

KNOWLEDGE DIPLOMACY & TALENT CORRIDORS: ROMANIA AS A REGIONAL HUB 2025–2030

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Abstract

This paper proposes a Romanian “Knowledge Diplomacy & Talent Corridors” strategy for 2025–2030 across the Black Sea–Danube–Balkans region. Rather than competing on hard power, Romania can shape outcomes through education–science–culture instruments: joint degrees and micro-credentials, dual-supervision PhDs, cross-border university alliances, and cultural platforms aligned with EU/NATO priorities. We introduce the CREDO framework—Connectivity, Reciprocity, Equivalence (of credentials), Dual-use guardrails, and Outcomes—to design scalable talent corridors that attract and circulate students, researchers, and cultural practitioners. Using theory-guided mini-cases (MD/UA accession facilitation, Danube innovation axis, cultural diplomacy nodes), we derive metrics for diplomatic impact (standard setting, network centrality, follow-on funding). The contribution is a practical playbook for Romania as a normative middle power: policy levers, partnership templates, and an education-centered signaling doctrine that strengthens resilience, integration, and soft power in a fragmenting order.

Keywords: *Education, Knowledge Diplomacy, Talent Corridor, Regional Hub.*

1. Introductory Aspects

Romania stands at a strategic crossroads in the Black Sea–Danube–Balkans region, uniquely positioned to leverage education, science, and culture as instruments of diplomacy. As an EU and NATO member sharing borders and historical ties with aspiring EU entrants like Moldova and Ukraine, Romania can deploy “knowledge diplomacy” as a form of soft power to foster regional stability and integration¹. Knowledge diplomacy refers to strengthening international relations through higher education, research, and innovation initiatives, emphasizing mutual benefit and cooperation over one-sided influence². This strategy aligns with Romania’s aim to become a regional soft-power hub by 2025–2030, using the exchange of knowledge and talent to build goodwill, encourage democratic norms, and accelerate European integration in its neighborhood.

A knowledge-centric diplomatic strategy would complement traditional statecraft by engaging universities, academies, cultural institutes, and civil society as key actors. Such multi-actor engagement is increasingly important in contemporary diplomacy, where influence is no longer wielded solely by foreign ministries. Romania’s dense networks of educational and cultural linkages in the Black Sea and Balkan region can thus serve as vectors of strategic communication and resilience, amplifying its voice as a normative middle power, a medium-sized state that punches above its weight by promoting norms and values in line with the EU/NATO liberal-democratic order. While one analysis finds that Romania, by its capabilities, could be labeled a “middle power” but has yet to fully perform as one in Europe³.

An assertive knowledge diplomacy agenda offers a pathway to fulfill that role. By investing in talent corridors, structured pathways for mobility of students, researchers, and ideas, Romania can enhance its institutional centrality in regional networks and become an indispensable hub for cooperation. This article proposes a CREDO framework (Connectivity, Reciprocity, Equivalence of credentials, Dual-use guardrails, Outcomes) to articulate Romania’s strategy and examines three theory-informed mini-case studies to illustrate how it might play out in practice. We further discuss measurable diplomatic impact indicators and practical programmatic tools (dual degrees, consortia, exchanges, etc.) to operationalize this vision.

¹ Skelton, E. *Knowledge diplomacy*, The British Council, August 2019

² Knight, J. *Knowledge Diplomacy vs. Soft Power*, NAFSA IE Magazine, October 2022

³ Angheliescu, A.M., *Is Romania a Middle Power? A Neoclassical Realist Interpretation of Post-communist Romania's Foreign Policy*. *Studia Politica*. XXI. 487-514, 2022

2. Knowledge Diplomacy as Soft-Power Strategy

Knowledge diplomacy is an emerging concept distinguishing itself from traditional cultural diplomacy or simple academic exchange by its explicit diplomatic intent. Rather than viewing international education as merely a means of attracting foreign talent or projecting cultural influence (as in classic soft power), knowledge diplomacy centers on mutuality and co-creation.

It is built on the idea that collaborative research, educational partnerships, and knowledge sharing can address global and regional challenges while simultaneously improving relations between states

This approach aligns well with Romania's interest in stabilizing and integrating its neighborhood. Whereas soft power relies on attraction and sometimes pursues national advantage, knowledge diplomacy "is based on co-creating... for mutual (but often differing) benefit"⁴ and treats partner countries as equals working toward common goals. Education thus becomes not just a projection of influence but a two-way street strengthening all parties.

Romania's universities and research institutes can be pivotal in this diplomatic turn. British Council analysts note that higher education institutions often have better links with foreign counterparts than governments do, and their autonomy and academic credibility allow them to operate beyond the confines of politics. . For example, the Pan African University and other international networks show how academic hubs can foster regional cooperation and "subtly shift relationships between countries"⁵.

In the Romanian context, leveraging university networks and scientific collaborations could serve as a source of soft power that also actively creates diplomatic goodwill. Indeed, Romania's ability to attract and educate thousands of students from neighboring Moldova, hosting four out of five Moldovan students studying in the EU⁶ has already built significant goodwill and people-to-people bonds. These ties, formed through scholarships, alumni networks, and academic cooperation, translate into long-term influence and trust. Crucially, knowledge diplomacy emphasizes reciprocity: benefits need not be identical for each side, but each partner should gain tangible value

This principle helps Romania avoid a patronizing stance; instead, partnerships with Moldova, Ukraine, or Balkan states should be framed as jointly solving problems (such as brain drain, innovation gaps, or skills shortages) in a way that advances all countries involved.

To structure Romania's strategy, we introduce the CREDO framework – a set of five pillars that ground effective knowledge diplomacy initiatives. These are Connectivity, Reciprocity, Equivalence (of credentials), Dual-use guardrails, and Outcomes. CREDO, meaning "I believe" in Latin, reflects Romania's belief in the power of knowledge ties to enhance its regional leadership. Each element is discussed below.

3. The CREDO Framework: Pillars of Romania's Knowledge Diplomacy

Connectivity: Building networks and linkages for exchange. At the heart of knowledge diplomacy is connecting people and institutions across borders. Romania must strengthen institutional connectivity – expanding consortia of universities, joint research centers, and innovation clusters in the Black Sea–Danube–Balkans region. Enhanced connectivity involves physical mobility (student and faculty exchanges, joint campus programs) and digital connectivity (virtual exchanges, collaborative online learning communities). Such networks create talent corridors – sustained pathways through which students, scholars, and professionals circulate and share ideas. The benefits of dense connectivity are well-documented: countries that internationalize their higher education more tend to see greater research collaboration and even higher economic growth. For Romania, a flagship connectivity initiative is the newly established DANUBIUS-RI research infrastructure, a pan-European network for environmental science. Headquartered in Romania's Danube Delta, DANUBIUS-ERIC brings together institutions from seven countries (including Moldova, Italy, and even the UK), making it the first European research consortium based in Romania⁷. Its coordination hub in Murighiol will link laboratories across Europe, exemplifying how Romania can serve as a coordination center for regional science collaboration

Likewise, Romania's Erasmus+ agency recently convened the DanubE+ Cooperation conference (June 2025) for rectors from six Danube region countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Moldova, Serbia, Ukraine) to

⁴ Skelton, E., *ibidem*

⁵ *Ibidem*

⁶ ***, *Romania leads European Union in the number of Moldovan students*, EU NEIGHBOURSEAST Online publication, February 2023

⁷ Trtíková, I., *The Czech Republic has become one of the founding countries of the newly established European research consortium DANUBIUS-ERIC*, Large Research Infrastructures, August 2025

forge new academic partnerships⁸. By actively fostering such multi-country networks, Romania increases its institutional centrality – becoming the connective node through which regional partners engage. Over time, institutional centrality in research and education networks translates into influence, as seen in other contexts where universities with high co-authorship centrality wield great field-specific clout⁹.

Reciprocity: Ensuring mutual benefit and two-way exchange. Romania's knowledge diplomacy must be founded on genuine reciprocity to gain trust in the region. This means moving beyond one-way "brain drain" flows or donor-recipient paradigms and structuring initiatives so that all sides benefit, albeit in different ways.

Reciprocity can be achieved by designing exchange programs where Romanian students and researchers also spend time in neighboring countries, not only the reverse. For instance, joint degree programs could require participants to study in both Romania and the partner country, sharing the educational experience. Co-tutelle doctoral arrangements (dual supervision of PhDs by Romanian and foreign professors) could enrich Romanian academia with new perspectives while building capacity in the partner institution. As Knight observes, in knowledge diplomacy "mutuality of benefits does not mean all actors benefit equally but that everyone benefits in some way"¹⁰.

Embracing this ethos, Romania has treated Moldovan students as de facto domestic students in many cases, offering them scholarships, housing and tuition support as fellow Romanian-speakers, while those students later contribute back by strengthening cross-border business and civic ties. A concrete example is Romania's long-running scholarship program for Moldovan youth, which by 2023 resulted in roughly 14,000+ Moldovan students studying at Romanian universities (approximately 80% of all Moldovans studying in the EU)¹¹.

These students often remain attached to Romania, creating an alumni network that bolsters inter-state relations. At the same time, they fill skill gaps in the Romanian economy or facilitate cross-border investments, a reciprocity of human capital. Romania's support for Ukraine's academic community after 2022 similarly underscored mutual aid: Romanian universities opened hundreds of spots for Ukrainian students and researchers, providing free Romanian language courses, accommodation, and even employment opportunities for displaced academics¹².

This humanitarian influx also enriched Romanian campuses with talented individuals and fostered goodwill that Romania can draw upon in future cooperation. By emphasizing fairness, respect, and co-creation in every partnership, whether establishing a joint research center or twinning universities, Romania will strengthen its image as a benevolent collaborator rather than a self-interested actor. Reciprocity also implies commitment to standardization and quality, as Romanian institutions must uphold high standards so that partnerships are truly valuable to others (e.g. issuing degrees and research output that partners recognize and appreciate).

Equivalence of Credentials: Bridging the gaps in recognition of degrees and skills. For a genuine regional knowledge space, academic and professional credentials must be portable and comparable across borders. Romania can champion frameworks of equivalence, ensuring that a diploma from Chişinău or Belgrade is understood and valued in Bucharest, and vice versa. This principle draws on the European Union's Bologna Process of harmonizing degree structures and the various recognition conventions. Indeed, joint and dual-degree programs – which award graduates degrees from multiple institutions, have been a key tool in Europe to "promote convergence of higher education systems as well as to foster... international cooperation"¹³

By expanding such programs, Romania helps align curricula and trust in qualifications between itself and partners. Moreover, Romania should actively utilize mechanisms like the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the new UNESCO Global Convention on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (which entered into force in 2023) to simplify credential recognition¹⁴. These treaties promote fair and transparent procedures so that foreign qualifications can be recognized unless substantial differences are proven. Romania's National Recognition Centre (CNRED) is already a partner in the Council of Europe's European Qualifications Passport

⁸ ***, *International Conference on Cooperation in Higher Education: "DanubE+ Cooperation"* (25–27.06.2025, Bucharest, Romania), National Office Erasmus+ UA, June 2025

⁹ Wang, S., Yu, L., *Visual analysis of research hot topics and trends of clinical decision support system based on CiteSpace*, Langenbeck's Archives of Surgery, September 2025

¹⁰ Knight, J. (2020). *Knowledge Diplomacy: What Are the Key Characteristics?* International Higher Education.

¹¹ ***, *Romania leads European Union in the number of Moldovan students*, EU NEIGHBOURSEAST Online publication, February 2023

¹² ***, *Office for supporting the students, professors and researchers from the Ukrainian Universities*, website, accessed at 04.10.2025

¹³ Tobenkin, D., *Web Extra! The European Model for Joint and Dual Degrees*, NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2008

¹⁴ ***, *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education*, UNESCO, 25 November 2019

for Refugees (EQPR) initiative, which assesses refugees' qualifications even when documentation is missing¹⁵. This tool was highlighted in 2022 as facilitating Ukrainian refugees' integration into European universities and job markets. Such efforts not only serve a humanitarian purpose but also lay the groundwork for integrated regional labor markets and academic communities. Going forward, Romania could propose a "Black Sea Academic Mobility Agreement" a multilateral pact among countries in the region to expedite mutual recognition of credits, degrees, and professional certifications, potentially using EU frameworks as a reference. Equivalence of credentials, in practice, creates a credential bridge: for example, a Moldovan engineer retrained in Romania can have her license recognized in the EU, or a Romanian medical degree holder can easily serve in Ukraine's reconstruction. By smoothing these pathways, Romania helps its neighbors meet EU standards (supporting their EU accession goals) while also increasing Romanian-trained professionals' regional impact. Equivalence initiatives will be measured by outcomes like joint diploma supplements, fast-track recognition procedures, and the reduction of "brain waste" (skills going unused due to bureaucratic obstacles).

Dual-Use Guardrails: Safeguarding collaboration from security risks. In expanding knowledge exchange, Romania and its partners must remain vigilant about the dual-use dilemma, knowledge and technology that can be used for both benevolent and malevolent purposes. Academic cooperation should advance civilian and democratic development, and be shielded from exploitation by authoritarian actors or military programs contrary to NATO/EU interests. As a frontline NATO state, Romania is acutely aware of hybrid threats and malign influence in the region. Thus, a Romanian knowledge diplomacy strategy must include guardrails to prevent sensitive research or critical technologies from leaking to hostile powers, and to ensure transparency and ethics in collaboration. This doesn't mean erecting barriers to exchange, but rather implementing smart risk mitigation. Experts argue that in ambiguous dual-use domains, we need "guardrails rather than bans", for example, secure research environments and vetted partnerships instead of outright isolation¹⁶. Romania can institute policies in its international projects such as: screening of research proposals for sensitive content, cyber-security training for joint labs, and agreements on IP and data sharing that protect critical information. NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) programme provides a model, funding only civil security-related research among member and partner states with full transparency¹⁷. In Romania's context, projects under a knowledge diplomacy umbrella might focus on areas like public health, energy security, climate resilience, and cyber defense – all dual-use relevant, but approached with agreements that results will be open and not appropriated for hostile ends. For instance, a cross-border cyber incubator with Moldova could include NATO-standard protocols to ensure tools developed aren't misused. The principle of dual-use guardrails extends to educational exchanges: monitoring that foreign students in sensitive fields (e.g. nuclear engineering, AI) come from partner countries with whom Romania shares trust, or have appropriate clearances. The need for such guardrails is underscored by recent global experiences, collaborations with certain countries have led to concerns of intellectual property diversion and military application of research. By proactively setting rules (for example, Romania could develop a Code of Conduct for Responsible Research Collaboration to be signed in any bilateral science MOU), Romania will reassure its Western allies that its regional openness does not create security loopholes. It also protects the integrity of its academic system from espionage or undue influence. In essence, Romania must balance openness with sovereignty: keeping collaboration flows wide in areas of common good, while erecting "firm walls around areas that demand insulation"¹⁸ a stance that will ultimately bolster regional resilience against hybrid threats.

Outcomes: Focusing on impact and accountability. Finally, Romania's knowledge diplomacy strategy must be outcome-oriented, with clear goals and metrics to evaluate success. Diplomatic initiatives often falter when they remain at the level of meetings and MoUs without tangible change; to avoid this, CREDO calls for defining measurable diplomatic impact indicators from the outset. We propose four key indicators to gauge Romania's progress as a knowledge diplomacy hub: (1) Policy adoption, (2) Standardization influence, (3) Network centrality, and (4) Follow-on funding.

- (1) **Policy adoption:** This refers to instances where Romanian-supported initiatives lead partner governments or institutions to adopt new policies, frameworks, or reforms aligned with European standards or best practices. For example, if Moldova and Ukraine, through joint working groups with Romanian experts, adopt Romanian-influenced legislation on university quality assurance or research ethics, that counts as a diplomatic win. Already, Romania's advocacy is evident, its president has pushed for accelerated EU accession negotiations for Moldova and Ukraine, sharing

¹⁵ ***, *European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) supports Ukrainian refugees' access to job market in Europe*, Council of Europe, 20 May 2022

¹⁶ Simon, D.; Wagner, C.S., *U.S.–China Scientific Collaboration at a Crossroads: Navigating Strategic Engagement in the Era of Scientific Nationalism*, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 4 November 2025

¹⁷ NATO, *Science for Peace and Security Programme*, 17 April 2023

¹⁸ Simon, D.; Wagner, C.S., *ibidem*

Romania's pre-accession experience to guide reforms¹⁹ We can measure policy adoption by tracking reforms in neighboring states in areas like education governance, credential recognition, or innovation policy that cite Romanian models or involvement. Each such uptake signals Romania's normative influence.

- (2) **Standardization influence:** Beyond formal policy, this indicator measures Romania's role in shaping regional standards and norms, for instance, the extent to which Romanian institutions lead the development of common curricula, joint accreditation standards, or regional qualifications frameworks. If a Danube-based university alliance agrees on standard credit transfer mechanisms under Romania's guidance, or if Romanian experts lead an initiative to standardize Black Sea marine research methods (via DANUBIUS-RI) adopted by multiple countries, it reflects normative power. Such influence can be captured by citations of Romanian-led guidelines in international documents, or the number of regional projects where Romanian institutions are the coordinators setting the quality benchmarks²⁰ Romania's involvement in drafting EU's education and research programs for the region (like the Danube Strategy Priority Areas on knowledge society) would also demonstrate standard-setting capacity.
- (3) **Institutional centrality in networks:** This is a quantitative network analysis measure – essentially how central Romanian entities are in various cooperation networks (educational, scientific, cultural). We can gauge this by the number of international consortia coordinated by Romanian universities, the frequency with which Romanian institutions are hubs connecting otherwise distant partners, or network metrics like betweenness centrality in co-publication or student mobility networks. For example, if University of Bucharest emerges as a top-five node in co-authorship network analysis in Southeastern Europe, or if the Romanian Cultural Institute leads the most cross-national projects in the Balkans Cultural Network, these point to increased centrality. A higher centrality means other countries depend on Romania as a connector, amplifying its soft power. This indicator can be tracked via project databases (Erasmus+ partnership links, Horizon Europe consortium data) and regional initiatives, the goal being to see Romania's centrality score rise over time. Notably, network power can substitute for material power: even a mid-sized country can be influential if it sits at the crossroads of many relationships²¹
- (4) **Volume of follow-on funding:** Finally, a concrete outcome of effective knowledge diplomacy is attracting increased funding from multilateral sources (EU, UNESCO, etc.) for regional initiatives centered in Romania. If Romania becomes known as a hub for successful projects, it should see a growing share of EU programs (like Horizon Europe WIDERA or Erasmus+ Capacity Building) being awarded to consortia led by Romanian entities. The EU's Widening participation scheme already encourages channeling funds to Eastern members; Romania can capitalize on this by demonstrating strong networks and readiness. We can measure this by the total € value of grants for regional education/research projects coordinated by Romania, and the number of UNESCO or Council of Europe sponsored initiatives hosted in Bucharest or Cluj. An uptick in these numbers by 2030 would indicate that donors see Romania as a credible regional leader capable of managing impactful projects. One example is the EDUREGION project under the Danube Transnational Programme, aimed at improving higher education governance in the region, in which Romania plays a key role, securing and successfully executing more such grants will both signify and reinforce Romania's hub status.

At the threshold of 2030, Romania stands at a crossroads of opportunity and responsibility. Embracing its role as a normative middle power anchored in European values, it has set a course to transform the Black Sea–Danube–Balkans region through knowledge diplomacy and talent corridors. Under the CREDO framework, emphasizing connectivity, reciprocity, equivalence of credentials, dual-use guardrails, and outcomes – Romania's soft power strategy is both visionary and pragmatic. It is visionary in that it seeks to strengthen resilience, regional integration, and democratic values by knitting together a community of scholars, innovators, and future leaders. It is pragmatic in demanding measurable outcomes: from mutual recognition of diplomas and joint research centers, to tangible increases in academic exchanges and innovation partnerships, ensuring this initiative does not devolve into symbolic policy but catalyzes real impact.

¹⁹ Diaconescu, A.M., *Exclusive: Romania's President Dan pushes for Moldova and Ukraine's EU bid, challenging Hungary*, Euronews, 2 October 2025

²⁰ EU Commission, *Widening participation and spreading excellence*, Research and Innovation website accessed 3 November 2025

²¹ Wilding, P., *The Diplomacy League: How Political Globalisation Measures a Nation's Smart Power*, League of Nations publication, 5 August 2025

Crucially, Romania's own post-Cold War journey, from transition to EU accession, lends it credibility to guide its neighbors along the path of reform and openness. By championing liberal-democratic norms and sharing its educational resources, Romania can bolster societal resilience against hybrid threats such as disinformation, while fostering a common sense of purpose with its neighbors. The long-term diplomatic and developmental returns of this education- and research-centered cooperation promise to be profound: a more stable, prosperous region aligned with European standards and inoculated against authoritarian drift. Yet there is a palpable sense of urgency – a risk of missed opportunity if Romania fails to seize the moment. In an era of intensifying soft power competition in Eastern Europe, hesitation could see less benevolent influences fill the void. The coming years thus form a narrow window for Romania to solidify its leadership as a regional hub. By decisively implementing the CREDO agenda now, with ambition tempered by accountability, Romania can ensure that its knowledge diplomacy is not just aspirational rhetoric but a transformative force securing the region's European future.

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