

# Gateways of Eurasia: New Challenges, New Opportunities

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**Abstract:** *Based on identifying the main areas that engage the mutual interest of Asian and European countries, this paper tries to determine the role and status of the new gateway states of Eurasia, with a particular focus on Romania. Building on this common ground could eventually lead to both sustainable economic growth and bridging the cultural gap which is keeping apart the two continents. Globalization has generated new challenges that could not be treated solely or unilaterally, by governments, international organizations or other stakeholders. Issues like climate change, increased inequalities, scarcity of resources, terrorism, digital divide, migration, in the forms they evolve nowadays were equally determined or driven by globalization. These global issues require a common effort to build resilience and to reverse the emerging trends which have already shown their negative impact in the aspects of our lives and global politics. Europe and Asia, despite the apparent distances and divisions which are highlighted lately by the competition on limited resources, competition on markets and currencies, on political and even philosophical disputes about the clash of civilizations, have always had a common ground of inhabitation. During the centuries, there were the natural and political factors and barriers that determined the openness, relationships and interconnections between the East and the West. In the era of knowledge society, could there be new gateways that brake the cultural and geopolitical barriers? How then could be redefined the roles of the old gateways?*

**Keywords:** *gateway states, international trade, European Union, Eurasia, geopolitics, international relations*

## 1. Introduction

In the past decades, globalization has led to multiple transformations of the human systems. Nevertheless, the factors that drove globalization have had a great impact on the world economy, on political systems, on social mechanisms of the economic choice and on individual behaviors. The unprecedented development of technology, the spread of innovation and the information society have driven unimaginable urban economic development, an explosive growth of trade and financial markets, with the emergence of new regional blocks, of new business models and a steady economic growth of the emerging world. The smart specialization under the specter of a new industrial revolution and the transition towards a more sustainable economy are the most common strategic objectives of any country or region. All these positive impacts of globalization have led to the assumption that the nation states, as political entities that stood at the basis of the actual world order after the WWII-nd, are regressing as relevant actors on the global scene, that other actors are going to replace this vacuum, non-state actors, like global corporations, financial institutions, global organizations and regional entities, like European Union or Eurasian Economic Union.

But, the recent trends in global politics have proven that interconnections and relationships are more complex than that. There were the negative impacts of globalization that have occurred roughly. They have proven that global interconnections and regional integration have weaknesses when it comes to dealing with the economic and financial crisis. The financial crisis of 2008-2009 have demonstrated that the existing systems were missing effective mechanisms to respond to crisis. That the nation states which corresponded to the former peers of the systems were so exposed and unable of resilience and institutional approach. And that the tough competitors like corporate banks or multinational corporations have gained sufficient power to negotiate a more favorable position for their own interest of the repartition of losses.

Besides the negative effects of globalization, some other developments on the global scene marked the return of geopolitics and the retake of the discussion about the role of state in dealing with the global issues, such as the new developments of conflicts, the military engagement of Russia in Syria and the Middle East, Brexit and a serious discussion of dismantling of European Union, the ambiguous position of Turkey in the regional conflicts, clearly disobeying of an official position of NATO and not to neglect the rise of China, as a main contender of United States as a leading global power.

To summarize, there were several types of causes that marked the return of geopolitics: localized conflicts with global intensity or strategic relevance, the resurgence of old tensions and frictions, the emergence of China as the first economic power, the expected reset of the international organization system, fragmentation and reshuffle of the European Union and the claim of a new world order, contesting *pax americana*.

This paper starts with the premise that geopolitics has regained the relevance as an analyzing instrument of global challenges. With that inquiry, there can't be made any exception to skip off from analysis the return of the political games on the global scene in order to understanding the world economy and possibly a new multipolar world order. Although geopolitics will not excel with the relevance it had in the XX-th century, it rather offers a different perspective of a more globalized world which previously seemed to have unhitched of the *real politik* approaches. Geopolitics could offer a framework of analysis that explains better the synergies between the factors of globalization and their economic significance. Such a framework could combine three complementary modes of analysis: the geopolitical systemic configuration, the geopolitical culture of the main agents, and the specific geopolitical situations. (Venier, 2010) Based on this approach, the paper tries to redefine the gateway regions/states of Eurasia and to underline their actual and future roles.

## 2. From the Heartland to the Gateway

During the Cold War, it was acknowledged that all the systems and processes of international relations, trade agreements and economic models were set up under the framework of the balance of power and the balance of power was only driven by the existence of the two blocks: the Western block led by USA and the Eastern block led by USSR, separated by the Iron Curtain.

As the former US National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski imagined (Brzezinski, 1997), the world could be figured out as a chessboard, a contest of nerves and smart moves between the two Great Powers that used to competing one against the other, to cooperate for mutual benefit and also to annihilate each other's move. The classical studies of geopolitics, which have influenced a lot the international scene during the Cold War, were based on the theory of the Heartland. "The Heartland was determined geographically as the vast zone of continental and arctic drainage of Central Asia. The Heartland theory stated that a power which would control both Eastern Europe and the Heartland would be able to dominate the World Island (Europe, Africa, and Asia), and in turn the whole world." (Mackinder, 1919) To the Heartland it was opposed the Rimland, defined as the periphery of the Heartland. United States were the main power of the Rimland and USSR the main power of the Heartland. For centuries, "the heartland had been the geographical pivot of history and remained the pivot of the world's politics". (Venier, 2010) In order to protect its Heartland, USSR has created a Shatterbelt, formed of artificial surrogate states, natural borders or states under direct control of Moscow, orbiting in its sphere of influence, which played a role of buffer zones between the Heartland and the Rimland. Eastern Europe, the Caucasian republics, Kashmir, Africa and the Middle East, few countries in Latin America were the most common examples of buffer zones.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the communist systems were thought to mark the end of geopolitics, the end of history, as it marked "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy." (Fukuyama, 1992) However, many of the remaining buffer zones were temporarily upgraded to frozen conflicts or military enclaves. As opposed to Fukuyama's theory, Huntington responded with the clash of civilizations theory which he argued to replace on a long term the temporary conflict between ideologies. (Huntington, 1996)

After 9/11 attacks of the World Trade Center twin towers in New York, with the rise of China and the Russian come-back on the international scene, with its Cold War rhetoric of sphere of influence, the American foreign policy seemed to rebound to the classical objective, which has its core in the heartland theory: "to employ its influence in Eurasia in a manner that creates a stable continental equilibrium, with the United States as the political arbiter [...] it is imperative that no Eurasian challenger emerges, capable of dominating Eurasia and thus also of challenging America." (Brzezinski, 1997) With this background, Obama administration adopted a new foreign policy doctrine called the Asia – Pacific "pivot", which aims at strengthening security in Asia Pacific and rebalancing the rise of China. (Oehler - Sincai, 2016)

Following the recent developments of the Syrian conflict, more and more the American security analysts admit that amongst the Syrian civil war, there is an ongoing proxy war in Syria between USA and Russia, (Mazzeti, 2016) which unequivocally leads back to the Cold War rhetoric. "For the first time since Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Russian military for the past year has been in direct combat with rebel forces trained and supplied by the C.I.A." (Mazzeti, 2016) The relative victories that Mr. Putin reclaimed in Ukraine,

with the annexation of Crimea and the instate of two unrecognized separatist republics in Eastern Ukraine, with the rebalancing of war in Syria, rejecting the Western Coalition's struggle to replace the president Bashar Al Assad into power, has given Moscow the opportunity to bargain decisions about the future of the Middle East, a position which Russia has lost after the crash of USSR.

On the opposite to the buffer zone concept, the American professor of geopolitics Saul Cohen was a contester of the thesis of the Heartland-Rimland, stating that "the Free World has become the victim of a myth – the myth of the inherent unity of World Island, given the unity of Heartland in combination with part of the Rimland. An adjunct of the myth is that the sea based powers cannot maintain their position unless complete command over all parts of the Eurasian littoral is maintained." (Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a World Divided*, 1963) He considers that as the Great Powers become mutually dependent, the possibility of the buffer zones to mutate to "gateways" increase.

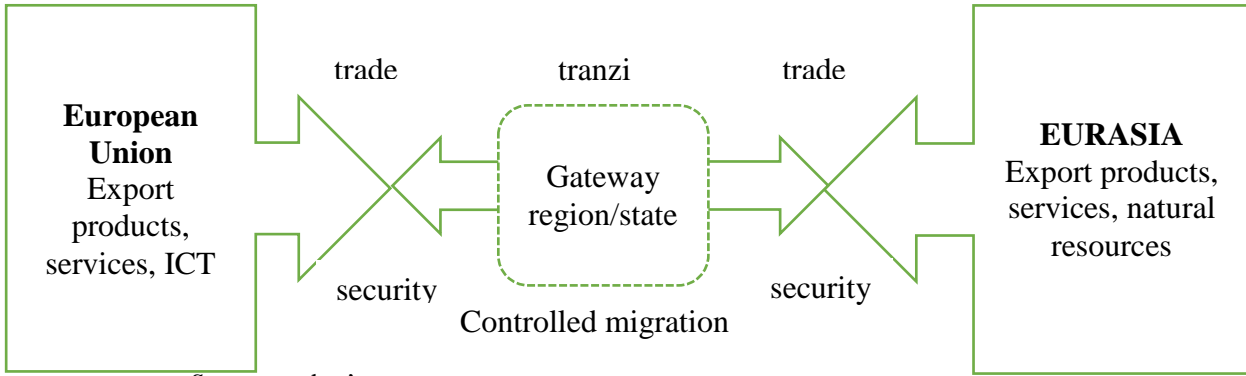
From a geopolitical perspective, a gateway, a gateway region or a gateway state represent "small exchange states with qualified sovereignty that will spin off from existing national entities to help link the world system." (Cohen, *Presidential Address: Global Geopolitical Change in the Post-Cold War Era*, 1991) The notion of gateway region derived from a larger concept of geostrategic region, which reunites as well the meaning of geopolitical region or buffer zone, regions that stimulate socio-economic and political interaction. Cohen regards the whole Central and Eastern Europe as a gateway region, as a region open to economic transfer from West to East and reversal. (Hyde-Price, 1996) What makes the buffer zones and gateways look alike? Is the gateway just an upgraded and political correct term for buffer zone?

To define the role of a gateway state, one must rely on the links between the socio-economic aspects of systems' interference and the military and political ones that inherently converge in such nodes that we call gateways. This does not necessarily translate into looking primordially at one shot economic picture of the transactions carried out through a certain route or a one shot picture of the security map. It must instead portraying a specific pattern which is provided by the historical, geographical, political and socio-economic features. Same as the buffer zones, the gateways must require political and economic stability. To provide stability, the gateways must be offered from both plans of interaction the provisions of economic and social development and the security conditions of safe transfer. As opposed to the buffer zones, the main asset of the gateways is the value of trade, under qualified sovereignty. The gateway does not have the property to neutralize and localize conflicts, as buffer zones used to have, they transfer the conflicts further. Weather the system of a side provide conflict and instability, the gateway would transfer the same instability and tensions to the other side. If the relationships are stabilized and a state of cooperation is regained, the gateway would facilitate the positive transaction.

How does a gateway excel, what are its main assets? A gateway not necessarily dispose of large deposits of natural resources, but it could acquire them or facilitate the bulk transfer. It does not necessarily have a large military power, but it is granted security. It is not necessarily an economically developed and abundant region or country, but it is transited by main routes of trade. In that sense, the properties on which a gateway state rely are: an accessible and strategic geographical position, with fair climate, good infrastructure and intermodal transport opportunities, strategic military bases and international alliance commitments. For instance, in Eastern Europe the Cold War context and the preeminence of the Soviet sphere of influence has generated several artificial boundaries, buffer zones that unnecessarily were related to socio-economic aspects. Did these former buffer zones acquire all the necessary ingredients to evolve into gateway states? Does necessarily the emerging gateways had a starting point as a buffer zone? That is clearly not the case. The roles of a regional gateway are defined by its geographical, economic and political relevance today:

- Economic integration: it helps facilitating the integration of sound economies with the surrounding regions,
- Shorter transport route: compared to the existing route to transport goods, it is faster and cheaper, it connects the main transport and trade networks,
- Natural resources access: the gateway might offer opportunities to access resources,
- Exports: it could open destinations of exports,
- Security pillar in the region: the gateway builds on a stable security policy and military alliances, having good relations with its neighbors and constructive partnerships with potential enemies.

**Figure 1. The Actual Role of the Gateway State**



Source: author's concept

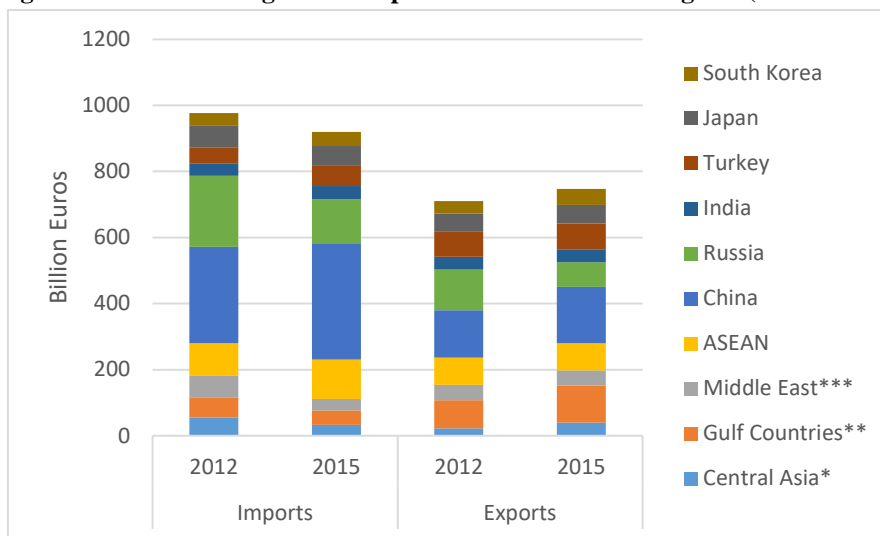
### 3. European Union and the Eurasian "Dragon"

European Union has grown up from an economic and trade union towards a more political integrated entity, without assuming yet a political will. Not for a long time ago, the idea that the integration process was irreversible and unequivocal was deeply fixed in the European leadership and the citizens' acknowledge. There was a solid trust in the welfare state which the European model had practiced, in its sustainability and the positive brake up of the free movement's barriers. Recently, unprecedented evolutions have raised tough challenges to the European project: Brexit, Euro-skeptical, nationalist and radical political parties in France, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Greece, self-determinism in Scotland, Catalonia, Basque Country, Flandra, Padania, South Tirol, Corsica and Bavaria, the refugee crisis and the inability of the European leadership to reach consensus on such provocations, divergence of interests and opinions in the European foreign policy and security areas.

A recent study concentrated the challenges European Union is facing into three main categories: the perception of being too rigid and "status quo -ist", the dependence on the Transatlantic political and economic axis and the persistent structural inability to open to the world at large. (Saran, 2016) To these challenges correspond three main dimensions in which Europe and Asia should cooperate in order to increase mutual benefits of globalization and prevent the manifestation of risks: economy, migration and security.

On the economic dimension, EU is the main trade partner of the largest countries of Eurasia: China and Russia. It is also a main trading partner for other regional powers in the Middle East and Turkey. As Figure 2 shows up, out of a total of 1,700 billion Euros value of trade between EU and the Asian blocks/states in 2015, more than 520 billion was realized with China.

**Figure 2. Trade exchanges of European Union with Asian regions (billion euros)**

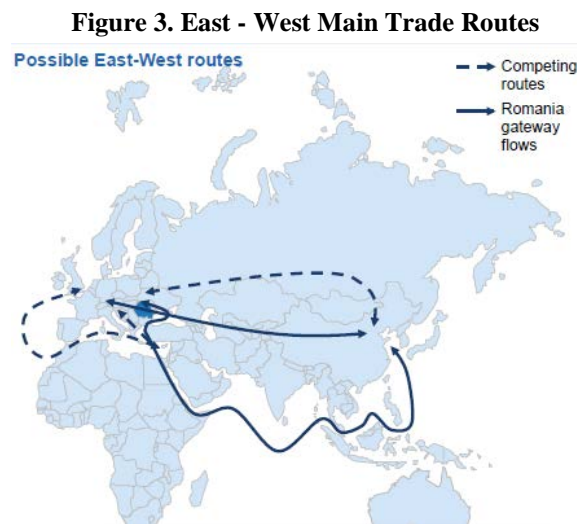


Source: compiled data from Eurostat, 2016

\*ASEAN: Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand; Middle East: Syria, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Libya, Lebanon, Palestine; Gulf Region: Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, Yemen; Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Georgia, Armenia

Nevertheless, the trade balance between EU and China is clearly in favor of the later. In 2015, EU's imports from China represented 38% of the total from the region (350 bln. Euro) while the EU's exports to China amounted to 23% of the total to the region (170 bln.). Bilateral EU-China trade favored the later by nearly 122 bln. Euro 2015.

Trade with Russia was obviously influenced by the political turmoil in the region. Total trade was 40% lower in 2015, as compared to 2012, mostly due to the economic sanctions which both parties have imposed to each other as a consequence of the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation. Most of the losses in trade with Asia were replaced with third parties, so that the total volume has preserved about the same. For instance, EU has extended trade with China and Turkey, but also started to diversify trade with ASEAN group in the Far East and with the Middle East countries. But, still, EU would have a lot of map to uncover in order to develop more trade relations, especially with the emergent economic powers in the South and South-East Asia. Within the European Union, the main liner traders are Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Spain, with Germany alone accounting for around 20% of the total EU trade in 2014. (World Shipping, 2017)



Source: Aspen Institute Romania, 2014.

The main routes of transport which connect Europe and Asia, as they are drafted in Figure 3, are equally determined by the existing infrastructure of ports and inland logistics. By far, the main route of trade, with more than 80% of the trade volumes of goods in 2015 (70% of global trade value) is carried out by sea and this is not going to change much in the future, due to the cost efficiency. (UNCTAD, 2015) This aspect gives the ports and shipment infrastructure the highest importance. In that sense, in Europe, the Netherlands' ports of Rotterdam and Amsterdam handle 27% of EU's Top 30 ports in terms of loaded and unloaded goods. As regards the volumes of shipping, the main routes on East and West Bounds were Asia – North Europe in 2013, with 13.7 mil. TEU and Asia- Mediterranean, with 6.74 mil. TEU. (World Shipping, 2017)

Besides the sea routes, which connect the main port cities of China with Western Europe, there are several alternative routes and projects promoted lately, by either European Commission, China or Russia, which take into consideration a further development of trade:

- China's One Belt One Road Initiative (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016): announced in 2013 as a New Silk Road, it is an initiative of China to physically and economically integrate Eurasia with China. It could allow traded goods between EU and China to passing just two customs checks. China has set up a Silk Road Fund of \$40 billion, aimed at promoting private investment along OBOR. It engages large financial institutions such as Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), the China Investment Corporation, the Export-Import Bank of China, and the China Development Bank. The Economist reported that China intends to spend \$1 trillion in "government money" on OBOR. It will create \$2.5 trillion in trade among the 65 countries involved over four billion people.

- The East – West rail corridors, which connects East Asia and East Russia with Western Russia and from there to Northern Europe. This route comprises the Trans-Siberian Railway, Trans-Manchurian Railway and the Trans-Mongolian Railway. Based on development projects of railway systems and fast speed trains, which both Russia and China have engaged with, it is possible that this route increased more as relevance on a medium term.
- TRACECA (European Commission, 2017): a programme initiated at the Conference in Brussels, in May 1993, involving Ministries of Trade and Transport from 8 countries in Central Asia, financed from the European Union and aimed at the development of the transport corridor from Europe, crossing the Black Sea, Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and reaching the Central Asian countries. In the period of 1996-1998 Ukraine, Mongolia and Moldova joined the programme. In 2000, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey have become members and Islamic Republic of Iran and Lithuania were granted the status of observer.

In the sense of a gateway state, as we describe it above, there are few particular cases which have an increased significance with the Europe – Asia transit and deserve further analysis. Therefore, we can observe each of this case with the providing features and determine which could be seen as more favorable than other to make this transit more accurate, cost efficient and safer. It is obviously possible to transit East – West routes only where geography, infrastructure and political stability confer more trust. But still, this could not be sufficient to address them as gateways, if they were missing the cultural property of a complex diversity that could possibly make the transition from a European culture to an Asian one. On the existing routes, there are few particular cases which could make the subject of a thorough research, for countries like Turkey, Greece, Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania. Yet, it was not in the scope of this paper to go that thoroughly, but opens the gate for further research and comparison. Further on, there will be presented few of the characteristics of Romania as a gateway state that might deserve a particular attention.

#### **4. Romania – a gateway state of Eurasia**

Romania is a medium state in South Eastern Europe, member of the European Union, since 2007 and NATO, since 2004. In the regional context, Romania is the largest most stable Western ally in the Black Sea region. Romania's economy is rather weak, considering its size and population, but it met a strong growth since the integration in European Union. The economy still requires structural reforms in order to comply with the market economy conditions. Romania is almost entirely dependent on the European Union, as more than 70% of its trade is carried out within EU and there are 3 to 4 million Romanians working in other European countries.

As of particular interest, Romania is not dependent on the imports of the Russian gas, it has a favorable position that could become a possible pivot for the West or an inland gateway for the East – West corridor. Romania lacks the infrastructure for transport, industry and agriculture, but it has a competitive advantage in the energy sector and agriculture, mostly due to the existing resources and the natural capital. ICT is the success story of Romanian economy after transition to market economy and an asset for future development, providing good network connectivity, good experience and training of employees, good market conditions and global outsourcing.

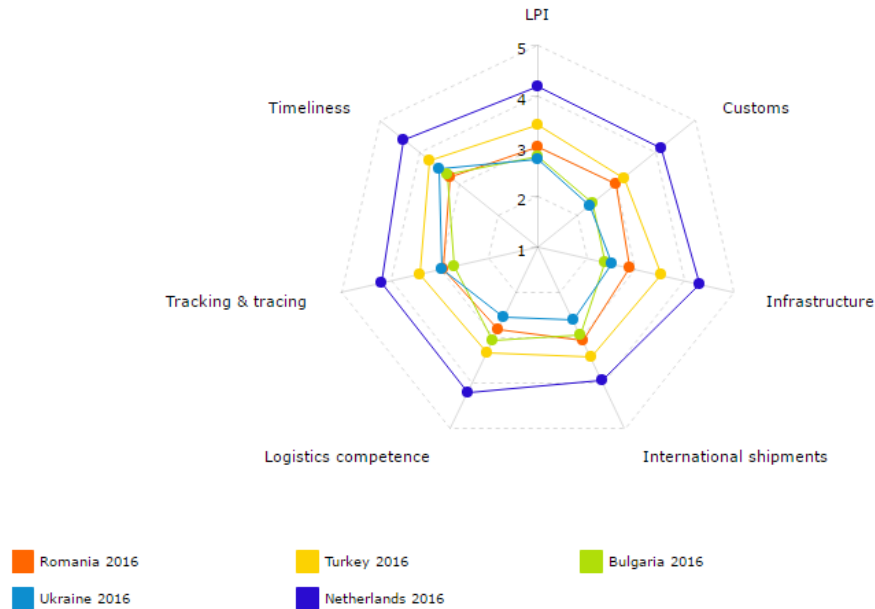
Romania could leverage its strategic gateway location into a competitive advantage and to achieve a steady economic growth over the next decades.

As a regional gateway in Eastern Europe, Romania could provide multi-modal transport interconnection: maritime freight with logistical port in Constanta, with terminals for crops, LNG and petroleum, railway freight and highway connection, together with a potential Rin – Danube fluvial corridor. The port of Constanta is already one of the largest shipment ports in the Black Sea and Mediterranean, having a shipment capacity of 100 mil. tons per year and 156 berths. In 2015, port of Constanta operated 689 thou. Teu cargo, (Port of Constanta Administration, 2016) the second inland port in the region after Turkey's Ambarli, with 3.500 thou teu. The opportunity of assessing European funds could be an important incentive to further develop on this direction.

As setbacks and risks (Aspen Institute Romania, 2014), the main bottleneck is the network overcapacity and weak interconnectivity, both inside the country and with the European regions. Lack of physical infrastructure of energy and transport, bottlenecks in road and rail inland determine delays and limits of trade. A second risk is the dependence on the Bosphorus straits, as a maritime gate and depends on the political developments in Turkey.

About the logistics performance, as the Figure 4 shows up, Romania was on average with most of the analyzed criteria, in some aspects a little better off as compared with the neighboring countries, Bulgaria and Ukraine, but worse off as compared with its competitor Turkey and a far distance to the Netherlands and other Western destinations.

**Figure 4. Logistics performance index, 2016**



Source: author’s comparison based on World Bank Logistics Performance Index

Note: 1 Efficiency of the clearance process (i.e., speed, simplicity and predictability of formalities) by border control agencies, including customs;  
 2 Quality of trade and transport related infrastructure (e.g., ports, railroads, roads, information technology)  
 3 Ease of arranging competitively priced shipments  
 4. Competence and quality of logistics services (e.g., transport operators, customs brokers)  
 5 Ability to track and trace consignments  
 6 Timeliness of shipments in reaching destination within the scheduled or expected delivery time.

With regards to its security, Romania is more stable than its neighbors, giving the regional circumstances. Romania was not a buffer zone of the USSR and it maintained a sovereign state during the Cold War, mostly under Ceaușescu’s regime. After the collapse of communism, Romania engaged in a transition process to liberalize the economy and to democratize the society, which culminated with the accession in NATO and European Union.

Following NATO and US commitment to the Black Sea region, Romania’s national security strategy has relied mostly on the strategic partnership with United States.

After the regional political turmoil in Eastern Europe, which evolved into open conflicts in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the unstable situation in Turkey, giving the engagement in cross border operations in Syria, the terrorist attacks and a failed coup, which eventually turned into a consolidation of power of actual president Erdogan and a reconsideration of relations with Russia, Romania could provide a safe access to European markets and a cultural buffer of Eastern and Western interaction. The national security could be improved, based on its commitment with NATO, as a main security priority, providing that it succeeds to build up a safe relationship in the Black Sea region, with its neighbors outside EU, Moldova and Ukraine and the two bordering powers, Russia and Turkey.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has tried to bring into attention the larger picture of the Black Sea region, by providing different arguments at the intersection of international trade, economics and geopolitics. Considering that due to the recent political turmoil and profound transformations that take place at the global scale in which regards the

repositioning of the Great Powers, the uptakes from the vast literature of geopolitics could bring a new possible mode of analysis, which combine specific geopolitical situations with geopolitical systemic configuration. In that sense, a section was dedicated to review the main concepts of geopolitics and to bring them closer to nowadays significance. One concept was treated specifically, the gateway region or the gateway state, a concept evolved from the XX-th century buffer zone or shatterbelt. As of today, in a globalized world, the meaning of buffer zone was outdated, but the term of gateway makes sense as it comprises the pillars that could provide a safe transition of trade, energy and security between two large opposing powers or to say the least, of two different civilizations. Why is this important? Because making this liberal interaction further possible it would eventually keep the opposing blocks of not colliding. For the gateway state, the main gain would be the guarantee of the state sovereignty, as long as it confers the liaison of communication and trade and further on the asset derived from the value of trade.

Starting at this point, it was further defined the concept, with its main role and attributes. It was presented the state of trade between European Union and Asian largest powers and blocks, underlining the importance at the global scale of the trade and routes between Europe and Asia, with a particular attention to shipping trade and main ports, which remains the largest trade route in the global economy, with more than 80% of trade carried out by sea.

There were further described briefly few large existing projects that could largely develop the amount of trade and the relationship of the two continents: China's One Belt One Road or the New Silk Road, Russia and China complex railway corridor and EU's TRACECA.

In a separate section, it was analyzed the case of Romania as a possible gateway state, providing synthetic information on the main advantages and risks which Romania shows up and a brief state of the economy. Constanta, Romania's largest port and second inland gateway to Central Europe after Turkey's Ambarli could be a more cost effective shipping port for the Asian traded goods. But for that to happen, further development of infrastructure and logistics is required, as Romania lacks the road and rail infrastructure, as compared to its neighbors and it is on average distance in Logistics Performance Index, just a little bit better than Bulgaria and Ukraine, but still far away of the logistics performance of the countries with the largest ports in Western Europe, the Netherlands and Germany.

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