

## IMAGINARY GEOGRAPHY AND NATIONAL SECURITY: OPPORTUNITIES, VULNERABILITIES, AND THREATS

MATEI BLĂNARU\*

**Abstract.** Viewed from the perspective of national security, imaginary geographies constitute a genuine problem. They open the path toward biases, subjectivism, and an inaccurate representation of the objective reality of a given moment. Yet this is only part of the issue, for, on the other hand, knowledge of the imaginary geographies of a foreign adversarial or competitive actor – and of that actor’s society – offers highly valuable insights that may be used to our advantage. In yet another twist, the familiarity of a society’s own political elites with these imaginary geographies can once again give rise to a different problem: the temptation toward cynicism and the instrumentalization of these geographies by the elites themselves for their own benefit, regardless of national interest.

**Keywords:** *Imaginary Geography; Bias; Competitors; Opportunities; Threats; Vulnerabilities*

### *Introduction*

Imaginary geography is a concept seldom used. Nevertheless, a proper understanding of this concept can offer valuable insights into competitors or adversaries, into our own vulnerabilities, or into potential opportunities. Grasping the notion of imaginary geography can assist us in anticipating certain developments or attitudes.

To give a very recent and proximate example of how important an adequate understanding of imaginary geographies is, we may refer to the war in Ukraine, where we cannot afford to avoid asking the difficult questions: *What does Ukraine look like according to the imaginary geography of China, Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the United States of America, and what does Ukraine look like according to the imaginary geography of the Russian Federation?* Realistic answers to these questions can help us anticipate certain developments with greater accuracy and help us prepare appropriately for them – beyond our own illusions and our own imaginary geographies.

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\* PhD candidate, Doctoral School of Sociology, University of Bucharest, Romania, email: matei.h.blanaru@gmail.com.

On the other hand, speaking of vulnerabilities, once one understands the aspirations, desires, and fears that shape the imaginary world of a society, one may nourish – at the narrative level – those very desires and fears that dominate public consciousness, while in practice pursuing an entirely different agenda that may wholly disregard that society’s real needs in terms of national security or strategy. This is a very old recipe, used not only in Romania but everywhere, and it illustrates yet another reason why imaginary geographies and awareness of them are important. The manner in which the political elites of Hungary or Turkey after the First World War decisively contributed to the establishment of the so-called *Trianon Trauma*<sup>1</sup> and *Sèvres Syndrome*<sup>2</sup> within their respective societies – taking advantage of imaginary geographies and continuing to generate new ones for their own benefit – stands as a striking example.

Viewed in relation to Romanian society, its fears, after yet another Russian occupation in the past century followed by a communist occupation, it may be said that these anxieties have remained largely the same for hundreds of years, originating predominantly from the same eastern and south-eastern spaces. As for the aspirations of Romanian society and the direction toward which they are oriented – namely, the West – these too have remained broadly consistent for several centuries, a fact rendered more than evident by numerous surveys indicating the pro-European and pro-Western orientation of Romanian citizens.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with the special attention devoted by Romania’s foreign policy to Euro-Atlantic and European Union integration; on the contrary, such orientation is *essential*, as it offers protection against any external military threat. What was mistaken, however, was the almost complete neglect of the eastern and south-eastern space. For example, Romania has not held any position of a European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for the Republic of Moldova (paradoxically, Hungary has had one, and a very influential one), nor any position of Head of the European Union Delegation in the Republic of Moldova. Romania has not held any position of European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for the Western Balkans either, nor for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, or for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. Bulgaria and Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Estonia, for example, have had such representatives. Romania has not held any position of European Commissioner for Enlargement, the officials who manage relations with the Western Balkans, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Albania, and other states. Hungary, once again, has had such a commissioner, and a very influential one. Slovenia and the Czech Republic have held such positions as well. This is saying something about Romanian strategy in the region, or rather the lack of it. And current reality shows us once more – if proof were still needed – that the predominant external threats of the

<sup>1</sup> Éva Kovács, “Overcoming History through Trauma. The Hungarian Historikerstreit”, *European Review*, Vol. 24, Nr. 4: 523-534, 2016, DOI:10.1017/S1062798716000065, pp. 530-531.

<sup>2</sup> Levon Hovsepyan, “The Fears of Turkey: The Sèvres Syndrome. Manifestations of the “Sèvres Syndrome”, in *Turkey’s Socio-Political Discourse*, Erevan, Information and Public Relation Center, 2012, pp. 20-66; Dorothee Schmid, “Turkey: the Sèvres syndrome, or the endless war”, IFRI Contemporary Turkey Programme, Franco-Turkish Paper No.13, 2015, pp. 5-16.

present originate from the East or the South: beginning with Russia's aggressions, continuing with the proliferation of the "Moldovan" identity created by Stalinist USSR in 1924 specifically as a weapon against Romanians and Romania<sup>3</sup>, followed by the geopolitics of religion from Moscow and Kyiv<sup>4</sup>, "Russkiy Mir" ("Russian World") vs. "the Ukrainian World" that the bishop of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine wants to build<sup>5</sup>, which threaten the freedoms of ethnic Romanians in the area<sup>6</sup>, and many other developments. Yet opportunities also exist.

In the present analysis, we will examine – intermittently – all three implications for national security and national interests outlined earlier in the first paragraphs: the tendency toward bias or subjectivism and the resulting lack of awareness of objective reality; the perspectives offered by understanding the imaginary geography of other societies, which may be used to our advantage; and the instrumentalization of imaginary geographies by domestic elites for their own benefit.

### *Theoretical Argumentation*

Thus, more precisely, what is imaginary (or imaginative) geography? The concept was first formulated in relation to Orientalism, by Edward Said, an American scholar of Orientalism of Christian Palestinian origin. His first ideas about imaginative geography revolved around the concept of "us" against "them" and how we construct spaces arbitrary in our own minds: «It is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality. A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call "the land of the barbarians." In other words, this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs" is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. I use the word "arbitrary" here because imaginative geography of the "our land-barbarian land" variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for "us" to set up these

<sup>3</sup> Elena Negru, *Politica etnoculturală în R.A.S.S. Moldovenească (1924-1940)*, Chișinău, Prut Internațional, 2003, pp. 143-144.

<sup>4</sup> Peter S. Henne, "The Geopolitics of Faith: Religious Soft Power in Russian and U.S. Foreign Policy", Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2019, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/the-geopolitics-of-faith-religious-soft-power-in-russian-and-u-s-foreign-policy>; Volodymyr Kulyk, "Church and Geopolitics: The Battle Over Ukrainian Autocephaly", *Ponars Eurasia*, 2019, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/church-and-geopolitics-the-battle-over-ukrainian-autocephaly>; Carmen Valică, "Serviciile de informații vs. clericii apropiate de Rusia. Ce urmează pentru Biserica Ortodoxă Ucraineană", *Europa Liberă România*, 2022, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/biserica-ortodoxa-ucraina-razii-servicii-informatii/32180326.html/>.

<sup>5</sup> Sabina Fati, "Analiză: Jocul geostrategic al BOR în Ucraina", *Deutsche Welle*, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/ro/jocul-geostrategic-al-bor-%C3%AEn-ucraina/a-70616576>.

<sup>6</sup> Matei Blănuș, "Weaponization of Religion as one of the Main Hybrid Instruments Directed Against Romanians in The Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Romania", 2025, pp. 214-231, in Florian Cîrciumaru and Lică Daniela (eds.), *Proceedings Of The International Scientific Conference Strategies XXI – The Complex and Dynamic Nature of The Security Environment*. "Carol I" National Defence University Publishing House, Bucharest, Romania, 2025, DOI: 10.53477/3045-2309-25-19. [https://revista.unap.ro/index.php/XXI\\_CSSAS/article/view/2205/2150](https://revista.unap.ro/index.php/XXI_CSSAS/article/view/2205/2150).

boundaries in our own minds; “they” become “they” accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from “ours.”<sup>7</sup>

However, he went on to present what are perhaps the features of imaginative geography that interest us the most: how we project our own emotions on spaces, which in time begin to resemble a completely different geography (real geography or figuratively speaking) than the real one. But first, he makes a very good observation: “All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space outside one’s own.”<sup>8</sup> And then he goes on to show how we project these emotions, these associations, fictions, emotions, on the space and time around us, thus building an imaginative geography: “The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard once wrote an analysis of what he called the poetics of space. The inside of a house, he said, acquires a sense of intimacy, secrecy, security, real or imagined, because of the experiences that come to seem appropriate for it. The objective space of a house – its corners, corridors, cellar rooms – is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel: thus, a house may be haunted, or homelike, or prisonlike, or magical. So, space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here. The same process occurs when we deal with time. Much of what we associate with or even know about such periods as “long ago” or “the beginning” or “at the end of time” is poetic-made up. For a historian of Middle Kingdom Egypt, “long ago” will have a very clear sort of meaning, but even this meaning does not totally dissipate the imaginative, quasi-fictional quality one senses lurking in a time very different and distant from our own. For there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away.”<sup>9</sup>

From our point of view, the difference between “us” and “them” is not the defining factor behind the imaginary or imaginative geography. The main factor is the “unknown” space or time upon which we project our emotions, desires, fears or suppositions. However, it is true that without an “us” or an “I” and “them” or “it”, which we do not know very well, there would be no imaginative geography.

Another key point concerning a difference between how we view imaginary geography compared to these definitions arises from a much more recent definition of imaginary geography, provided by Caroline Desbiens, following Edward Said: “Imaginative geographies are representations of peoples and places that express the perceptions, desires, fantasies, fears, and projections of their authors, who are generally external observers.”<sup>10</sup> What we would find very important to add is that we consider as imaginary/imaginative geographies our own projections

<sup>7</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books A Division of Random House, 1979, p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Desbiens, *Imaginative Geographies*, Wiley Online Library, 2017, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118786352.wbieg0865>, p. 1.

about ourselves too, about our own spaces, and not just our projections about the “unknown” or “the others” as external observers.

Imaginary geography thus offers us an X-ray of a society at a given moment – its fears, its aspirations – while also revealing the character and worldview of those who produce it, whether as a society or as a group. All of these constitute extremely relevant and valuable forms of knowledge about any society: from a sociological standpoint, from the realist perspective of national security, and even from more cynical or mercantile perspectives.

We are not the only ones who have reflected on the influence of imaginary geography on national security. In the United States, for example, scholars have examined the ways in which imaginary geography has shaped – and continues to shape – U.S. security strategies, with particular emphasis on its influence on the “war on terror”<sup>11</sup>. It remains very important – just as U.S. analysts have done – to examine continually how our own security strategies have been and are being influenced by our own imaginary geographies.

Various analysts have shown that the foreign and national security policies of states “are said to be both enabled by and productive of specific geographical imaginations,”<sup>12</sup> and that, in U.S. strategic thinking, “the imagination of place creates political and spatial realities.”<sup>13</sup> Translating these observations into the political landscape of Romania, we may argue that while Romania’s official political and security narratives consistently presented the East as merely a hostile factor unworthy of deeper consideration – thus ignoring potential strategic opportunities at the national level (to be clear, we are *not* referring to strategic opportunities with the Russian Federation, as pursued by other states such as Germany, France, and others) – the public was encouraged to concentrate exclusively on the West. Meanwhile, many of the same political actors were engaging in personal or group dealings with the East that ultimately undermined national security. In other words, while we were all looking toward the West, certain figures – including political figures in Romania – were bringing the East into the country<sup>14</sup>. We elaborate on this argument below.

In short, practically speaking, until the war in Ukraine, the East hardly mattered for Romanian foreign policy or public discourse, with very few, mostly situational

<sup>11</sup> Luiza Bialasiewicz et al, “Performing security: The imaginative geographies of current US strategy”, *Political Geography*, Vol. 26, Nr. 4: 405-422. DOI 10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.12.002, 2007, p. 405.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 406.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> Digi 24, “România Furată. Cazul Mechel – cum au ajuns rușii să controleze mare parte din siderurgia românească”, <https://www.digi24.ro/special/campanii-digi24/romania-furata/romania-furata-cazul-mechel-cum-au-ajuns-rusii-sa-controleze-mare-parte-din-siderurgia-romaneasca-343777>, 2015; Petru Zoltan, “România importă pulberi pentru armament din Rusia, via Serbia, deși este țară NATO cu rol strategic”, *Newsweek*, 2020, <https://newsweek.ro/investigatii/importam-pulberi-pentru-armament-din-rusia-via-serbia>; Ioana Șerbu and Daniel Bojin and Cristi Ciupercă, “Rafo: amanetată la ruși, sechestrată de stat”, *Rise Project*, 2015, <https://www.riseproject.ro/rafo-amanetata-la-rusi-sechestrata-de-stat/>; Sorin Ozon, “Cel mai iubit oligarh din România. Proprietarul rus al ALRO este susținut de un KGB-ist care conduce industria de apărare a Rusiei”, *Ziare.com*, 2022, <https://ziare.com/oligarhi-rusia/oligarhi-rusi-alro-slatina-machitsky-kgb-1735357>.

exceptions, and never as part of any identifiable strategy. Even the Republic of Moldova was of limited significance for public policies formulated in Bucharest. Likewise, no Romanian minority beyond the borders, nor the Balkans, held much relevance<sup>15</sup>.

### *Exercises in Imaginary Geography: Opportunities, Vulnerabilities, Threats*

But first, let us carry out a few brief exercises in *factual geography* versus *imaginary geography*, in order to better understand the difference between the two.

*Iran.* For example, which seems closer to us from Bucharest: Iran or Brussels? We would probably be very surprised to learn that the distance to Iran is approximately 2,180 km by road (of course, not in a straight line), while Brussels is just 1 km farther, at 2,181 km from the same starting point. Geopolitically, Iran is an important and complex actor, with both positive and potentially negative aspects. However, imaginary geography should not limit our understanding or relations with other states. A correct comprehension of realities – which, as we have seen, can be directly influenced by imaginary geographies – is essential in international relations, and such understanding can have a direct positive impact on national security.

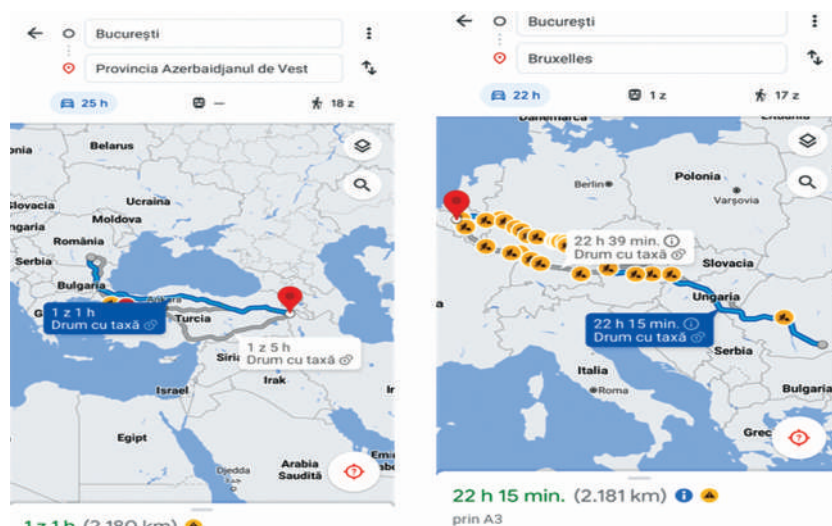


Figure 1. Distance between Bucharest and Iran, and Bucharest and Brussels.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Radu Baltasiu and Cătălin Manole, “Radu Baltasiu (Directorul Centrului European de Studii în Probleme Etnice al Academiei Române): “E o mare tragedie să ai o istorie ca a noastră și să nu-ți pese de ea”, <https://www.formula-as.ro/2025/03/21/radu-baltasiu-directorul-centrului-european-de-studii-in-probleme-etnice-al-academiei-romane-e-o-mare-tragedie-sa-ai-o-istorie-ca-a-noastra-si-sa-nu-ti-pese-de-ea/>, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Source: Google Maps.

*Kazakhstan.* Another example: which is closer to Bucharest, Kazakhstan or Paris? We would likely be just as surprised to learn that the distance to Kazakhstan is 2,273 km – almost 100 km less than the distance to Paris, which is 2,362 km away. Although Kazakhstan is almost entirely absent from the imaginary geography of Romanian society, tens of thousands of descendants of Romanians deported or taken prisoner by the Soviets still live there<sup>17</sup>, representing a potential bridge to this important Central Asian state. Until recently, at the official level, Romanian institutions showed a marked lack of interest in this sizable community located in a country with enormous energy potential, such as Kazakhstan. Yet, at a personal level, some political figures chose to cultivate private, individual ties with entities in Kazakhstan, serving strictly personal interests rather than national ones. A strategic partnership with this state, however, could provide national opportunities far exceeding any individual or personal gains.

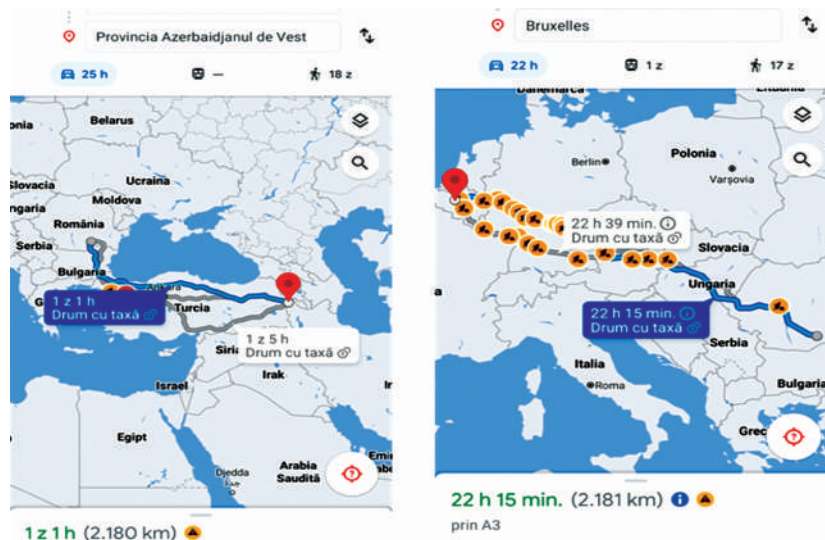


Figure 2. Distance between Bucharest and Kazakhstan, and Bucharest and Paris.<sup>18</sup>

*Syria.* The distance from Bucharest to Berlin is 1,704 km, while the distance to the Afrin province in northern Syria – a still highly tense area – is only 58 km farther, at 1,762 km.

<sup>17</sup> Oana Despa, "Români în Kazahstan | Ce a mai rămas din comunitatea deportată în secolul XX", *Europa Liberă România*, 2022, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/soarta-romanilor-din-kazahstan/31645193.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Source: Google Maps.

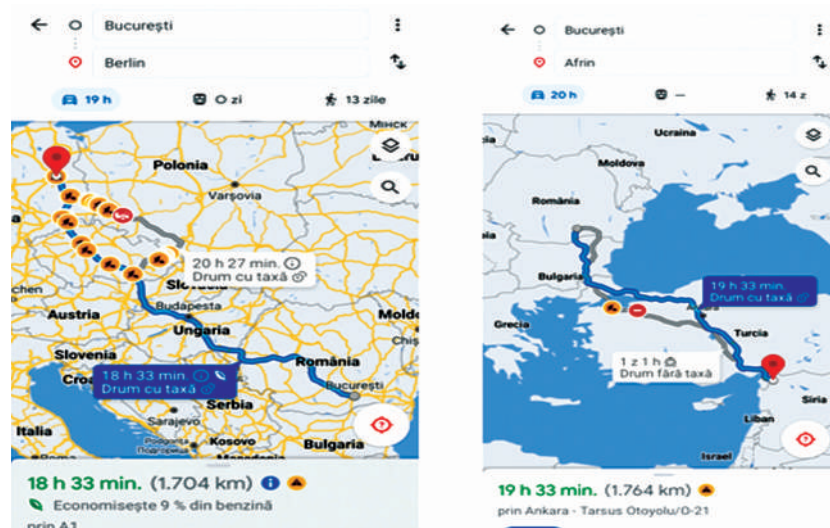


Figure 3. Distance between Bucharest and Berlin, and Bucharest and Afrin.<sup>19</sup>

But how far do the three eastern destinations seem to us, compared with the three western ones, which appear so close? Naturally, from the perspective of culture and civilizational space, we are much closer to the three Western European destinations than to the three eastern ones, which seem exotic to us despite being physically nearer than the western ones. Yet when it comes to national security, we are never concerned only with what we believe or what seems immediate to us – on the contrary.

What we mean to emphasize, as the current context of the war in Ukraine shows, is that focusing solely on the West does not mean that significant dangers cannot arise from the East – such as the ongoing war in Ukraine – but also that opportunities for national strategy may emerge there, for example, in transport and energy connectivity with Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The “Ostrich Effect” approach does not work in international relations, because problems will catch up with you faster if you ignore them than if you confront them properly. This attitude is therefore far from beneficial to Romania’s national security, leaving the country vulnerable to threats while also closing our eyes to potential opportunities. Given current developments, Central Asia and the South Caucasus are likely to become increasingly important in regional or even global geopolitical, strategic, and economic relations, already acting as serious players from an energy perspective.

We can continue with examples of such eastern (or southeastern) states regarding which, at the official level, Romania has completely closed its eyes to both threats and opportunities over the past decades.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem.*

*Ukraine.* Another clear example is the way Russia's aggression in Ukraine changed the perspectives of the imaginary geography of much of Romania's political echelon and of the Romanian society in general. Until recently, Romania scarcely looked toward Ukraine in terms of foreign policy and international relations over the past thirty years. There were only two minor exceptions: the dispute over the Bâstroe Canal and the proceedings at the International Court of Justice in The Hague<sup>20</sup> regarding the delimitation of the continental shelf. Yet, to the discredit of Bucharest's politicians, and despite some small<sup>21</sup> recent reactions and efforts, the substantial Romanian minority there has received little attention from Romania's political class. If political imaginary geography prior to the war dictated neglect, the new imaginary geography that is being constructed now dictates that nothing can be done that would upset the Ukrainian political leaders, because Ukraine is facing an unjust invasion. However, even though the Russian invasion is definitely unjust, pragmatically problems, issues and concerns should still be responsibly addressed by the Romanian political leaders despite any imaginary geography that is being built nationally or continent-wide.

For example, one of the most pressing issues for the Romanians in Ukraine is the religious problem. In order to avoid Ukrainization<sup>22</sup>, the ethnic Romanians in Ukraine want to set up an association, according to Ukrainian law, and later join the Romanian Patriarchate, the Romanian Orthodox Church, in order to preserve their Romanian language and traditions. However, even though local Romanian leaders have begun this initiative almost two years ago, the Ukrainian officials have not accepted the establishment of this association, prohibited the entry in Ukraine for one of the Romanian initiators, confiscated chapels traditionally built and used by the Romanians and where local Romanian leaders had been buried<sup>23</sup>, stated that this is a political matter to be negotiated with Romanian politicians, thus ignoring own Ukrainian laws, and stated that this petition "is perceived as disrespect to Ukraine"<sup>24</sup>. Concerning Ukrainization, this is a real concern, as the concept of "offensive Ukrainization"<sup>25</sup> has been publicly stated by Ukrainian top officials, and it is also important to point out that Ukrainian Metropolitan Epiphanius of the state-sponsored Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) stated in Cernăuți, the centre for the Romanian community in Ukraine,

<sup>20</sup> Ministerul Afacerilor Externe. s.a. a, "Procesul de la Haga în date și cifre", <https://www.mae.ro/node/3109>.

<sup>21</sup> *Idem*, "Comunicat de presă privind poziția MAE referitoare la adoptarea, de către Rada Supremă a Ucrainei, a Legii privind minoritățile naționale (comunitățile) din Ucraina", 2022, <https://www.mae.ro/node/60649>.

<sup>22</sup> Anatol Popescu, "Elevii români din Ucraina: derusificare prin ucrainizare, inclusiv la pauzele între ore", 2024, [https://bucpress.eu/elevii-romani-din-ucraina-derusificare-prin-ucrainizare-inclusiv-la-pauzele-intre-ore/?fbclid=IwY2xjawGcLIFleHRuA2F1bQIxMQABHQewRVc\\_8EVFZAoGwFLt14R9pzjyK1MJ65unwIb9XX2Q8C7uvtNaeCHh6w\\_aem\\_XD8eBwA\\_bD6nuKmae6ByYw](https://bucpress.eu/elevii-romani-din-ucraina-derusificare-prin-ucrainizare-inclusiv-la-pauzele-intre-ore/?fbclid=IwY2xjawGcLIFleHRuA2F1bQIxMQABHQewRVc_8EVFZAoGwFLt14R9pzjyK1MJ65unwIb9XX2Q8C7uvtNaeCHh6w_aem_XD8eBwA_bD6nuKmae6ByYw).

<sup>23</sup> Felix Corley, "Ukraine: Official claims «social outrage» prevents Romanian Orthodox registration", 2025, Forum 18, [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2992](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2992).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> Viktoriya Vaskovska, "Мовний омбудсмен заявив про етап «наступальної українізації»: що це означає" ("The Language Ombudsman announced a stage of 'offensive Ukrainization': what does this mean?"), 2024, <https://fakty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/20241024-movnyj-ombudsmenzayavyv-pro-etap-nastupalnoyi-ukrayini-zacziyi-shho-cze-oznachaye/>.

that he wanted to build a “Ukrainian world,” in mirror to the *russkiy mir* or “Russian world”<sup>26</sup>, a declaration of intent on Ukrainization, just as the Russians used to perform Russification in order to build the *russkiy mir* or “Russian world”. It is important to mention that, against all this background, according to the latest survey performed on the Romanians in Ukraine, 95% of the Romanians in Ukraine want to be a part of the Romanian Orthodox Church<sup>27</sup>. However, the response from the Romanian officials thus far and has not met the expectations of the Romanian community in Ukraine, of the Romanian Orthodox Church, or of other petitions coming from the Romanian society<sup>28</sup>. Apparently, some of the responses of the Romanian officials even appeared to mirror the desire of the Ukrainian side, and not of the Romanian minority<sup>29</sup>.

Although there were ample pretexts, none of them come close to justifying this attitude, which has resulted in losses for Romania’s national interests, distrust from Romanian ethnics (34.6% of the Romanians in Ukraine believe the Romanian officials have not done enough to ensure the registration of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine<sup>30</sup>, and many more Romanians in Ukraine believe the Romanian state has helped Ukraine a lot, as opposed to the Romanians’ in Ukraine opinion on the help Romania provided for the Romanian minority<sup>31</sup>, for the country’s prestige, and for respect from neighboring states. Naturally, all these oversights and the resulting decline in regional status ultimately translate into negative impacts on national security. Unfortunately, this attitude may even poison future relations with Ukraine, if sensitive issues like religion are not properly, lawfully and swiftly addressed in order to meet the expectations of the people concerned. 95% of a community who wants to join the Romanian Orthodox Church<sup>32</sup> should definitely be a number to be acknowledged and considered appropriately both in Bucharest and in Kiev.

*The Republic of Moldova.* Moving forward, in the last 30 years, even the Republic of Moldova has not benefited from coherent attention from the authorities in Bucharest. Until recently, there has been no strategic, coherent national plan

<sup>26</sup> Sabina Fati, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Marin Gherman (coordinator), IPSSC Team: Sergiu Barbuța, Caterina Maga, “Barometru social – 2025. Românii din Ucraina în al patrulea an de război. Broșură”, Institutul de Studii Politice și Capital Social, Cernăuți, 2025, [https://bibliotecacernauti.com/images/2025/2025\\_BROSURA.pdf](https://bibliotecacernauti.com/images/2025/2025_BROSURA.pdf), p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Ovidiu Cornea, “Preoții români din Cernăuți spun că au fost amenințați cu înrolarea dacă insistă cu afilierea la BOR. Cazul a ajuns pe masa lui Nicușor Dan”, *Europa Liberă*, 2025, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/comunitati-romanesti-ucraina-afiliere-biserica-ortodoxa-romana-memoriu-presdintele-romaniei/33457125.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Agerpress, “Ministrul de Externe despre înființarea Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în Ucraina: Autoritățile ucrainene au reiterat ‘nevoia de dialog cu BOR’”, 2025, <https://agerpres.ro/politic/2025/08/08/ministrul-de-externe-despre-infiintarea-bisericii-ortodoxe-romane-in-ucraina-autoritatile-ucrainene—1474707>; Ionuț Benea, “Cernăuți | Cum a ajuns Capela Mitropoliei români din Bucovina de Nord victimă colaterală a luptei dintre Kiev și Moscova”, *Europa Liberă*, 2024, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/culisele-preluarii-de-catre-autorita-tile-ucrainene-a-capelei-mitropolitane-din-cernauti-locul-de-rugaciune-al-romanilor/33105664.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Gherman et al., *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

for the Republic of Moldova or for Romanians living there. Instead, numerous private dealings occurred between political elites on the two sides of the Prut River, to the detriment of Romania's national security and to the advantage of the Russian Federation<sup>33,34</sup>.

Thus, although traumatic imaginary geographies exist for societies on both sides of the Prut – linked to Moldova and Romania, nostalgia, aspirations, and painful memories – it has been extremely easy for political elites on both sides to exploit this traumatic imaginary geography. This allowed them to avoid developing certain topics, policies, or national strategies (which were virtually non-existent), while cynically pursuing numerous personal ventures that served their own or their groups' interests<sup>35</sup>. Meanwhile, until recently, the Romanian language was still officially referred to there as the "Moldovan language," even though, as recent events have shown, a minimal degree of political will in Bucharest and Chișinău could have changed this relatively easily.

Also, until recently, The Metropoly of Bessarabia, belonging to the Romanian Orthodox Church, did not receive adequate support from the Romanian politicians when facing even violence from the Metropoly of Moldavia, which belongs to the Russian Patriarchy<sup>36</sup>. According to a survey from 2024, 63.9% of the citizens in the Republic of Moldova, which used to belong to the Romanian Patriarchate until Russian and later Soviet occupation, would like that Patriarch Daniel, the leader of the Romanian Orthodox Church, visit the Republic of Moldova<sup>37</sup>. Only 15.4% did not want Patriarch Daniel of the Romanian Orthodox Church to visit the Republic of Moldova<sup>38</sup>. However, such a visit needs to be politically negotiated, which Romanian political leaders have not managed to do until now. Again, we can notice a sense of neglect owing perhaps to an outdated imaginary geography, as well.

*The Middle East.* Regarding the Middle East in relation to Romania, we can discuss it both in terms of threats and vulnerabilities, as well as in terms of opportunities for Romania. This is because Romania maintained privileged relations with the region for many decades before 1990. However, when these relations were not continued and supported as a state strategy, they were once again exploited by certain individuals from the business sector, with implications that

<sup>33</sup> Sorin Ozon, "Caracatița" lui Plahotniuc s-a extins și în România. Ce afaceri și ce profituri fac "locotenentii" infractorului moldovean", *Libertatea*, 2025, <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/caracatița-lui-plahotniuc-s-a-extins-si-in-romania-ce-afaceri-si-ce-profituri-fac-locotenentii-infractorului-moldovean-5471397>.

<sup>34</sup> Iurie Sanduța and Daniel Bojin, with contributions from Marcela Zămosteanu, Dumitru Stoianov, Roman Filippov. "Avea lui Plahotniuc, feliată de un fugar român.", *Rise Project*, 2023, <https://www.riseproject.ro/investigations/uncategorized/avea-lui-plahotniuc-feliata-de-un-fugar-roman/>.

<sup>35</sup> Sorin Ozon, 2025, *op. cit.*; Iurie Sanduța and Daniel Bojin, *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> Ilie Cucu, "Mitropolia Basarabiei condamnă atacurile violente din partea structurii de jurisdicție moscovită", 2018, <https://mitropoliabasarabiei.md/mitropolia-basarabiei-condamna-atacurile-violente-din-partea-structurii-de-jurisdicție-moscovita/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ion Jigău, "Sondaj socio-politic. CBX-AXA – performed at the request of IDIS "Viitorul" and The University Foundation of The Black Sea", 2024, <http://viitorul.org/files/library/Studiu%20Omnibus%20IDI%202024.02.28%20final.pdf>, p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

extended even to national security<sup>39</sup>. Certainly, the Middle East does not occupy a prominent place in the imaginary geography of Romanian society, but this can serve only as an excuse for politicians – not for national security considerations or for Romania’s strategic opportunities.

*Israel.* Since we have mentioned the Middle East in terms of opportunities, we can again highlight the privileged relations Romania has maintained both with the state of Israel and through the numerous communities there of Romanian origin. Once more, although Romania never developed a coherent strategic approach toward Israel, a number of political figures cultivated private business relationships or official political appointments that, at times, had a significant impact on matters important not only for Romania’s national security but also for other local dimensions or local Israeli residents<sup>40</sup>. These practices have only generated significant confusion and a lack of trust or credibility in recent years, undermining Romania’s image even in the eyes of those in Israel who hold the country in high regard<sup>41</sup>.

In spite of a number of important purchases regarding military equipment, Israel has not featured prominently in Romania’s political or security public narratives. This is not only about the current sensitive context, due to the war in Gaza, but a long-standing issue. Meanwhile, private, opaque relationships have been abundant, causing serious harm to the national interests of both countries<sup>42</sup>.

The examples above are presented solely to illustrate what happens when a society’s imaginary geography focuses attention on one area while neglecting others, allowing various individuals or interest groups to instrumentalize these relationships for their own benefit.

*Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia.* Since we have previously mentioned examples of *imaginary geography* versus *factual geography*, we can also discuss a recently concluded war – the one in Nagorno-Karabakh (Mountainous Karabakh) – which lies 2,489 km East of us, less than the 2,556 km separating us from London.

<sup>39</sup> Alina Neagu, “Documentar Omar Hayssam – 20 de ani de inchisoare pentru terorism, o premiera in Romania. Cum a intrat sirianul in atentia opiniei publice, rapirea jurnalistilor si fuga din tara”, *HotNews*, 2013, <https://hotnews.ro/documentar-omar-hayssam-20-de-ani-de-inchisoare-pentru-terorism-o-premiera-in-romania-cum-a-intrat-sirianul-in-atentia-opinii-publice-rapirea-jurnalistilor-si-fuga-din-tara-593784>.

<sup>40</sup> Digi 24, “Condamnare definitivă în dosarul Black Cube”, 2017, [https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/justitie/black\\_cube/condamnare-definitiva-in-dosarul-black-cube-656994](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/justitie/black_cube/condamnare-definitiva-in-dosarul-black-cube-656994).

<sup>41</sup> Cornel Nistorescu, “Împărțirea ciolanelor pe tarlăua ICR”, *Cotidianul*, 2022a, <https://www.cotidianul.ro/impartirea-ciolanelor-pe-tarlaua-icr/>; Cornel Nistorescu, “ICR Tel Aviv, directorul Salomon sau Cine nu e cu noi e împotriva noastră”, *Cotidianul*, 2022b, <https://www.cotidianul.ro/icr-tel-aviv-directorul-salomon-sau-cine-nu-e-cu-noi-e-impotriva-noastra/>; Marius Pașcan, “Întrebare”, Parlamentul României, Camera Deputaților, 2018, <https://www.cdep.ro/interpel/2019/i9014A.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Cornel Nistorescu, 2022a, *op. cit.*; Digi 24, 2017, *op. cit.*; Cornel Nistorescu, 2022b, *op. cit.*; Marius Pașcan, 2018, *op. cit.*

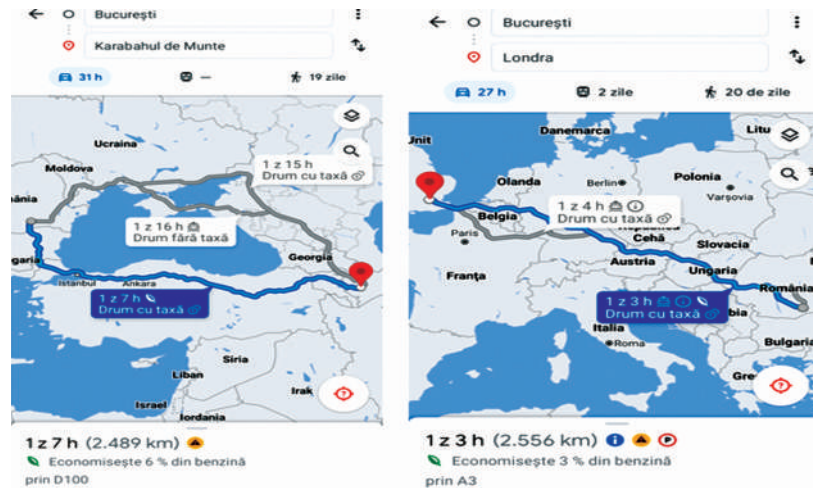


Figure 4. Distance between Bucharest and Nagorno-Karabakh, and Bucharest and London.<sup>43</sup>

Among the few positive developments in this direction, we can highlight the strategic partnership with Azerbaijan signed in 2009 and the strategic partnership with Georgia<sup>44</sup>. We can also mention the signing of a memorandum for the construction of liquefied natural gas facilities on the Black Sea – two terminals, one on the eastern shore and one on the western shore – together with Azerbaijan<sup>45</sup>, even though, unfortunately, it did not materialize. Additionally, there is an agreement to implement a project for a submarine electricity transmission cable from Azerbaijan to the European Union, signed by Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Romania, which seems to be going forward<sup>46</sup>. However, all of these initiatives are very recent; for a long time, nothing was done in this direction. Although it is quite late, there is hope that lessons have at least been learned from past mistakes and disinterest, that these agreements will be fully implemented, and that they will become part of a consistent strategy rather than merely another isolated, situational episode. Achieving this, however, depends on multiple factors and international actors, including the broader regional climate.

Nevertheless, the South Caucasus also includes Armenia, and one may wonder why Romania does not have a strategic partnership with this country as well.

<sup>43</sup> Source: Google Maps.

<sup>44</sup> Ministerul Afacerilor Externe. s.a. b. “Parteneriate strategice”, <https://www.mae.ro/node/1861>.

<sup>45</sup> Laura Culiță, “Acord între România și Azerbaidjan pentru un hub de gaz lichefiat la Marea Neagră”, *ProTv*, 2022, <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/international/acord-intre-romania-si-azerbaidjan-pentru-o-facilitate-de-gaz-lichefiat-la-marea-neagra.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Claudia Pirvoiu, “Transelectrica a înființat o companie cu Azerbaidjan, Georgia și Ungaria pentru cablul de curent continuu din Marea Neagră, de 3,5 miliarde de euro”, *Hotnews*, 2025, <https://hotnews.ro/trans-electrica-a-infintat-o-companie-cu-azerbaidjan-georgia-si-ungaria-pentru-cablul-de-curent-continuu-din-mar-ea-neagra-de-35-miliarde-de-euro-1891684>.

The longstanding and close cultural ties and friendship between Romania and Armenia, as well as current European and bilateral opportunities, would fully justify such a partnership.

*The Balkans.* Once again, it must be emphasized that all Romanian minority communities in the Balkans and other neighboring countries have been practically abandoned by the political class in Bucharest for the past thirty years<sup>47</sup>. Yet all of these communities hold considerable importance for any state from many perspectives, not least from a security standpoint, as they represent crucial bridges to the societies of their host countries. For example, even Bulgaria has been on an offensive lately trying to bind together all Bulgarian communities in the region, considering it a strategic priority and calling that “a single national body”<sup>48</sup>, a fact that Romania has not done. Obviously, we would not want Romania to behave in the irresponsible manner that Viktor Orbán has often behaved regarding Hungarian minorities abroad, however, a responsible, appropriate strategy, narrative and action should be undertaken by Romanian representatives.

Among the many human, national, humanitarian, and fundamental human rights arguments, there is also a significant component of foreign policy – strictly speaking, in terms of national security and international relations, the matter is quite straightforward: through these minorities, Romania’s regional weight would increase, the leverage Romania can exercise in relations with other states would grow, respect for Romania in the region would rise, and its soft power would be strengthened. Instead, Bucharest has abandoned these communities to the discretion of the respective states, taking advantage of the relative disinterest of Romanian society in this area, which itself does not occupy a prominent place in its imaginary geography, due to the half a century of Communist rule which basically closed borders and shut out information<sup>49</sup>. For example, Romanian and Aromanian speaking communities are not even recognized as minorities in Bulgaria and Greece, do not benefit from the protection of such a status. In Ukraine, the Romanian minority is not recognized as an indigenous minority, which is absurd. These should be starting points for the Romanian officials.

This is not about the cynical instrumentalization of one’s own communities abroad (even to their detriment), as other states sometimes practice (we have given above the example of Viktor Orbán), but it is ultimately about regional prestige – which is lost, in part, through such inaction by Bucharest.

Once again, while society may afford itself an imaginary geography, those responsible for Romania’s foreign policy, national strategies, and national security cannot. All the less understandable, then, is Romania’s lack of political engagement in the Balkans<sup>50</sup>, given that all other states are playing a very active role in the

<sup>47</sup> Baltasiu and Manole, *op. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> Mihai Isac, “Bulgarii de pretudinteni și Sofia, un pariu politic pentru 2026?”, *Karadeniz Press*, [https://karadeniz-press.ro/bulgarii-de-pretudinteni-si-sofia-un-pariu-politic-pentru-2026/?fbclid=IwDGRjcAPhfBpjbGNrA-F73GV4dG4DYWVtAjExAHNydgMGYXBwX2lkDDM1MDY4NTUzMTcyOAABHteBYTfaev9RMiibgx\\_kuRsEcs6m19Q6B95m9RL-on082C\\_jH-d19QZJji69\\_aem\\_MLOiXlvHbwjl4ZzzF3yOMw](https://karadeniz-press.ro/bulgarii-de-pretudinteni-si-sofia-un-pariu-politic-pentru-2026/?fbclid=IwDGRjcAPhfBpjbGNrA-F73GV4dG4DYWVtAjExAHNydgMGYXBwX2lkDDM1MDY4NTUzMTcyOAABHteBYTfaev9RMiibgx_kuRsEcs6m19Q6B95m9RL-on082C_jH-d19QZJji69_aem_MLOiXlvHbwjl4ZzzF3yOMw), 2025.

<sup>49</sup> Baltasiu and Manole, *op. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem.*

region, as we have given the Bulgarian example above. Most likely, here too, political decision-makers – pursuing political capital (which could not be generated through narratives about the Balkans) or personal/group interests – have, at the level of national strategy, abandoned nearly all initiatives in the Balkans<sup>51</sup>.

*The Russian Federation: Vulnerabilities  
and Threats Arising from Imaginary Geography*

Here, we must highlight how, over the past decades, the imaginary geography of Romanian society has perceived the Russian Federation – shaped by repeated historical traumas over the past centuries – essentially attempting to avoid looking at it at all, despite its geographical proximity. Meanwhile, members of Romania’s political and business elites, unburdened by such traumas, viewed the Russian Federation far more favorably, pursuing personal and group interests and allowing it to infiltrate key areas critical to Romania’s national security<sup>52</sup>.

Undoubtedly, at the official level, even before the outbreak of the War in Ukraine, Romania has acted appropriately with regard to the Russian Federation, refraining from the kinds of dealings that France, Germany, Hungary, and other states engaged in, which left much of Europe dependent on Russia. However, in other dimensions, Romania’s approach has been seriously flawed.

- First, through strategic non-engagement in the Republic of Moldova, consistently allowing Moscow to build and maintain levers of power, while the Romanian state did not even establish cultural levers. For example, we mentioned earlier that Romania has not held any position of a European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for the Republic of Moldova, while paradoxically, Hungary has had one, and a very influential one. Romania has not held any position of Head of the European Union Delegation in the Republic of Moldova. Romania has not held any position of European Commissioner for Enlargement, the officials who manage relations with the Republic of Moldova, the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Albania, and other states. These are very important political positions that signal interest, involvement, a strategy, and Romania has not held any of them, while Hungary, for example, has held both, and this is not by accident.

We have also mentioned earlier the lack of political support coming from Romania for the Metropoly of Bessarabia, and for a visit of the Romanian Patriarch Daniel in the Republic of Moldova, a visit desired by the very citizens of the Republic. We can also add the delay in building big infrastructure projects in

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> *Digi 24*, “România Furată. Cazul Mechel – cum au ajuns rușii să controleze mare parte din siderurgia românească”, 2015, <https://www.digi24.ro/special/campanii-digi24/romania-furata/romania-furata-cazul-mechel-cum-au-ajuns-rusii-sa-controleze-mare-parte-din-siderurgia-romaneasca-343777>; Petru Zoltan, “România importă pulberi pentru armament din Rusia, via Serbia, deși este țară NATO cu rol strategic”, *Newsweek*, 2020, <https://newsweek.ro/investigatii/importam-pulberi-pentru-armament-din-rusia-via-serbia>; Ioana Șerbu and Daniel Bojin and Cristi Ciupercă, “Rafo: amanetată la ruși, sechestrată de stat”, *Rise Project*, 2015, <https://www.riseproject.ro/rafo-amanetata-la-rusi-sechestrata-de-stat/>; Sorin Ozon, “Cel mai iubit oligarh din România. Proprietarul rus al ALRO este susținut de un KGB-ist care conduce industria de apărare a Rusiei”, *Ziare.com*, 2022, <https://ziare.com/oligarhi-rusia/oligarhi-rusi-alro-slatina-machitsky-kgb-1735357>.

order to connect the Republic of Moldova with Romania concerning natural gas and electricity transport, or a highway. Even though the natural gas connection has finally happened in late 2022, owing much to the war in Ukraine, the Vulcănești-Chișinău high voltage line has not yet become operational. It may happen in February or March 2026<sup>53</sup>. This was a project that a Romanian company offered to build, and yet the authorities in the Republic of Moldova awarded the project to an Indian company<sup>54</sup>. We can notice the lack of political leverage or implication of the Romanian officials. There have been investigations showing explicitly how these big infrastructure strategic projects have been delayed owing to Russian interests<sup>55</sup>.

- Second, through the way the political class, pursuing personal or group interests, permitted the infiltration of the Russian Federation into Romania's strategic sectors via various privatizations or highly questionable acquisitions, thereby weakening and rendering Romania vulnerable across multiple dimensions<sup>56</sup>.

Thus, while at the level of public rhetoric and national strategy we had – quite rightly – identified Russia as a threat<sup>57</sup>, as early as the previous National Defence Strategy, at the level of private business activity with implications for national security, collaborations with the Russian side were in fact proceeding quite smoothly. The same dynamic can be observed in all earlier examples discussed here – Syria, Israel, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Russia, or the Republic of Moldova.

Highlighting a few of these examples was essential to demonstrate the scale of what was happening at the level of private interests, while the imaginary geography of Romanian society focused exclusively on the West<sup>58</sup>. Figures within the political elites, more formally than genuinely, provided Romanian society with what it desired – an alignment with the West – while simultaneously opening up essential sectors of Romania toward the East. In discourse, they were all pro-European, pro-NATO, pro-EU, and anti-Russia; in practice, however, Russia, through the involvement of certain Romanian actors, controlled important sectors of the country – and continues to do so in some areas<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> Doina Bejenaru, “Dorin Junghietu, la Radio Moldova: “Spre sfârșitul lui februarie – începutul lui martie, vor trece primii kilowați prin linia Vulcănești-Chișinău”, *Moldova 1*, 2026, <https://moldova1.md/p/66351/dorin-junghietu-la-radio-moldova—spre-sfarsitul-lui-februarie—inceputul-lui-martie-vor-trece-primii-kilowati-pe-linia-vulcanesti-chisinau->.

<sup>54</sup> Redacția ZdG, “Începe construcția liniei electrice Vulcănești – Chișinău. Cât costă proiectul și cine-l va implementa”, *Ziarul de Gardă*, 2024, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-economice/incepe-construcția-linii-electrice-vulcanesti-chisinau-cat-costa-proiectul-si-cine-l-va-implementa/>.

<sup>55</sup> Cristian Pantazi and Mădălin Necșuțu, “România trage, Rusia încurcă. Marile probleme ale gazoductului Iași-Chișinău”, 2019, <https://sinopsis.info.ro/2019/01/20/romania-trage-rusia-incurca-marile-probleme-ale-gazoductului-iasi-chisinau/>.

<sup>56</sup> Digi 24, *op. cit.*; Petru Zoltan, *op. cit.*; Ioana Șerbu et al., *op. cit.*; Sorin Ozon, *op. cit.*

<sup>57</sup> Administrația Prezidențială, *Strategia Națională de Apărare a Țării pentru perioada 2020-2024*, Bucharest, 2020, [https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia\\_Nationala\\_de\\_Aparare\\_a\\_Tarii\\_2020\\_2024.pdf](https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia_Nationala_de_Aparare_a_Tarii_2020_2024.pdf), p. 24.

<sup>58</sup> Digi 24, *op. cit.*; Petru Zoltan, *op. cit.*; Ioana Șerbu et al., *op. cit.*; Sorin Ozon, 2022, *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> Pantazi and Necșuțu, *op. cit.*; Sorin Ozon, *op. cit.*; Sanduța and Bojin, *op. cit.*

During all of this – and much more – the imaginary geography of Romanian society saw only the West. This was perfectly convenient for certain politicians and businesspeople, who could conduct their dealings with the Russian East without obstruction, to the detriment of Romania’s national interests, both domestically and in the Republic of Moldova, as we have shown above. This is imaginary geography cynically instrumentalized to the detriment of a society. Informally speaking, it resembles a *geopolitical shell game*: all eyes are fixed on one hand, while the other hand quietly takes what it wants.

### *Imaginary Geography vs. Personal Geography*

Certainly, in all of the above, one could invoke an explanation for this imaginary geography – that most invasions leaving countless traumas in Romania came from the eastern space: beginning with the migratory peoples from Asia in antiquity and the early Middle Ages, continuing with the Mongol invasion, the Ottoman Turkish invasions, Tatar incursions, and followed by approximately twelve Russian invasions in Romanian territory. From this perspective, it is understandable why, in terms of imaginary geography, society may hesitate to look eastward. However, this explanation is valid for Romanian society, not for those who govern it. From the standpoint of national security, opportunities, and national strategies across all dimensions – security, identity, geopolitics, economy, energy, etc. – *we are compelled to look east*. Yet, at the level of national strategy, this must be done in service of national interests, not at the private level, contrary to the country’s interests. And we are *compelled* to look West as well, and pursue national interests in that direction as well, as economic development can only happen by being a part of the European Union, and security can only be provided by being a part of NATO. These two main directions are actually what Ukraine is fighting for as we speak.

As we have said, we can understand that these strictly West-oriented strategies were generated, influenced, and endorsed by the political class – those who, aware of or sensitive to the direction of Romanian society’s imaginary geography, did not attempt to pursue the interests of the Romanian State toward the East or South. Instead, they insisted exclusively on this Western orientation to serve political capital and other purposes, providing a pretext before public opinion that they were doing what was necessary for Romanian society. Yet, they did not do what was truly necessary for Romanian society, because:

- In the West, although Romania has been integrated into essential structures for the country’s development – NATO and the EU – the national interests were not pursued there as they should have been. This failure may even compromise, in the eyes of part of society, Romania’s Western orientation, with potentially catastrophic effects. For example, according to a survey from September 2025, almost 80% of Romanian citizens agreed that the direction we should follow is West, NATO and the EU<sup>60</sup>, exactly what we have been arguing throughout this

<sup>60</sup> Sebastian Eduard (ed.), “Ce arată cel mai recent sondaj de opinie în privința apartenenței românilor la UE și NATO. Câți români ar dori ieșirea din Uniune?”, *Digi24*, 2025, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/ce-arata-cel-mai-recent-sondaj-de-opinie-in-privinta-apartenentei-romanilor-la-ue-si-nato-cati-romani-ar-dori-iesirea-din-uniune-3406139>.

paper. However, 88% of Romanians agreed that “Romania should play a more active role on the international stage.”<sup>61</sup> 88% is not an accidental percent, it is the consequence of Romanian interests not being adequately pursued by officials, and the vast majority of the Romanian society is noticing it.;

- And toward the East, Romania seems to have largely ignored both:

- *threats* – how else can we characterize the sale of NATO-certified equipment from the Târgoviște Special Steel Plant to Russian entities, the sale of refineries such as RAFO Onești, or the closure of munitions factories, leaving us dependent on imports from Serbia? There are many other examples. Or how else can we describe the nurturing and toleration of a “Moldovan” identity – a construct deliberately created by Stalin and the USSR as a weapon against Romanians on both sides of the Prut River? Out of the four main countries that have been divided due to the Cold War or due to the Second World War, Germany and Vietnam have reunited, South Korea has a Ministry for Reunification despite the fact that it is still at war, theoretically, with North Korea. It is only Romania and The Republic of Moldova that are still debating whether Stalin was right or not to divide a country into two or to invent an alternative identity for the occupied territory. This was compounded, until recently, by the absence of any coherent institutional efforts to foster real rapprochement in view of a potential reunification, which would have been nothing other than the natural reintegration of a single people;

- *and the opportunities* – consider the energy prospects in Kazakhstan and across Central Asia, closer engagement with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (even though strategic partnerships exist with the latter two), as well as the opportunities presented by the Republic of Moldova. Wherever there have been positive developments, we may notice they have often happened only recently, largely due to the situation created by the War in Ukraine, and perhaps not even due to the initiative of the Romanian officials themselves. It is true that it is better late than never, but we would like to see more initiative and energy regarding both collaboration with Armenia, for example, and with the whole of Central Asia.

We may notice that the Republic of Moldova appears both as a source of threats – through the currents and groups that proliferate there, fueled by the lack of proper pursue of national interests by Romanian state representatives (as we have showed a survey earlier mentioning that 88% of Romanian citizens thought that “Romania should play a more active role on the international stage”<sup>62</sup> – and as a source of opportunities, not only pragmatic, economic, or security-related, and not solely national, since we are still dealing with a branch of the Romanian nationality. Additionally, these opportunities relate to the country’s status, Romania’s regional prestige, soft power – which is so important today – and the respect it commands from other states in the region.

It can be said that some political figures lack an imaginary geography, which is positive; however, they may have a personal geography, which is far less beneficial.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem.*

### Conclusions

It is extremely important to have a clear understanding of both the imaginary geography of our own society and that of other societies. We need to know what other societies desire in order to meet their needs for cooperation, what they aspire to so we understand what to avoid, and what they fear so that we can offer them alternatives or even security.

A proper understanding of the imaginary geography of other regions or states – whether near or far – is essential. Consider, for example, the vast difference between how China, Asia, South America, or Africa perceive the war in Ukraine compared to our own perspective, or how it is viewed by the Russian Federation. This difference is enormous, and if we fail to understand the other party's perspective, we risk overlooking threats or missing beneficial opportunities. In the worst case, we risk deepening fractures in international relations that will come at a cost.

And if we look closely at certain states close to us, such as Hungary and Türkiye, we can see how the Trianon Trauma and the Sèvres Syndrome continue to have an overwhelming impact on their societies and shape the imaginary geography of these states<sup>63</sup>. These are realities it is important to understand – exactly as Caroline Desbiens notes in the quote at the beginning of this analysis: “Imaginative geographies are representations of peoples and places that express the perceptions, desires, fantasies, fears, and projections of their authors, who are generally external observers.”<sup>64</sup> “The fears and the projections” of societies surrounding us must be approached and understood with great care.

The imaginary geography of Romanian society has rightly oriented us toward the West. However, the geography of national security and Romania's interests must also pay close attention to the East – and this does not refer solely to the Russian Federation. We are obliged to have, or to create, or to take advantage of an alternative imaginary geography, as others do – for example, Poland with the *Three Seas Initiative* or the *Intermarium*, explicitly referred to as an “imagined geography” in an analysis available here<sup>65</sup>. Although we do not necessarily consider this project an exercise in imaginary geography, but rather a strategic exercise – similar to the *Three Seas Initiative* – it is nonetheless a product shaped, in part, by an imaginary geography.

If Romanian society has faced and continues to face westward, attempting in a sense to flee from the dramatic memories evoked by the East, that is understandable. However, national security and national strategies (when or if they exist) are obliged to look both East and South – not just businesspeople,

<sup>63</sup> Matei Blănu, “Sondaje – Ce cred turcii într-adevăr despre Occident? Între dorința de prosperitate, complexul de superioritate și teama din Sindromul Sèvres”, *LARICS – Adevărul*, 2023, <https://adevarul.ro/blogurile-adevarul/sondaje-ce-cred-turcii-intr-adevar-despre-2289737.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Caroline Desbiens, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Laruelle, Marlene and Rivera, Ellen., “Imagined Geographies of Central and Eastern Europe: The Concept of Intermarium”. Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, IERES Occasional Papers, 2019, [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/laruelle-rivera-ieres\\_papers\\_march\\_2019\\_1.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/laruelle-rivera-ieres_papers_march_2019_1.pdf).

more or less concerned with the national security of society as a whole. Looking at Romania's strategic partnerships and special relationships<sup>66</sup>, we can see that Romania does not have a strategic partnership or even special relations with any country in Central Asia, a region that will become increasingly important. Nor does it have a strategic partnership with any country in Africa, the Middle East – not even Israel – South or Central America, Polynesia, ASEAN member states, Australia, or New Zealand. This reflects a strategy extremely limited in imagination and in the resolve to act, resulting in a very short and narrow list of strategic partnerships and special relationships for a country of Romania's size and potential.

We conclude with what has already been stated: it is natural and entirely legitimate for societies and citizens to have an imaginary geography, as this is an intrinsic part of the construction of a society and a nation. National security, a country's foreign policy, and its international relations, however, cannot afford this luxury. They are, instead, obliged to have a thorough understanding of both the imaginary geography of their own citizens and – perhaps even more critically – that of other external actors.

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