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Navigating through the Watershed

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

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Preface

This thesis was written in the spring of 2024, and my trips to Georgia and Moldova took place between the 12th and 20th of February. On my first morning in Tbilisi, I had breakfast at a café-ice cream shop along Shota Rustaveli Ave, the same main street that is now filled with Georgian protesters every evening. That morning, the street was calm. My flight had arrived at 5 a.m. After sleeping for only four hours, I prepared for my first interview with former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, whom I met on the outskirts of Tbilisi.

In Chişinău, one memorable moment was when I discovered that Sweden's Radio had sent a correspondent to cover the Russian Presidential election, which coincided with my visit. Since a significant Russian minority lives in Moldova, many people voted at the Russian Embassy in Chişinău. I reached out to the correspondent that evening, and it turned out we were nearly on the same street in the small city centre. We identified an Irish pub located between us, met there, and had a pint. It was also apparently Saint Patrick's Day. Little did I know that my first Saint Patrick's celebration would happen in Chişinău.

While I have taken the opportunity to improve the language of this version of my thesis to make it more pleasant, I decided not to alter the content from the original version. This means that you will sometimes come across references to 'the upcoming elections', which, of course, have already taken place.

The Georgian Parliamentary elections took place on the 26th of October. The outcome is well known. Georgian Dream claimed victory, in stark contrast to what reliable polls had predicted. The international election observers' report was clear, noting pressure on public sector employees and vote-buying. Neither the EU nor the US have formally recognised the result. In relation to my findings, it can be argued that recent developments indicate that Georgian Dream is no longer even trying to appear legitimate. The permissiveness of the internal environment had previously incentivised the government to, on a declarative level, pursue a pro-European policy. After the election in October, the government decided to override its population and pause the EU integration process until 2028. Unsurprisingly, this sparked an outcry within the Georgian population, and the protest movement has now been active for 64 consecutive days. With a determination to cling to power, the government has relied on violent repression and total control over the country's institutions. Driven by a perceived threat to elite survival, it has thus far managed to stay in power. The EU has yet to step up in this situation, risking negative consequences for its credibility among the Georgian people.

At the same time, Moldova is still in an election cycle, where the pro-European government faces obstacle after obstacle. On the 20th of October, the Moldovan people voted by a tiny margin to amend the country's constitution to include EU aspirations. On the same day, President Sandu fell short of gaining enough support to be re-elected without a second round. On the 3rd of November, she won against the pro-Russian challenger with 55% of the vote. In all these elections, massive Russian interference has been observed, and votes from the Moldovan diaspora have been crucial in

ensuring that the country stays on its pro-European path. One crucial test remains for the government: securing a victory in the Parliamentary elections later in 2025. This will be the hardest one, as the vote is proportional. A majority has been crucial for PAS to push through reforms and fight corruption, thus building strong momentum in the EU integration process and making an impression on Brussels. Losing this majority would likely make this journey considerably more challenging.

In addition to the internal tensions, external developments in 2025 are likely to have a significant influence, impacting the systemic incentives at play. What will Donald Trump's policy be on Russia, Ukraine, and the post-Soviet states? Will Germany and France overcome internal political turmoil, reactivate the Franco-German engine, and strengthen the EU's leadership in the region? Will Romania, Moldova's most important partner, continue its key role after the May presidential election? Will 2025 be the last year of fighting in Ukraine? What might a peace deal look like, and what signals would such a deal send to Georgia and Moldova? Many questions remain unanswered.

In this thesis, I illustrate how both internal and external factors shape history. I hope it will help understand recent developments and provide theoretical tools for navigating both the short-term and long-term futures of Georgia and Moldova.

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Abstract

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

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1. Introduction

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

– Olaf Scholz

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

Georgia's and Moldova's trajectories since independence have exhibited both similarities and differences. Following a turbulent 90s marked by civil war, corruption and crime, Georgia emerged, in the aftermath of the 2003 Rose Revolution, the star pupil in the group of countries that, since 2009, have comprised the EU's Eastern Partnership (Meister, 2018, p. 304).[1] During the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili (2004 to 2013), the country underwent significant modernisation, made strides in combating corruption, and took major steps towards the EU and NATO (Gvalia et al., 2019, p. 22 &

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

30). In 2008, Russia invaded the country, resulting in the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – regions amounting to 20% of Georgian territory (Euractiv, 6 August 2021). The country has an overwhelmingly pro-European and pro-Western public opinion, with a late-2023 poll showed that 86% *fully or somewhat positive* supports for EU membership (IRI, 2023).

By contrast, Moldova, often regarded as Europe's poorest country, has grappled with internal tensions between pro-European and pro-Russian elites, parties, and electorates (Rumer, 2017). The governments in Chișinău have faced challenges from two pro-Russian autonomous regions: Transnistria in the east and Gagauzia in the south. Transnistria has been a particularly complicated issue due to its breakaway status following a bloody civil war in 1992. To this day, the region hosts approximately 1500 Russian peacekeeping soldiers (Całus, 2023a). Corruption has been widespread among the Moldovan elite and within society (Rumer, 2017). In 2014, some of the most powerful political figures in the country were involved in a bank fraud scandal involving the theft of assets amounting to 12% of the country's GDP (Reuters, 29 January 2024). The orchestrator of the fraud, Ilan Shor, was sentenced to 15 years in prison but remains in exile in Israel, from where he organises pro-Russian protests in Moldova against the incumbent pro-European government with the intent to overthrow it (Reuters, 29 January 2024).

Today, many of the attributes are still present, and Georgia scores overall better than Moldova when it comes to the technical aspects of EU integration, such as *the existence of a functioning market economy* (COM, 2023a, p. 54; COM, 2023b, p. 56). On the other hand, their roles on the international stage have changed significantly. Admittedly, the pro-European government in Chișinău still struggles with pro-Russian populations in the electorate, Transnistria and Gagauzia. These tensions have only worsened since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Evans et al., 2024; Reuters, 21 April 2024). Meanwhile, Russia has done its best to destabilise Moldova through illegal funding of parties and hybrid attacks (Hedenskog, 2023). Nevertheless, the incumbent government appears to be the most pro-European and genuinly reform-oriented since independence. The country has taken bold steps towards the EU and shown significant progress in the European Commission's latest report (COM, 2023b). Trade has been diversified away from Russia and there is increasing alignment with Western sanctions (Całus, 2023b; RFE/RL, 2 February 2024). By contrast, Georgia has pursued a more ambiguous foreign policy, which the Georgian government describes as 'cautious', 'pragmatic', or 'practical' (Georgian Diplomat, Interview with the Author). Under the rule of the Georgian Dream party, which has governed since 2012, the country has taken several steps to normalise its relations with Russia (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023, p. 680). The government has decided not to introduce Western sanctions since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (GPB, 28 February 2022). In Brussels, there are doubts about whether the Georgian application for membership is truly genuine or if it is mainly a symbolic gesture aimed at the pro-European electorate in the country, timed for the upcoming parliamentary elections in October 2024 (European Diplomat, Interview with the Author). While the country still scores highly in several technical areas of the enlargement process, backlashes have been observed in critical areas such as the rule of law, democracy, and alignment with the EU's Common

Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (COM, 2023a). Among the Georgian opposition, there is a strong sense of frustration at seeing the country fall behind Ukraine and Moldova, which were previously far behind Georgia in terms of EU accession (Georgian Former PM, Interview with the Author).

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

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

While EU-centred examinations of general trends, such as Europeanization in the Eastern neighbourhood, have received attention in the EU literature for many years, less attention has been given to the external and internal forces impacting the foreign policy decisions of governments in these states (Hyde-Price, 2021, p. 153). Research on these forces and considerations deserves greater attention from scholars within European Studies. This is especially true at a time when the EU does not act in a vacuum but in rivalry with other powers that are also trying to integrate these states into their spheres of influence. During a recent State Visit to the University of Gothenburg, Finnish President Alexander Stubb argued that the current state of global disorder might settle within a decade (Länsstyrelsen Västra Götaland, 2024). No one knows what that order will look like, but even small steps can have long-term consequences. The EU's door for enlargement will likely not be open forever, while Putin's predominant strategic ambition is to regain control over Russia's 'lost empire'. That is why several countries are now in a watershed moment. By examining the drivers behind Georgia's and Moldova's foreign policies through the lens of neoclassical realism – using a mixed-methods approach of elite interviews, policy documents and secondary sources – this study represents a first step towards a greater understanding of the forces impacting the strategic considerations of post-

Soviet states navigating between the West and the East. At the outskirts of Europe but at the epicentre of geopolitics.

1.2. Aim

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

2. Previous Research

This chapter reviews previous research to identify the research problem concerning foreign policy behaviour of small states towards more powerful neighbours, with a focus on post-Soviet states navigating between the rival systems of the EU and Russia. The chapter is divided into two subchapters, each addressing a distinct field of research: *Small State Studies* and *Foreign Policy Analysis of Post-Soviet States*. These sections highlight valuable findings that are relevant to this thesis, while also specifying the existing research gaps. The first gap lies in the absence of comparative case studies that examine two cases from the same theoretical prism. The second gap is the fact that most studies on Georgia and Moldova are several years old and much has changed in the international landscape in recent years, particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

To begin with, every study of foreign policy needs a definition of what foreign policy is. There has been considerable debate regarding how narrow or broad this definition should be. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to apply Hill's definition from 2003, which views foreign policy not only as a means of engaging with external actors but also as a tool to achieve various domestic objectives. Consequently, this definition combines "the critical but intermittent problems of war and peace, autonomy and outside interference" with "modern concerns of welfare, prosperity and national identity" (Hill, 2003, p. 254).[2] From this perspective, foreign policy concerns the fundamental question of a state's orientation in the world. Hill's definition is particularly useful since it can be argued that Georgia's and Moldova's behaviour is not only a matter of foreign policy directed towards external actors but also in how the countries position themselves between the EU's system and the Russian governance model. This orientation will fundamentally shape the future of these countries. This is not least evident in the way deepening partnerships with either the EU or Russia necessitate domestic adaptations within the countries in question (Delcour, 2015, p. 316). Consequently, the analysis will encompass not only the activities of foreign ministries but also broader issues related to the countries' positioning in the world.

2.1. Why Study Small States?

The following subchapter begins with a discussion of the definition of small states. It then presents the primary arguments from small-state scholars regarding how the behaviour of small states differ from that of larger states, and how this understanding can contribute to the disciplines of International Relations (IR) and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). The review continues with a brief overview of the various foreign policy strategies that small states employ to manage their smallness, accompanied by examples from relevant case studies. Finally, I will address the limitations of Small State Studies and

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

explain why an explanatory study of Georgia's and Moldova's foreign policy can make a valuable contribution to the field. In this context, I will highlight which findings are particularly useful for my analysis.

As noted in the introduction, scholars have debated how small states should be defined. This is a crucial question, as the definition establishes the boundaries of the field. Various measurements, ranging from population or economic size to military capabilities, have been proposed, with further debate on whether absolute thresholds should be established (Panke & Thorhallsson, 2024, p. 502). The definition outlined in the introduction is the most promising, as it rests on two pillars: an internal pillar focusing on political, economic, and administrative capabilities, and a relative/external pillar that emphasises the asymmetrical relationship towards other states.

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

How can small states manage their relative fragility and increase their chances to security and prosperity? Scholars within the field of Small State Studies argue that small states tend to employ strategies such as shelter-seeking, neutrality and hedging (Panke & Thorhallsson, 2024, p. 501-502). Shelter-seeking refers to states that seek international shelter, such as the EU and/or NATO, "as they need to compensate for their integral structural weaknesses" (Panke & Thorhallsson, 2024, p. 503) – both in terms of security and economic prosperity. Neutrality is the strategy of avoiding military involvement in geopolitical conflicts by remaining non-aligned (Panke & Thorhalsson, 2024, p. 505). Hedging entails diversifying a state's bets in terms of both security and economy through a 'multi-vector foreign policy', cooperating in multiple directions to maximise benefits (Panke & Thorhallsson, 2024, p. 502). In addition, the classic approaches of bandwagoning and balancing should be mentioned. Bandwagoning is a strategy employed to manage the threat posed by a greater power by aligning with it or at least facilitating its interests (Waltz, 1979, p. 118). In contrast, balancing involves developing resilience through alternative coalitions or alliances aimed at deterring or containing the threat (Waltz, 1979, p. 126). These different approaches have, to a different extent, been applied to small EU states, post-Soviet states, microstates in the Caribbean, Gulf States and Asian states (Braveboy-

Wagner, 2010; Bueger & Wivel, 2018; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Kuik, 2008). Recently, the decisions of Finland and Sweden to abandon their non-alignment and apply for NATO membership have received significant scholarly attention, such as in Thorhallsson & Vidal (2023) and Michalski et al. (2024).

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

Which approaches can be useful for my examination? First, Jervis' observation that small states operate within a narrower margin of time and error offers a valuable insight. Second, different strategies can help identify the dependent variable, namely the diverse foreign policy outcomes observed in the two countries. In this regard, Georgia's foreign policy appears to be characterised by hedging, as it seeks to maintain relationships with both the EU and Russia. Meanwhile, Moldova is intensifying its European integration process, indicative of a shelter-seeking strategy. However, Chișinău has thus far maintained its neutrality status, continuing a neutrality strategy in terms of military non-alignment. This combination of shelter-seeking and neutrality aligns with Wivel's (2021, p. 8) finding that small states "rarely pursue balancing" because "their main motive is to use one or more great powers as a shield against threatening power(s), not to affect the balance of power and, by definition their limited capabilities that have little effect on the overall balance".

In conclusion, studying small states enhances our understanding of the international system and the considerations that smaller states – representing a significant portion of the world's sovereign states – typically contend with. Furthermore, deepening our knowledge of the dynamics in Georgia and Moldova is particularly relevant given their potential future membership in the European Union. Nonetheless, the field has yet to produce a comprehensive theory capable of fully explaining the diversity of choices made by small states.

2.2. Foreign Policy Analysis of Post-Soviet States

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

With some exceptions (Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan), post-Soviet states are also small states, with populations of 10 million or fewer. These are, by far, the weaker actors in their relationships with both the EU and Russia. Consequently, foreign policy analysis of post-Soviet states can be considered a sub-category within the small states literature. However, this field is concerned with its own specific questions: What are the implications of Russia's continuing "security, energy, and cultural power" alongside its declining role in "trade and economic development" (Meister, 2018, p. 301)? Why, and in which policy areas, has the EU succeeded – or failed – to achieve its objectives regarding Europeanization (Schimmelfennig, 2021, p. 124) and the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy (Hyde-Price, 2021, p. 157)? What are the dynamics between pro-European and pro-Russian forces within these countries? And how can the foreign policies of post-Soviet states be understood?

These questions have prompted scholars to make several key observations. One pertains to the success or failure of Europeanization, which can be contrasted with Russian influence. Schimmelfennig (2021, p. 131) has found that the EU's promotion of democratic governance is more successful in its Eastern neighbourhood when accompanied by "a credible offer of EU membership", whereas its success in other cases is limited to specific policy areas. The membership prospect can now be applied to Georgia and Moldova, which opens an interesting opportunity for theory-testing Schimmelfennig's notion. The EU has also significantly influenced the economic sphere, with post-Soviet states benefiting considerably from trade agreements with the bloc (Cantir & Kennedy, 2015, p. 407). On the other hand, Russia's pull factors remain influential in certain areas. Despite its use of coercive strategies and hybrid threats, countries like Belarus and Armenia have depended heavily on Russia for security and/or economic support (Meister, 2018, p. 304). In summary, the states in question experience competing pull factors: "while the EU tries to transform its Eastern neighbors through association and free trade agreements, Russia works to reintegrate these states in its security and economic institutions" (Meister, 2018, p. 310). For these states, the EU and Russia clearly represent two rival systems.

A second observation stresses that the classic foreign policy strategies of bandwagoning and balancing are exceptions rather than the norm among post-Soviet states. Instead, these states have generally pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, incorporating hedging and wedging strategies (Gnedina, 2015, p. 1007 & 1010; Preiherman, 2017, p. 4; Meister, 2018, p. 306). The multi-vector approach seeks to exploit the rivalry between more powerful actors to extract benefits. While hedging has already been defined, wedging involves internationalising disputes – such as appealing to the EU during disagreements with Russia, and vice versa in case of a disagreement with Russia, involving the

EU and vice versa – allowing these states to "threaten defection to an alternative camp, 'trade' loyalty and exploit information asymmetries" (Gnedina, 2015, p. 1013). Post-Soviet states in Europe typically navigate between Russia and the EU, while those in Central Asia juggle relations with Russia, the EU and China (Meister, 2018, p. 303). An important point raised in these studies is that the multi-vector foreign policy does not necessarily serve the countries' long-term interests. Instead, it often reflects the incentives of post-Soviet elites "who are more focused on personal short-term benefits than their states' sustainable development through reforms and modernization" (Meister, 2018, p. 309). This dynamic explains the persistence of multi-vector foreign policies, as "any decision to integrate with one side would have detrimental implications for these elites: stronger integration with Russia would result in a loss of sovereignty and the redistribution of resources in favor of Russian elites; integrating with the EU would further challenge their power position and undermine rent-seeking options through increasing political competition, transparency, and rule of law" (Meister, 2018, p. 309-310). Given the role of elite interests, this factor will be incorporated into the analytical framework of this thesis. Moreover, multi-vector foreign policy appears to be a more fitting label for Georgia's dependent variable than hedging alone, as wedging captures the bargaining aspect that is evident in Georgia's strategic ambiguity.

Regarding research on Georgia and Moldova, several studies have been conducted, most of which examine both international and domestic factors. This dual focus is essential for understanding the behaviour of single states within the international system, as solely concentrating on either the international or domestic level cannot provide a comprehensive explanation. This argument will be further elaborated in the theoretical framework chapter below. Notable studies include a neoclassical realist analysis of Georgia's intensification of pro-European policies beginning in 2003 (Gvalia et al., 2019, p. 21), Georgia's pivot toward normalising relations with Russia starting in 2012 (Lebandize & Kakachia, 2023, p. 676), Moldova's surprising shift away from Russia and toward the EU under a Communist government in 2003 (Cantir & Kennedy, 2015, p. 397), and an analysis of Moldova's ambiguous foreign policy under alternating pro-European and pro-Russian governments between 2010 and 2019 (Morar & Dembińska, 2020). Additionally, Dinesen & Wivel (2024) offer a comparative case study of the security dilemmas faced by both countries. While all these studies are highly valuable, special mention should be given to Cantir & Kennedy's work. Their study introduces a promising multi-level analytical framework comprising five factors – three external and two domestic – that may help explain foreign policy choices of post-Soviet states (Cantir & Kennedy, 2015, p. 398). These factors are integrated into the neoclassical realist framework used in this thesis and is elaborated further in the theoretical chapter.

The focus of previous studies has been clear and fruitful, often explaining strategies through a combination of states' positions in the international system and domestic factors. However, there is, with the exception of Dinesen & Wivel (2014), a notable lack of comparative case studies investigating two post-Soviet states through the same theoretical lens. Comparative case studies are particularly valuable as they can better illustrate the explanatory power of various factors: if a single factor explains

only one case, it says not very much, but if it accounts for differences between two cases, its explanatory strength becomes more compelling. Addressing this gap is a primary objective of this thesis. Like many other studies on post-Soviet states, I will utilise the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism, as it has effectively highlighted both the vulnerability of post-Soviet states in the external environment and the internal dynamics of their societies. Moreover, this thesis aims to refine the neoclassical realist toolbox by incorporating Cantir & Kennedy's multi-level analytical framework. Finally, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge since many the mentioned studies were conducted, particularly Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is time to contribute with new studies on the dynamics in the post-Soviet states.

3. The Theoretical Framework of Neoclassical Realism

This thesis employs neoclassical realism as its theoretical framework. As noted above, neoclassical realism has proven effective in explaining the foreign policy choices of Georgia (Gvalia et al., 2019; Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023). However, there is a notable lack of theory-testing studies that utilise a comparative analysis applying the same factors to multiple cases. To date, a standardised conceptual framework for neoclassical realism has not yet emerged that can be consistently applied across empirical cases. On the other hand, the significance lies not in the precise terms of the factors but in the interplay between different levels of the framework. For this study, I will draw on concepts developed by two of the theory's most influential scholars, Rose (1998) and Ripsman (2011), while incorporating Cantir & Kennedy's (2015) multi-level analytical framework that was briefly mentioned in *Previous Research*.

The fundamental idea of neoclassical realism is to simultaneously address the limitations of neorealism and the shortcomings of *Innenpolitik* by integrating "both external and internal variables" into a unified framework for explaining foreign policy outcomes (Rose, 1998, p. 146). This approach differs from neorealism, which focuses exclusively on external factors, adopting a 'helicopter perspective' on state behaviour within the international system. The ambition of neorealists was never to explain the foreign policy choices of single states (Rose, 1998, p. 145). Neither can *Innenpolitik*, an umbrella term for approaches that "explain foreign policy primarily in terms of internal characteristics of states, their domestic political processes and the individuals, parties, and coalitions that lead them" (Ripsman, 2011, p. 10). Neorealism and *Innenpolitik* struggle namely with the same but opposite problem: Neorealism cannot account for *variation* in outcomes among countries with *similar* systemic incentives or for *similar* outcomes among countries with *different* systemic incentives. *Innenpolitik* encounters the same issue when replacing systemic factors with internal variables.

Considering neorealism, it can be argued that "the influence of systemic factors may often be more apparent from a distance than from up close – for example, in significantly limiting the menu of foreign policy choices considered by a state's leaders at a particular time, rather than in forcing the selection of one particular item on that menu over another" (Rose, 1998, p. 147). Neoclassical realists contend that domestic and individual factors, interacting with systemic incentives, might explain why a specific choice is made. The following sections will outline the features of the theoretical framework, beginning with the independent variable (external factors at the international level), followed by the intervening variables (internal factors at the domestic level).

3.1. The Independent Variable: Systemic Incentives

As a *realist* theory, neoclassical realists uphold the fundamental realist notion that "the most powerful generalizable characteristic of a state in international relations is its relative position in the international system" (Zakaria, 1995, p. 482). This position is determined by power, defined as "the capabilities and resources [...] with which states can influence each other" (Wohlforth, 1993, p. 4). The

emphasis on power presupposes another core realist principle: that the international system is, *at the end of the day*, an anarchic realm where the ultimate authority does not reside with international organisations but by states (Ripsman, 2011, p. 2). The distribution of relative power shapes the dynamics of this system, generally leading states to adapt to this dynamic. As Ripsman (2011, p. 3) points out:

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

As the quote illustrates, neoclassical realists interpret the external factors provided by the international system as *systemic incentives* for states. These systemic incentives constitute the independent variable that "shapes and shoves" (Waltz, 1997, p. 915) the room for manoeuvre available to single states – the *menu* referred to earlier. While military power is the primary source of existential threats in the short term, the realist emphasis on capabilities and resources also necessitates considering economic power in a neoclassical realist analysis. As Ripsman (2011, p. 2) argues, "differential growth rates, which over time change the relative distribution of capabilities between states, are the driving forces of international politics". Consequently, a state is likely to avoid foreign policy decisions that could jeopardise its economic prospects. Nevertheless, when confronted with a direct and immediate threat, it is expected to prioritise security over economic interests, sacrificing the latter to safeguard the former.

In addition to the hierarchical predominance of systemic incentives as the independent variable, neoclassical realists argue for an analytical sequence in which they are examined *prior* to internal factors. This is because "the influence of structural factors such as relative power is not always obvious even to political actors themselves [... and] analysts who do not begin by looking carefully for such influence may mistakenly attribute causal significance to other factors that are more visible but in reality are only epiphenomenal" (Rose, 1998, p. 151). While this argument is essential, it is equally important, in my view, to maintain critical awareness also in the opposite direction. For instance, a decision-maker might cite systemic incentives as justification for a decision, while the true motivation lies in personal preferences or party-political or private interests. Therefore, from the outset, the investigation of external factors should be conducted with proper source criticism, allowing findings from the subsequent analysis of internal factors to inform and potentially reshape conclusions drawn about systemic incentives.

While Rose (1998) and Ripsman (2011) emphasise the dynamics of systemic incentives, they do not provide specific guidelines regarding which external factors should be analysed. Consequently, I will draw on the three external factors from the framework of Cantir & Kennedy's (2015), as referenced in *previous research*. These are military and economic *power disparity* (between the weaker

and more powerful state), *intensity of external threat* and *permissiveness of the external environment* (2015, p. 398). Intensity of external threat is defined as "how threatening one country's actions are to another's security". To further refine this factor, I include the aspects of directness and urgency, capturing the potential for a powerful state to threaten the survival of the weaker state in the near future. Permissiveness of the external environment is analysed "in terms of the amount of alternatives the weak state has with respect to limiting the hegemon's power over it". Together, these three factors constitute the systemic incentives, which serve as the independent variable. These incentives are expected to at least determine the range of possible foreign policy outcomes – the dependent variable.

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

3.2. The Intervening Variables: Internal Factors

The neoclassical realist inclusion of internal factors – opening the 'black box of state' – can be seen as a necessary complement to the analysis of external factors in two types of cases: 1) when a foreign policy response contradicts the neorealist expectation of rational behaviour, and 2) when the identification of systemic incentives results in a broad menu of possible choices (Ripsman, 2011, p. 6-7). Which, if any, of these types this thesis addresses should become clear after the investigation of the systemic incentives. Neoclassical realists would, however, find the occurrence of either type *likely*, as they view such complexity as the rule rather than the exception in the short term. As Rose (1998, p. 146) notes, "the impact of [...] power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level". Consequently, systemic incentives are understood to have an *indirect*, rather than direct, effect on foreign policy outcomes. On this basis, it can be argued that an analysis of internal factors should be fruitful even when a foreign policy response aligns with systemic incentives over the long term – as it may reveal eventual 'gravel in the machinery' along the way.

It should be reiterated that internal factors cannot, from the neoclassical realist perspective, serve as the *independent variable*. Instead, they function as intervening variables, all of which must relate to the independent variable. Consequently, in the cases of Moldova and Georgia, internal factors may influence foreign policy outcomes, but these factors must have been shaped by systemic incentives. For example, internal factors may exert a conservative effect on a state's responsiveness by reflecting previous – perhaps outdated – systemic incentives that have been preserved at the domestic level, such as in the minds of policymakers, strategic documents and 'ways of doing things'. In the following, I

will point out several intervening variables, all of which are internal factors situated at the domestic (or individual) level. Neoclassical realism is, therefore, a multi-level theory.

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

The second intervening variable, identified by Ripsman (2011, p. 8), is *strategic culture*. Strategic culture reflects the traditions through which a state has historically safeguarded its interests and can as such preserve practices addressing old systemic incentives. It can also reflect a pre-determined policy that guides the state's decision-making, such as a national security strategy. Strategic culture is likely to influence leader perceptions or delay a response to contractionary or unexpected systemic incentives.

The third intervening variable, borrowed directly from Cantir & Kennedy (2015, p. 398), is the *intensity of threat to elite survival*, defined as "how threatening the hegemon's actions are to the continuing power of the ruling elites in the weaker state". Here, I will also look at potential internal threats to elite survival, as these can present decision-makers with even more difficult choices. This variable is included because I contend that realists may sometimes adopt a naive perspective on the integrity of states. It is far from certain that decision-makers act in the state's best interest under all circumstances. In the post-Soviet context, there are compelling reasons to believe that many decisions have been driven by elites seeking to safeguard their own power positions within the country (see, for instance, the reasoning of Meister (2018) in *Previous Research*).

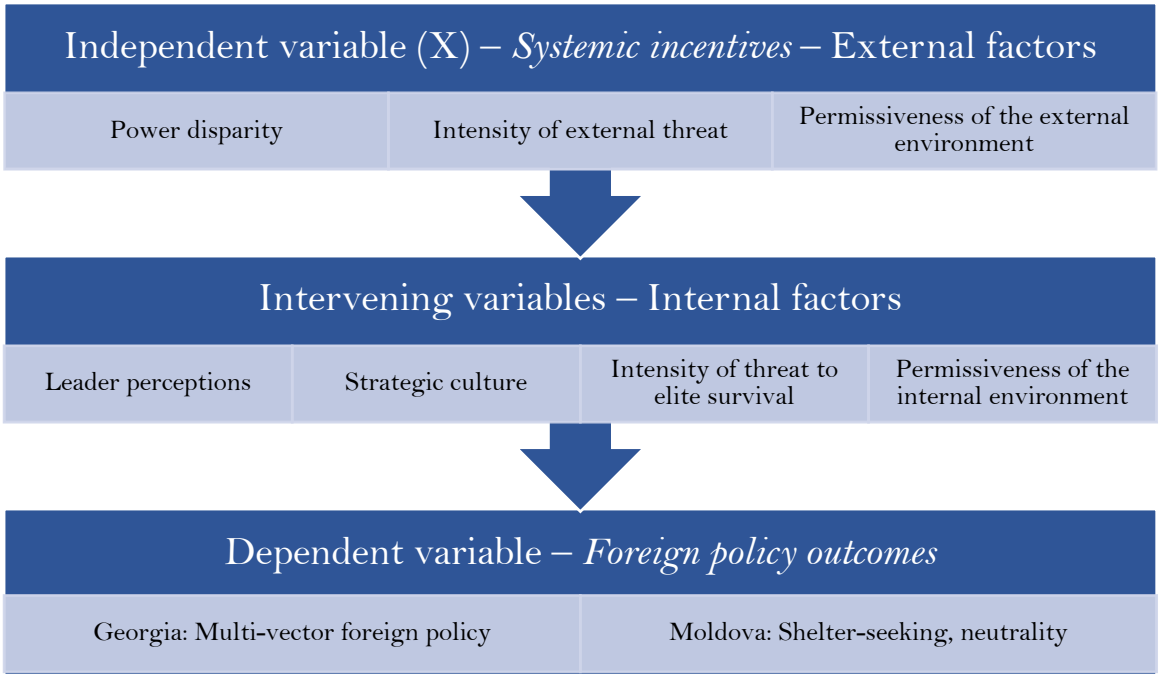
The fourth intervening variable is highlighted by several scholars and referred to by various terms, such as *state-society relations*, *state power*, or *national political power*. Regardless of terminology, this concept generally encompasses "the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation's human and material resources behind security policy initiatives" (Ripsman, 2011, p. 1; Rose, 1998, p. 162-163; Christensen, 1996, p. 11). For instance, Zakaria (1998, p. 10-11) underscores the slow development of American state power at the end of the nineteenth century, when successive presidents sought to increase their influence abroad but were constrained by "a federal state structure and a tiny central

bureaucracy that could not get men or money from the state governments or from society at large". Beyond such structural constraints, such as decentralised veto players, this category also includes factors like public opinion. Neoclassical realists argue that "the elites tend to get what they want in the end but have to make concessions to their publics along the way – with the result that foreign policy is linked to systemic incentives but not wholly determined by them" (Rose, 1998, p. 164). For this thesis, I have adjusted the theory slightly, adopting Cantir & Kennedy's (2015, p. 398) concept of the *permissiveness of the internal environment*, which complements their external environment factor. When internal permissiveness prevails, the condition "allows ruling elites to shift geopolitical strategy without adverse electoral consequences" (Cantir & Kennedy, 2015, p. 398). I have broadened this definition to include internal risks of increasing societal tensions and the government's ability to implement its objectives, particularly in relation to the distribution of seats in the national parliament and the influence of domestic veto players. This adjustment allowed me to exclude the variable of *domestic institutions*, which is sometimes included by neoclassical realists (Ripsman, 2011, p. 8), while retaining one of its key elements – the distribution of power in parliament. Domestic institutions were excluded because incorporating five factors would overly complicate the analysis. Additionally, it can be argued that "there are relatively fewer constraints on the operation of power in Eastern Europe than there are in Western and Central Europe" (Hyde-Price, 2021, p. 156). In line with Hyde-Price's observation, the institutions in this region are more volatile and susceptible to influence by incumbent governments, suggesting that they may play a less significant role compared to other internal factors.

It should be acknowledged that these four internal factors may occasionally overlap. For instance, strategic culture can influence leader perceptions, while the permissiveness of the internal environment is closely linked to the intensity of threat to elite survival. Such overlaps pose challenges for analytical structure and isolation of the factors. However, removing any of the factors would not desirable. Consequently, it must be accepted that none of the factors can be entirely isolated in the conclusions.

In sum, what decision-makers aim to do does not always align with systemic incentives. And even when they intend to act rationally in accordance with the state's relative power, they may face constraints such as an inherited strategic culture embedded in domestic institutions, threats to their own survival, or public dissent. In practice, states "choose [therefore] from a range of policy alternatives to navigate between systemic constraints and domestic political imperatives" (Ripsman, 2011, p. 8). An illustration of the framework can now be presented.

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



4. Methodology

This thesis employs a comparative case study approach, combining the in-depth exploration characteristic of case study design with the theory-testing aim of comparative analysis (Bryman, 2016, p. 61-65). Georgia pursues a multi-vector foreign policy, while Moldova follows a shelter-seeking strategy – though remaining neutral in terms of military non-alignment. Given the notable divergence of these strategies, neoclassical realism expects that differences at the external level are likely. The theory would, however, still have a say if the systemic incentives turn out to be similar while clear differences persist among the internal factors. For example, through a deeply ingrained strategic culture shaped by historical external experiences or heightened threats to elite survival driven by geopolitical circumstances. The theory would be *strengthened* if the external factors, combined with domestically modified responses, account for the observed outcomes. Conversely, it would be *weakened* if it appears that internal factors unrelated to the external level explain the differences.

The following chapter is divided into four subchapters. The first explains the case selection of Georgia and Moldova, which is motivated by the principle of Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). The second addresses the challenges associated with investigating complex political processes. The third discusses the employment of elite interviews as a method, detailing how they were conducted for this thesis and emphasising the importance of triangulation.[3] The fourth subchapter introduces the supplementary material.

4.1. Case Selection

The case selection of Moldova and Georgia is based not only on their empirical relevance but also on their similarities, which allow for theory-testing through the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), a common method in comparative politics for testing or developing theories (Steinmetz, 2019). MSSD can be "predicated on comparing very similar cases which differ in their dependent variable" because the "assumption here is that comparing similar cases that bring about different outcomes will make it easier for the researcher to control factors that are not the causal agent and isolate the independent variable that explains the presence or absence of the dependent variable" (Steinmetz, 2019).

While Georgia and Moldova do have differences, they share several important characteristics that would be difficult to control for if they diverged significantly. Both countries were republics of the Soviet Union and experienced a challenging post-independence decade in the 90s (Lupu Dinesen & Wivel, 2014, p. 1). They are small states with populations of 3.7 and 2.5 million, respectively (World Bank, 2022a & 2022b). In relative terms, Georgia is part of the South Caucasus region alongside two other small states, Armenia and Azerbaijan, but is also squeezed between Russia and a regional power, Türkiye. Moldova is the smallest state in its neighbourhood, sandwiched between the significantly

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

larger Ukraine and Romania, and 57 times smaller than Russia. As prospective members of the European Union, both Georgia and Moldova would rank among the smallest EU states in terms of population. Economically, they are classified as small economies, ranking 111th and 137th globally in 2022 (World Bank, 2024, p. 2-3). At the time of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, their military expenditures were 1.4 and 0.3% of GDP (SIPRI, 2024). While Moldova has recently made efforts to increase its military spending, it started from an exceptionally low base (Balkan Insight, 13 February 2023). Georgia's 1.4%, though higher, remains modest when considering the limited size of its economy and the strong military powers in the neighbourhood. These factors serve as control variables, enabling the exclusion of several alternative hypotheses from the outset and ensuring the applicability of the basic logic of MSSD.

Nevertheless, significant factors remain that can be reasons for the different foreign policy outcomes. Georgia is an old nation with a deeply rooted language and culture (Suny et al., 2024). By contrast, Moldova is a diverse state, divided between a Romanian majority, Ukrainian and Russian minorities, and the Turkish-Christian Gagauz people in the south – a country shaped in the crack between greater powers' ambitions (King, 1999, p. 1, 36, 63, 168, 209). Furthermore, the Georgian government is led by a party founded by an oligarch who made his fortune in Russia, while the Moldovan government is led by the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), established by the incumbent President Maia Sandu, a former World Bank employee in Washington (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023, p. 677; Morar & Dembińska, 2021, p. 311).

4.2. The Challenge of Investigating Complex Political Processes

As mentioned above, there are several differences between Georgia and Moldova. Moreover, foreign policymaking is a complex process, making it a challenge to determine the extent to which these differences have influenced the foreign policy outcomes. One way to identify the impact of different variables would be through process tracing, as it aims "to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable" (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 206). However, conducting such a historical investigation of the sequence of events is a substantial task and would require the effort of a PhD rather than a master's thesis. Therefore, I have conducted a synchronic analysis of categories – the factors outlined in the theoretical framework – rather than a diachronic investigation "along a timeline" (Bryman et al., 2022, p. 200). This approach is feasible because neoclassical realist considers factors beyond systemic incentives, and the theory can thus be disproven if internal factors are shown to be *independent* of, and more influential than, external factors. As noted earlier, neoclassical realism only holds explanatory power if internal factors are linked to the systemic incentives.

In some respects, features of process tracing are incorporated through the neoclassical realist focus on the causal chain, though not with the chronological detail typically associated with process tracing. As we have seen above, neoclassical realists expect not a simple story linking X with Y, but a

complex transmission from systemic incentives through intervening variables to a certain outcome. As Rose (1998, p. 165) points out:

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

It should be acknowledged that several obstacles make it difficult to validate "the full complexity of the causal chain linking relative material power and foreign policy outputs" within the scope of this thesis. The first issue is that the given time frame is too limited to consider *all* available material on the topic. To address this, I have aimed to be transparent with my considerations in the selection of relevant data. The investigated time frame, extending from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine to the present, is also delimitated, meaning that there have been only a few radical shifts during the period. The second issue is that the actuality and sensitivity of the topic entail limitations in two aspects: a) I cannot consider secret information about systemic incentives that are accessible only to intelligence services and a small circle of policymakers, and b) there are no memoirs or published letters that would provide insight into centrally placed policymakers' perceptions. This issue is partly connected to the third challenge: language barriers, which prevent me from examining sources in Romanian, Russian, and Georgian. As Rose (1998, p. 166) notes, "to investigate how perceptions matter, for example, one has to get inside the heads of key state decision makers, something that often requires foreign language capabilities and/or archival research". Research that fully lives up to this ambition – particularly regarding sensitive state issues – is rare, but that cannot be an excuse to avoid this area of study. The solution to these challenges, in my view, is to acknowledge and be honest about the limitations while addressing them as much as possible. In this regard, I decided to conduct semi-structured elite interviews with strategically selected individuals in Moldova and Georgia. These interviews were crucial for gaining insights into the policy-making circles of the countries and obtaining exclusive information in English.

4.3. The Elite Interview

As Christensen (1996, p. 248) points out, an "application of the [neoclassical realist] approach to any given country requires a great deal of knowledge about the nation in question". Guided by this insight, I decided to conduct elite interviews and travel to Tbilisi and Chișinău for face-to-face meetings, allowing me to explore the contexts in the countries further. During my free time, I walked around the cities and visited museums to gain a deeper sense of the history, daily life, and atmosphere of the countries. The primary objective of the journey was to collect firsthand material that could bring me as close to the empirical reality as possible.

The Elite interview is a form of respondent interview involving "those with close proximity to power or policymaking" (Lilleker, 2003, p. 207). Lilleker (2003, p. 208) notes that it provides an opportunity "to learn more about the inner workings of the political process, the machinations between influential actors and how a sequence of events was viewed and responded to within the political machine". While expertise on Georgia and Moldova can be found in published articles, the dynamics behind closed doors or within the heads of decision-makers remain largely inaccessible. Given the intermediating role of leader perceptions in decision-making, subjective interpretations of the world influence the objective reality. For these reasons, elite interviews were deemed suitable for addressing the research question, aligning with the theoretical framework of this thesis. The respondents were strategically selected in two categories to ensure a combination of deep insights and diverse perspectives on the policymaking processes in the countries:

1) I required at least one respondent from each country who represented the government, either as a civil servant or a politician. Ideally, this individual would hold a highly senior position with direct insight into the inner workings of foreign policymaking.
2) I also sought at least one outside perspective to provide an account that could offer insights beyond those presented by the government itself.

I managed to find interviewees for both these categories. For Georgia, a helpful 'gatekeeper' facilitated connections with two of the respondents. For Moldova, I sought recommendations from several individuals before securing suitable interviewees. Contacts was made through email, WhatsApp, or social media platforms, with confidentiality assured for those who requested it. The principle of informed consent was strictly adhered to, and all respondents were informed that the interviews would be recorded and securely stored.

In Georgia, I interviewed a high-ranking Georgian diplomat (category 1). Second, I interviewed an opposition party leader who served as Prime Minister from 2019 to 2021. After resigning from the position, this individual left the ruling party, Georgian Dream, to launch a new pro-European party. While this respondent belongs to category 2, he also offered valuable insights from his tenure in the highest position within the Georgian government, albeit prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This respondent will hereafter be referred to as the *Georgian Former PM*. Lastly, I interviewed a diplomat from an EU member state, providing an external perspective. This respondent will be referred to as the *European Diplomat*.

In Moldova, I interviewed the Head of the Bureau for European Integration (category 1), hereafter referred to as the *Moldovan Diplomat*. The bureau is responsible for overseeing the country's EU integration process, and its central role as a 'spider in the web' positions the interviewee at the heart of the Moldovan government. Within category 2, I met the Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Association of the Republic of Moldova (APE), hereafter referred to as the *Moldovan Director for APE*. APE facilities exchange among political actors, academia, and the public in Moldova (APE,

2024). Finally, I interviewed a National Advisor from the Swiss NGO Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF). DCAF, with funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), implements a project promoting good governance within the security sector (Albu & Enicov, 2024). This interviewee will be referred to as the *Moldovan National Advisor*.

The interviews were neither formal nor unstructured but semi-structured, directed by an interview guide to enhance reliability and enable comparisons (Bryman, 2016, p. 468- 469). Since this study is theory-testing, I drafted the interview guide based on factors outlined in the theoretical framework, covering intensity of external threat, permissiveness of the external environment, intensity of threat to elite survival and permissiveness of the internal environment. Regarding the remaining factors, my approach was to examine power disparity primarily through other sources, while allowing leader perceptions and strategic culture to emerge spontaneously during the interviews.

I began by following the neoclassical realist emphasis on addressing questions in the correct analytical order, starting with external factors. I expected these factors to be less sensitive to discuss than the internal affairs of the countries. Additionally, the interviewees were given an opening question asking them to describe the political discourse in their country prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the immediate aftermath, and in broad strokes how the situation has evolved since then. This served both as a 'warm-up question' and an opportunity to elicit unexpected topics that could be explored further during the interview. In the end, each respondent was given the possibility to add any points they believed were important to consider.[4]

The interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes, depending on the interviewee's availability, and were conducted in the capitals of Georgia and Moldova, except for the interview with the Moldovan Diplomat, which was conducted digitally from Sweden. Five of the interviews were recorded and transcribed using OtterAI, followed by manual corrections. The remaining interview, conducted and recorded in a language other than English, was both transcribed and translated manually.

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

Figure B: Table of Interviews

Session	**Name, designation**	**Position**	**Organisation**	**Location**	**Duration** (minutes)	**Date**
1	Giorgi Gakharia, *Georgian Former PM*	Opposition Party Leader	For Georgia[5]	Face-to-face, Tbilisi	30	2024-03-12
2	Confidential, *Georgian Diplomat*	Diplomat	Georgian government	Face-to-face, Tbilisi	45	2024-03-13
3	Confidential, *European Diplomat*	Diplomat	EU Member State	Face-to-face, Tbilisi	70	2024-03-14
4	Vadim Enicov, *Moldovan National Advisor*	National Advisor	DCAF	Face-to-face, Chişinău	40	2024-03-18
5	Natalia Stercul, *Moldovan Director for APE*	Executive Director	Foreign Policy Association of Moldova	Face-to-face, Chişinău	45	2024-03-20
6	Ghenadie Marian, *Moldovan Diplomat*	Head of Bureau, Moldovan Diplomat	Moldovan government	WhatsApp video-call	60	2024-04-02

Before continuing, it should be noted that interviewing has its limitations, "which means they cannot be relied upon as the sole methodology" (Lilleker, 2003, p. 208). As Lilleker stresses, "the data collected must be reinforced by other forms of empirical data or must be based upon a broad sample of interviews, all conducted with those who enjoyed equal access to the event or activity under focus". This limitation primarily stems from source criticism, as those "with close proximity to power" may not only have incorrect perceptions but also motivations for saying one thing over another. The fact that I conducted three interviews per country allows for comparison of these accounts, but it is arguably too small a sample size to draw definitive conclusions without cross-referencing them with other types of material. Thus, the interviews were triangulated with additional empirical data. In combination with supplementary material, the interviews proved critical in gaining in-depth knowledge.

[5] Giorgi Gakharia's party.

4.4. Supplementary Material

The additional data consisted mainly of text and, in a few cases, statistics. The text material was categorised into two groups: primary and secondary material. The primary material included official documents from EU bodies, the Moldovan government, the International Energy Agency, and UNDP. An important document within this category, frequently referenced by interviewees, was Moldova's national security strategy. Updated in 2023, this document for the first time mentions Russia as an existential threat (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2023, p. 11). Notably, the Georgian government has not begun working on an updated security strategy. In this case, individual statements from Georgian government officials partly compensate for the absence of a document.

The secondary material consisted of: first, previous research conducted by prominent scholars in the field; Second, reports published by well-recognised think tanks, organisations, and academic institutions in international relations and foreign policy, such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Institute for the Study of War, OSW in Warsaw, the European Council on Foreign Relations, SCEEUS in Stockholm, Chatham House, the Jamestown Foundation, and Transparency International. These provided the expert knowledge that could also have been obtained through informant interviews. Third, the material includes articles from newspapers and media outlets, such as Balkan Insight, BBC, CNN, Euractiv, Euronews, the Financial Times, Politico, Reuters and The Guardian.

The selection of supplementary material was an ongoing process, guided by the interviews to triangulate the findings and fill important gaps, while adhering to the criteria of using reliable sources. The questions posed to this material were therefore the same as those for the interviews, focusing on the external and internal factors. I refer to this approach as a question-based analysis, which is grounded in the theory and the interviews. I decided not to use a coding scheme, which has emerged as a common tool in qualitative social science. A coding scheme would have been appropriate if the research question were more specific and if the material, to a greater extent, consisted of extensive policy documents. By contrast, this topic demands a richer description and a more flexible approach. Such an approach offers more promising opportunities to validate the theory. It is important to note that a question-based analysis requires significant reflexivity, including a critical reflection on the questions, assumptions, and interpretations. It is essential to approach the analysis as a puzzle all the way through, allowing each new finding to influence the overall understanding, like the process of a hermeneutic circle.

5. Empirical Analysis

The structure of the results and analysis is as follows: in accordance with the methodological guidelines of neoclassical realism, the external factors are analysed before the internal factors. Within the category of external factors, power disparity, intensity of external threat and permissiveness of the external environment are investigated for each country. These are followed by an analysis of the internal factors, including leader perceptions, strategic culture, intensity of threat to elite survival, and permissiveness of the internal environment. As external factors tend to interplay as systemic incentives and internal factors also interact with each other, no single factor can be tested in isolation. Instead, the analysis evaluates the neoclassical realist expectations regarding the respective roles of the international and domestic levels.

5.1. External Factors

The external factors are situated at the international level and regarded as systemic incentives. If the theory holds, they should function as the independent variable. The theoretical expectation at this level is, therefore, that differences in these factors should shape the range of possible choices for Georgia's and Moldova's respective foreign policy behaviour.

Power disparity

For both Georgia and Moldova, the military and economic power disparity with Russia is obvious, immense, and, as it appears, a major consideration in shaping their foreign policy. As pointed out previously, the countries are among the smallest post-Soviet states in terms of population and area. In 2022, Georgia's military spending was 1.4%, while Moldova's was 0.3% (SIPRI, 2024). Since then, Moldova has slightly increased its spending, but it is widely understood that neither country would be able to resist Russian aggression without significant external support. As the Georgian Former PM mentioned, "Georgia is a small country in a very complicated region. Of course, all realistic Georgian politicians understand that this is very limited sovereignty". This stands in contrast to the Ukrainian case, where the power disparity with Russia is smaller. As the Georgian Diplomat pointed out, "Ukraine is a completely different context because it's a big country, large country. The people are 45 million. You can compare 45 million with a 3 million population". He also stated the small size of Georgia as the reason why the government had decided not to send military equipment to Ukraine: "there will be no need because Georgia is a small country. It will be finished in a few days". In the Moldovan case, it is evident that the country cannot match the Russian military capabilities. Nevertheless, according to the Moldovan Diplomat, the country aimed to increase its military capacity

"to make sure that at least we will not be invaded by the 4000 or 5000 of Russian peacekeepers that are currently based in Transnistria". [6]

Regarding economic power disparity, the countries have traditionally been vulnerable to Russian restrictive measures. Since 2006, Georgia has steadily decreased its energy dependence on Russia, aided by its proximity to energy-rich Azerbaijan (International Energy Agency, 2024). On the other hand, Russia has maintained leverage over the general economy. The Georgian Diplomat argued that the Russian ban on the import of Georgian wine, minerals, and other products in 2008 "had an extremely negative impact on the Georgian economy [...] Because our dependence on the Russian market was very hard, now it's less but still, it's still high". The Georgian Former PM emphasised the link between economy and sovereignty, stating that "you cannot simply be committed to statehood if your economy cannot serve this" – an insight that aligns with the realist notion that economic development is essential for sustaining other power capabilities. The Georgian Former PM viewed this as a key incentive for strengthening Georgia's ties to the European market. The Georgian Diplomat, representing the government, was more sceptical on this point, noting that Georgia shares no land border with the EU, a limitation that makes diversification more challenging.

It should be mentioned that Georgia's economic dependence on Russia for trade and remittances has increased since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Transparency International, 2023). The opportunity to profit economically from the geopolitical situation has likely been a systemic incentive for the Georgian government. This aligns with the expectations of a multi- vector foreign policy. However, the neoclassical realist notion is that the root cause of this policy is not driven by bargaining or economic interests per se, but rather a spillover from the security considerations. If the Georgian government decided not to impose sanctions on Russia due to fears of increasing tensions with its neighbour, why not take the chance to earn some bucks on that choice? At this stage of the analysis, these potential motivations remain speculative.

In comparison to Georgia, Moldova was, for a long time, even more dependent on Russia. In 2021, Moldova's dependence on Russian gas was 100% (Statista, 2022), and the Moldovan state owed $800 million to the state-owned Russian energy company Gazprom (Reuters, 3 September 2023). After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow did its best to use this dependence to put pressure on the pro-European government Chişinău. When the price of natural gas increased sevenfold in 2022 (UNDP, 2023), many would have predicted that the government might not survive, that a Russian-friendly administration would be installed, and Moldova would bandwagon with Russia. Against these odds, however, the country, with support from European financial institutions, diversified its energy sources away from Russia (Litra, 2023).

[6] The attentive reader might note that the number of Russian soldiers stationed in Transnistria has previously been mentioned as 1500. After the interview, I reached out to the interviewee and inquired about the discrepancy. The response was that the additional soldiers were Transnistrian troops, but *de facto* under Russian command.

Similar dynamics can be observed in Moldova's trade relations. Since the country signed the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, Russia has sought to influence Moldovan politics by imposing embargos on wine and other agricultural goods, products that once made Moldova the 'pantry' of the Soviet Union (The Guardian, 15 August 2014). Also this strategy backfired on Kremlin, as it incentivised Moldova to diversify its exports towards the European market. As the Moldovan Diplomat pointed out, "Now, they [the wine producers] are exporting all these [wines] on the Western markets. And the price of these wines are five to ten times bigger than the ones that they get from Russian markets". Unlike Georgia, and similar to the energy issue, Russia's confrontational policies have not strengthened its influence but rather weakened it. It is possible that the geographical position of Moldova, compared to Georgia's, helped to facilitate this transition. This warrants further investigation through the factor of *permissiveness of the external environment.*

To conclude the analysis of military and economic power disparity, the picture is mixed. While the power disparity with Russia is undeniably vast, Moldova's starting point was even more challenging than Georgia's in some respects. The Moldovan military strength was almost non-existent, and its territory, population, and economy were even smaller than Georgia's. Additionally, its energy dependence on Russia was nearly total before Russia's full- scale invasion of Ukraine. However, since 2022, Moldova has made progress in addressing some of these vulnerabilities, such as achieving energy independence from Russia. As the geographical position may have played a role in this shift, it is evident that power disparity must be considered in conjunction with other factors to fully explain the different foreign policy choices made by the two countries.

Intensity of external threat

Power disparity is one thing. Intensity of external threat another, and it is not unreasonable to expect that variations in this intensity can have a significant impact on the different foreign policy outcomes. To begin with, the most obvious point must be mentioned: Georgia shares a border with Russia. Moldova does not. The threat of a traditional military invasion is therefore *direct* in Georgia's, while it is *indirect* for Moldova. Ukraine serves as a buffer between Moldova and Russia, and while Russia attempted to establish a land corridor through Ukraine to Transnistria in 2022, the Ukrainian army resisted, and the frontline remains far from Moldova's Transnistrian border (Balkan Insight, 22 April 2022; ISW, 2024b). As long as Ukraine successfully defends its Black Sea coast around Odesa, it is reasonable to argue that Moldova's 'menu' offers more foreign policy options than Georgia's. Although the Moldovan state faces constant hostile actions from Russia, including cyber-attacks and coup attempts, it does not face the immediate threat of military aggression due to the Ukrainian buffer. Strengthening Moldova's resilience in areas like cybersecurity, the economy, and society is also something the EU can assist with, whereas the EU's ability to support in the event of military aggression is far more limited.

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

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

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

Considering these indicators, it appears that the intensity of external threat is high in the Georgian case, and it is a constant consideration in the decision-making. There are reasons to believe that this consideration would persist regardless of the incumbent government in Tbilisi, though with potentially different outcomes. As the European Diplomat mentioned:

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

On the other hand, military experts have observed a significant relocation of Russian military resources from the occupied region of Abkhazia to Ukraine (RFE/RL, 18 March 2022), raising questions about the strength of Russia's capacity to pose a military threat in the short term.

By contrast, as expected, the Moldovan interviewees did not see a direct risk of Russian invasion at this point in time. The Moldovan Diplomat noted that, right after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldovan government circles had discussed whether accelerating the European integration process might provoke a Russian invasion. However, they had witnessed that "the Ukrainians were strong in stopping the Russian invasion. And Russians are still relatively far from Moldova. And as long Ukraine will be able to keep at least the current status quo, we know that we can continue our process on EU Accession". Neither were the Russian troops in Transnistria currently considered a direct threat: "It's clear that this was a very and is still a very theoretical risk, because they cannot do something like this. I mean, they understand very well that any action against Moldova or against Ukraine will result in a very, let's say, speedy military operation of Ukrainians in Transnistria". However, the government remained cautious not to escalate tensions with the breakaway region, avoiding giving its leadership any pretext for intensifying demands for Russian protection or for Russia to invade. Thus, the government sought to "avoid any message related to leaving the neutrality that we have embodied in our Constitution". Interestingly, this highlights that the Moldovan government still does not feel it has full room for manoeuvre due to the situation in Transnistria, which can be seen as both an external and internal threat.

Furthermore, the Moldovan Diplomat emphasised the high intensity of hybrid attacks: "[Russia] tried to use some political parties in Moldova in order to destabilise the country, to create this feeling of insecurity. To riddle all the external investors, to put our citizens in a continuous feeling that something will happen soon". This hybrid warfare has been confirmed by both the Moldovan government and independent experts (Politico, 13 February 2023; Hedenskog, 2022). The Moldovan Director for APE made a similar assessment, arguing that Russia's soft power threat was just as significant as its hard power threat (see more under *permissiveness of the internal environment*). These threats and attacks were nonetheless of a different nature than the risk of a large-scale military invasion.

Comparing the intensity of external threat faced by Georgia and Moldova, a significant difference emerges: Georgia shares its border with Russia, while Moldova does not. This distinction was reflected in the interviewees' reasoning. While the Georgian Diplomat feared that Russia could invade Georgia "at any moment", the Moldovan Diplomat argued that Moldova could continue to advance its EU Accession as long as Ukraine managed to defend at least the current status quo. Although the observation of a diminishing Russian presence in the occupied Georgian region of Abkhazia serves as a caveat, the overall evidence suggests that the intensity of external threat differs to a considerable extent between the two countries. Therefore, the intensity of external threat appears to be a key factor in explaining the different foreign policy outcomes in Georgia and Moldova. However, intensity of external threat should not be considered in isolation, as it may still result in

variations in foreign policy choices. Thus, it remains crucial pieces in the puzzle. One to consider is what external support the countries can rely on when countering these external threats.

Permissiveness of the external environment

In the investigation of power disparity, it was established that both Georgia and Moldova are significantly weaker than Russia, to an extent that cannot be compared to the disparity between Russia and Ukraine. Given this, it can be expected that each country will only explicitly counter Russian influence if they receive sufficient and credible external support. What constitutes sufficient support may vary depending on the needs and intensity of the external threat each country faces. As we have seen, Moldova, due to its geographical position, is not currently directly threatened by a military invasion but is instead targeted by Russian efforts to undermine the pro-European government through the weaponisation of energy, economy, and disinformation. In these areas, the EU appears to have been relatively successful in bolstering Moldova's resistance. In 2022, the country received European support to achieve independence from Russian gas (Litra, 2023). Moldova's exports have been increasingly redirected to the European market since DCFTA came into force in 2016 (COM, 2024b). Regarding disinformation, the EU launched a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission in Chişinău in 2023 focused on cybersecurity (EEAS, 2023).

The Moldovan interviewees mentioned indeed that the EU's support had been invaluable in helping the country address these challenges. The Moldovan Diplomat, in particular, frequently highlighted the interplay between external push factors (threats and actions by Russia) and pull factors (European support to counter these threats and actions). As he explained: "When Russia tries to put you in a very difficult position, you have someone in the European Union or in in the Western countries that will support you to invest in improving your capacities". These dynamics, he argued, had "determined our political leadership to definitely push on European integration vector".

By contrast, the Georgian Diplomat argued that diversifying Georgia's economic dependence away from Russia had been challenging due to the lack of a shared border with the EU: "For Moldova, it's very easy because they can deliver their products to the EU market by rail, by road and by sea as well. For us it's only the sea, Black Sea, which is Black Sea ports that are not kind of flexible for that. Their connectivity is not well developed". Additionally, given the intensity of external threat, it can be expected that Georgia would require some form of security guarantee to balance against Russia. This is precisely the type of support that the West has been unable to provide to countries outside NATO. Addressing this issue, the Georgian Diplomat stressed that NATO membership had been Georgia's priority for 30 years, noting that the country had applied for EU membership as early as 2002. He suggested that Georgian foreign policy had been shaped by previous instances where Western support fell short of meeting Georgia's needs, particularly NATO's decision not to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan in 2008 (which will be discussed further under internal factors). Furthermore, he highlighted how the "current dynamic", including Trump in the US and Hungary in

the EU, had created "a serious problem in terms of credibility". The ongoing developments in Ukraine, he argued, demonstrated that Western support for Ukraine had been insufficient to fully block Russian advancements. He concluded by stating:

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

On the other hand, the Georgian Diplomat also identified positive developments regarding the permissiveness of the external environment. During the Merkel era, Germany acted as a brake on the EU's willingness to grant Georgia candidate status and, alongside France, blocked NATO from offering a Membership Action Plan. According to him, this cautious approach by the German Chancellor was driven by concerns about increasing tensions with Russia and jeopardising the "economic ties, the oil". Today, Germany had radically shifted its position. While this shift was not sufficient for Georgia to reconsider its cautious foreign policy, it nonetheless represented a positive development.

The European Diplomat acknowledged the logic behind Georgia's cautious foreign policy towards Russia. Alongside the intensity of external threat, the country also bore the memory of Russia's invasion in 2008: "Last time, no one came to help [...] I'm not 100% sure if it would have been very much different today [...] I think that everyone more or less agrees that he [the pro-European president Saakashvili] expected too much from the outside that did not come". Consequently, the Georgian government tried to appease Russia to avoid provoking an invasion: "I think they are very much conscious about where the limit goes". This cautious approach might also partly explain – though it is unlikely to be the main reason – the introduction of the agent bill: "we are suppressing our civil society because we know that's what they [Russia] like".

Concluding the findings at the external level, it can be stated that the independent variable correlates with the dependent variable. Consequently, this study cannot falsify the neoclassical realist theoretical expectation that external factors constitute the primary driving force behind foreign policymaking. However, an analysis of the internal level remains necessary to fully understand why specific policy choices were made. Considering the reasoning of the Georgian and European Diplomats, the current dynamics in Ukraine, and Georgia's experiences in 2008 (to be further elaborated in the section on *strategic culture*), the cautious foreign policy towards Russia demonstrates a certain logic. However, while the international level has limited Georgia's menu of foreign policy options, it has not reduced it to a single course of action. The indicators fail to explain why the government has chosen to impose the Russian- inspired agent law, which, as of this writing, has sparked protests with over one hundred thousand participants in Tbilisi (BBC, 11 May 2024). Nor do they clarify why the government has falsely accused Ukraine of pressuring Georgia to open a second front in the war

(Agenda, 19 July 2023). Although appeasing Russia may be a contributing factor behind these actions, one could still envision a policy where Georgia adheres, at least as far as possible, to its constitutional commitment and the public's desire for Western integration. This suggests that much remains to be analysed in the subchapter on internal factors. The same holds true for the Moldovan case, where interviewees frequently referred to an interplay between external factors and domestic constraints. While Moldova's menu of policy options appears broader than Georgia's, external factors alone cannot fully account for the government's choice of a strategy combining shelter-seeking and neutrality.

5.2. Internal Factors

Following the analysis of the international level, we now turn our attention to the domestic level. According to the neoclassical realist framework, factors at this level are expected to function as intervening variables. These variables can modify the foreign policy response to the systemic incentives and help explain the choices made from the available menu of options.

Leader perceptions

Leader perceptions can influence foreign policy outcomes in three ways: by distorting signals from the international system, through cognitive biases in the decision maker(s), or via a deliberate choice to act contrary to rational incentives. This introduces a new level of complexity to the analysis, and it is likely impossible to fully unravel without temporal distance from the events and access to the decision makers' inner thoughts, such as through letters or memoirs. Despite these limitations, the perspectives provided by the respondents offer valuable insights into this factor.

Moldova's political spectrum is sharply divided between pro-European and pro-Russian forces (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024). Consequently, the ultimate choice between the EU and Russia becomes a matter of preference. For the incumbent pro-European government, the push and pull factors outlined above provided clear signals regarding systemic incentives. Russia proved to be an unreliable counterpart, both in terms of security and economy. This was evident as early as the autumn of 2021 when Russia plunged the country into an energy crisis (Euronews, 22 October 2021). As the Moldovan Diplomat explained:

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

Before these events, the political leadership had already perceived European Union as the future for the country. However, leaving the country's multi-vector foreign policy was a big step. This policy had survived through various presidencies and governments, serving as a compromise for the polarised

preferences within the electorate (Morar & Dembińska, 2021, p. 294). It was not until the launch of the updated security strategy in 2023 that the Russian behaviour was officially declared an existential threat for the first time (Financial Times, 11 October 2023; Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2023, p. 11). It is likely that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine heightened the political leadership's sense of urgency and helped foster wider legitimacy among the population for this shift. This will be further discussed under the section on *permissiveness of the internal environment.*

Nevertheless, the Moldovan Director for APE argued that the political leadership was caught off guard when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022: "Practically all our political leaders and authorities were assured that it will not happen [...] But it [the political leadership] tried to reduce the fears, the fears regarding security". In this, the government was successful, according to the interviewee. As we will see, this contrasted sharply with the Georgian case, where the opposition has accused the government of using fear to benefit their own agenda (Georgian Former PM, Interview with the Author). In Moldova, the government worked to calm the population, while some critical voices accused the leadership of risking making Moldova the next Ukraine by provoking Russia (Moldovan Director for APE, Interview with the Author). As will be discussed in the section on *intensity of threat to elite survival*, the Georgian government's motivation for exaggerating the danger remains unclear. However, the systemic incentives do provide some logic for it, while in Moldova, playing with fear seems unnecessary given that the country has significant room for manoeuvre as long as the Ukraine can maintain the status quo.

As mentioned under *intensity of external threat*, the Moldovan government was careful not to signal to either Russia or the leadership in the separatist region of Transnistria that Chişinău would consider abandoning the neutrality that is embodied in the country's constitution. This approach appears to stem from a combination of external and internal factors, clearly illustrated by the situation in Transnistria – Moldovan territory *de jure* but *de facto* autonomous involving the presence of Russian peacekeeping troops. The government was determined not to increase tensions with the Russian and Gagauzian minorities, nor to give Russia a pretext for invasion (Moldovan Diplomat, Interview with the Author). However, the Moldovan National Adviser noted that the issue of neutrality had been increasingly discussed within the expert community since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. He argued that the rationale of 'not giving Russia a pretext for invasion' was no longer valid, as Russia's actions had already demonstrated its disregard for the sovereignty of other states. Nevertheless, the domestic sensitivity surrounding the matter remained a key factor in why a reassessment of neutrality would take time – an argument also raised by the Moldovan Director for APE. Consequently, it appears that the government's decision to maintain the neutrality status has been primarily shaped by its perception of the permissiveness of the internal environment.

The Georgian Diplomat perceived NATO's decision not to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 as a missed window of opportunity to strengthen the country's security and solidify its commitment to Western integration. He did not suggest that Georgia had abandoned its European aspirations, but as discussed earlier, he argued that the country

could not pursue a straightforward course through this geopolitical situation given its small size and lack of a security umbrella.

While the Georgian Diplomat consistently returned to the theme of this missed opportunity, my interview with the Georgian Former PM showed that the current situation can be interpreted in another light, also by an individual who was recently centrally placed in the decision-making apparatus of Georgia. He viewed the current moment as a window of opportunity for Georgia to take clear steps towards EU membership, a window that might only remain open for "one, two years". He added: "Unfortunately, it looks like the current government is putting all bets to bet Russia will win this war, and this is a strategic mistake they made". A second mistake, according to the Georgian Former PM, was failing to recognise that the critical moment for Georgia's security would come by the end of the war. A "big deal", he predicted, was then going to take place between the democratic West and authoritarian Russia. Georgia had to be on the side of democracy: "without this; there is not any security guarantees for Georgia, we are staying face to face alone with Russia". He asked: what will Georgia's position be when that moment arrives? The answer to that question, he thought, would shape the country's future. When questioned whether a more straightforward pro- European path could provoke Russia into aggression, he responded that Russia had never been interested in Georgia's statehood, regardless of the country's policy direction – a view that aligned with the perceptions of the Moldovan National Advisor and the Moldovan Director for APE regarding Moldova and Russia. By contrast, the Georgian Former PM argued, the EU and the US were committed to Georgia's statehood. Therefore, "even when keeping in mind the possible provocations on Russia, we have to continue moving the country towards Europe because there are no other security guarantees".

As we can see, the Georgian Former PM held a different perception of the systemic incentives compared to than Georgian Diplomat. The intensity of external threat was high but would remain so regardless of Tbilisi's foreign policy. Moreover, he placed greater trust in the Western partners' commitment to strengthening the Georgian state and was notably more optimistic about the permissiveness of the external environment than he had been during his tenure as Prime Minister three years ago. Some of the most influential EU member states had since shifted their stance on Georgian membership, as the Georgian Diplomat had mentioned with Germany. From the Georgian Former PM's perspective, the war in Ukraine had highlighted the importance of Black Sea security to EU countries, positioning Georgia as a potential key player. And the way to further enhance the permissiveness of the external environment, and reduce Moscow's interference in the country, was through "strengthening democracy and democratic institutions". The Georgian Former PM's alternative account illustrates two points: first, that systemic incentives are not easily discernible within the complex geopolitical landscape. When Ukraine has positive momentum, the Georgian government's gamble on a Russian victory seems like a miscalculation. Conversely, when Ukraine struggles and Western support wanes, the Former PM's outlook can appear optimistic. Navigating this turbulence is no simple task. However, the divergence between the two views may not only stem

from the system's bleary signals but also reflect the interviewees' underlying preferences or cognitive biases.

The contrasting perspectives of the Georgian Diplomat and the Georgian former PM highlight how Georgia's situation can be interpreted in different ways. Additionally, pinpointing the specific leader perceptions shaping Georgia's foreign policy is inherently challenging. This is due to the elephant in the room: Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's wealthiest man, founder and honorary chairman of Georgian Dream, who accumulated his private wealth in Russia (Forbes, 2024; Atasuntsev, 2024). As the European Diplomat noted, "It's very difficult to make any sensible analysis of his actual influence in this country. It depends on who you ask. If you ask the government, they'll say he has none. If you ask the opposition, they'll say he controls everything down to the smallest detail". Ivanishvili has previously been described as a "man who plays 'according to the rules set by the Russian government'" (Genté, 2022). Given this, it is nearly impossible to determine who, when, and why specific foreign policy decisions are made in Georgia. As the European Diplomat put it, "No matter how much insight we wish we had, it's extremely difficult to answer that question. How much influence does he really have? I wonder if even those inside the system know". Nonetheless, it is evident that leader perceptions influence the evaluation of opportunities and risks in the international system and thereby shape foreign policy in Georgia. In Moldova, the government appears to have held strong perceptions even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, perceptions that were subsequently reinforced by the war. However, the government contends with significant segments of the electorate who hold divergent perceptions – a crucial factor that will be further explored under *permissiveness of the internal environment.*

Strategic culture

In the case of Georgia, Russia's invasion in 2008 significantly influenced the country's strategic culture. Unlike Moldova, which updated its national security strategy in 2023, Georgia's strategy has remained unchanged since 2011, likely reflecting a reluctance to address sensitive issues. Updating the strategy would expose the government's contractionary foreign policy and the differing voices it projects in bilateral, regional, and global contexts (European Diplomat, Interview with the Author). Nevertheless, some aspects of the government's strategic culture can still be discerned. Georgian Dream came to power in the aftermath of Russia's invasion in 2008. By contrast to Saakashvili, who pursued a hawkish policy toward Russia, Georgian Dream sought to reduce tensions with its northern neighbour (Lebandize & Kakachia, 2023, p. 680).

The Georgian Diplomat frequently returned to the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008, where the decision was made not to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan: "Instead of that, we got the message that Georgia will become a part of the EU. One day. One day. But it led to the Russian large-scale aggression and occupation of the territories. We lost our territories, a lot of refugees, a lot of sacrifices". This limbo – where Georgia was given enough to provoke Russia but too little to guarantee

its safety – can be seen as a fatal outcome. The situation was further exacerbated by the lack of military support from the West when the Russian invasion occurred just four months after the NATO Summit (Georgian Diplomat, Interview with the Author). These events, coupled with Georgian Dream's perceptions of the international landscape, appear to have fundamentally altered Georgia's strategic culture. This culture has, in turn, shaped the government's interpretation of the current geopolitical environment. In 2008, Georgia witnessed how Germany and France prioritised avoiding tensions with Russia over providing security guarantees for Georgia (New York Times, 3 April 2008). In this context, Georgia's subsequent cautious foreign policy becomes more understandable. If the EU's most powerful states, Germany and France, hesitated to counter Russia, why would Georgia take a bolder stance? Both the Georgian and the European Diplomat emphasised how the West's failure to protect Georgia and deter Russia had left a lasting impact on the country's strategic culture. Since 2008, as the European Diplomat noted, "One [the Georgian leadership] has evidently observed that the Kremlin hasn't changed its strategy. They haven't changed policies; it's just gotten worse". So, "ultimately, it's [the foreign policy choice] about their country's security. And they don't want war because they know exactly what war implies".

In Moldova, the strategic culture was for long characterised by the neutrality status. The aim of the neutrality was to maintain a position between the EU and Russia, and, importantly, to avoid escalating tensions with Transnistria (Moldovan Diplomat, Interview with the Author). However, the Moldovan version of neutrality was peculiar in some respects, including the notion that the country should refrain from investing in its military forces (Socor, 2022). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine prompted a revaluation of this stance, as it became evident that Moldova needed to bolster its defence capabilities (Całus, 2023c). In response, the government has made efforts to renew its strategic culture, with the updated national security strategy serving as a notable example. Nevertheless, as with many aspects discussed so far, this renewal is constrained by the permissiveness of the internal environment. As the Moldovan National Advisor described it:

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

Concluding this section, strategic culture emerges as a mediating factor for other variables. It reflects inherited experiences from historical systemic incentives, such as Moldova's loss of Transnistria in 1992 and Georgia's trauma of the Russian invasion and loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 – events that, in Georgia's case, are further entangled with the lack of Western military support. Strategic culture also mediates permissiveness of the internal environment, as public opinion and

internal tensions can constrain a government's ability to adjust its approach. In this regard, public opinion likely compels the Georgian government to maintain an emphasis on Western partnerships, at least on declarative level. Simultaneously, the Moldovan government appears constrained from implementing even more significant changes to its strategic culture. These dynamics are not unusual, as strategic culture often holds deep significance for a country's identity. Notably, contractionary external and internal constraints may also explain the Georgian government's reluctance to update its security strategy.

Intensity of threat to elite survival

While the factors examined thus far provide partial explanatory power, it is evident that the survival of the ruling elite may also play a significant role. Governments inherently strive to preserve their hold on power, a priority that becomes even more critical in highly polarised countries.

The Georgian Former PM argued that he resigned as Prime Minister and left Georgian Dream because he realised that democracy was at risk and that the party "was owned by some oligarchs in the country", which he described as "a huge gift to Russia". At this point, Russian interference in Georgian politics posed a greater threat than the risk of an actual invasion. According to him, the oligarchs within and around the Georgian Dream viewed Russian interference as less threatening than EU reforms, which would jeopardise their power and corrupt business practices.

Among the nine steps outlined by the European Commission as conditions for Georgia's candidate status, one prominently called for "to improve the current action plan to implement a multi-sectorial, systemic approach to deoligarchisation" (EEAS, 2023b). If the former PM's assessment of the oligarchic influence over Georgian Dream is accurate, these EU conditions represent a threat to the elite's dominance over Georgian politics and the economy. As he put it, the goal of these oligarchs is "not to strengthen democracy in the country but somehow maintain power" and "continue making corrupt and corrupted money". Rather than using the current geopolitical situation as an opportunity to accelerate Georgia's EU integration efforts, the government exploited the war to propagate a "fake narrative that someone from the West, Europe, and the US was putting pressure on the current government to open a second line for war". This narrative, according to him, was designed to "put pressure on people" and create "the picture that there is a choice between Europe and peace".

The Georgian Former PM's arguments should be interpreted in context. He is challenging his former party in the upcoming election, within a political arena described by the European Diplomat as being characterised by 'pie-throwing'. Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence supporting the core of his claims in other sources (Genté, 2022). After the interviews were conducted, the government reintroduced the agent bill to parliament, targeting civil society. Given the tone from the EU, this move risks derailing the entire accession process – something that cannot come as a surprise to the Georgian government (Reuters, 17 April 2024). At the time of the interview with the European Diplomat, the bill had not yet been reintroduced. However, the diplomat noted that the government

had already begun targeting funding agencies such as USAID and EU aid agencies, framing them as "foreign powers attempting to influence the domestic political situation here". Additionally, the European Diplomat identified the government's motivation to maintain its grip on power as a significant factor behind decisions such as continuing flight traffic between Georgia and Russia and refraining from imposing sanctions:

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

Considering the domestic policies of Georgian Dream and the mysterious role of Ivanishvili, it is impossible to ignore that the EU's demands for reforms may be perceived as a significant threat to the ruling elite's power position.

For the Moldovan government, Russian interference poses a direct threat to the pro-European elite's survival. Russia has made its intentions clear by orchestrating coups aimed at toppling the government in Chişinău (Financial Times, 11 October 2023). Unsurprisingly, the government has taken measures to counter Russian influence, such as shutting down Russian-funded political parties and media outlets (Reuters, 30 October 2023). At the same time, pro-Russian elites actively work to undermine the government's authority and preserve ties with Russia (CNN, 18 March 2023). However, according to the Moldovan Diplomat, even within the pro-Russian camp, certain actors – such as business leaders in Transnistria – recognised the economic opportunities provided by the European market.

Permissiveness of the internal environment

As long as Georgia holds free elections[7], it would be impossible for any government to explicitly shift its direction from European integration to a pro-Russian stance. This is because the population's support for European integration is exceptionally high, at 86% in 2023, a unique level among post-Soviet countries (IPI, 2023). On a *declarative* level, Georgian Dream positions itself as a pro-European party, much like all governments since independence. Walking around Tbilisi, one can see EU and Ukrainian flags displayed everywhere, sometimes even NATO and US flags on walls and balconies. However, the European Diplomat noted that the general knowledge about the EU was low, and the government did nothing to address this gap. The diplomat suggested that this lack of awareness may actually benefit Georgian Dream, as it allows them to control the narrative surrounding EU accession. In the upcoming election, the party could highlight the country's unexpected early candidate status, while many in the electorate remain unaware of why Georgia has lagged behind Ukraine and Moldova.

[7] After the election in 2024 and the serious concerns expressed by OSCE election observers, this can arguably be questioned. For further details, see the report: https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/584029

The Georgian Former PM also emphasised Georgian Dream's significant control over the media. He noted that with a struggling economy and people unable to meet basic needs, "it's very easy to influence through propaganda". As Georgian Dream has been in power since 2012, the party likely holds a stronger influence over the country's institutions than the Moldovan government, which has only been in power since 2021. This has not stopped large protests against the government in recent years, particularly against the so-called 'agent law', and there has also been wide criticism for not supporting Ukraine more practically in the war (European Diplomat, Interview with the Author). Despite this, the European Diplomat observed that the opposition is fragmented, often squabbling among themselves rather than focusing on challenging the government. In this context, "the government wins in being perceived as the only stable alternative. As a guarantee against war. Guarantee for economic growth". Georgian Dream holds a majority in the parliament, meaning that they can, at the end of the day, largely conduct the foreign policy as they want it. However, if the government were to seek a rapprochement with Russia, public opinion would possibly become a constraining factor, as seen with the current backlash over the 'agent law', though the outcome remains uncertain.

In the case of Moldova, the analysis of other factors has already touched on the permissiveness of the internal environment to a large extent. Everything points to it being a key consideration in Moldovan foreign policy. The systemic incentives, combined with the government's pro-European aspirations, have resulted in an increasingly pro-European foreign policy. However, the limits to this change – such as the government's reluctance to abandon the neutrality status – are constrained by the internal environment in the country. On the one hand, the President and government are from the same party, PAS, which currently holds a parliamentarian majority capable of adopting constitutional changes. On the other hand, presidential and parliamentary elections loom, with the outcome anything but certain (Hedenskog, 2022). Additionally, the Moldovan Director for APE pointed out that the large Moldovan diaspora played a crucial role in PAS' victory in the last elections. On the ground in Moldova, the public opinion is even more divided than the election results might suggest. While the pro-Russian population is primarily concentrated in Transnistria, Gagauzia, and the northern parts of the country, a significant portion of the population supported the neutrality status. Among ordinary citizens, it was not uncommon to hear the view that Ukraine had provoked Russia, and many feared that the government's policy might turn Moldova into a second Ukraine (Moldovan Director for APE, Interview with the Author).

Despite this polarisation, the systemic incentives allowed the pro-European government to pursue a straightforward pro-European foreign policy, including some radical changes. However, it appeared that the (un)permissiveness of the internal environment was a concern for the government, setting limits on its room for manoeuvre. For instance, it avoided open discussions about reconsidering the neutrality status, as it was clear that it did not wish to further deepen social divisions (Moldovan Diplomat, Interview with the Author). According to the Moldovan Director for APE, the government preferred to change foreign policy step by step, aiming to gradually increase the permissiveness, even

among pro-Russian minorities. The situation, as the interviewee noted, was very challenging. While Gagauzia had benefitted more from EU financial support than any other region in the country, Russian soft power – through Russian-speaking media and the Russian Orthodox Church – proved difficult to counter (Moldovan Diplomat; Moldovan Director for APE, Interviews with the Author).

The constraints on Moldova's foreign policy bring us back to the paradox that served as the starting point for this thesis. In Georgia, the population is more pro-European than the government's foreign policy. In Moldova, a pro-European government party currently holds a large majority in parliament, but over the long term, pro-European, pro-Russian, and mixed governments have alternated since the independence. Unlike in Georgia, Moldova continues to see openly pro-Russian parties attract a significant share of voters (PolitPro, 2024).

6. Conclusions

The final chapter of this thesis consists of two subchapters. The first presents the findings from the analysis, while the second discusses the overall conclusions of the investigation.

6.1. Findings

In elaborating each factor, it has become evident that significant differences exist between Georgia and Moldova. While the two countries were almost equal in terms of military and economic *power disparity* with Russia, this factor had fundamentally different implications when the *intensity of external threat* and the *permissiveness of the external environment* were added to the equation. Due to the varying intensity of external threats, the countries required different types of support from the European Union. For Moldova, there was no immediate risk of a Russian invasion. The primary threats were economic – such as energy and trade issues – and disinformation. The EU was able to support Moldova in managing these threats, aided by the fact that Moldova shares a border with Romania, an EU Member State. By contrast, Georgia faced similar economic threats but encountered greater difficulty in diversifying trade towards the EU due to the absence of a common border. Furthermore, the Georgian government perceived a direct threat of Russian invasion because of its geographical position. As a result, the EU and the West had more limited capacity to support Georgia in a short time span, both economically – due to its location and insufficient infrastructure – and militarily, given the EU's limited military capabilities and NATO's lack of guarantees to non-members.

Already at the external level, there are consequently significant reasons for the countries' different foreign policies. A forward-looking analysis, starting from the independent variable, would broadly expect Georgia to adopt a more cautious position towards Russia than Moldova. However, the external factors alone cannot explain the intensity and particular shape of these policies. From the factor of *leader perceptions*, we learned that the Georgian Former PM did a different reading of the international landscape. He argued that Georgia, through its foreign policy and democratic backsliding, missed the current window of opportunity for EU membership and risked positioning itself poorly when the "big deal" would be negotiated between the West and Russia. The signals from the international system on this issue are inevitably blurry, as there are arguments supporting both the government's and the former PM's views. Only time will tell whose reading of the international landscape proves to be correct.

Furthermore, it is worth questioning the true motivation of the Georgian government: is it to avoid a Russian invasion at all costs, or is it to maintain power and prevent a deoligarchisation of the country? While the analysis of systemic incentives provided evidence for the first explanation, the discussion of *intensity of threat to elite survival* suggests that the second may be likely. There are also indications that the government may be exaggerating the current Russian threat, as Russia's military capacity is practically limited due to the prioritisation of the war in Ukraine. It is possible that the current policy is the result of a combination of the two: external factors that shaped the major

orientation (pragmatic, multi-vector foreign policy), while the intensity of threat to elite survival influenced the particular form of this orientation, which could have impacted both the perception of external factors and certain exaggerated elements of the policy, such as the 'agent law'.

On the other hand, the *permissiveness of the internal environment* allowed the government to remain strong, given its parliamentary majority, while the pro-European public opinion constrained further rapprochement with Russia. Lastly, the *strategic culture*, informed by the experiences of the 2008 Russian invasion, influenced the government's perception of the current international situation and its unwillingness to trust the West's ability to provide sufficient support.

While the external level gave Moldova strong incentives to take advantage of the current situation in terms of deepening its EU integration, these incentives also had to be interpreted in that way by an incumbent government. The incumbent government, being pro-European, naturally shaped its reading of the external environment to see the EU as a credible partner and a path to the future. Furthermore, increasing Russian interference posed a direct threat survival of the pro-European elite. While the strategic culture had been modified by recent events, some inherited aspects – such as the neutrality status – remained due to the (un)permissiveness of the internal environment in accepting radical change. This observation reveals a relationship between the permissiveness of the internal environment and strategic culture, a dynamic that seems to have been overlooked in previous neoclassical realist studies. The government was also constrained by the polarised opinions between pro-European and pro-Russian populations in the country, particularly with the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections.

In conclusion, the interplay between the three external factors, which together constitute systemic incentives as an independent variable, and the four internal factors as intervening variables, is a complex story. As we have seen, intervening variables often contain inherited aspects from past systemic incentives, such as Moldova's experience with the loss of Transnistria in 1992 and Georgia's with the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. Through the process from the independent variable to foreign policy outcomes, intervening variables shape the response in various directions. For instance, a lack of permissiveness of the internal environment can simultaneously increase the intensity of the government's choice (Georgian Dream's introduction of a Russian-style agent law to obstruct the opposition, PAS' decision to ban Russian propaganda channels) and temper it through concessions (Georgia's application for EU membership, PAS' hesitation to reconsider the neutrality status).

6.2. Discussion

The broader conclusions drawn from this study are as follows. First, the neoclassical realist expectation regarding the process between systemic incentives and internal factors passed the test. Between the two cases, significant differences existed at the external level, which provided the policymakers with strong incentives. However, it was clear that these incentives could be interpreted

in fundamentally different ways, and that they were weighed and compromised alongside other factors in the policymaking process.

Second, the factors investigated played a critical role in shaping the different foreign policy outcomes. Notably, the factors borrowed from Cantir & Kennedy (2015) proved to be useful. While power disparity corresponded to the realist notion of relative power, it illuminated, when combined with the intensity of external threat and permissiveness of the external environment, the dynamic of push and pull factors that often define how systemic incentives work in practice within the international system. The intensity of threat to elite survival highlighted the leadership's vested interests, which may often have been overlooked in the realist tradition. While proponents of 'human nature' realism stress the "irrevocable kernel of egoism and self-interest in human affairs" (Hyde-Price, 2021, p. 153), the focus is seldom on the 'integrity' of states. I suggest that the state does not always have the integrity to make decisions that are the best for its security and prosperity. Decisions that appear irrational need not be solely attributed to leader perceptions, such as a miscalculation of the international landscape, cognitive biases, or irrational tendencies. They can also be driven by business interests or a desire to stay in power. This factor, therefore, can be a valuable addition to neoclassical realism.

Furthermore, the permissiveness of the internal environment represents an invaluable tool for assessing the government's room for manoeuvre at home. While power disparity and permissiveness of the internal environment should be applicable to all states, the other three factors from Cantir & Kennedy (2015) are likely particularly relevant for small states in geopolitical borderlands. External push and pull factors, along with elite interests, can have a greater effect on this category of states since they possess smaller capabilities, and their neighbours often exert considerable influence on the elite. In addition to the factors from Cantir & Kennedy, the traditional neoclassical realist factors – leader perceptions and strategic culture – also proved useful. Leader perceptions are the funnel through which all decisions are made and the point at which different interpretations of the menu of available options can arise. Elite interviews represented an invaluable method to explore these perceptions, particularly when letters or memoirs are unavailable. Strategic culture operates as a mediating factor, channelling and conserving certain forces. As such, it should continue to be analysed separately.

What cannot be determined with certainty is how the factors interrelate and which of them hold the greatest importance. While the external factors have outlined a menu of possible choices, they cannot fully explain the decisions made. They can suggest varying levels of opportunity and risk for different options, but this study cannot assess whether such considerations or internal factors were decisive. I encourage further research on Georgia and Moldova to address these uncertainties – preferably several years from now, when both researchers and decision-makers can reflect on these events with greater distance and clarity.

Assessing the tendencies in this investigation, it is worth noting that there is often a grain of truth in differing perceptions. What initially appears as contractionary explanations can often be reconciled at a deeper level of analysis. For instance, the Georgian government may be driven *both* by

legitimate security concerns and self-serving interests. There are indications that the government has manipulated the perception of security threats to serve its own agenda. The intensity of threat to elite survival may have an even stronger impact in the near future, as the ongoing tug of war between the Georgian government and the protest movement reaches its climax. The situation in Georgia is at a critical juncture, with much uncertainty. The government may either consolidate its grip on power or lose control entirely. A potential change in leadership would provide an opportunity to evaluate whether new administration in Tbilisi would also pursue a cautious foreign policy towards Russia.

Several measures can be taken to enable more definitive conclusions about the weight of the different factors. First, such a study would require a broader dataset, including several dozen interviews supplemented by surveys targeting a wider pool of decision-makers. Access to a comprehensive collection of policy documents would also be essential. Second, a detailed process tracing study could investigate foreign policy formation chronologically rather than synchronically. By sequencing events, it might be possible to determine how specific factors influenced others at critical moments. Process tracing could also help isolate the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Third, it would be valuable to explore conflicting goals in greater depth. Did decision-makers face moments where they had to choose between two conflicting incentives? Which prevailed – external or internal? And why? These approaches, among others, could significantly refine our understanding of Georgia's and Moldova's foreign policy.

That said, I am confident this investigation has revealed some of the most critical features. Comparative case studies of foreign policy, framed through neoclassical realism, offer valuable insights into both the theory itself and the empirical world it seeks to explain. Despite their small size, Moldova and Georgia have become pivotal states in the geopolitical rivalry between the EU and Russia. These findings might also be applicable to other small states navigating between major powers, such as the US and China. Understanding the considerations and dynamics of small states will be crucial, particularly for policymakers in European institutions and EU Member States.

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Appendix

Figure C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Opening remark

Q1: What is your role at XXX?

Q2: Can you please describe the political discourse in [Georgia/Moldova] prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the days after, and in broad strokes how the situation has evolved since then?

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

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

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

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