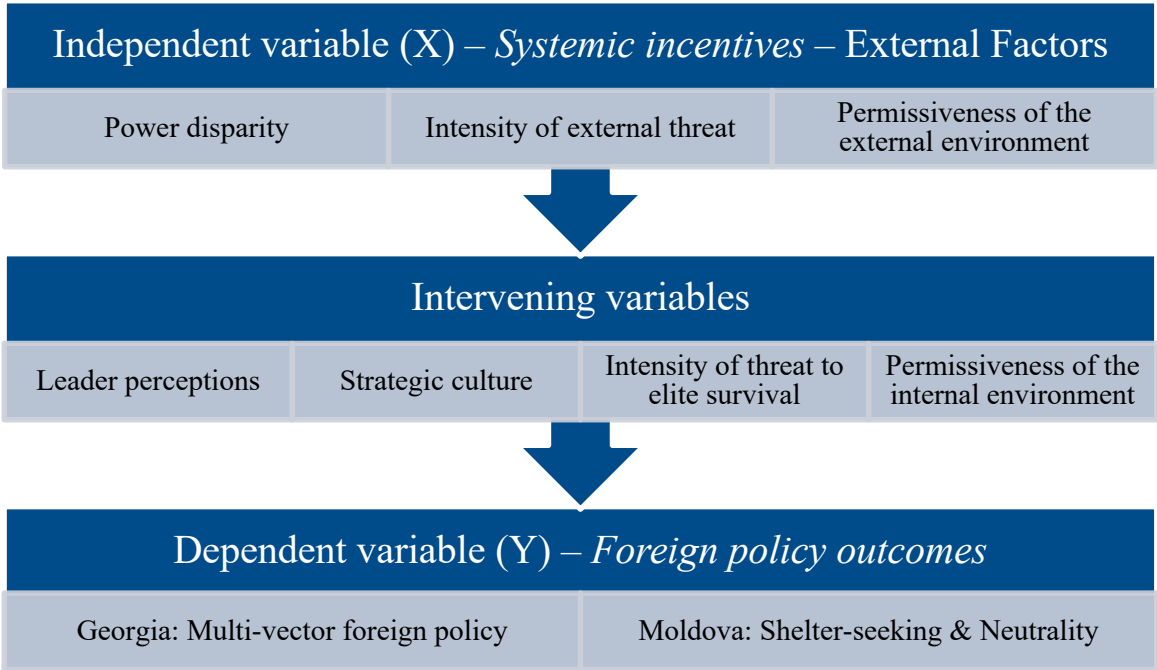
The fourth intervening variable is raised by several scholars and formulated in various ways, may it be as *state-society relations*, *state power*, or *national political power*, but is regardless generally encompassing “the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation’s human and material resources behind security policy initiatives” (Ripsman, 2011, p. 1; Rose, 1998, p. 162-163; Christensen, 1996, p. 11). Zakaria (1998, p. 10-11) points, for instance, out the slow development of the American state power at the end of the nineteenth century, where successive presidents sought increasing power abroad but were constrained by “a federal state structure and a tiny central bureaucracy that could not get men or money from the state governments or from society at large”. Beyond the constraining potential of, for instance, decentralised veto players, this category can also include internal factors such as public opinion. Neoclassical realists find that “the elites tend to get what they want in the end but have to make concessions to their publics along the way – with the result that foreign policy is linked to systemic incentives but not wholly determined by them” (Rose, 1998, p. 164). For this thesis, I have adjusted the theory slightly, using Cantir & Kennedy’s (2015, p. 398) factor *permissiveness of the internal environment* as it constitutes a suitable pair with the external environment factor. When internal permissiveness prevails, it “allows ruling elites to shift geopolitical strategy without adverse electoral consequences” (Cantir & Kennedy, 2015, p. 398). I will broaden this definition a bit and let it include internal risks of increasing tensions in society and the government’s ability to carry out its preferred objectives in relation to the number of seats in the national parliament or the feature of potential domestic veto players. In this way, I have been able to exclude a factor that is sometimes used by neoclassical realists, *domestic institutions* (Ripsman, 2011, p. 8), while keeping one of its most important elements – the balance of power in the parliament. Domestic institutions are excluded since five factors would have been too many to focus on, and it can be argued that “there are relatively fewer constraints on the operation of power in Eastern Europe than there are in Western and Central Europe” (Hyde-Price, 2021, p. 156). From Hyde-Price’s notion, it can be argued that the institutions in this region are more volatile and influenceable by the incumbent government and that domestic

institutions may, therefore, play a smaller role in these countries compared with the other internal factors.

It should be acknowledged that the four internal factors that have been pointed out can sometimes overlap. For instance, the strategic culture can impact leader perceptions, and the permissiveness of the internal environment is tightly connected with the intensity of threat to elite survival. This can engender some problems in terms of structure in the analysis and isolation of the variables. The alternative, to delete some of the factors, would, however, not be desirable either. However, the implication is that none of the factors can be isolated in terms of conclusions.

In sum, what decision-makers want to do does not necessarily reflect systemic incentives. And even if they want to do the ‘rational’ thing according to the state’s relative power, they can be constrained by, for instance, an inherited strategic culture in the domestic institutions, by threats against their own survival, or by public disagreement. In reality, states “choose [therefore] from a range of policy alternatives to navigate between systemic constraints and domestic political imperatives” (Ripsman, 2011, p. 8). An illustration of the framework can now be offered.

Figure A: Neoclassical realism merged with Cantir & Kennedy’s (2015) multi-level analytical framework



4. Method

This thesis is a comparative case study, integrating the in-depth examination typical for case study design and the theory-testing element of comparative design (Bryman, 2016, p. 61-65). Georgia conducts a form of multi-vector foreign policy, while Moldova pursues a shelter-seeking (but neutral when it comes to military non-alignment) approach. Since the difference between these approaches is significant, the theoretical expectation of neoclassical realism would be that differences on the external level are likely. The theory would, however, still have a say if the systemic incentives were similar while there are strong differences among the internal factors. For instance, through a grounded strategic culture shaped by previous external experiences or a strong threat to elite survival enhanced by geopolitical circumstances. The theory would be *strengthened* if the external factors, along with modifications on the domestic level, explain the outcome. On the other hand, it would be *weakened* if it appeared that internal factors disconnected from the external level are explaining the difference.

This chapter consists of four subchapters. The first covers the case selection of Georgia and Moldova, which is motivated by the principle of Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). The second elaborates on the challenges that occur when investigating a complex political process. In the third subchapter, I discuss elite interviews as a method, how they were conducted for this thesis and the significance of triangulation³. The fourth subchapter introduces the additional material.

4.1. Case Selection

The idea behind the case selection of Moldova and Georgia is that the countries are not only empirically relevant – but also that the similarities allow for theory-testing based on Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), which is a common tool in comparative politics for testing or developing theories (Steinmetz, 2019). The function of MSSD is that it can be “predicated on comparing very similar cases which differ in their dependent variable” because the “assumption here is that comparing similar cases that bring about different outcomes will make it easier for the researcher to control factors that are not the causal agent and isolate the independent variable that explains the presence or absence of the dependent variable” (Steinmetz, 2019). While Georgia and Moldova indeed have differences, they are similar in several important factors that would be difficult to isolate if they differed. They share the experience of being republics of the Soviet Union and had a very difficult decade post-independence (Lupu Dinesen & Wivel, 2014, p. 1). They are small states with a

³ Triangulation is defined as “the use of more than one method or source of data in the study of a social phenomenon so that findings may be cross-checked” (Bryman, 2016, p. 697).

population of 3,7 respectively 2,5 million (World Bank, 2022a & 2022b). In relative size, Georgia shares the Caucasus region with two other small states, Armenia and Azerbaijan, but it is also squeezed between Russia and a regional power, Türkiye. Moldova is the smallest state in its neighbourhood, sandwiched between the significantly larger Ukraine and Romania, and 57 times smaller than Russia. As prospective members of the European Union, both Georgia and Moldova would be among the smallest states in terms of population. Moreover, they are small economies, ranked in place 111, respectively 137 globally in 2022 (World Bank, 2024, p. 2-3). Regarding military capabilities, the expenditure as a percentage of GDP was in 2022 1,4 respectively 0,3% (SIPRI, 2024). Since then, Moldova has made some efforts to increase military spending, but from an extremely low level (Balkan Insight, 13 February 2023). Georgia's 1,4% is not very low, but still small if the limited size of the economy and the strong military powers in the neighbourhood are considered. These factors are all control variables, and some alternative hypotheses can hence be excluded from the beginning, making the basic logic of MSSD applicable.

Nevertheless, significant factors remain that can be reasons for the different foreign policy outcomes. Georgia is an old nation with its antique language and culture (Suny et al., 2024). Moldova is divided between a Romanian majority and Ukrainian and Russian minorities, along with the Turkish-Christian people of Gagauzians in the south – a country constructed in the crack between greater powers' ambitions (King, 1999, p. 1, 36, 63, 168, 209). Moreover, the Georgian government is led by a party founded by an oligarch who made his fortune in Russia, while the Moldovan ditto is led by PAS, a party founded by the current President Maia Sandu, who has worked for the World Bank in Washington (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023, p. 677; Morar & Dembińska, 2021, p. 311).

4.2. The Challenge of Investigating Complex Processes

As mentioned above, there are several differences between Georgia and Moldova. Moreover, foreign policymaking is a complex process. It is therefore a challenge to identify to what extent differences between the countries have impacted the foreign policy outcomes. One way to identify the impact of different variables would be through process tracing as it attempts “to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable” (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 206). Such historical investigation of the sequence of the events is a huge task and would demand the work effort of a PhD rather than a master's thesis. Thus, I have instead conducted a synchronic analysis of categories (the factors that neoclassical realism considers) rather than a diachronic investigation “along a timeline” (Bryman et al., 2022, p. 200). This is possible since the neoclassical realist considers factors other than

systemic incentives and the theory can, therefore, be disproved if internal factors are shown to be *independent* of, and more important than, external factors. As mentioned above, neoclassical realism has only explanatory power if the internal factors have a relationship with the systemic incentives.

In some respects, features of process tracing are included through the neoclassical realist emphasis on the causal chain but not with the chronological detail typical for process tracing. As we have seen above, neoclassical realists expect not a simple story linking X with Y but a complex transmission from systemic incentives through intervening variables to a particular outcome. As Rose (1998, p. 165) emphasises:

A distinct methodological perspective flows from neoclassical realism's theoretical argument: analysts wanting to understand any particular case need to do justice to the full complexity of the causal chain linking relative material power and foreign policy outputs.

It should be acknowledged that some obstacles make it difficult to validate “the full complexity of the causal chain linking relative material power foreign policy outputs” within the scope of this thesis. The first problem is that the given time frame is too limited to allow for consideration of *all* accessible material on the topic. To manage this problem, I have tried to be transparent with my considerations in the selection of relevant data. The investigated time frame, ranging from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine to the present, is also limited, which means that there are only a few radical turns during the period. The second problem is that the actuality and sensitivity of the issue entail limitations in two aspects: A) I cannot consider secret information about systemic factors that only intelligence services and a small circle of policymakers have access to. B) There are not yet any written memoirs or letters that can give an idea of central policymakers' perceptions of things. This problem is partly connected to the third problem, which is that the language barrier makes it impossible for me to investigate sources in Romanian, Russian, and Georgian. As Rose (1998, p. 166) mentions, “to investigate how perceptions matter, for example, one has to get inside the heads of key state decision makers, something that often requires foreign language capabilities and/or archival research”. Research that fully lives up to this ambition (when it comes to subjects that are sensitive to states) is rare, but that cannot be an excuse to avoid that area of research. The answer to these problems is, in my opinion, to be conscious and honest about the limitations while trying to address them as much as possible. In this regard, I decided to conduct semi-structured elite interviews with strategically selected persons in Moldova and Georgia. The elite interviews were key to receiving insights into the policy-making circles in the countries and to getting exclusive information in English despite the language barrier.

4.3. The Elite Interview

As Christensen (1996, p. 248) points out, an “application of the [neoclassical realist] approach to any given country requires a great deal of knowledge about the nation in question”. Guided by this, I decided to conduct elite interviews and travel to Tbilisi and Chişinău to have them face-to-face and explore the contexts in the countries further. In my free time, I walked around the city and visited museums to get a sense of the history, daily life, and atmosphere of the countries. The main objective with the journey was to collect primary material which could get me as close to the empirical reality as possible. The elite interview is a form of respondent interview involving “those with close proximity to power or policymaking” (Lilleker, 2003, p. 207). As Lilleker (2003, p. 208) points out, it allows us “to learn more about the inner workings of the political process, the machinations between influential actors and how a sequence of events was viewed and responded to within the political machine”. Expertise in Georgia and Moldova is possible to find in articles, but what goes on behind closed doors or in the heads of decision-makers is another thing. Due to the intermediating role of *leader perceptions* in the decision-making process, the subjective understanding of the world is thought to be a part of the objective reality. As a result of these opportunities, elite interviews were considered suitable for the research question and the theoretical framework of this thesis. The respondents were strategically selected to cover deep insight and various perspectives on the policy-making processes in the countries. The respondents were selected within the following two categories:

- 1) I needed at least one respondent from each country who represented the government – either as a civil servant or as a politician. The person should preferably have a highly senior position and insight into the inner circle of foreign policymaking.
- 2) I needed at least one perspective from the outside who could, subjectively or not, offer an account that is not provided by the government itself.

I managed to find interviewees from both these camps. For Georgia, I had a helpful ‘gatekeeper’ who connected me with two of the respondents. For Moldova, I asked several people for recommendations before finding suitable interviewees. The interviewees were contacted by email, WhatsApp, or social media channels, and their identity was treated confidentially if they wished. The principle of informed consent was applied, and I informed that the interviews would be recorded and stored safely.

In Georgia, I interviewed a high-level Georgian Diplomat (category 1). Second, I interviewed an Opposition Party Leader who was Prime Minister from 2019 until 2021, when he resigned from the post and left the governing party, Georgian Dream, to launch a new pro-European party. This respondent can be considered as belonging to category 2 but had also deep insight from the highest position in the Georgian government, although not since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This

respondent will hereafter be entitled Georgian Former PM. Finally, I interviewed a diplomat from an EU member state giving me an outward perspective, hereafter called the European Diplomat.

For Moldova, I interviewed the Head of the Bureau for EU Integration (category 1), hereafter just entitled as the Moldovan Diplomat. The bureau's task is to oversee the country's EU integration process. The bureau's function of being a spider in the web implies that the interviewee has a central position in the Moldovan government. Within category 2, I interviewed the Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Association of the Republic of Moldova (APE), hereafter called the Moldovan Director for APE. APE plays an important role in facilitating an exchange between the political actors, the academia, and the public in Moldova (APE, 2024). Finally, I interviewed a national advisor at the Swiss NGO Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF). DCAF implements a project funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), which concerns good governance of the security sector (Albu & Enicov, 2024). This interviewee will be entitled as the Moldovan National Advisor.

The interviews were neither formal nor unstructured, but semi-structured directed by an interview guide to increase the reliability and make comparison of the cases possible (Bryman, 2016, p. 468-469). Since the study is theory-testing, the questions for the interview guide were drafted based on the factors presented in the theoretical framework, covering intensity of external threat, permissiveness of the external environment, intensity of threat to elite survival and permissiveness of the internal environment. Regarding power disparity, leader perceptions and strategic culture, the idea was that power disparity can mainly be examined through other sources and that the others should turn up spontaneously among the respondents.

I started in line with the neoclassical realist emphasis on the right analytical order to ask questions related to the external factors. The idea was also that these factors might be less sensitive to talk about than the countries' internal affairs. In addition, the interviewees received an opening question where they were asked to describe the political discussion in their country before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the days after, and in broad lines how the situation has developed since then. This was raised partly as a 'warm-up question' but also to give room for unexpected answers that could be followed up later in the interview. In the end, each respondent had the possibility to add something that could be important to bear in mind.⁴

The interviews lasted 30 to 70 minutes, depending on the interviewee's availability, and were conducted in the Georgian and Moldovan capitals except from the one with the Moldovan Diplomat, which was conducted digitally from Sweden. Five of the interviews were recorded and transcribed

⁴ The semi-structured interview guide is included in the appendix.

with OtterAI and subsequently corrected manually. The remaining interview was conducted in another language than English and then transcribed and translated manually.

Figure B: Table of Interviews

* How the interviewee will be referred to in the text ** Minutes

Interview Session	Name Entitled*	Role	Organisation	Location	Interview Length**	Date
1	Georgi Gakharia, <i>Georgian Former PM</i>	Opposition Party Leader	For Georgia ⁵	Face-to-face, Tbilisi	30	2024-03-12
2	Confidential, <i>Georgian Diplomat</i>	Diplomat	Georgian Government	Face-to-face, Tbilisi	45	2024-03-13
3	Confidential, <i>European Diplomat</i>	Diplomat	EU Member State	Face-to-face, Tbilisi	70	2024-03-14
4	Vadim Enicov, <i>Moldovan National Advisor</i>	National Adviser	DCAF	Face-to-face, Chişinău	40	2024-03-18
5	Natalia Stercul, <i>Moldovan Director for APE</i>	Executive Director	Foreign Policy Association of Moldova	Face-to-face, Chişinău	45	2024-03-20
6	Ghenadie Marian <i>Moldovan Diplomat</i>	Head Moldovan Diplomat	Bureau for EU Integration	Whatsapp video-call	60	2024-04-02

⁵ Georgi Gakharia’s party.

Before continuing, it should be added that interviewing also has its limitations, “which means they cannot be relied upon as the sole methodology” (Lilleker, 2003, p. 208). As Lilleker stresses, “the data collected must be reinforced by other forms of empirical data or must be based upon a broad sample of interviews, all conducted with those who enjoyed equal access to the event or activity under focus”. This limitation has mainly to do with source criticism, as those “with close proximity to power” can not only have wrong perceptions about things, but also motivations for saying one thing over another. The fact that I conducted three interviews for each country means that these accounts can be compared with each other, but it is arguably too small a number to make definitive conclusions without comparing them with other material types. The interviews were hence triangulated with other empirical data. In combination with other material, the interviews turned out to be critical in gaining in-depth knowledge.

4.4. Additional Material

The additional material consisted mainly of texts and, in a few cases, of statistics. The text material was divided into two categories: primary and secondary material. The primary material consisted of official documents from EU organs, the Moldovan government, the International Energy Agency, and UNDP. An important document to analyse within this category, which many interviewees referred to, was Moldova’s security strategy. This was updated in 2023 and, for the first time, mentioning Russia as an existential threat (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2023, p. 11). Perhaps tellingly, the Georgian government has not started to work on an updated security strategy. Single statements from representatives of the Georgian government can partly compensate for this absence. The secondary material consisted first of previous research conducted by prominent scholars from the field. Second, of reports published by well-recognised think tanks, organisations and academic institutions within international relations and foreign policy such as, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Institute for the Study of War, OSW in Warsaw, European Council on Foreign Relations, SCREEUS in Stockholm, Chatham House, Jamestown Foundation and Transparency International. These provided the expert knowledge that could also have been provided by informant interviews. Third, of press and news articles from newspapers and media agencies, such as Balkan Insight, BBC, CNN, Euractiv, Euronews, Financial Times, Politico, Reuters and The Guardian.

The selection of the additional material was a continuing process guided by the interviews to triangulate the findings and fill important gaps, controlled by the criteria to use reliable sources. The

questions posed to this material were, therefore, the same as for the interviews, encompassing the external and internal factors. I call this approach a question-based analysis, which is based on the theory and the interviews. I decided not to use a coding scheme which has emerged as a common tool in qualitative social science. A coding scheme would have been suitable if the research question were more specific and if the material, to a greater extent, consisted of extended policy documents. By contrast, I would argue that the topic demands a richer description and a more flexible approach. Such an approach also opens better opportunities to falsify the theory. A question-based analysis must, however, include significant reflexivity, such as a critical reflection on the questions, assumptions, and interpretations. It is important to approach the analysis as a puzzle all the way through, allowing every new finding to impact the whole understanding, just as the process of a hermeneutic circle.

5. Empirical Analysis

The structure for the result and analysis is as follows. Based on the methodological guidelines of neoclassical realism, the external factors are analysed before the internal factors. Within the category of external factors, power disparity, intensity of external threat and permissiveness of the external environment are investigated from country to country. Subsequently, the internal factors are followed by elaborations of leader perceptions, strategic culture, intensity of threat to elite survival, and permissiveness of the internal environment. As the external factors tend to interplay as systemic incentives and the internal factors also interact with each other, each factor cannot be tested for itself. Instead, the analysis tests the neoclassical realist expectations of the function of the international and domestic levels.

5.1. External Factors

The external factors are located at the international level and considered as systemic incentives. They should function as the independent variable if the neoclassical realism holds the test. The theoretical expectation at this level is hence that differences in these factors should set the limits for the menu of possible choices for Georgia's respectively Moldova's foreign policy behaviour.

Power disparity

For both Georgia and Moldova, the military and economic power disparity with Russia is obvious, huge, and, as it appears, a major consideration in the shaping of foreign policy. As pointed out previously, the countries are among the smallest post-Soviet states in terms of population and area. In 2022, Georgia's military spending was 1,4%. Moldova's tiny 0,3% (SIPRI, 2024). Since then, Moldova has slightly increased its spending, but everyone understands that neither of the countries would be able to resist Russian aggression without significant external support. As the Georgian Former PM mentioned, "Georgia is a small country in a very complicated region. Of course, all realistic Georgian politicians understand that this is very limited sovereignty". This can be contrasted with the Ukrainian case, where the power disparity with Russia is smaller. As the Georgian Diplomat pointed out, "Ukraine is a completely different context because it's a big country, large country. The people are 45 million. You can compare 45 million with a 3 million population". The smallness of Georgia was also the reason why the government had decided not to send military equipment to Ukraine, "there will be no need because Georgia is a small country. It will be finished in a few days".

In the Moldovan case, it is evident that the country cannot match the Russian military capabilities. According to the Moldovan Diplomat, the country's strategy was however to increase the military capacity "to make sure that at least we will not be invaded by the 4000 or 5000 of Russian peacemakers that are currently based in Transnistria".⁶

Regarding economic power disparity, the countries have traditionally been vulnerable to Russia's restrictive measures. Since 2006, Georgia has steadily decreased its energy dependence on Russia, which has been possible because of its proximity to energy-rich Azerbaijan (International Energy Agency, 2024). By contrast, Russia has had leverage on the general economy. The Georgian Diplomat argued that a Russian ban on the import of Georgian wine, minerals, and other products in 2008 "had an extremely negative impact on the Georgian economy [...] Because our dependence on the Russian market was very hard, now it's less but still, it's still high". The Georgian Former PM underlined the relationship between economy and sovereignty, stating that "you cannot simply be committed to statehood if your economy cannot serve this", a reasoning which goes in line with the realist notion that economic development is a prerequisite for the sustainability of other power capabilities. The Georgian Former PM considered this fact to be a major motivation for strengthening the country's ties to the European market. The Georgian diplomat, who represented the government, was more sceptic in that regard. He highlighted that Georgia shared no land border with the EU, a limitation which made diversification more difficult.

In this regard, it should be mentioned that Georgia's economic dependence on Russia for trade and remittances has increased since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Transparency International, 2023). The opportunity to economically profit from the geopolitical situation has probably been a systemic incentive for the Georgian government. This goes in line with the bargaining of a multi-vector foreign policy. On the other hand, the neoclassical realist expectation is that the root cause for this policy is not bargaining or economic interests per se but rather a spill-over from the security considerations. If the Georgian government decided not to impose sanctions on Russia due to fear of increasing tensions with the neighbour, why not take the chance to earn some bucks on that choice? This early in the analysis, these possible motivations are however only speculations.

In comparison to Georgia, Moldova was, for a long time, even more dependent on Russia. In 2021, Moldova's dependence on Russian gas was 100% (Statista, 2022). In addition, the Moldovan state had a \$800 Million debt to the state-owned Russian energy company Gazprom (Reuters, 3 September 2023). After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia did its best to use this leverage to put pressure

⁶ The attentive reader might note that the number of Russian soldiers posted in Transnistria has previously been mentioned as 1500. After the interview, I reached out to the interviewee and asked him about the difference. The answer was that the additional soldiers were Transnistrian soldiers, but "de facto" under Russian command.

on the pro-European government Chişinău. When, in 2022, the price for natural gas increased sevenfold (UNDP, 2023) some would probably have bet that the government would not survive, a Russian-friendly government be installed and bandwagoning with Russia occur. Against such odds, the country did however – with support from European financial institutions – diversify away from its dependence on Russia (Litra, 2023). For trade in general, the same dynamics can be observed. Russia has, since Moldova’s signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, tried to influence Moldovan politics through embargos on wine and other agricultural products from the country that was once ‘the pantry’ of the Soviet Union (The Guardian, 15 August 2014). The measure had however not the effect that the Kremlin had wished, as it incentivised the country to diversify its exports towards the European market. And, as the Moldovan Diplomat pointed out, “Now, they [the wine producers] are exporting all these [wines] on the Western markets. And the price of these wines are five to ten times bigger than the ones that they get from Russian markets”. Unlike in Georgia, and just as with the energy issue, the aggressive Russian policy did rather decrease the Russian influence than strengthen it. It is possible that the geographical position of Moldova, in comparison with Georgia’s, facilitated such a transition. This is therefore worth looking closer at through the factor *permissiveness of the external environment*.

To conclude the military and economic power disparity, the picture is mixed. While the power disparity with Russia is huge, Moldova’s point of departure was worse than Georgia’s in some respects. The Moldovan military strength was almost non-existent, the area, population and economy even smaller than Georgia’s. The energy dependence on Russia was almost total before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, Moldova has addressed some of these weaknesses since 2022, for instance through achieving energy independence from Russia. While it is possible that the geographical position played a role in this regard, it is however evident that power disparity must be considered in relation to other factors to explain the different foreign policy choices of the countries.

Intensity of external threat

Power disparity is one thing. Intensity of external threat another, and it is not unreasonable to expect that nuances in the intensity can have a clear impact on the different foreign policy outcomes. To begin with, the obvious must be mentioned. Georgia shares its border with Russia. Moldova does not. The threat of a traditional military invasion is therefore *direct* in the case of Georgia, while it is *indirect* in the case of Moldova. Ukraine functions as a buffer between Moldova and Russia, and while it is known that Russia made an effort to advance a land corridor to Transnistria at the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian army resisted – and the frontline is still on a considerable distance

from the Transnistrian border (Balkan Insight, 22 April 2022; ISW, 2024b). As long as Ukraine successfully defends its Black Sea coast around Odesa, it is hence reasonable to argue that Moldova's 'menu' of foreign policy choices is slightly longer than Georgia's. The Moldovan state is subject to constant hostile actions from Russia, such as cyber-attacks and coup attempts. But because of the Ukrainian buffer, Russia cannot threaten with military aggression. Strengthening the Moldovan state's cyber, economic and societal resilience is also possible for the EU to help with, while the EU's capacity to support in case of military aggression is much more limited.

The impact of sharing a border with Russia was emphasised by the interviewees in Georgia. Not surprisingly, the Georgian Diplomat (whose professional duty is to promote the Georgian state's interest) made a central point of this. He underlined that it is only 45 kilometres from Tbilisi to the closest Russian base in the breakaway⁷ region of South Ossetia: "Therefore, the security threats are very high, because they cannot only occupy but create a serious threat in terms of operation of the Georgian state in a very short period of time". Consequently, he argued, the Georgian government conducted a "pragmatic", "practical" and "cautious" policy. Georgia was supporting Ukraine but could not be "as straightforward" as Ukraine and "other countries" against Russia. As we can see, the Georgian Diplomat strongly underlines the high intensity of the Russian threat. The difference in relative power between the small country Georgia and the Russian Federation and the geographical proximity are strong factors in this regard. The European Diplomat agreed on this but remembered a certain confusion when the Georgian government the day after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine revealed that they would not align with the Western sanctions:

I hadn't been here for so long, and I was very surprised. My colleagues, who had been here for a longer period, were not. And now I understand why. It's because of the balancing act they maintain with their neighbour. They can't afford to align with it. It would have hurt the country economically more than it would have given them positive points from the outside. And in that regard, they are realists.

The same kind of considerations were also made on other issues, according to the European Diplomat. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a large Russian population had migrated to Tbilisi, and the current rules permitted them to stay as long as they wanted in the country. This had engendered fear among Georgians because "everybody knows how Russia used to speak about their Russians in other countries, that they sometimes need to come to protect them". The European Diplomat added: "But I think the government realises its limitations here. If they were to start restricting only Russians, it would have consequences [...] I don't know, but I don't think they have considered it worth taking the risk".

⁷ The EU entitles Abkhazia and South Ossetia as breakaway regions. The Georgian government entitles them as occupied regions.

Considering these indicators, it appears that the intensity of external threat is high in the Georgian case, and it is a constant consideration in the shaping of the government's foreign policy. There are reasons to believe that this consideration would be present regardless of the incumbent government in Tbilisi, however with potentially different nuances in the outcome. As the European Diplomat mentioned:

To say it simply, without a shift of power in Kreml I don't think we will see any bigger shifts here with the current government. And if we would get a new government, which I don't think we will get, they will have to make similar considerations [...] No one is interested in a new war in this country. So regarding that, one will need to continue to be cautious as long as it looks like it does in Moscow.

On the other hand, military experts have observed a significant relocation of Russian military resources from the occupied region of Abkhazia to Ukraine (RFE/RL, 18 March 2022). Thus, it can be questioned how strong the Russian capacity is in the short term.

By contrast, as expected, the Moldovan interviewees did not see a direct risk of Russian invasion at this point in time. The Moldovan Diplomat argued that while it just after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine had been discussed in the government circles if the acceleration of the European integration process could risk provoking a Russian invasion, they had witnessed that "the Ukrainians were strong in stopping the Russian invasion. And Russians are still relatively far from Moldova. And as long Ukraine will be able to keep at least the current status quo, we know that we can continue our process on EU Accession". Neither were the Russian troops in Transnistria currently considered as a direct threat: "It's clear that this was a very and is still a very theoretical risk, because they cannot do something like this. I mean, they understand very well that any action against Moldova or against Ukraine will result in a very, let's say, speedy military operation of Ukrainians in Transnistria". However, the government was still careful not to increase the tensions towards the breakaway region and give the leadership a pretext for intensifying its requests for Russian protection, or a pretext for Russia to invade. Hence, the government wanted to "avoid any message related to leaving the neutrality that we have embodied in our Constitution". Interestingly, this shows that the Moldovan government does still not feel a full room for manoeuvre because of the situation in Transnistria which can be considered as both an external and internal threat.

Furthermore, the Moldovan Diplomat emphasised the high intensity of hybrid threats and hybrid attacks: "[Russia] tried to use some political parties in Moldova in order to destabilise the country, to create this feeling of insecurity. To riddle all the external investors, to put our citizens in a continuous feeling that something will happen soon". This hybrid warfare has been confirmed by both the Moldovan government and independent experts (Politico, 13 February 2023; Hedenskog, 2022). The Moldovan Director for APE did the same assessment, also arguing that the soft power threat of Russia

was as significant as that of the hard power (see more under *permissiveness of the internal environment*). These threats and attacks were nonetheless of another character than the threat of a large-scale military invasion.

Comparing the intensity of external threat towards Georgia and Moldova, a significant difference can be concluded as Georgia shares its border with Russia while Moldova does not. The impact of this fact was also present in the interviewees' reasoning. While the Georgian Diplomat feared that Russia could invade Georgia "at any moment", the Moldovan Diplomat argued that Moldova could continue to intensify its EU Accession so long as the Ukrainians managed to at least defend the status quo. The observation of a waning Russian presence in the occupied Georgian region of Abkhazia represents a caveat, but the overall material indicates that the intensity of external threat differs at least to some extent. Intensity of external threat appears therefore to be a reason for the different foreign policy outcomes in Georgia and Moldova. Intensity of external threat should however not be considered in a vacuum, as it can still bring variations in foreign policy outcomes. Therefore, it remains important pieces in the puzzle to understand. One of them is what external support the countries can expect when dealing with the external threats.

Permissiveness of the external environment

In the investigation of power disparity, it was established that both Georgia and Moldova are significantly weaker than Russia, to an extent that cannot be compared with the relationship between Russia and Ukraine. Based on that fact, it can be theoretically expected that each country will only explicitly counter Russian influence if they are offered sufficient and credible external support. Due to the needs and intensity of external threat, what support is sufficient might differ between the countries. As we have seen, Moldova is, because of the geographical reality, not yet directly threatened by a military invasion but by Russian efforts to undermine the pro-European government through the weaponisation of energy, economy, and disinformation. In these spheres, it appears that the EU has been rather successful in supporting the Moldovan resistance. In 2022, the country received European support to achieve gas independence (Litra, 2023). The Moldovan export has been diversified towards the European market since DCFTA entered into force in 2016 (COM, 2024b). Regarding disinformation, the EU launched in 2023 a CSDP mission in Chişinău specialising in cybersecurity (EEAS, 2023).

The Moldovan interviewees argued indeed that the EU's support had been invaluable for the country in tackling these challenges so far. In particular, the Moldovan Diplomat often exemplified an interplay between external push factors (threats and actions by Russia) and pull factors (European

support to deal with these threats and actions): “When Russia tries to put you in a very difficult position, you have someone in the European Union or in in the Western countries that will support you to invest in improving your capacities”. All these events had “determined our political leadership to definitely push on European integration vector”.

By contrast, the Georgian Diplomat argued that it had been difficult for Georgia to diversify its economic dependence away from Russia because of the lack of a common border with the EU: “For Moldova, it’s very easy because they can deliver their products to the EU market by rail, by road and by sea as well. For us it’s only the sea, Black Sea, which is Black Sea ports that are not kind of flexible for that. Their connectivity is not well developed”. In addition, because of the intensity of external threat, it can be expected that Georgia would need some kind of security guarantee to balance against Russia. This is precisely the kind of support that the West has been unable to offer countries without NATO membership. Addressing the issue, the Georgian Diplomat underlined that NATO membership had been the priority for Georgia for 30 years and that the country applied for EU membership in 2002. According to him, the Georgian foreign policy had been impacted by previous failures by the West to meet the Georgian needs, in particular NATO’s decision not to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan in 2008 (which will be elaborated under the umbrella of internal factors). Moreover, he argued that the “current dynamic” with, for instance, Trump in the US and Hungary in the EU had created “a serious problem in terms of credibility”. The current development in the war made clear that the Western support to Ukraine was not enough to obstruct Russian advancements. Therefore, he added:

It’s quite easy to say ‘why are you not supporting Ukraine?’, ‘why are you not sending arms and military everything?’, but it’s not as easy. When you are a NATO member, it’s very easy to do this. Because you have a NATO umbrella [...] everyone realises that if escalation breaks out, and if Russia starts aggression against Georgia, nobody will fight instead of us.

On the other hand, the Georgian Diplomat also saw positive signs regarding the permissiveness of the external environment. Germany was, during the Merkel era, a brake pad for the EU’s willingness to grant Georgia candidate status and blocked together with France NATO from offering the Membership Action Plan since the German Chancellor was cautious with every action that could increase the tensions with Russia and jeopardise the “economic ties, the oil, everything”. Today, Germany had shifted its position radically. While this was not enough for Georgia to reconsider its cautious foreign policy, it was a positive development.

The European Diplomat understood the logic of Georgia’s cautious foreign policy towards Russia. Notwithstanding the intensity of external threat, the country had also experienced Russia’s invasion in 2008: “Last time, no one came to help [...] I’m not 100% sure if it would have been very much

different today [...] I think that everyone more or less agrees that he [the pro-European president Saakashvili] expected too much from the outside that did not come". Hence, they are trying to appease Russia to not give them a reason to invade, "I think they are very much conscious about where the limit goes". It could also be a partial explanation (though perhaps not the main reason) behind the introduction of the agent bill: "we are suppressing our civil society because we know that's what they [Russia] like".

Concluding the findings at the external level, it can be stated that the independent variable correlates with the dependent variable. Consequently, this study cannot falsify the neoclassical realist theoretical expectation that the external factors constitute the major force for foreign policymaking. It remains however for the analysis of the internal level to assess why a certain choice was taken. When considering the Georgian and the European Diplomats' reasoning, the current dynamics in Ukraine, and Georgia's experiences from 2008 (which will be further elaborated on in the section on *strategic culture*) the cautious foreign policy towards Russia has its logic. The analysis of the international level has limited Georgia's menu of foreign policy choices, but it has not narrowed the menu down to one single option. The indicators cannot explain why the government has decided to impose the Russian-inspired agent law that, as this is written, is arousing demonstrations with over one hundred thousand participants in Tbilisi (BBC, 11 May 2024). Or why the government has accused Ukraine of pushing them to open a second front in the war (Agenda, 19 July 2023). While appeasing Russia can be a factor behind these actions, it is still possible to imagine a policy where Georgia, at least as much as possible, follows its constitutional commitment and the public desire for Western integration. It is, therefore, still a lot to sort out in the subchapter of internal factors. The same is true for the Moldovan case, where the interviewees' reasoning often touches on an interplay between the external factors and constraints at the domestic level. Moldova's menu can be considered as longer than Georgia's, but the external factors cannot explain why the government has selected the combination of shelter-seeking and neutrality.

5.2. Internal Factors

Following the analysis of the international level, our focus will now turn to the domestic level. The factors here should according to the neoclassical realist expectation function as intervening variables which can modify the foreign policy response to the systemic incentives and explain the choices selected from the menu.

Leader perceptions

Leader perceptions as an intervening variable can impact the foreign policy outcome in three different ways: through bleary signals from the international system, a cognitive bias in the decision maker(s) or through a conscious choice to act contrary to the rational incentive. This opens for a rather complex analysis, and it is probably impossible to reach all the way without a distance to the historical event and access to the decision makers' inner thoughts through for instance letters or memoirs. Despite these limitations, the different perspectives given by the respondents can shed valuable light on this factor.

Moldova's political spectrum is divided between openly pro-European and openly pro-Russian forces (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024). Therefore, the choice is ultimately a question of preference. For the incumbent pro-European government, the push and pull factors outlined above posed clear signals about systemic incentives. Russia was not a credible counterpart, neither security-wise nor economically. This became clear already in the autumn of 2021 when Russia plunged the country into an energy crisis (Euronews, 22 October 2021). As the Moldovan Diplomat explained it:

A couple of months before the invasion, we already had some signals and indicators that we can no longer think about keeping this position between the European Union and the Russian Federation. We have to make a choice, and the choice was made already at that time, we need to move towards the European Union.

Before these events, it was already the political leadership's perception that the European Union was the future for the country. But to leave the country's in many aspects multi-vector foreign policy was a big step. It had survived various presidents and governments and did also function as a compromise for the polarised preferences in the electorate (Morar & Dembińska, 2021, p. 294). It was therefore not until the launching of the updated security strategy in 2023 that Russia for the first time officially became declared as an existential threat (Financial Times, 11 October 2023; Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2023, p. 11). It is likely that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine enhanced the political leadership's perception of that necessity and that it also engendered a wider legitimacy among the population for such a move. This will be further elaborated under *permissiveness of the internal environment*.

According to the Moldovan Director for APE, the political leadership was however caught off guard when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022: "Practically all our political leaders and authorities were assured that it will not happen [...] But it [the political leadership] tried to reduce the fears, the fears regarding security". In that, they were successful according to the interviewee. As we will see, this contrasted sharply with the Georgian case, where the opposition has accused the government of

frightening the population for their own benefit (Georgian Former PM, Interview with the Author). In Moldova, the picture was the opposite. The government tried to calm down the population, while critical voices on the street accused the government of risking making Moldova a new Ukraine by provoking Russia (Moldovan Director for APE, Interview with the Author). As we will see in the elaboration of *intensity of threat to elite survival*, the motivation for the Georgian government to do this is not clear. However, the systemic incentives mean that the government can do so with some logic, while in the Moldovan case it would be unnecessary given that the country has considerable room for manoeuvre so long as the Ukrainian army prolongs the status quo.

As mentioned under *intensity of external threat*, the Moldovan government did not want to give either Russia or the leadership in the separatist region of Transnistria a sense that Chişinău was considering abandoning the neutrality status of Moldova. The reason was an interplay of external and internal reasons, which is symbolically clear in Transnistria which is Moldovan territory *de jure* but *de facto* autonomous with the presence of Russian peacekeeping troops. The government did not want to increase the tensions with the Russian and Gagauzian minorities, and not give Russia a pretext to invade (Moldovan Diplomat, Interview with the Author). Nevertheless, the Moldovan National Adviser mentioned that the neutrality status has been increasingly discussed in the expert community since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. According to him, the argument of 'Not giving Russia a pretext for invasion' was not valid since Russia had, through its actions, made clear that it did not respect other states' sovereignty. According to him, the domestic sensitivity was however a reason why a reconsideration would take time, an argument that was also put forward by the Moldovan Director for APE. It appears consequently that the government's decision not to reconsider the neutrality status may have been based on perceptions about the permissiveness of the internal environment.

The Georgian Diplomat perceived NATO's decision not to give Georgia a Membership Action Plan at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 as a missed window of opportunity to ensure the country's security and hence its commitment to a straightforward Western integration. Not to say that he argued that Georgia had left its European aspiration, but as seen above, he meant that the country could not be so straightforward in this geopolitical situation due to its smallness and the lack of a security umbrella. While the Georgian Diplomat's argument continuously returned to that missed opportunity, the interview with the Georgian former PM showed that the current situation can be interpreted in another light, also by a person who was recently central in the decision-making apparatus of Georgia. He argued that this moment in time was a window of opportunity to join the EU family and that it was probably just going to be open for "one, two years". He continued: "Unfortunately, it looks like the current government is putting all bets to bet Russia will win this war, and this is a strategic mistake

they made”. The second strategic mistake, according to the Georgian former PM, was to neglect that the decisive moment for Georgia’s security would be after the end of the war. “The big deal” was then going to take place between the democratic West and the authoritarian Russia, and Georgia had “to be on the first side [...] without this; there is not any security guarantees for Georgia, we are staying face to face alone with Russia”. What would Georgia’s standing be when that moment came? The answer to that question would shape the country’s future. On the question if a more straightforward pro-European path of the country would not risk provoking Russia to be more aggressive, he stated that Russia had never been interested in Georgia’s strong statehood, regardless of the direction of policy – a perception similar to the Moldovan Advisor and the Moldovan Director for APE. By contrast, the EU and the US were interested in Georgia’s strong statehood. Consequently, “even when keeping in mind the possible provocations on Russia, we have to continue moving the country towards Europe because there are no other security guarantees”. As we can see, the former PM had another perception of the systemic incentives than the Georgian Diplomat. The intensity of external threat was high but would be there regardless of Tbilisi’s foreign policy. In addition, he trusted the Western partners’ commitment to strengthen the Georgian state and was much more optimistic regarding the permissiveness of the external environment than when he was Prime Minister three years ago. Some of the most influential member states in the European Union had since then shifted their stance on Georgian membership, just as what the Georgian Diplomat had mentioned with Germany. From the Former PM’s perspective, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine had reminded EU countries about the necessity of Black Sea security, for which Georgia could play a central role. And the way to further enhance the permissiveness of the external environment, as well as decrease Moscow’s interference in the country, was through “strengthening democracy and democratic institutions”. The Former PM’s alternative account shows two things: the systemic incentives are not easy to read in the complex geopolitical landscape. When it goes well for Ukraine in the war, it appears as a miscalculation by the Georgian government to bet that Russia would win. But when it goes bad for Ukraine and Western support is waning, the Former PM’s understanding seems somewhat optimistic. It is not easy to navigate in this turbulence. However, the difference might not only be based on the system’s bleary signals, but also on the interviewees’ preferences.

The contrasting picture between the Georgian Diplomat and the Georgian former PM shows that Georgia’s situation can be interpreted in different ways. To explain exactly which leader perceptions that shape the foreign policy outcomes in Georgia is however impossible. There is namely an elephant in the room: Bidzina Ivanishvili, the richest man in Georgia who is the founder and honorary chairman of Georgian Dream and made his private wealth in Russia (Forbes, 2024; Atasuntsev, 2024). As the European Diplomat pointed out, “It’s very difficult to make any sensible analysis of his actual influence in this country. It depends on who you ask. If you ask the government, they’ll say he has

none at all. If you ask the opposition, they'll say he controls everything down to the smallest detail". He has previously been described as a "man who plays 'according to the rules set by the Russian government'" (Genté, 2022). Considering this, it is not possible to assess who, when, and why that person(s) made the certain foreign policy choice in Georgia. With the European Diplomat's words, "No matter how much insight we wish we had, it's extremely difficult to answer that question. How much influence does he really have? I wonder if even those inside the system know". Nevertheless, it can, in the Georgian case, be concluded that leader perceptions play a role in the assessment of opportunities and risks for the country in the international system and, hence, in the shaping of foreign policy. In Moldova, it appears that the government already had strong perceptions before Russia's full-scale invasion but that they became enhanced by it. However, the government struggles with wide parts of the electorate, which has another perception of the situation – an important factor which will be elaborated under *permissiveness of the internal environment*.

Strategic culture

In the case of Georgia, Russia's invasion in 2008 had a big impact on the strategic culture of the country. Unlike Moldova, which updated its national security strategy in 2023, Georgia's has not been updated since 2011, probably due to a reluctance to touch on the issue. Such an update would suddenly reveal Georgia's contractionary foreign policy and the different voices that the country speaks with in bilateral, regional, and global contexts (European Diplomat, Interview with the Author). However, the incumbent government's strategic culture can still be revealed in some respects. Georgian Dream came to power in the wake of Russia's invasion of the country in 2008. By contrast to Saakashvili, who conducted a rather hawkish policy towards Russia, Georgian Dream tried to decrease the tensions with the country's northern neighbour (Lebandize & Kakachia, 2023, p. 680).

The Georgian Diplomat returned to the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008, where the decision was taken to not offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan: "Instead of that, we got the message that Georgia will become a part of the EU. One day. One day. But it led to the Russian large-scale aggression and occupation of the territories. We lost our territories, a lot of refugees, a lot of sacrifices". It can, therefore, be argued that this limbo, where Georgia was offered enough to provoke Russia but to less to be guaranteed security, was a fatal outcome. It made not the situation any better that when the invasion in 2008 then occurred, Georgia did not receive any military support from the West (Georgian Diplomat, Interview with the Author). It appears that these events – and Georgian Dream's perceptions about the international landscape – did radically change the strategic culture of Georgia. A culture which has then been important for the government's interpretation of the current

geopolitical situation. The country had in 2008 witnessed how Germany and France were more afraid to increase the tensions with Russia than eager to offer Georgia security guarantees (New York Times, 3 April 2008). In one way, it is not so strange that the country then started to pursue a cautious foreign policy. When not the EU's most powerful states, Germany and France, dared to be straightforward against Russia, why should Georgia? Both the Georgian and the European Diplomat underlined that the previous failures of the West to protect Georgia and deter Russia had impacted the strategic culture of the country. And since 2008, the European diplomat noted, "One [the Georgian leadership] has evidently observed that the Kremlin hasn't changed its strategy. They haven't changed policies; it's just gotten worse". So, "ultimately, it's [the foreign policy choice] about their country's security. And they don't want war because they know exactly what war implies".

In Moldova, the strategic culture was for a long time characterized by the neutrality status. The aim of the neutrality was to keep a position between the EU and Russia and, notably, to not increase the tensions with Transnistria (Moldovan Diplomat, Interview with the Author). The interpretation of the neutrality was, however, rather odd: that the country should not even invest in its military forces (Socor, 2022). Russia's full-scale invasion engendered a new interpretation of neutrality as it became apparent that Moldova had to strengthen its capacities (Całus, 2023c). In that regard, the government worked to modernise its strategic culture, with the updated national security strategy as a clear example. Nevertheless, just like much else that we have touched upon so far, this process is constrained by the permissiveness of the internal environment. As the Moldovan National Advisor put it:

There is somehow a reluctance of a part of society to this process because they still see the place of Moldova between the European Union and Russian influence. And a part of society still sees the neutrality status as a guarantee for non-participation in any wars or military actions. So, to have a deepening discussion regarding neutrality, we have to work better for social cohesion, to enhance dialogue with different parts of society, including ethnic minorities like Russians or Gagauzian minorities in Moldova or generally Russian speaking part of our society.

Concluding this section, it appears that strategic culture works as a form of mediator for other factors. It can largely represent inherited experiences from historical systemic incentives, such as Moldova's loss of Transnistria in 1992 and Georgia's trauma of the Russian invasion and loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, in the Georgian case interwoven with the lack of Western military support. It can also function as a mediator of the permissiveness of the internal environment since public opinion and internal tensions can constrain the government in its adjustments to the strategic culture. In this regard, it is likely that the Georgian government is forced by the public opinion to, at least on a declarative level, keep the emphasis on Western partnership. With Moldova, it appears as the opposite,

that the Moldovan government is constrained from enforcing even bigger changes in the strategic culture. These mechanisms are not strange since strategic culture tends to have a deep meaning for a country's identity. Interestingly, external and internal constraints might have impacted the Georgian government's reluctance to update its security strategy.

Intensity of threat to elite survival

While the factors investigated so far have all shown partial explanatory power, it is evident that the survival of the ruling elite in the country may also have an impact. A government strives to maintain its power position, and that can be an even more crucial consideration in polarised countries.

The Georgian Former PM argued that he resigned as Prime Minister and left Georgian Dream because it became clear to him that the democracy was at risk and that the party "was owned by some oligarchs in the country" which was "a huge gift to Russia". The Russian interference in Georgian politics was, hence, a bigger threat at this point in time than the risk of an actual Russian invasion. It was clear that the oligarchs within the Georgian Dream were considering Russian interference as less damaging than EU reforms, which would have threatened their own power position and their corrupt ways of doing business. The Georgian Former PM's reasoning makes sense. Among the nine steps with which the European Commission conditioned Georgia's candidate status, one was "to improve the current action plan to implement a multi-sectorial, systemic approach to deoligarchisation" (EEAS, 2023b). If his assessment of the oligarchic influence over Georgian Dream is correct, the conditions set out by the EU pose a threat to the survival of this elite's great influence over Georgian politics and economy. According to the Georgian Former PM, the aim of these oligarchs is "not to strengthen democracy in the country, but somehow maintain power" and "continue making corrupt and corrupted money". Consequently, the government did not use the current geopolitical situation as a window of opportunity to accelerate its efforts to join the European Union. By contrast, it used the war to implement a "fake narrative that someone from the West, Europe, and the US was putting pressure on the current government to open a second line for war" as a strategy to "put pressure on people" and create "the picture that there is a choice between Europe and peace".

The Former PM's arguments should be interpreted in its context. He is challenging his old party in the upcoming election and in a political arena which, according to the European Diplomat, is characterised by pie-throwing. Nevertheless, there is strong evidence for the core of his claims in other sources (Genté, 2022). After the interviews were conducted, the government reintroduced the agent bill to parliament, which targets civil society. Judging by the tone from the EU, this risks overturning the whole accession process, and that cannot come as a surprise for the Georgian government (Reuters, 17

April 2024). At the time of the interview with the European Diplomat, this had yet not been reintroduced, but the diplomat pointed out that the government had targeted funding agencies, such as USAID and EU aid agencies, framing them as “foreign powers attempting to influence the domestic political situation here”. Furthermore, the European Diplomat saw also the government’s motivation to cling to power as important for their choice not to stop the flight traffic between Georgia and Russia, as well as not imposing sanctions:

They try to balance [between the EU and Russia] to benefit themselves as much as possible to stay in power here, I would say. As long as the economy is doing well, people are better off, that one can sort of show that and that it’s stable and that there are no wars, then one has, so to speak, fulfilled their demands towards the voters.

Considering the domestic policy of Georgian Dream and the role of Ivanishvili (whatever it is), it is impossible to ignore the fact that the EU’s demands for reforms can be perceived as a significant threat to their power position.

For the Moldovan government, Russian interference is a threat to the pro-European elite’s survival. Russia has clearly shown its intentions by planning coups to set aside the government in Chişinău (Financial Times, 11 October 2023). It is, therefore, not strange that the government does what it can to decrease Russian influence, such as shutting down Russian-funded parties and media channels (Reuters, 30 October 2023). On the other hand, it is evident that pro-Russian elites are trying to undermine the government’s power and retain the partnership with Russia (CNN, 18 March 2023). Nevertheless, according to the Moldovan Diplomat, even many actors within that camp, for instance, business leaders in Transnistria, understand the opportunities offered by the European market.

Permissiveness of the internal environment

As long as Georgia has free elections, it would be impossible for any government to publicly change its preference from a policy for European integration to a pro-Russian direction. Why? Because the population’s support for European integration, 86% in 2023, is at a unique level among post-Soviet countries (IPI, 2023). On a declarative level, Georgian Dream is a pro-European party, just as all other governments since independence. When walking around in Tbilisi, one sees EU and Ukrainian flags, sometimes even NATO and US, everywhere, on walls and on balconies. However, the European Diplomat underlined that the general knowledge about the EU is low. The government did nothing to address that lack of knowledge, and the European Diplomat suggested that it might be suitable for them since then Georgian Dream could control the narrative about the EU accession. In the upcoming

election, the party could point to the fact that the country has received candidate status unpredictably early, while large parts of the electorate did not know why the country had fallen behind Ukraine and Moldova. The Georgian Former PM pointed out that Georgian Dream had significant power over the media in the country. Also, the economy was “weary and people cannot fulfil their basic needs and when there is no fuel basically, it’s very easy to influence through propaganda”. Furthermore, Georgian Dream had ruled since 2012 and the party had probably a stronger influence over the institutions in the country than the Moldovan government, which had ruled since 2021. With this said, it is not a secret that it has been large protests against the government in recent years. Most famously against the so-called agent law, but there has also been wide criticism against the government that it has not supported Ukraine more practically in the war (European Diplomat, Interview with the Author). However, according to the European Diplomat, there is no vital and united opposition which can fully profit from the discontent against the government. The opposition parties tended to fight as much between themselves as against the government. In such a context, “the government wins in being perceived as the only stable alternative. As a guarantee against war. Guarantee for economic growth”. Georgian Dream has a majority in the parliament, so at the end of the day, they can conduct their foreign policy as they want it. But if it was the case that the government would like to normalise the country’s relationship with Russia, it is possible that public opinion would play a constraining role and dampen such an effort, which can currently be observed with the agent-law, though with an uncertain outcome.

In the Moldovan case, the analysis of other factors has already touched on the permissiveness of the internal environment to a large extent. Everything indicates that it is a key consideration for the Moldovan foreign policy. The systemic incentives, along with the government’s pro-European aspiration, have led to a strongly and increasingly pro-European foreign policy. The limit for this change, for instance the fact that the government has not considered abandoning the neutrality status, is, however, posed by the constraints of the internal environment in the country. In institutional terms, the President and government are admittedly from the same party, PAS, which currently has the parliamentary majority even to adopt constitutional changes. Presidential and parliamentary elections will however take place within a year and the outcome is anything but certain (Hedenskog, 2022). In addition, the Moldovan Director for APE pointed out that the large Moldovan diaspora abroad played an important part in PAS’ victory in the last presidential and parliamentary elections. On the ground in Moldova, the opinion is therefore even more divided than what the election result showed. While the strongly pro-Russian population is mostly concentrated to Transnistria, Gagauzia and the northern parts of the country, a considerable share of the population supported the neutrality status. Among ordinary people, it was not an uncommon reasoning that Ukraine had provoked Russia,

and these same people feared that the government's policy would turn Moldova into a second Ukraine (Moldovan Director for APE, Interview with the Author).

Despite this polarisation, the systemic incentives allowed for the pro-European government to conduct a straightforward pro-European foreign policy including some radical changes. So far, it appeared however that the (un)permissiveness of the internal environment was a worrying factor for the government to consider, and as such it set a limit for the room for manoeuvre regarding for instance an open discussion about reconsidering the neutrality status. It was clear that the government did not wish to increase social divisions further (Moldovan Diplomat, Interview with the Author). Rather, according to the Moldovan Director for APE, it preferred to change the foreign policy step by step with the aim to successively increase the permissiveness even among pro-Russian minorities. According to the interviewee, the situation was indeed very challenging. Gagauzia had profited more from EU financial support than any other region, but such impact could hardly reach through the influence of Russian soft power through Russian-speaking media channels and the Russian Orthodox Church (Moldovan Diplomat; Moldovan Director for APE, Interviews with the Author).

The constraining impact on the Moldovan foreign policy leads back to the paradox that was also a point of departure for this thesis. Georgia is a country with a population that is more pro-European than the government's foreign policy. In Moldova, the pro-European government party has admittedly a large majority in the parliament, but in a longer perspective, pro-European, pro-Russian and mixed governments have succeeded each other since the independence. By contrast to Georgia, parties can be openly pro-Russian and still attract a large share of voters (PolitPro, 2024).

6. Conclusions

The final chapter of this thesis includes two subchapters. First, I present the findings from the analysis. Second, it follows a discussion of the overall conclusions of the investigation.

6.1. Findings

In elaborating each factor, it has become evident that there is a significant difference between Georgia and Moldova. The countries were almost equal in terms of military and economic *power disparity* with Russia, but this factor had fundamentally different implications when the intensity of external threat and the permissiveness of the external environment were added to the equation. Because of the different intensity of external threat, the countries needed different support from the European Union. For Moldova, there was not a direct threat of a potential Russian invasion. The threats were of an economic nature (energy, trade), as well as disinformation. The EU was able to support Moldova in managing these threats which is possible since Moldova shares a border with Romania, which is an EU Member State. Georgia shared the economic threat but experienced bigger difficulties in diversifying its trade towards the EU because of the lack of a common border. In addition, the Georgian government perceived a direct threat to Russian invasion because of its geographical location. The EU and the West had, therefore, more limited capacity to support Georgia within a short time span. Economically, because of the geographical position and worse infrastructure. Militarily, because the EU had limited military capacities and NATO offered no guarantees to non-members.

Already on the external level, there are consequently significant reasons for the countries' different foreign policy: in a forward-looking analysis starting at the independent variable, it would also be broadly expected that Georgia would take a more cautious position towards Russia than Moldova. The external factors can, however, not explain the intensity and particular shape of these policies. From the factor of *leader perceptions*, we learnt that the Georgian Former PM did another reading of the international landscape: where Georgia, through its foreign policy and democratic backsliding, missed the current window of opportunity for EU membership and risked getting on the wrong side the day when 'the big deal' was negotiated between the West and Russia. The signals from the international system are inevitably blurry in this regard: there are arguments for both the government's and the former PM's perception. Only time can tell whose reading of the internal landscape that is correct. Furthermore, it can be questioned what the Georgian government's motivation really is: to avoid a Russian invasion of the country to all costs? To maintain power and prevent a deoligarchisation of the country? While the analysis of the systemic incentives gave some evidence for the first explanation,

the elaboration of the *intensity of threat to elite survival* showed likelihood of the second. There are also indications that the government is exaggerating the current Russian threat, as the Russian capacity is, in practice, limited due to the prioritisation of the war in Ukraine. It is possible that the current policy is the result of a combination of the two: namely that the external factors directed the major orientation (pragmatic/multi-vector foreign policy) while the intensity of threat to elite survival shaped the particular form of this orientation, which could have impacted both the perception of the external factors and the perhaps exaggerated elements of the orientation (such as the agent law). On the other hand, the *permissiveness of the internal environment* allowed for a strong government (through a majority in the parliament), while the public opinion (pro-European) obstructed further rapprochement towards Russia that cannot be ruled out as a potential motivation for the government. Finally, the *strategic culture* consisting of the experiences from the Russian invasion of 2008 explained the government's perception of the current international situation and its unwillingness to trust the Western ability to support militarily.

While the external level gave Moldova strong incentives to take advantage of the current situation in terms of EU integration, these incentives also needed to be interpreted in that way by an incumbent government. The incumbent government was pro-European, a fact that must have shaped such a reading of the external level, seeing the EU as a credible partner and as the future. Increasing Russian interference in the country would also be a direct threat to the pro-European elite's survival. The strategic culture of the country had furthermore been impacted by the events of recent years, but some inherited aspects of it – such as the neutrality status – remained because of a *(un)permissiveness of the internal environment* to accept radical change. This observation highlighted a relationship between the *permissiveness of the internal environment* and *strategic culture*, which appears to have been overseen in previous neoclassical realist studies. The government was also constrained by the polarised opinion between pro-European and pro-Russian populations in the country, not least because of the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections.

In conclusion, the interplay between the three external factors, which together constitute systemic incentives as an independent variable – and the four internal factors as intervening variables – is a complex story. As we have seen, the intervening variables can often contain inherited aspects from old or previous systemic incentives, such as Moldova's experience of the loss of Transnistria in 1992 and Georgia's of the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. Through the process from the independent variable to foreign policy outcomes, the intervening variables can also shape the response in various directions. For instance, the lack of *permissiveness of the internal environment* can at the same time increase the intensity of the government's choice (Georgia's introduction of a Russian-style agent law to obstruct the opposition – Moldova's decision to ban Russian propaganda channels) and

decrease it through concessions (Georgia's application for EU membership – Moldova's hesitation from reconsidering the neutrality status).

6.2. Discussion

The broader conclusions drawn from this study are the following. First, the neoclassical realist expectation of the process between systemic incentives and internal factors passed the test. Between the two cases, there were significant differences at the external level, which provided the policymakers with strong incentives. However, it was clear that these incentives could be interpreted fundamentally differently and that they were weighed and compromised towards other factors in the policymaking process. Second, the investigated factors played a role in the different outcomes of foreign policy. Not least, the factors borrowed from Cantir & Kennedy (2015) proved their usefulness. While power disparity corresponded to the realist notion of relative power, it shed, in combination with the intensity of external threat and permissiveness of the external environment, light on the mechanism of push and pull factors that may often be how the systemic incentives work in practice in the international system. The intensity of threat to elite survival brought attention to the leadership's vested interests, which may often have been overseen in the realist tradition. While adherents of the 'human nature' realism have stressed the "irrevocable kernel of egoism and self-interest in human affairs" (Hyde-Price, 2021, p. 153), the focus is seldom on the 'integrity' of states. By this, I mean that a state does not always have the integrity to make the decisions which are best for its security and prosperity. Decisions that appear as irrational do not need to be solely based on leader perceptions, such as a wrong reading of the international landscape, cognitive abilities, or a tendency to act irrationally. It can be based on pure business interests or a desire to stay in power. This factor can, therefore, be a valuable addition in neoclassical realism. Furthermore, the permissiveness of the internal environment represents an invaluable tool for looking at the government's room for manoeuvre at home. While power disparity and permissiveness of the internal environment should be applicable to all states, the other three factors from Cantir & Kennedy (2015) are probably particularly useful for application to small states in geopolitical borderlands. External push and pull factors and the elite's interests can have a greater effect on this category of states since they have smaller capabilities, and the neighbours will do what they can to influence the elite's decisions. In addition to Cantir & Kennedy's factors, the typical neoclassical realist factors, leader perceptions and strategic culture were also shown to be useful. Leader perceptions are the funnel through which all decisions need to be made and the factor in which different readings of the menu of possible choices can occur. Elite interviews represented an invaluable method to investigate these perceptions, especially when there is no availability of letters or memoirs. Strategic culture appears as a mediating factor, but as such, it can canalise and conserve

certain forces. Therefore, it should continue to be analysed separately, though with explicit overlaps with other factors.

What cannot be identified, however, is exactly how the factors relate to each other and which of them are *most* important. The external factors have outlined a menu of possible choices, but it is not certain that those best explain the choice. They can ascribe a greater or lower risk to different choices, but this study cannot assess if such a consideration or an internal factor, such as the threat to elite survival, was decisive. I want to encourage further research to follow up on these uncertainties, and why not several years in the future when the researcher and decision-makers can look back at the events with some distance? Assessing the tendencies in this investigation, it can, however, be mentioned that there may often be a grain of truth in different perceptions of explanations and that what was first perceived as contractionary pictures can be combined on a deeper level of analysis: for instance, that the Georgian government is driven *both* by security considerations and self-beneficial interests. There are some indications that the government has manipulated the security threat for its own interests, and it must be said that it is possible that the intensity of the threat to elite survival can show an even stronger impact in a year when the outcome of the current tug of war in Georgia between the government and the protest movement likely will be settled. Everything is now coming to a head in Georgia; a lot is up in the air. The government can tighten its grip on the country, or it can lose control. A potential change of power would make it possible to assess if a new government in Tbilisi would also conduct a cautious foreign policy towards Russia.

Several measures can nevertheless be taken to make a safer conclusion of the weight of the different factors possible. First, such a study would demand a broader sample of material: Probably a few dozen interviews combined with surveys directed to a larger number of decision-makers. It would also be a good idea to get access to a large number of policy documents that can follow the process. Second, a comprehensive process tracing study could be conducted where the foreign policy formation is investigated chronologically rather than synchronically. Through the sequencing of events, it can be possible to identify which factor impacted another factor at a particular moment. It is also possible that process tracing studies can isolate the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Third, it would be interesting to look even deeper at goal conflicts. Have the decision-makers experienced a very difficult choice at any crucial moment – between two different factors with contractionary incentives? Which incentive was chosen, external or internal? And why? These, as only three examples of improvements, could probably refine the understanding of Georgia's and Moldova's foreign policy significantly. I am, however, confident that this investigation has put the finger on some of the most important features. I am therefore convinced that comparative case studies of foreign policy, using the framework of neoclassical realism, can increase the knowledge about both the theory

itself and the empirical world that is investigated. Despite their small size, Moldova and Georgia have become key states in the geopolitical rivalry between the EU and Russia, and it is possible that the findings can be generalised to small states that navigate between, for instance, the US and China. Understanding the considerations and dynamics of these states will be crucial, not least for policymakers within the European institutions and EU Member States.

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Appendix

Figure C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Opening remark

Q1: What is your role at XXX?

Q2: Can you please describe the political discussion in [Moldova/Georgia] before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the days after, and in broad lines how the situation has developed since then?

Q3: What (potential) external threats does [Moldova/Georgia] experience?

Q4: How well prepared is the [Moldovan/Georgian] state to handle such external threats?

Q5: Does the [Moldovan/Georgian] state perceive the European Union as supportive?

Q6: How would you describe the elite in [Moldova/Georgia]? What threats does the elite experience against their position?