The Three Seas Initiative and Romania's Grand Behaviour in the Black Sea Area: Change and Continuity

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Abstract

Drawing on classical realism, the article investigates whether the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), just like the other subregional projects that Romania took part in since joining NATO in 2004, has been part of Romania's external balancing towards Russia. In contrast to the 1990s, when the Black Sea area had not been mentioned in Romania's strategic documents, Bucharest came up with a grand principle (the internationalisation of the Black Sea area) and a grand behaviour (external balancing) once it joined NATO. Considering that the Black Sea area has played a central role in all major strategic documents issued by Romania since 2005, one could draw the conclusion that, at least formally, Romania has devised a grand strategy for the region. The article examines whether 3SI, with its apparent emphasis on desecuritisation, marks a turn in Romania's grand behaviour in the region, as Bucharest's previous subregional initiatives have been guided by securitised multilateralism. By bringing into analysis the main differences among 3SI and Romania's prior strategic initiatives in the area, i.e. the Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership, Black Sea Synergy, Black Sea Flotilla and Bucharest 9, the article pays heed to the question of change and continuity in Romania's grand behaviour in the Black Sea area. The article concludes that 3SI is in line with securitised multilateralism, which is the common denominator of all Romania's subregional projects in the region.

Introduction

As a Polish-Croatian initiative that was officially set up at the 2016 Dubrovnik summit, the main objective of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) was to address the needs of twelve Central European nations with an emphasis on regional integration, energy, transportation and digital integration (Carafano 2023). As of 2023, Greece became the thirteenth member of 3SI. Unlike the interwar Polish Intermarium that had a clear-cut geopolitical and military profile, 3SI also takes into consideration low politics concerns, such as infrastructure development and economic cooperation. The main research question that this article poses is whether 3SI, a regional initiative that Romania has been part of since 2016, can be understood as a component of Romania's grand behaviour in the Black Sea area. This research question could raise eyebrows but there are two reasons behind it. First, the Black Sea region has been a fundamental security focal point of Romania since it joined NATO in 2004. Second, Romania came up with different regional projects tied to the Black Sea area between 2006 and 2016 in an attempt to improve the regional cooperation in this area. Can 3SI, as another regional initiative, be linked with the previous (sub)regional initiatives of Romania in the Black Sea area? Directly related to the first research question, the second one seeks to understand whether 3SI, which *at face value* looks like a rather desecuritised regional initiative, sharply contrasts with the regional initiative that Romania tried to set up in the Black Sea area between 2006 and 2016. The common denominator of Romania's regional projects was related to hard security concerns.

The article seeks to find support for the statement that, in contrast to the 1990s when Romania's behaviour in the Black Sea area was hardly discernible, once the country joined NATO in 2004 it started to display 'external balancing' (Wohlforth 2004: 215) towards the Russian Federation as a long-term grand behaviour. Along with its NATO membership, the 2006 Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership (BSF), the 2007 Black Sea Synergy (BSS), the 2016 Black Sea Flotilla (BSFt) and the Bucharest 9 (B9) have been subregional initiatives that Romania undertook in order to externally balance the Russian Federation in the Black Sea area. The common denominator of these initiatives has been what I have termed *securitised multilateralism*. This type of multilateralism did little to increase regional cooperation and identity in/of the Black Sea, a security environment within which the interest of great powers – the US, the EU, the Russian Federation – have been traditionally at odds since the early 2000s. Once Romania joined 3SI

in 2016 it seemed like Bucharest's security philosophy changed from securitised exclusive multilateralism to a more desecuritised one, an approach that, at face value, could be more effective for solving the security fault lines in the Black Sea area. Of interest for this article is whether 3SI stands for another instantiation of Romania's grand behaviour in the Black Sea area – that is, external balancing towards the Russian Federation. Or, on the contrary, does 3SI, as a desecuritised regional project, have nothing to do with external balancing.

The article is organised as follows. The first chapter introduces a theoretical and methodological context in which this article is embedded. It tries to make sense of the concept of grand behaviour, which may be hardly discernible when applied to secondary powers like Romania. It also discusses the concept of securitised multilateralism and classical realism as the main paradigm of this text. The second section looks at Romania's formal strategic documents in order to understand variation in the preferences of Romanian elites regarding the Black Sea area in the long run. Also, this section seeks to establish whether Romania has come up with a grand principle and a grand behaviour regarding the Black Sea area since it joined NATO in 2004. Then, in the third section, the article offers a quick glance at Romania's domestic politics that may help the reader understand why Romania has made certain strategic choices in the Black Sea area and not others. The last section delves into 3SI and seeks to understand whether this regional initiative has been perceived by the Romanian authorities and the local academic community as either a desecuritised project or a securitised one. Depending on these perceptions, one could link 3SI with Romania's previous regional projects, or, on the contrary, could claim that 3SI marks a shift in Romania's regional philosophy from securitisation to desecuritisation. Methodologically, given that the article traces variation in the security policies of Romania related to the Black Sea area over the long-term, I have resorted to a diachronic within-unit variance case study (Gerring 2004). The section dedicated to 3SI employs discourse analysis in order to explore whether 3SI has acquired a prevalent desecuritised meaning in Romania.

Investigating the grand behaviour of secondary powers: Ontological and paradigmatic issues

Secondary powers have been defined as states that 'cannot independently provide for their security against any other state, including the great powers' (Ross 2010: 357). Therefore, secondary powers are forced to join military alliances to provide for their security or to develop a system of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relations to this end. Under such circumstances, to claim that a secondary power could develop a grand behaviour as an instantiation of a potential grand strategy, could seem like a far-fetched statement. But, as already stated, this article is interested in ascertaining whether Romania has come up with a grand behaviour in the Black Sea area, and whether 3SI fits – or not – this behaviour that has

consisted of a string of regional initiatives. In the following, I try to theoretically substantiate this claim.

When scrutinising the grand strategy of great powers, it is pertinent to clarify some ontological aspects. Does the great power under consideration have a grand strategy and, more important, what is the object of that particular state's grand strategy? In an attempt to solve this conceptual conundrum, Silove argues that the researcher needs to 'develop a theory of the concept of grand strategy' (Silove 2017). To this end, Silove puts forward the distinction between a semantic and an ontological definition of grand strategy. While the former continues to dominate the research field, even if it offers no clear understanding of the object of grand strategy, the latter seeks to establish a clear link between a theoretical perspective and an empirical analysis of grand strategy. The ontological approach that Silove puts forth holds that researchers could use three different conceptualisations of grand strategy: a grand plan, a grand principle and a grand behaviour. 'The three concepts each provide a distinct and valuable addition to the corpus of conceptual tools in security studies' (Silove 2017: 4).

The article aims to explore whether Romania's strategic initiatives in the Black Sea area, that is, BSF, BSS, BSFt, B9, and the regional initiatives that Romania has been a part of, that is, 3SI, stand for a particular grand behaviour – namely, external balancing towards the Russian Federation. Broadly speaking, external balancing refers to states that 'aggregate their capabilities with other states in alliances' (Wohlforth 2004: 215) in order to check the rise of a potential hegemon. When a state checks the rise of a hegemon only by building up its own capabilities, this is a case of internal balancing. There are two reasons behind my choice to scrutinise Romania's grand strategy as a grand behaviour. First, 'in IR, *the behavior of the specific actor is the crucial question*' (Kirshner 2022: 73). Second, the grand strategy refers to a pattern of behaviour: 'the pattern *is itself the grand strategy*' (Silove 2017: 17).

Researchers who have examined grand strategy as 'grand behaviour' fall under three categories, adds Silove. First are those that have not linked a given state's grand behaviour with a grand principle or a grand plan. Instead, these scholars have demonstrated that the drivers of grand behaviour could be 'strategic cultures', 'coalitions of interest groups' or 'internationalist versus statist-nationalist regional policy networks' (Silove 2017). Second, there are scholars who have not looked at all at the issue of intentionality and have thus operationalised grand strategy as a pattern of behaviour (Silove 2017: 18). Third are scholars who have explicitly connected the grand behaviour of a certain state with the 'intentional design of individual agents'. Layne (2006), for instance, argues that 'open door internationalism' has guided the US grand behaviour in the post–World War II period.

In contrast to Silove, who only aimed at deciphering the object of grand strategy without getting into paradigmatic or methodological details, Layne employs

neoclassical realism as a metatheory that explains how 'the distribution of power in the international system, economic expansion, and ideology are linked causally' (Layne 2006: 10). Rebecca Lissner also resorts to neoclassical realism when discussing a particular strand of research on grand strategy, which is grand strategy as a variable (Lissner 2018: 59). In Lissner's account, grand strategy as a *dependent* variable seeks to clarify both the origins and changes that affect a given state's grand strategy. To this end, Lissner takes into account subsystemic variables, such as domestic politics, strategic culture and the role of individuals (Lissner 2018: 59–61). Neoclassical realism has also been employed as a metatheory by the editors of *Comparative Grand Strategy*, who resorted to subsystemic variables, such as 'domestic politics, strategic culture, and the influence of individual leaders' (Ripsman 2019: 284), in an attempt to move away from the constraints of neorealism.

In my view, once the object of grand strategy has been clarified, the next step in the process of tracing the potential grand strategy of a secondary power is related to the paradigmatic starting point. This paradigmatic starting point could become tricky in the case of secondary powers. As already argued by Hoffman, the perspective of the weak (Hoffman 1977: 240) is difficult to capture with the most important strand of research in the realm of international relations – that is, structural realism. Therefore, I have opted for classical realism. Unlike structural realism with its emphasis on power, classical realism brings into analysis both power and purpose. As a consequence of paying heed to purpose, classical realism allows for a certain agency of states in relation to structural pressures. In this vein, classical realism stresses that 'politics matter' (Kirshner 2022), as well as a given state's history, ideology (Kirshner 2022: 107), 'the influence of statesmen' (Kirshner 2022: 51) and a particular social structure (Kirshner 2022: 221). At the same time, especially when one seeks to understand the strategic behaviour of secondary powers, it would be heuristically unfruitful to completely 'put structure in its place' (Kirshner 2022).

Therefore, classical realism looks at 'the choices made by other great powers, whose behavior shapes the nature of the opportunities and constraints presented by the system' (Kirshner 2022: 52). This variable – the choices made by other great powers – is particularly relevant for understanding the question of change and continuity in Romania's grand behaviour in the Black Sea area. While the US and the EU showed little interest in the Black Sea area in the 1990s, 9/11 significantly changed their perspective on the region. In the aftermath of 9/11, the Black Sea region started playing an important role in the strategic logic of the international war on terror, and retained this role also in relation to the Freedom Agenda of the George W. Bush Administration. Energy and the need to set up a 'ring of friends' in the region also put the Black Sea on the security agenda of the EU after 9/11. The Russian Federation, like Turkey, was interested in preserving the closed-sea view that has been institutionalised by the Montreux Convention since 1936.

Based on this view, great power competition should be kept out of the Black Sea region. Needless to say, the 1936 Montreux Convention has systematically reinforced regional status-quo and, thus, the geopolitical clout of both the Russian Federation and Turkey in the Black Sea area.

By drawing on Goertz (2006), I employ *securitised multilateralism* as a three-pronged concept – that is, one with an ontological, realist and causal level. Regarding the ontological dimension, Goertz argues that this is the most important one because concepts are not just about definitions. They are about 'deciding what is important for an entity' (Goertz 2006: 27). From this perspective, securitised multilateralism illustrates the conceptual conundrum of the Black Sea region, which lies in what Felix Ciută calls the 'dual hermeneutics' (2008). Specifically, this 'dual hermeneutics' stands for the systematic interplay between security concepts and security practices that make the Black Sea region difficult to explore from an academic perspective.

The analytical trouble is that strategic concepts and security policies conflate at the expense of the Black Sea's regional cooperation, and as an institutional logic gets permanently entangled with geopolitical reasoning with the result of impending the emergence of a common vision – and identity – for the Black Sea area. The geopolitical reasoning depicts the Black Sea area as a security problem due to 'frozen conflicts, illegal arms trafficking, transnational crime' (Ciută 2008: 126) and Russia's growing assertiveness. At the same time, the Black Sea area is framed as a security asset. It is a valuable military platform for projecting power, while its fossil energy resources should not be discounted. In order to stop the security threats of the Black Sea area to spill westwards, a geopolitical solution – power projection of the US, NATO and the EU – is advanced along with an institutional one – that is, democratisation and cooperation. To sum it up, securitised multilateralism, as the common denominator of Romania's subregional initiatives in the Black Sea area, stands for a secondary power's regional efforts that are geared towards reconciling great power politics and regional cooperation.

The realist or the indicator level of securitised multilateralism refers to both security concepts and security practices that Romania has so far employed to project influence in the area. To this end, the article brings under scrutiny the BSF, BSS, BSFt and B9 and tries to understand whether their securitised philosophy has also been used by the Romanian authorities when dealing with 3SI. Last, but not least, the causal level of securitised multilateralism, which tries to sketch a theory that accounts for Romania's subregional initiatives in the region in line with classical realism, brings to the fore 'a residue of the evolution of post-Cold War European security' (Ciută 2007: 54) that was projected onto the Black Sea area in the early 2000s. This 'residue' highlights the fact that security as identity coexists with security as practice. Specifically, NATO's identity in the post–Cold War era as simultaneously a military alliance and security community, that is, 'an

alliance against enemies and a partnership for peace' (Ciută 2002, 47), exported the conflation between a geopolitical logic and an institutional one in the Black Sea area. In my view, this conceptual conundrum according to which a military alliance is simultaneously against something and for something has directly left its mark on Romania's guiding principle in terms of subregional initiatives – that is, securitised multilateralism. To a significant extent, Romania's securitised multilateralism is redolent of the 'Mitrany paradox', according to which exclusive integration projects depart from a functional logic, and this aspect may increase the zero-sum game perceptions for the states that are excluded (Diesen 2015).

The grand behaviour of Romania in the Black Sea area: Change and continuity

The scope of this section is to examine whether Romania has come up with a grand behaviour in the Black Sea area. To this end, this section delves into Romania's official strategic documents which could also shed light on a potential variation in the strategic preferences of the Romanian authorities in the long run. Romania's regional policies for the Black Sea area were not discernible in the 1990s, as Romania's 1999 National Security Strategy (NSS) did not even mention the Black Sea region. What Romania's 1999 NSS did mention though – in a rather normative vein – was the country's participation at subregional projects and the promotion of either bilateral or trilateral partnerships with the states in the region (NSS 1999: 10). Neither the name of the states nor details about the region were mentioned. In the same vein, Romania's 2001 NSS did not bring the Black Sea area to the fore. Also, the 2001 NSS hardly made any geographical references to the region that Romania was interested in, although the document brought into discussion the 'potential negative evolutions at the subregional level in the domain of democratization, respect for human rights and economic development' (NSS 2001: 4) that could pose a risk to the country's national security. Not only was the Black Sea area not mentioned in the 1999 NSS and the 2001 NSS, but Romania's strategic behaviour in the area was hardly discernible.

From a classical realist perspective, given the occurrence of the frozen conflicts in the region in the early 1990s, especially the one in Transnistria, Romania should have initiated a balancing behaviour – either internal or external – towards the Russian Federation. Romania's external balancing towards the Russian Federation gained traction only in 2005, one year into Romania's NATO membership. In terms of internal balancing, this behaviour was out of the question in the 1990s, as the country was experiencing a difficult transition from a state-led economy to a market economy. Moreover, by giving up on subsidising its 321 commercial ships (Ionescu 2021), many of which needed serious reparations and technological updates, Romania sent the signal that it had no economic ambitions in the region. Therefore, especially because of internal weakness, the strategic behav-

iour that Romania adopted in the 1990s in the Black Sea area could be deemed underbalancing. Which means that either Romanian elites did not perceive the threat or they had run into trouble mobilising resources – internal and external – to answer to this threat (Schweller 2023). I tend to believe that a combination of the abovementioned reasons led to Romania's underbalancing in the 1990s as the prevailing behaviour in the Black Sea area. One should not forget that in the early 1990s, Romania was the only ex-communist state that signed a Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union. This notwithstanding, the Treaty was not ratified due to the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. My point is that the dominant strategic subculture of the ruling elite was to a significant extent favourable to the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and this could account for the fact that the Russian-provoked frozen conflicts in the Black Sea area may not have been perceived as a significant threat to Romania's national security. And yet it is beyond the scope of this text to account for the subsystemic factors – that is, variables related to domestic politics – that could account for Romania's underbalancing in the 1990s. What matters is that this behaviour runs contrary to realist predictions according to which 'threatened states will balance against dangerous accumulations of power by forming alliances or building arms or both' (Schweller 2004: 160).

Once Romania joined NATO in 2004 its strategic vision on the Black Sea area shifted from the 'closed sea view' of the 1936 Montreux Convention to an 'open sea view'. Therefore, the 'internationalization of the Black Sea area' became the grand principle of Romania's policies in the region. In contrast to the 1999 NSS and the 2001 NSS, the 2006 NSS devoted roughly five pages to the importance of the Black Sea area for Romania's national security (NSS 2006). Specifically, after mentioning the fact that 'Romania holds a fundamental strategic interest' (NSS 2006: 18) in turning the wider Black Sea region into a stable, democratic and strongly connected area to the Euro-Atlantic institutions, the 2006 NSS points out that Romania's interest is 'to stimulate as strong as possible European and Euro-Atlantic regional implication' (NSS 2006: 19). Two points are worth making with regard to Romania's 2006 NSS, besides the fact that it was Romania's first National Security Strategy that emphasised the strategic importance of the Black Sea area. First, the Black Sea area is related to a fundamental strategic interest of Romania in the region. This means that, at least in 2006, the area under consideration was of no secondary strategic importance and, thus, just another object of Romania's foreign policy. Second, by reading the 2006 NSS alone, one may run into trouble clarifying the meaning of 'the internationalization of the Black Sea area', the new grand principle that guided Romania's policies in the region.

The 2006 NSS offers some insights into Romania's efforts to bring both NATO and the EU into the area, but two statements of Mr. Băsescu, the-then president of Romania, could shed more light onto the meaning of the 'internationalization

of the Black Sea area'. One year into his presidency, Mr. Băsescu stated in front of the representatives of the Romanian diaspora in San Francisco that the Black Sea should not turn into a 'Russian lake' (ziarul de iaşi.ro 2005). Notably, to Mr. Băsescu the internationalisation of the Black Sea area held the same significance at the end of his second presidential mandate against the backdrop of the 2014 Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. At the 2014 Newport NATO Summit in Wales, Mr Băsescu maintained that his administration had tried to turn the Black Sea area into a 'NATO lake' (click.ro 2014). In 2005, during a meeting on Romania's security problems with students of the University of Bucharest, Mr. Băsescu explained that the internationalisation of the Black Sea area consisted of 'controlling the [marine] traffic' in order for 'our allies to have a military and political presence in the Black Sea' (civicmedia.ro 2005).

As already stated, Romania came up with no subregional initiative regarding the Black Sea area in the 1990s. These initiatives started to emerge once Romania joined NATO in 2004. Romania's first regional policy in the Black Sea area was the Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership (BSF), which was mentioned in the 2006 NSS and launched the same year. According to the 2006 NSS, the BSF aimed at 'promoting democracy and economic development, building trust, reinforcing stability, peace and security' (NSS 2006: 21) at a regional level. Mr. Băsescu stated during the 2005 press conference that was held at the University of Bucharest that the internationalisation of the Black Sea area was related mainly to the military and political presence of Romania's allies in the Black Sea area. Under such circumstances, it hardly came as a surprise that the BSF's initial agenda was rife with hard security concerns (Dungaciu & Dumitrescu 2019). In the absence of the Russian Federation, the other countries that attended the 2006 BSF summit that was held in Bucharest in 2006 had no intention of aggravating the already existing security fault lines in the region, and therefore Romania's first regional policy was short-lived. It lasted less than a summit and clearly revealed that certain strategic obstacles could prove insurmountable for the president of a secondary power whose ambitions outweighed its capabilities, especially the diplomatic ones.

Romania's second strategic initiative regarding the Black Sea, called Black Sea Synergy (BSS), emerged in 2007, and, interestingly, was not launched by Bucharest. The main tenet of the BSS, namely the urge to solve the Black Sea area's 'frozen conflicts' through the regional involvement of the European Union, had already been mentioned during the BSF 2006 summit. BSS was the EU's first regional strategy regarding the Black Sea area and was launched in 2007 during the German presidency of the European Council. There are at least two reasons for which BSS was another short-lived strategy in the Black Sea area. First, it doubled Turkey's Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which was set up in 1992. Second, BSS had to compete with the Eastern Partnership (EaP), that was launched one year later. EaP was better financed and supported by more EU members. The third

regional initiative of Romania, that is, the Black Sea Flotilla (BSFt), emerged in 2016, in the aftermath of the 2014 annexation of Crimea, an event that tipped the balance of power in the region in favour of the Russian Federation. According to Carp, the NATO members of the riparian states had only two options at their disposal to remake the power equilibrium in the region – that is, either to alter the 1936 Montreux Convention or to set up a 'naval grouping made up of the riparian states that also were NATO members' (Carp 2018: 125). Romania supported this latter option, as the first one was out of the question, given Turkey's commitment to defending the legal status-quo in the Black Sea area. Therefore, in the logic of classical realism, the emergence of the BSFt was just a normal and predictable act of balancing the three riparian states against the rising power of the Russian Federation. Surprisingly, though, Mr. Boyko Borisov, the-then Bulgarian prime minister, had changed his mind overnight and refused to enforce the BSFt.

Notably, an alliance made up of Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria emerged in 2024 in order to demine the waters of the Black Sea against the background of the war in Ukraine. This alliance is called the Trilateral Initiative (Stan 2023). Bucharest 9 (B9), a regional initiative that was set up in 2015 based on the proposal of Romanian President Iohannis and Polish President Duda, should be read as a balancing act towards the Russian Federation in the context of the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea. The members of B9 – Romania, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Letonia and Lithuania – have strived to strengthen the coherence of NATO's Eastern flank. Through B9, Romania has tried to push the Black Sea area along with NATO's Eastern flank to the forefront of NATO's agenda, while the Baltic countries viewed B9 as a means to strengthen NATO's deterrence along its Eastern flank. Despite the fact that the last B9 summit took place in Riga on 11 June 2024 with the next one set to take place in Lithuania, some authors argue that this format 'is about to crumble' (Vușcan 2024). While Hungary and Slovakia did not attend the last Riga Summit, Bulgaria was against a unitary position of B9 regarding common assistance for Ukraine (Vușcan 2024).

Based on the data provided by the official strategic documents of Romania, this section has shown the existence of a grand principle, namely the internationalisation of the Black Sea, which has guided Romania's regional initiatives in the Black Sea area since 2006. Also, by tracing the regularities in the long-term initiatives of Romania in the Black Sea area, one can conclude that the country has come up with a grand behaviour in the region. And Romania's grand behaviour in the Black Sea area has been balancing the Russian Federation while bandwagoning with the US and the EU.

General aspects of Romania's domestic politics

As classical realism brings to the fore both power and purpose, and because the latter tends to be impacted by some domestic sources of grand strategy, a quick

glance at some aspects of Romania's domestic politics might offer a glimpse into the reasons why Romanian authorities have made certain strategic choices and not others regarding the Black Sea area. When it comes to the internal factors that may translate the pressures of international systems, neoclassical realism typically takes into account state capacity, political leadership and (sub)strategic cultures (Balzacq et al. 2019). Caverley (2023) argues that among the usually over-looked internal sources of grand strategy one can find regime type, capitalism type, militarism and nationalism.

The factors that I have chosen to shed some light on the domestic sources of Romania's grand strategy are the relation between the state and form of capital-ism, and the dominant strategic subculture. Regarding the former, Romania has been a dependent market economy for more than twenty years (Ban 2014, 2016). It has been administered by a low-capacity state endowed with the most underdeveloped fiscal capacity in the EU – that is, roughly 27 percent of the GDP (Eurostat 2023). As Caverley puts it, the type of capitalism and a given state's ability to tax may have a significant impact not only on the objectives of grand strategy, but also on its tactical choices and the ability to mobilise resources in times of crisis. In a different article (Dungaciu and Dumitrescu 2019), I offered support for the thesis that one of the reasons that account for the failure of Romania's subregional initiatives in the Black Sea area is directly related to lack of strategic expertise, an asset that a low-capacity state with a dependent market economy may run into trouble getting.

Another factor that I pay heed to in order to offer a glimpse into Romania's do-mestic factors with a potential impact on its grand strategy, refers to the dominant substrategic subculture. The premise that I start from is that substrategic cultures might shed some light on the prevailing 'strategic rationality' (Mearsheimer & Sorento, 2023), that is, the theories and heuristics that policymakers resort to in order 'to make sense of their situation and decide the way forward in an uncertain world' (Mearsheimer & Sorento, 2023: 36). Broadly speaking, strategic culture refers to 'the mental universe of the generation in power, that is, the bureaucra-cies in power and their institutional preferences' (Skak 2016: 4). This loosely operationalised 'mental universe' of the generation in power suggests that this elite has already been 'socialized into a mode of strategic discourse . . . that evolve only marginally over time' (Snyder 1977: 9). The fourth generation of research in the field of strategic culture has brought to the fore a new conceptualisation. Not only does the concept of substrategic culture diminish the risk of essentialisation, but it also offers a fresh perspective on the issue of change and continuity regard-ing a given state's strategic rationality. The trouble, at least for the time being, is that Romanian authors are still inclined to explore strategic culture, instead of looking at Romania's strategic subcultures. Ghincea (2021) argues that Romania's strategic culture has been shaped especially by the US's unipolar moment. This

aspect accounts for Romania's hierarchical vision of international politics and also for the 'underappreciation of equally important partnerships with European powers such as France and Germany' (Ghincea 2021: 7).

In my view, Romania's dominant strategic subculture is a mimetic one. This comes as no surprise as all former communist countries have been mimetic to a large extent once they chose to join both NATO and the EU (Krastev and Holmes 2018). Also, 'normative exaggeration and mimetism' (Börzel & Risse 2009: 12) stand for an institutional attitude that a low-capacity state with a dependent market economy – like Romania – tends to adopt in interactions with its stronger counterparts. However, unlike Hungary and Poland, which have advanced heterodox economic ideas with illiberal overtones (Scheiring 2021), no such translations have emerged so far in Romania. By exploring the way that neoliberal ideas have been 'translated' by top Romanian economists and bankers, some belonging to the former communist financial technocrats, Ban concludes that 'the degree of mimetism was amazing' (Ban 2014: 184). A radical, ideal-typical version of neoliberalism completely disembedded the market with a direct effect on growing inequality, which turned Romania into the second most unequal country in the EU in 2014. Ban holds that in the aftermath of the 2008 Financial crisis, when heterodox ideas started taking hold at the level of the International Monetary Fund and also in former ex-communist countries, Romanian neoliberals turned even more radical (Ban 2016). This mimetic attitude has left its mark on the civil society in Romania that has been turned 'into a prisoner of radical neoliberal ideology' (Dragoman 2022: 111).

Mircea Maliţa, former Romanian ambassador to Switzerland and the US in the Cold War era, professor and member of the Romanian Academy, argued that there was no problem that Romania chose to internationalise the Black Sea under President Băsescu. The trouble was that 'Romania put forth and formulated a total, unnuanced, Western option' (Maliţa & Dungaciu 2014: 337). Yet, Maliţa offers no details on what a nuanced Western option would have looked like. Such a debate might have been blocked, among many other factors, by Romania's dominant strategic subculture of – at times, radical – mimetism. Mimetism also lies in the proposal of Diana Şoşoacă, the president of a sovereignist party called SOS Romania, for organising a referendum on Romania's exit from NATO (Morozanu 2024). Such a proposal has not been made by any politician in Romania for the last twenty years. Despite the fact that it occupies a marginal position in Romanian politics, Diana Şoşoacă, along with one of her colleagues, has been propelled into the European Parliament in the aftermath of the 9 June European elections. Still, it is worth mentioning that Romania's mainstream parties and also most Romanian citizens are clearly in favour of NATO, while another sovereignist party, i.e. the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), also supports Romania's membership in both NATO and the EU. Therefore, with the clear exception of Diana Şoşoacă

and her party, Romania's sovereignist parties have not come up with heterodox ideas either in the field of economics or in the area of foreign policy, and therefore one cannot talk about the emergence of a political countermovement in Romania, as it has already happened in other Central European countries (Blokker 2013).

The Three Seas Initiative: A desecuritised regional initiative?

This section relies on discourse analysis to explore the 'representational practices' (Dunn and Neumann 2016) that both Romanian authorities and Romanian experts employ with respect to 3SI. Of interest for this section is: What kind of meaning these representational practices generate for 3SI? Is 3SI viewed as a desecuritised initiative, which is related to low security concerns, or as a securitised one, which pertains to military aspects? Or, in the absence of a preeminent meaning, could one find both institutional and geopolitical meanings in the texts under investigation? The texts that I have scrutinised fall under three categories: official texts related to the two 3SI summits that Romania hosted in 2018 and 2023 respectively, texts written by Romanian authors that belong to the local academic community that covers foreign policy and strategic matters, and texts that belong to international experts in the realm of international relations.

First, I bring under scrutiny the official position of Romania's Presidential Administration on the two summits of 3SI that Bucharest hosted in 2018 and 2023. Notably, an official document that was issued in the run-up to the 2018 summit defines 3SI as a 'flexible political platform' (presidency.ro 2018a) that concerns itself with economic development, the convergence of EU member states and also the strengthening of transatlantic ties. Mr. Iohannis, the president of Romania, stressed in his official speech delivered at the 2018 Summit, the establishment of 3SI's Business Forum (presidency.ro 2018b). With the support of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Romania, the Atlantic Council of the United States and the National University of Political and Administrative Studies, the first edition of the 3SI Business Forum took place in Bucharest in 2018. Based on the above, the official representations of 3SI link this regional initiative to low security concerns. This perception is strengthened by the depiction of 3SI on the official site of Romania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thus, the values that guide 3SI refer to 'the promotion of economic development, the enhance of cohesion at the European level and the strengthening of the transatlantic relations' (mae.ro 2021).

Five years later, Bucharest hosted another summit of 3SI which showed, according to President Iohannis, the importance that Romania grants to this regional project. In his official speech delivered at the 2023 3SI Summit, President Iohannis laid emphasis on the strategic interconnections between the northern and the southern parts of the region bordered by the Three Seas. Also, Mr. Iohannis stressed the importance of investment in projects that aim at economic development. Yet the most consistent part of Mr. Iohannis' speech highlighted the

security concerns created by the discovery of debris that could belong to a drone in Romania's territory against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine (presidency. ro 2023a). Also, the Joint Statement of the 2023 Summit highlighted once again the 'strategic role of 3SI as a political, economic and connectivity platform that strengthens regional connectivity' (presidency.ro 2023b) and builds transport, energy and digital infrastructure networks on the North-South axis. However, the Joint Statement laid emphasis on the 'contested security environment' within which the resilience of the regional infrastructure may lead to a double usage related to 'an enhanced civil and military mobility on the North-South axis' (presidency.ro 2023b). To sum it up, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine low security concerns continued to be preeminent on 3SI's agenda. Yet one could also notice both military aspects and military overtones on the official agenda, which shows the impact that great power competition could have on the contour of a regional initiative.

I now turn my attention to the texts written by Romanian experts, who belong to the academic community that comments on foreign policy and security issues. Mr Baconschi, former minister of foreign affairs, contends that the member states of 3SI intend to turn Central and Eastern Europe into a match for Western Europe in terms of 'roads, railroads, harbors, trade, digital networks and energy infrastructure' (2023). Therefore, in Baconschi's account, 3SI is exclusively related to low security concerns. Commenting on the 2023 3SI Summit held in Bucharest, Mr. Ştefan Popescu (2023) argues that the Investment Fund of 3SI seems to be severely underfunded. Specifically, the 91 projects adopted by 3SI in order to build transport, energy and digital infrastructure require roughly 700 billion euro while Romania's and Poland's foreign commerce banks can offer at best 6 billion euro. Again, the emphasis is laid on low security concerns, despite the fact that Mr. Popescu draws attention to the fact that France and Germany tend to look reluctantly at the US-inspired 3SI.

In contrast, Fati makes the difference between the initial project of 3SI that laid emphasis on connecting the states between the three seas through 'highways, high-speed rails, and gas infrastructure by bypassing Ukraine' (Fati 2023), and the actual project that accepted Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova as associate members against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Also, Fati argues that the transport infrastructure that is supposed to be built under the aegis of 3SI could improve the shipment of soldiers and military equipment through Romania, and also help Ukraine both economically and militarily. Alina Inayeh (2022), former director of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, couples an institutional framing of 3SI, one that it is related to 'infrastructure connectivity', with a geopolitical one. The latter approach, argues Inayeh, has already been employed by the US and the EU in the Black Sea area, and the same card should be played by the abovementioned great powers also relative to 3SI. Also,

a group of Romanian experts belonging to the European Institute of Romania places emphasis on the 'interconnectedness of the 3SI infrastructure' (Sebe 2023: 52), while simultaneously stressing the 'dual use – civil and military' (Sebe 2023: 58) that certain projects of 3SI can have, such as Rail Baltica, Via Carpathia or the Polish Solidarity Transport Hub.

Regarding the texts written by international experts, James Carafano stresses the focus of 3SI on 'transatlantic economic, energy and security issues' (2022). Notably, Carafano also brings into discussion the 'unstated' strategic overtones of 3SI, which offers both the US and the EU an engagement model that could balance China's 17+1 development framework for Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, Carafano (2022) holds that 3SI's energy infrastructure could address the Central and Eastern European countries' dependence on Russian gas and oil, while NATO could also avail itself of the infrastructure built under the aegis of 3SI. After making the difference between Intermarium, as a project for regional integration, and 3SI, which aims at regional cooperation, Aydaliani maintains that 'the Intermarium (sic) is not formally subject to NATO strategy, but in reality it functions outside it' (2019). At a local level that implies the interplay among neighbouring states; 3SI is indeed focused on low security concerns.

But once one changes vantage point, 3SI is directly related to great power competition (Ištok et al. 2018). On this aspect, Alexandr Vondra, a Czech politician, argues that the Russian Federation will likely seek to subvert 3SI because Moscow prefers investments on the East-West axis. Therefore, the survival of 3SI is heavily dependent on support offered by the US, the EU and the member states of 3SI (Vondra 2018). An institutional lens, which links transport, energy and digital infrastructure with regional development and cooperation, tends to magnify the low security concerns of 3SI. However, a geopolitical lens brings into relief the high politics aspects on the agenda of 3SI. While Poland and other Central European states aim at building a polycentric Europe and thus gain some degrees of autonomy in relation to the great powers that project influence onto the region, the US sees 3SI as a security buffer (Bartoszewicz 2021: 19). Notably, unlike President Obama who viewed exports of American LNG to Poland as an attempt to balance Russian influence, the Trump administration, which sent the first shipment of American LNG to Poland in 2017, viewed it as a bargaining chip in the trade negotiations with the EU (Grgić 2021: 14). Also, the US's USD 1 billion contribution to the Investment Fund of 3SI in 2020 came together with a more assertive stance on the 2014 Russia's annexation of Crimea. Although it is not directly involved with 3SI, China seeks to turn Central Europe into a commercial corridor by building infrastructure and connecting the area with BRI (Bartoszewicz 2021; Grgić 2021). Therefore, it is mistaken to view 3SI as a desecuritised subregional initiative. Based on the above, one may have a hard time arguing that 3SI is a completely desecuritised regional initiative.

Conclusion

By tracing Romania's regional initiatives in the Black Sea area, the article has found support for the thesis that Romania has come up with a grand behaviour in the Black Sea area since it joined NATO in 2004. This behaviour has been external balancing towards the Russian Federation and alignment with the US and the EU. Also, by scrutinising Romania's official strategic documents the article reveals that Romania has adopted a grand principle for the region – that is, the internationalisation of the Black Sea area. To date, Romania has not devised a grand plan for the Black Sea area despite the fact that this region has been steadily mentioned in all official strategic documents issued by Romania since it joined NATO in 2004.

In terms of change and continuity regarding the regional initiatives that Romania has either devised or been part of since 2004, the article has not found support for the statement that 3SI stands for a desecuritised form of multilateralism. Romania's membership of 3SI does not stand in contrast with BSF, BSS, BSFt and B9, since the common denominator of all these subregional projects has been securitised multilateralism. Therefore, the article has traced no variation in Romania's grand behaviour in the Black Sea area. Based on the scholarly literature and also on the meaning that both official documents and Romanian security experts attribute to 3SI, one draws the conclusion that the securitised contour of 3SI, especially against the backdrop of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, is more than clear.

This conclusion does not intend to suggest that 3SI was devised as a subregional initiative that dealt exclusively with low politics concerns in 2015, and then against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine has it acquired a more securitised profile. From the very beginning, the geopolitical logic was the prevalent philosophy of 3SI, as some of its members aimed at creating a polycentric Europe that would allow them certain degrees of autonomy in a highly interdependent world and relative to great power competition. From this perspective, it would be worth exploring in a comparative vein to what extent the 'dual hermeneutics', that is, the institutional logic coupled with geopolitical reasoning, also comes into play in the particular case of 3SI. At first glance, the situation seems to be slightly different. One of the factors that could account for the difference is China's manifest interest for investing in the infrastructure of some of the members of 3SI, and second, the heterodox ideas that, for instance, Hungary and Poland have been using not only in the realm of economics but also in the field of foreign policy.

The article has advanced the concept of securitised multilateralism as the common denominator of Romania's subregional initiative in the Black Sea area. The concept could be worth exploring also in the case of other NATO members' subregional initiatives in order to understand whether internal factors, such as state capacity, the dominant substrategic culture or the relation between democracy and capitalism, have translated in a specific vein the strain between the

institutional logic and the geopolitical philosophy, which is specific to subregional initiatives that great powers seek to instrumentalise in their favour. Despite the fact that it has employed classical realism as its main explanatory paradigm, this article has also looked at some internal factors that may leave its mark on Romania's strategic initiatives, such as the relation between state capacity and type of capitalism, and the dominant substrategic culture. The above mentioned subsystemic factors may offer a glimpse into Romania's domestic politics, but further research is required in this regard, as the conclusions that this article has reached in this regard are just tentative. The concept of strategic subculture is, at least for the time being, not in in the field of security studies in Romania. This concept, despite its theoretical and methodological drawbacks, could shed significant light on Romania's agency regarding the subregional projects that it has been involved in so far. The findings of this article could also bring their contribution to further the investigation of secondary powers' grand strategy. For instance, are Romania's grand behaviour and grand principle for the Black Sea area synonymous with Romania's grand strategy in the region, the latter being understood as a comprehensive approach that couples economic, political and military resources?

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