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## Romania, NATO and the Black Sea's Geopolitics

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## **Romania, NATO and the Black Sea's Geopolitics**

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## Executive summary

- Romania's strategic location by the Black Sea is undoubtedly a great asset for the country, and has for centuries been one of the most important geostrategic points on the European continent, situated as it is at the junction of three cultural and civilisational areas – United Europe representing the Western world, Orthodox Russia, and Turkey which, despite its pro-European leanings still belongs to the Middle East and the Muslim world.
- The significance of the Black Sea region increased as a result of the aforementioned NATO and EU expansions, the USA gained loyal allies, while Russia, the successor to the USSR which once dominated the region, was faced with the necessity to share political influences. This requirement to take into account the actions of other players is due to the fact that the influences of the major actors on the world political stage overlap in the Black Sea region.

- The chapter on “Romania’s role on NATO’s Eastern flank” explores Romania’s foreign policy within NATO and towards the Black Sea region as a security environment. I argue that Romania’s foreign and security policy has prioritized as security providers the strategic partnership with the United States, its membership in NATO, and in the EU. To gain membership and build security guarantees with the United States, Romania has temporarily adjusted its security and defence policy towards expeditionary warfare. As soon as Romania obtained security guarantees, the country started efforts to increase Western presence in the Black Sea region and the overall understanding of the Black Sea region as an insecure environment. Bucharest’s results in securitizing the Black Sea region in the West have been mixed, reconfirming the country’s security understanding of the United States, NATO and the EU as providing different degrees of security to the region.
- The chapter on “Romania’s actorness in the eastern neighbourhood” examines the external perceptions in Ukraine and Moldova of Romania’s foreign policy capacity and resources to play an active role in its immediate neighbourhood. We argue that, at the current stage, Romania’s actorness is underdeveloped, which means that a “capabilities-expectations” gap exists at the level of Romania’s foreign policy.  
To back up the main argument, we constructed an analytical framework for assessing state international capacity, based on a six-factor index comprising both hard and soft elements of power. We then investigated

how Romania is perceived in Moldova and Ukraine according to each of the six factors by employing a triple methodology: discourse analysis, national surveys, and semi-structured interviews.

The policy recommendations suggest that in order to become a much more visible actor in the Romania – Ukraine – Moldova regional triangle, Romania needs to show more political determination in relation to its immediate neighbourhood.





Tomasz Stępniewski

## Romania and the Black Sea's geopolitics

### Introduction

Romania's strategic location by the Black Sea is undoubtedly a great asset for the country, and has for centuries been one of the most important geostrategic points on the European continent, situated as it is at the junction of three cultural and civilisational areas – United Europe representing the Western world, Orthodox Russia, and Turkey which, despite its pro-European leanings, still belongs to the Middle East and the Muslim world<sup>1</sup>.

Forgotten somewhat by the West during the post-Cold War era, the Black Sea region found itself in the centre of political interest at the turn of the 21st century. This was due in part to Bulgaria and Romania's accession to the structures

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<sup>1</sup> Wider see: T. Stępniewski, *Geopolityka regionu Morza Czarnego w pozimnowojennym świecie*, Lublin–Warszawa 2011, *passim*; D. Phinnemore (ed.), *The EU and Romania. Accession and Beyond*, London 2006, *passim*; I. Joja, *Romania's Strategic Culture*, Stuttgart 2019.

of NATO (2004) and the European Union (2007). The importance of this region, situated on trade routes and supply lines for energy resources from the neighbouring Caspian Sea region, is enormous. For this reason, Romania aims to take on the role of a regional energy centre. The significance of the Black Sea region increased as a result of the aforementioned NATO and EU expansions, the USA gained loyal allies, while Russia, the successor to the USSR which once dominated the region, was faced with the necessity to share political influences. This requirement to take into account the actions of other players is due to the fact that the influences of the major actors on the world political stage overlap in the Black Sea region.

The situation of contemporary Romania is affected by historical circumstances not only from the distant past, but also from the country's tragic post-World War 2 history, the time of the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. The "Genius of the Carpathians" created a dense network of political police – the *Securitate*, whose structures terrorised society and controlled political life in the country for many years. This made it difficult for Romania to open up to the outside world and take up the difficult task of economic reforms after the fall of communism in 1989 and then during the 1990s.

Romania's foreign policy can be divided into actions regarding: 1) the neighbours of Romania as an EU member (Moldova, Ukraine, the Western Balkans, the Black Sea region); 2) the Russian Federation; 3) Central Asia; 4) the South Caucasus; and also 5) within structures of regional and sub-

regional cooperation<sup>2</sup>. The chapter below focuses mainly on an analysis of Romania's geopolitical position and the factors shaping the situation in the Black Sea region.

## 1. Romania's geopolitical position

The geopolitical position of Romania as a state situated on the Black Sea and having an excellent access point to the Balkan region has been recognised by third parties many times during the history of this country<sup>3</sup>. On one hand, the Carpathians, which run through Romanian territory, form a natural frontier and protective buffer against external threats, on the other they divide it into two parts. As an EU member, Romania wishes to take advantage of its geographical position in order to improve its image and position within the structures of the EU, where it has been functioning for several years, but in terms of economic development and political position it still stands apart from the other member states. This is why it is so important for decision-makers in Bucharest to make use of the country's convenient geopolitical position, and by skilfully conducting foreign policy in the Black Sea basin increase Romania's prestige. It is worth remembering that Romania's EU accession – like that of Bulgaria – contributed to an opening of the European structures onto the Black Sea region. This is a topic often brought up in Romania itself. The public opinion stresses a desire to create a stable neighbourhood, democratic and wealthy,

<sup>2</sup> Romania, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mae.ro/>.

<sup>3</sup> J. Solak, *Rumunia: narodowe i ponadnarodowe aspekty integracji ze strukturami euroatlantyckimi*, Toruń 2004, p. 130; L. Boia, *Rumuni: świadomość, mity, historia*, trans. K. Jurczak, Kraków 2003, *passim*.

which would be an expression of a genuine community of states equal in terms of effort, responsibility and benefits<sup>4</sup>.

Romania is a Black Sea state. Its territory contains the Danube delta (which is expanding by 2-5 metres per year). The country is therefore important not only for its location in the Black Sea basin but also because it has direct access to the mouth of one of Europe's most important rivers<sup>5</sup>. Apart from Serbia and Croatia, the Danube is present in a large number of EU states. Currently, thanks to Romania's accession to the EU, river transport on a certain section of the Danube may turn out to be far easier in an economic sense, with the inclusion of direct and customs-free contact with the Black Sea. For the EU, then, Romania is not only a valuable sales market but is also of great importance for its energy security, as it lies on the transit route for petrol and natural gas from the Caspian Sea region and the whole of Central Asia (discussed below). Apart from this, Romania has several port towns, the largest of which are: Constanța, Galați and Brăila (the latter two are cities with river traffic on the Danube which, like Constanța, have access to the open sea). It can be said, then, that Romania is an exceptionally attractive country in terms of its geostrategic possibilities, and thanks to the Danube it looks more interesting for water transport than neighbouring Bulgaria.

<sup>4</sup> M. R. Ungureanu, *Complicatul sistem de ecuații de la Marea Neagră*, <http://www.adevarul.ro/articole/complicatul-sistem-de-ecuatii-de-la-marea-neagra.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The importance of the Danube as a river connecting the North Sea (via the Main – Rhine – Danube canal) is increasing successively, in particular since the adoption of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), which was approved by the European Council at the summit on 23-24 June 2011, during Hungary's Presidency of the EU Council.

It is worth adding that the scope of Romania's interests also includes the Caspian Sea region, which this country does not directly border, but which it considers vital for the energy security of both its own territory and the EU as a whole. The Caspian Sea basin is an emotional topic on the international arena due to the enormous petrol and natural gas resources to be found there – considered the fourth richest after Saudi Arabia, Siberia and Iran. The Caspian deposits are a veritable treasure trove of black gold. There is one problem with them, though, and it is a serious one – they are found very far from potential customers. An additional obstacle is a fierce rivalry for influence in this region. Control of the extraction and transportation of raw materials from the Eurasian states of the former USSR gives immense power. Romania does not aspire to the position of leader here, but it is attempting to manoeuvre on the political arena in a way that will ensure it a place among the winners in this political contest, as a transit country.

The European Union, realising the importance of the region on the transport map, took steps aimed at connecting this area with its internal market. It is worth mentioning the infrastructure projects of strategic importance which will enable diversification of both suppliers and transit corridors. This means the energy corridor linking the Caspian with the Black Sea, as well as the pipelines between Constanța – Trieste and AMBO (Albania Macedonia Bulgaria Oil) and other planned projects related to petrol and gas transport which cross the Black Sea, as well as the INOGATE (Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe) and TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe – Caucasus – Asia) projects, intended to connect the Caspian Sea region with the Black Sea region.

## 2. Factors shaping the situation in the Black Sea region

The Black Sea region is often referred to as the Hospitable Sea. The interests of Russia, the Caucasus and Balkan states, Turkey and the European Union all interlock here. The United States also have an interest in developing their influences in the region, which until now has been avoided in their foreign policy. The European Union looks on with a greedy eye at the opportunities which access to the Black Sea gives it – a new field for manoeuvre in its contacts with Moscow, or proximity to non-Russian sources of energy materials. By offering up Caspian deposits of natural gas and oil, the states of the Caucasus are hoping for an improvement in their international standing. The Balkan states, divided between those sympathetic to Russia and those favouring a united Europe, expect resolutions that will benefit their future. Russia and Turkey display a similar way of thinking here, reacting negatively to the presence of new political actors in the Black Sea area. This has led them to unite in the face of a common enemy and to defend their interests decisively, unwilling to share the chance to steer the direction of events in this region.

Romania finds itself right in the centre of this political hotchpotch. A state which was only recently accepted into the structures of NATO and the EU<sup>6</sup>, thereby realising the priorities set in its foreign policy and increasing its pres-

<sup>6</sup> For more on the road to the Euro-Atlantic structures in the 1990s see: D. Turnock, "Romania: Contemporary Geopolitical Perspectives", *Geopolitics*, vol. 6, 2001, no. 1, pp. 119-140; M. Willaume, *Rumunia*, Warszawa 2004, pp. 269-270.

tige, is now seeking a new road for itself and a new place in international relations.

Thanks to its stronger political position, Romania aims for intensive participation in the political gameplay under way in the Black Sea basin, choosing for itself the role of intermediary. Its ambition is to become a bridge of understanding linking united Europe with Russia, a field for opening up dialogue between Moscow and Brussels and, as a result, strengthening economic, commercial and cultural cooperation between them.

Although Russia and the EU collaborate in many areas, it is not an easy collaboration. As well as the complicated situation in the Black Sea region, the war in the Caucasus is another problem. There is also Russia's unfavourable view of certain European initiatives – the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea Synergy – which has a negative influence on Moscow's relations with Brussels. The European Union, while needing Russian raw materials, looks at Russia with suspicion after the war in Georgia and the gas crisis with Ukraine.

The Romanian government wishes to be an initiator of extended cooperation and mutual trust between the East and West of Europe. It wants to help create better conditions for joint action in the economic field for the EU and Russia, to coordinate cultural relations and economic processes. The Black Sea area is a pivotal point in Europe, so it is and will continue to be a field of interest for both Russian and EU politicians. Romania wants to exploit its location and become a point linking Europe with Russia, thus enabling Brussels and Moscow to reach agreement in a situation where one does not want to give up new op-

portunities, and the other to abandon its former habits as a monopolist.

Romania presents itself in the best possible light – as a trustworthy and serious partner to mediate in such dialogue. Romania's ambitions are lofty, and will not be easy to achieve.

## Conclusions

Romania's location by the Black Sea is a factor that has a profound influence on its foreign policy. This important geostrategic point is a place where the economic and political interests of European and Asian states clash. These are interests of an economic and political nature that affect the prestige of these countries in international relations. Seeing this in terms of the diversity of political actors operating in this area, one cannot help but notice that the Black Sea is an enormous opportunity for Romania to break into the international arena by mediating in contacts between them. One of the goals of Romania's Black Sea policy is to acquire the status of a key transit country for raw materials for power production from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to the European market.

Romania, from the point of view of its geopolitical position and 22.5m inhabitants<sup>7</sup>, functions as an intermediary between the European Union and the Black Sea and Balkan region. It can participate in EU politics aimed at all the states of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Turkey and Asia.

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<sup>7</sup> A. Koseski, M. Willaume, *Nowe kraje Unii Europejskiej: Bułgaria, Rumunia*, Warszawa 2007, p. 112.

It is convinced of its strategic role in the perspective of the positive development of events in the Black Sea region.

An important aspect of Romania's foreign policy is its proximity to Russia. Romania aspires to the role of intermediary in dialogue between Russia and the EU. Moscow has always seen the Black Sea as its natural sphere of influence, but now it has to contend with the existence of other players in this field, as well as the differing interests of the coastal states. It is also – and this is of fundamental importance – the major gas supplier for some EU states. Gazprom, controlled by the Russian state, satisfies 25% of the EU's gas requirements, of which 80% is sent through Ukraine. Europe, temporarily at least, is condemned to cooperate with Gazprom and Russia. The events of the “gas war” with Kyiv, however, have undermined trust in the Russian government and the matter of the reliability of supplies of Russian gas. Romania sees itself as a bridge connecting the European Union with Russia. It is aware of its potential in terms of population and territory and thus wishes to play a major role among medium-sized states on the EU forum<sup>8</sup>. From the beginning of its membership, it has tried to be active with regard to formulating proposals directly affecting it and covering the Black Sea area. Romania's EU membership has led to matters being raised and discussed at the EU forum concerning the geostrategic importance of the Black Sea region. Romania warned of the necessity to consider the monopolistic urges of Russia and Turkey and the expected obstacles which those

<sup>8</sup> Ł. Kudlicki, „Bułgaria i Rumunia: specyfika nowych członków Unii Europejskiej”, *Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe*, no. I-II – 2007/3-4, p. 79, <http://www.bbn.gov.pl/download.php?s=1&id=929>; also: D. Filipiak, *Rumunia. Pęknięte lustro Europy*, Kielce 2021.

two countries may place before new political actors entering the area. It also reminded how important it is for Brussels to appropriately strengthen its presence in this region, since the balance of power and interests may be determined for years to come by questions of energy supplies from the Caspian Sea basin, Caucasus and Central Asia.

Another sensitive matter raised by Romania was the problem of the gas crises whose effects were felt most particularly by the states of South-Eastern Europe. Romania has proposed that access should be sought to fuel supplies from non-Russian sources. The Romanian government presented its own vision of energy security, and also pointed out Brussels' lack of any agreement in this matter. It indicated the necessity of quickly defining a common energy policy.

Romania has chosen the role of leader among the states of the region as its strategy for the Black Sea basin. In relation to the smaller states, it wants to be a guide on their road to integration with the EU and NATO, and earlier on to opening up collaboration between the structures of those organisations and the small Black Sea republics which attract the interest of western states due mainly to the wealth of raw materials which they possess. In addition, the question of the Caspian as well as Black Sea is a constant thread in Romania's foreign policy.

Romania is also highly interested in actions included in the EU's eastern policy, and is partially involved in them, due to neighbouring Ukraine and the unsolved problem of Transnistria. It maintains proper, basically partnerly, relations with its remaining neighbours. The exception is Moldova – relations between the two have deteriorated drastically due to mutual political accusations. Although Romania is

frequently placed alongside Bulgaria due to their shared struggles with complying with Brussels' requirements, in reality the two neighbouring countries differ in many matters. It is enough to consider, for example, the two states' relations with Russia to see that Bulgaria has chosen a different direction than Romania.

Romania is a country full of potential, which is trying to make the best of its assets – membership of important organisations such as NATO and the EU, and its geopolitical position. Romania's prestige has benefited greatly from the fact that it lies on the Black Sea, which forms an arena for complex political power play in a region which is crucial to the military, energy and migratory security of the European Union. It is also worth remembering that Romania has well-prepared ports – better than Bulgaria's. In addition, Romania has within its borders the delta of the Danube, which has long been a major transport route. After the two countries – Romania and Bulgaria – acceded to the EU, there was an increase in the number of investors in the northern and southern sides of the Danube. It can thus be assumed that Romania will be a transit country of particular importance for the EU, no doubt for a long time to come. The importance of Romania as a country which enables exchange will additionally increase, as the goal of the EU will be not only the Black Sea and the states lying within its basin, but also the Caspian and the countries within reach of it. It can be said that thanks to Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the EU, the Black Sea may turn out to be a bridge to Georgia, among other places, which will become genuinely closer to the European Union. If, therefore, Romania is able to conduct its internal politics in an appropriate and sustainable manner,

it is certain to take advantage of its beneficial geopolitical position. For Romania to succeed in its Black Sea policy in the future, it must conduct its activities in that region in a balanced way, constantly bearing in mind that its borders are also the borders of the European Union.

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Iulia-Sabina Joja

## **Romania's role on NATO's Eastern flank**

### **Introduction**

Romania's role and history in NATO is a complex one. NATO membership (along with EU membership) has been the national bipartisan priority since the mid-1990s. Joining the Alliance has found large-scale popular support in Romania and justified major national political efforts and sacrifices. The rationale behind the high motivation to join the Alliance was Romania's historically heightened threat perception of Russia. Historical experiences of World War I and II have cemented Romania's high threat perception of Russia. Both Romania's communist dictators, Gheorghe Gheorgiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceausescu, promoted a policy of distancing the country from the Soviet Union and developing close ties with any country willing to help Romania balance out the Soviet domination in Eastern Europe: Ceausescu developed close ties to non-aligned countries, and Romania became China's closest European ally and, at the same time, a War-

saw pact member that received US most favoured nation status. After the end of the Cold War, Romania's foreign policy priorities were briefly clouded in a "grey zone lens", in which Bucharest positioned itself briefly as a "middle power" between the West and Russia<sup>1</sup>. Starting with 1994 Romania's Western course, its threat perception of Russia, and its focus on territorial defence and the Black Sea were set<sup>2</sup>.

Romania's determination to join NATO and seek security guarantees under Article 5 generated two interlinked phenomena. First, Bucharest prioritized its bilateral relationship with the United States, along with NATO and EU integration. Second, the country aligned itself with Washington after 9/11 and invested in expeditionary warfare to secure NATO membership. First, Bucharest quickly started regarding Washington as the key power that could offer Romania – and the Black Sea region – more security. And so, while Romania started working towards meeting the interoperability criteria for joining NATO, it also began developing its bilateral relationship with Washington at the same time. The result has been that for the last two decades Bucharest has established a triad of security priorities: NATO, EU, and its strategic partnership with the US.

The efforts and sacrifices Romania made to join NATO consisted first of granting NATO access to its airspace in the 1999 Kosovo war and second of framing 9/11 terrorism as the most important threat to Romania's national security. A similar phenomenon took place in many former communist Central and Eastern European countries, who did not share

<sup>1</sup> I. Joja, *Romania's Strategic Culture*, Stuttgart 2019, chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

the threat of Islamic terrorism with the United States but aligned with Washington to ensure their chances of joining NATO. Romania started to contribute to the NATO mission in Afghanistan in 2002 and maintained its participation until the end of the mission in 2021. This has meant a change in both threat assessment and military investments away from territorial defence and the Black Sea neighbourhood towards expeditionary warfare. Reflective of Romania's prioritization of the relationship with Washington, Bucharest also contributed to the "coalition of the willing" in Iraq, with the price of jeopardizing its EU membership<sup>3</sup>.

National efforts to support Washington in expeditionary warfare showed results: Romania joined NATO in 2004. Since 1999, Romania has hosted US troops in an air force base used for logistical purposes in Afghanistan.

The year Romania joined NATO constituted a pivot in its national security threat assessment and security policy assessment. Shortly after its 2004 accession to NATO, Bucharest reoriented its foreign and security focus to its own neighbourhood, the Black Sea region, and the inherent insecurity of the region. Black Sea insecurity was set in the early 1990s by the Russian Federation, who created or contributed to a series of "frozen conflicts" in the newly independent countries of the region: Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Bucharest's Black Sea prioritization began with a series of initiatives aimed at stabilizing the region by increasing cooperation among neighbours

<sup>3</sup> "Chirac Upsets East Europe by Telling It to 'Shut Up' on Iraq", *New York Times*, 18 February 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/18/international/europe/chirac-upsets-east-europe-by-telling-it-to-shut-up-on.html>.

and bringing the region into Western focus. The Black Sea NGO Forum<sup>4</sup> and various diplomatic overtures are reflective of Romania's Black Sea policy.

## **Romania's Black Sea policy**

Romania's success in bringing Western security to the Black Sea region and stabilizing it remained limited. At the NATO Bucharest summit of 2008, the Alliance under US leadership promised Georgia and Ukraine membership. Naturally, Romania was one of the strongest promoters of NATO enlargement into the Black Sea. A few months later, Russia invaded Georgia, effectively cancelling out Tbilisi's hope of joining the Alliance and maintaining its territorial integrity. The five-day conflict also demonstrated the West's limited willingness to invest in Black Sea security and insufficient commitment to NATO enlargement.

Following the Russo-Georgian war and the increased Black Sea insecurity, Bucharest continued its efforts to "upload" the region to the EU and NATO level. At the EU level, Bucharest proposed the "Black Sea Synergy" initiative<sup>5</sup> in 2008 with the aim of transforming it into a regional EU strategy. This attempt failed, as well. The 2008 war did not lead to sanctions against Russia nor to the West's adjustment of its threat perception of Moscow. With European member states overall reluctant to give impetus to a common security policy, Romania turned its attention to NATO and Washington. After 2008 Bucharest insisted the Black Sea should become a NATO priority and the Alliance should focus more on

<sup>4</sup> Black Sea NGO Forum, <https://blackseango.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> EU Black Sea Synergy, [https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/black-sea-synergy\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/black-sea-synergy_en).

Eastern Europe overall and territorial defence<sup>6</sup>. Bucharest's strategy also consisted of strengthening its relationship with the United States with the aim of bringing Western security to the Black Sea or, if that failed, at least strengthening its own national security through increased American presence on its territory. In 2010 Romania agreed to host part of the American-sponsored NATO Ballistic Missile Defense. In 2011 Bucharest signed a strategic partnership with the United States that solidified the bilateral security and defence cooperation. Romania's security investments with the United States established the triad of NATO-US-EU with clear priorities, maintained until today: first the US, then NATO, and lastly security investments with the EU.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 constituted the turning point for the Alliance's reconfiguration away from expeditionary warfare and back to territorial defence and Russia. But for the Black Sea region itself and Romania's prioritization of the region's increasing insecurity, the West's response to the Russian threat remains insufficient.

At the 2014 NATO Wales summit, the Alliance was taken by surprise, and its response was rhetorical in nature, rather than substantive: NATO members called on Russia to withdraw its troops and promised to support Ukraine, albeit with vague wording, rather than concrete actions. Two years later, at the Warsaw summit, calls by Poland and the Baltic states resulted in the establishment of NATO military tripwires under the concept of "Enhanced Forward Presence".

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Romanian President Traian Basescu at NATO, 2 July 2008, <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2008/so80630b.html>.

Meanwhile, on the Northern side of NATO's Eastern flank, member states stepped up, albeit symbolically, rather than through a proportional response to Russia's increasingly aggressive stance and actions.

On the Black Sea, however, NATO's response has been reduced. Romania initially lobbied for a NATO Black Sea fleet, which Bulgaria openly vetoed<sup>7</sup>. The lack of a common threat assessment in the Black Sea region vis-à-vis Russia has played a detrimental role, reducing Romania's chances of bringing more Western security and stability to the region. With the exclusion of a Black Sea NATO fleet to counter-balance Russia, Moscow has since 2014 increasingly militarized the maritime area – first through the ongoing military buildup in Crimea, then in 2018 through the Kerch bridge and the closing of the Azov Sea, and finally through another massive military buildup in the first months of 2021. Russia's militarization of the Black Sea has led to reduced freedom of navigation in both the Azov Sea (and the implicit economic strangling of Ukraine), and increasingly in the waters around the Crimea peninsula, which Moscow regards as "territorial waters"<sup>8</sup>. Through the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has effectively become a (maritime) neighbour of Romania, and Romania's offshore gas explorations are increasingly at risk<sup>9</sup>. Finally, Russia's involvement in the Nagorno Karabakh 2020 war has further added to

<sup>7</sup> "Bulgaria Pulls out of Joint Black Sea Patrol", *Balkan Insight*, 16 July 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/16/bulgaria-pulls-out-of-joint-black-sea-patrol-06-16-2016/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Russia restricts movement of 'foreign warships' in Black Sea", *Deutsche Welle*, 25 April 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-restricts-movement-of-foreign-warships-in-black-sea/a-57326730>.

<sup>9</sup> I. Joja, "Three Conflict Scenarios for 2020", Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/01/three-conflict-scenarios-for-the-black-sea-in-2020/>.

the Black Sea region's insecurity; new borders have been established in the Caucasus, and yet another deployment of 2000 Russian troops on foreign ground has been enabled, without triggering a reaction from the West.

Today, Romania's Black Sea policy has not suffered substantial modifications compared to a decade ago. Bucharest has continued to knock on the three Western security doors to bring focus on the Black Sea and help stabilize the region. Within the EU, Romania's Foreign Ministry has recently published a paper with recommendations for the Union to step up its conflict resolution efforts and target frozen Black Sea conflicts<sup>10</sup>. It remains to be seen whether yet another call from Romania will determine the EU to increase its focus on the Black Sea and ultimately develop a regional security strategy. Within NATO, after the annexation of Crimea, all Romania has been able to achieve has been a Tailored Forward Presence, which consists of a multinational brigade led by Romania with limited member state contribution and the mandate of training<sup>11</sup>. No NATO troops for deterrence or defence have been deployed yet to the Black Sea, and no Allied maritime presence dedicated to the Black Sea has been established. As in the past, the most significant success Romania had was knocking on Washington's door. Over the past year a third US military base has been established on Romanian ground, this time with American Reaper drones<sup>12</sup>,

<sup>10</sup> B. Aureescu, "Tackling frozen conflicts in the EU's own neighbourhood", *EU Observer*, 19 January 2021, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/150638>.

<sup>11</sup> "NATO launches Black Sea force as latest counter to Russia", *Reuters*, 9 October 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato/nato-launches-black-sea-force-as-latest-counter-to-russia-idUSKBN1CEoMJ>.

<sup>12</sup> "MQ-9 Reaper UAV Detachment Deployed to 71st Air Base in Campia Turzii", *Aviation-Pros*, 5 January 2021, <https://www.aviationpros.com/aircraft/defense/news/21204745/>

to counterbalance Russia's increasing military buildup and range of its Anti-Access Area Denial capabilities in Crimea, which increasingly threaten NATO territory.

## Romania on the Eastern flank

The most substantial instruments of Romania's Black Sea policy have been limited to the actual bilateral relationship with the United States as the only major Western power interested in counterbalancing Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. But Black Sea security involves a multitude of actors and players in the region, and "the track record of cooperation and support between Bucharest and its neighbors and allies is mixed.

For Romania, the most important neighbour has traditionally been Moldova, and most of Bucharest's foreign policy resources have been dedicated to support Chisinau's Western path. But Moldova remains a militarily neutral country, without an armed force focused on defence, with some of its territory occupied by Russia, and with a history of governments oscillating between the East and the West. On the security level, Romania's support for Moldova is limited, as is Chisinau's role in bringing security to the Black Sea region. Romania's efforts to increase Moldova's security in the energy domain have been limited, as well. The Romanian-Moldovan interconnector pipeline intended to offer an alternative to Chisinau's complete dependence on Russian gas was finalized only in 2020<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> mq9-reaper-uav-detachment-deployed-to-71st-air-base-in-campia-turzii.  
"Completion of work on the Romanian-Moldovan gas pipeline", *Centre for Eastern European Studies*, 20 October 2020, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2020-08-12/completion-work-romanian-moldovan-gas-pipeline>.

Romania's relationship with and support for Ukraine has been limited. Former Romanian President Basescu's call during and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine for lethal weapons<sup>14</sup> remained unheard for years. Romania's current President, Klaus Iohannis, has reduced Romania's commitment to Ukraine. In light of the 2021 Russian military build-up, he summoned the Bucharest 9 (NATO) member states of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as President Biden<sup>15</sup>, but not Ukraine's political leadership itself. Within the NATO framework, Romania has led support for Ukraine's cyber security policy<sup>16</sup>. But bilateral relations have been blocked (by Romania) on all fronts for years, Bucharest's opposition across the spectrum being motivated by Ukraine's controversial language law, as well as by Bucharest's concern for the Romanian minority's rights in Ukraine<sup>17</sup>. Given Romania's privileged partnership with the US on the Black Sea and extensive security and defense experience, Bucharest has significant space and resources left to expand its bilateral security cooperation with Ukraine.

The other two key allies of Romania in Eastern Europe are Poland and Turkey. Poland has played a key role, along with Romania, in bringing NATO's Eastern flank and the Russian threat to the forefront. Poland also headed within

<sup>14</sup> "Romania va cere NATO si UE arme pentru Ucraina...", *Stirile ProTV*, 1 September 2014, <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/traian-basescu-cere-nato-si-ue-echipamente-militare-pentru-ucraina-fara-sprajin-luptele-se-vor-transforma-intr-un-macel.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "Bucharest Nine summit: US president to join virtual event", *Romania Insider*, 10 May 2021, <https://www.romania-insider.com/biden-b9-summit-may-2021>.

<sup>16</sup> "Romania defending Ukraine's cyberspace", *The Hill*, 13 May 2015, <https://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/241889-romania-defending-ukraines-cyberspace>.

<sup>17</sup> "Ukrainian Language Bill Facing Barrage Of Criticism From Minorities, Foreign Capitals", *RFE/RL*, 24 September 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-language-legislation-minority-languages-russia-hungary-romania/28753925.html>.

the EU the Eastern Partnership program, which Romania has supported, and which grants Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia a path towards EU membership. Turkey, on the other hand, plays more of an ambiguous role in the Black Sea. On the one hand, the Erdogan-Putin friendship and energy cooperation, as well as Turkey's policy of keeping the West out of the Black Sea (through the Montreux Convention) plays counter to Romania's and Poland's interests. On the other hand, Turkey's support for Ukraine's (and Georgia's) NATO membership and the recently signed Turkish-Ukrainian military cooperation deal are encouragements for more security in the Black Sea. Romania's role has been to encourage Ankara to accept more West in the Black Sea, with limited success so far. With Poland increasingly invested in support for Ukraine's security, the Polish-Romanian-Turkish triad can gain more political weight.

## **Romania and Black Sea security – what can we expect?**

The past three decades have revealed two important patterns that help us structure our expectations with regards to the Black Sea region and Romania's foreign and security policy as a NATO member state. The first pattern is that the Black Sea region has evolved into one of the most insecure security environments in the world. The stage for this regional insecurity was set by Russia's creation of frozen conflicts and grey zones around the Black Sea region, aimed at maintaining (through violence) its influence after the loss of the Cold War. Without the Black Sea, Moscow's access to warm waters is highly restricted.

And so, after creating or contributing to the creation of frozen conflicts three decades ago, Moscow's actions in the region over the past years – with hybrid warfare across Central and Eastern Europe, the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, and the subsequent militarization of the region – have pursued the aim of restricting Western access to the region and forcing Black Sea countries into a grey zone. Black Sea insecurity has also been building up as the Black Sea countries have failed – unlike in the Baltic Sea – to shape a common threat perception of Russia and increase cooperation and interoperability between them. Given this pattern of increased insecurity, we should not expect a regional shift in the years to come. Rather, the Black Sea's insecurity is likely to increase in the next years, with Moscow becoming more, rather than less, aggressive in the region.

Secondly, Romania's foreign and security policy over the past decades, first as an aspiring, then as a full NATO member state, has been constant in trying to bring more West, i.e., more NATO into the Black Sea region and increasing Western attention on the region and its inherent (and increasing) insecurity. Bucharest's significant contributions to out-of-area warfare and sacrifices in Afghanistan and Iraq should be read as efforts to support Bucharest's number one strategic partner, the United States. The past few decades of Romanian foreign and security policy have shown that Bucharest has repeatedly tried to "upload" Black Sea security to the attention of its Western partners through all three avenues – EU, NATO, and the US. Bucharest's success remains limited at best in bringing more Western security to the Black Sea.

The Black Sea region today is far more insecure than it was a decade ago. But Romania's efforts have also shown that, through bilateral relationship with Washington, it managed to achieve far more security than through NATO and even more than through the EU. These patterns, as well as limited regional efforts and the absence of a common regional threat perception vis-à-vis Russia, have generated an incoherent regional Black Sea policy and reduced Bucharest's success in bringing more security to the region. Based on these patterns we can expect Romania in the years to come to maintain its calls within EU, NATO, and with the US for more West in the Black Sea.

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[rferl.org/a/ukraine-language-legislation-minority-languages-russia-hungary-romania/28753925.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-language-legislation-minority-languages-russia-hungary-romania/28753925.html).



Teodor Lucian Moga

## **Romania's actorness in the eastern neighbourhood (external perceptions from Ukraine and Moldova)<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

With the growing volatility in the former Soviet space, Romania has shown an increased preoccupation with present developments in the region and started to display a strong interest in the relationship with the eastern vicinity<sup>2</sup>. Yet, so far, Romania has not been fully able to carve out a visible role for itself in relation to the immediate neighbourhood and has preferred to follow the initiatives of its Euro-Atlan-

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<sup>1</sup> This text is excerpted from the report "Romania's actorness in the immediate eastern neighbourhood (external and internal perceptions)". The report is the final outcome of the research project "Boosting Romania's role as a security provider in its immediate vicinity (the cases of Ukraine and Moldova)" (RoSec), supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Research and Innovation, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2016-0073, within PNCDI III. For the detailed project report please consider [https://cse.uaic.ro/rosec/index\\_html\\_files/RoSecRPolicyrecs.pdf](https://cse.uaic.ro/rosec/index_html_files/RoSecRPolicyrecs.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Romanian Presidency of the Council of the EU 2019, p. 17, <https://bit.ly/359shNi>; Romanian Government, "Program de Guvernare", 2019, pp. 26-27, <https://bit.ly/3n9JxbF>.

tic allies, such as the United States, Germany, France, or Poland. Thus, in the past years “decision-taking” rather than “decision-making” has appeared to be Romania’s main foreign policy feature at the international level. Nevertheless, a common impression persists that Romania has untapped potential to act as a foreign policy role entrepreneur in the region and that currently it ‘punches below its weight’.

Thus, we sought to assess Romania’s foreign policy towards the near abroad by looking at its relationship with its immediate neighbours, Ukraine and Moldova, and by studying how Romania’s external actions are perceived in the two neighbouring countries. We call into question Romania’s capacity to wield actorness in the neighbourhood and, in this regard, we argue that Romania’s limited actorness could be objectively explained by the limited resources at the country’s disposal.

To this end, we have designed an analytical framework aimed at studying state power and external influence based on a six-factor model. The first three are the so-called material factors, which are usually fixed (that is, they are given and cannot be easily altered) and refer to 1) size (namely, surface and population) and geographic location, 2) economic weight, and 3) military capabilities. Specifically, in the case of the first factor, the country’s size is understood to be a salient asset since large states usually wield considerable influence and small states are seldom seen as influential<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, size often determines whether a state is

<sup>3</sup> R. O. Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics”, *International Organization*, 23 (2), 1969, pp. 291-310; R. Väyrynen, “On the Definition and Measurement of Small Power Status”, *Cooperation and Conflict* VI, 1971, pp. 91-102; B. Thorhallsson, “The

dependent (or not) on international organizations (such as NATO&EU) to compensate for its external limitations<sup>4</sup>. Concurrently, a state's strategic location could be perceived as influential, provided the respective state is able to project power from its whereabouts. Similarly, the economic resources (including here the market size and the significance of the GDP and trade flows in the regional configuration) and the military capabilities (namely, the size of the defence budget, the availability of trained and equipped armed forces) place a high premium on a country's potential to wield a strong foreign and security policy.

The other three factors which constitute international influence are of a nonmaterial nature and variable (that is, they are defined by the ability of a state to pursue a given policy at a certain time). These latter factors entail a normative nature (namely, they are linked to the international reputation of a state and its use of diplomatic instruments): 1) the historical experience and culture, 2) domestic institutional capacity (and expertise) to hold sway over international negotiations, and 3) membership in international organizations. While the historical and cultural track record shapes how a state is perceived abroad, strong institutional capacity and expertise at home are paramount to wielding influence over international negotiations, to underpinning foreign policy ambitions, and/or to building a good reputation and credibility externally. Last but not least, membership in international organizations is salient nowadays, not

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Size of States in the European Union: Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives", *European Integration*, 28 (1), 2006, pp. 7-31.

<sup>4</sup> N. Copsey, T. Haughton, "The Choices for Europe: National Preferences in New and Old Member States", *JCMS*, 47 (2), 2009, pp. 263-286.

only because a member state has the ability to forge alliances and count on multilateral support when pursuing external actions, but also because participation in international institutions confers legitimacy to a country's foreign policy.

To test this six-factor model, first, we applied discourse analysis to understand how Romania is portrayed in the two countries' official discourse. In the second stage, we looked at the data from two original surveys, conducted at the national level in Ukraine and Moldova, to see what the societal perceptions in the two neighbouring countries reveal about Romania's state power and influence<sup>5</sup>. In the third stage, we conducted semi-structured interviews with experts from both Ukraine and Moldova in order to acquire a much more in-depth view of Romania's actorness<sup>6</sup>.

## **Romania's actorness in its eastern vicinity: external perceptions from Ukraine**

### **Size (surface and population) and geographic location**

In Ukraine's official discourse Romania is largely referred to as a neighbouring country with emphasis on the common border/borderlands (often in the context of cross-border cooperation projects) and on regional initiatives (such as, in the Black Sea, in the Eastern Partnership, or within the Ukraine – Moldova – Romania triangle).

<sup>5</sup> The surveys were conducted by two contracted companies (one for Ukraine, one for Moldova) in September 2019 and were based on a representative national quota sample.

<sup>6</sup> Face-to-face interviews with experts, academics and policymakers, were conducted in the Ukrainian language in Kyiv and Chernivtsi (15 interviews), Ukraine, in November 2019 and in the Romanian language in Chişinău (13 interviews), Moldova, in December 2019.

At the expert level, the overall perceptions of Romania's size and geographic location have been split. On the one hand, the attributes related to size and geographic location are seen as not so important in the present-day world given that other indicators, such as national income, total GDP, and/or military spending, are better suited to determine power and influence in the current international relations. On the other hand, some experts believe that territory and population still matter in regional and international affairs, especially in those linked to Eastern Europe. As such, experts characterize Romania as a relatively important country, neither big nor small, but rather belonging to the medium-tier of states in the region, which makes quite effective use of its potential.

The overall societal perception of Romania's geographical location is rather favourable: 47.7% of respondents think it is advantageous or somewhat advantageous. The main benefit of Romania's geographical location is justified, according to the experts, by the country's ability to be a so-called "facilitator of interests" for the EU and NATO both in the Black Sea and in the Balkans (provided that sufficient political will on behalf of Romania's authorities is available). At the same time, as expressed by experts, this location might also carry strategic disadvantages since geography may prove to be a challenge when a state finds itself at the junction of two unstable regions or when a state is situated on the borders of an alliance. Thus, the "regional security complexes" which border Romania might represent a litmus test for Romania's capacity and readiness to exercise actorness. Moreover, among the experts from Ukraine there is a tendency to compare Romania's potential in terms of

size and geographical location to other states in the region, first and foremost, with Ukraine itself, which is significantly bigger surface- and population-wise and richer in natural resources due to its extensive territory. Such comparison contributes to the perception that Romania is not sufficiently influential in terms of size and geography. This is indicated also at the societal level given that only 18.6% of Ukrainians consider or somewhat consider Romania to be a large country in surface area and 16.6% population-wise. Furthermore, only 23.9% of respondents think that Romania's size (surface and population) confers the country necessary conditions to exert influence in the region.

### **Economic weight**

Ukraine's increasing preoccupation with the economic dimension of the bilateral agenda is highlighted in the country's discourse. Thus, the focus on the economy and the need to enhance economic ties is always present in the official discourse of Ukraine vis-à-vis Romania, with frequent references to the new possibilities for cooperation opened by the comprehensive zone of free trade with the EU envisaged within the Association Agreement (AA). Romania's experience of adapting its standards to European ones in the economic field is regarded as useful for Ukrainian business. In fact, since 2014, the volume of the bilateral trade between the two countries has been constantly increasing<sup>7</sup>. In the past, trade exchanges were low because Ukrainian

<sup>7</sup> "Економічна статистика. Зовнішньоекономічна діяльність. Географічна структура зовнішньої торгівлі товарами", Державна служба статистики України, <http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua/>.

consumers were not familiar with Romanian products. For instance, 58.3% of Ukraine's population has never bought any products produced in Romania, whilst 14.7% (mostly those residing in the Ukrainian regions bordering Romania) buy such products very rarely.

At the societal level, the high non-response rate in the survey<sup>8</sup> shows that Ukrainians generally know little about the Romanian economy. Thus, they do not assess Romania's economy highly enough in terms of development, stability, diversity, prosperity, and ability to play an active role in the region. Romania is not perceived as a possible model for economic development either. However, Ukrainians tend to rank high or very high the importance of having a solid economic cooperation between Ukraine and Romania (47.2% of respondents).

Among experts, Romania's economy was generally rated moderately, whilst acknowledging its growing potential. However, as indicated by the experts, Romania still lags behind other EU countries in the region and does not always make sufficient use of its potential to be more visible. The level of economic cooperation between Ukraine and Romania was not highly evaluated either. Romania is seen not sufficiently interested in developing closer economic ties with Ukraine. According to the experts, economic dialogue with Ukraine is not currently a priority for Romania, which benefits mostly from the current ties with the West. Moreover, when questioned about Romania's economic potential to ex-

<sup>8</sup> A high non-response rate (usually around 30%) was observed during the survey in Ukraine not only in the block of questions related to the economic factor, but for all the questions related to respondents' awareness of neighbouring Romania, regardless of the topic raised.

ert actorness in the region, this is seen neither as Romania's priority nor as an objective. The majority of experts argue that it would be possible to speak about efficient actorness in the region only when Romania reaches a higher level of economic development and is able to initiate regional economic initiatives.

### **Military capabilities**

Throughout official discourse in Ukraine, an interest in regional stability and security is present. Thus, military cooperation with Romania, a member of the Euro-Atlantic structures, is perceived of great significance. Concurrently, 40% of Ukrainians believe or somewhat believe that Romania should have offered more assistance to support their country against Russian aggression. As shown by the survey data, military cooperation between Ukraine and Romania is desirable for 31.3% and somewhat desirable for 25.6% of the respondents.

Among experts, the military capacity of Romania is assessed primarily via Romania's membership in NATO, which guarantees high standards in the defence sector. Overall, Romania's NATO membership was the main reference point when discussing Romania's military capacity. Romania *per se* is not perceived as a security guarantor in the region given the presence of other major actors, such as Turkey or Poland. However, Romania is considered an important actor since through its NATO membership it can persuade its allies to pay particular attention to the stability and security of the eastern flank of the transatlantic community.

At the societal level, the number of those who consider or somewhat consider Romania to be a strong military power

reached only 9.8%, while 21% of Ukrainians assess Romania as somewhat powerful in terms of military capabilities.

### **Historical experience and culture**

In the history and culture spheres, two main challenges were identified which had so far impacted bilateral dialogue between Ukraine and Romania.

The first one concerns territorial issues. Between Ukraine's independence in 1991 and the 1997 Treaty of Good-Neighbourly Relations and Cooperation, Romania had been dragging on the process of recognizing Ukraine's borders. This move seriously affected bilateral relations. Another territorial "bone of contention" revolved around Snake Island and referred to the delimitation of the continental shelf in the Black Sea. Similarly, the Danube-Black Sea Channel aimed at creating a deep waterway in the Ukrainian part of the delta was also indicated among past sensitive issues.

The second challenge generating misunderstandings between the Ukrainian and Romanian sides is linked to minority rights. After the Law on Education was adopted in Ukraine in September 2017, Romania expressed concern over Article 7 on the language of education because it was seen as an attempt to weaken the rights of ethnic Romanians. However, compared to the tough statements criticizing the "language article" in the Law made by Hungary<sup>9</sup>, Romania's reaction is perceived in Ukraine as much more dialogue-oriented.

<sup>9</sup> After the Law on Education was adopted in Ukraine, Péter Szijjártó, the Hungarian Foreign Minister, declared that Hungary would 'block' Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. See, for instance, "Hungary Sets Condition For Ukraine's Participation In NATO Meeting", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 19 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/3n4h9aL>.

Yet, these issues, which occasionally emerge in the public discourse or mass media, are mostly seen as politicized attempts to gain voters' support by inflaming bilateral relations, particularly during electoral campaigns. Interestingly, at the societal level, 16.5% of respondents consider or somewhat consider territorial issues to be problematic in the bilateral dialogue between Ukraine and Romania. Moreover, only 9.6% of Ukrainians see or somewhat see minority issues as problematic.

In general, Romanian culture is very little known in Ukraine. Cooperation with Romania in the cultural field is characterized as one of the least developed, since Romania does not target the wider Ukrainian society, but rather limits its cultural initiatives to the border regions where most of the Romanian minority is located. Thus, the cultural dialogue seems to be largely sporadic and lacking a strong institutional framework and a strategic view. As a result, only around 5% of the overall population of Ukraine is well aware of Romanian culture (cuisine, art, music and literature).

### **Domestic institutional capacity and expertise**

When assessing Romania's domestic institutional capacity, the country's main success story appears to be the fight against corruption. The experts admit that Romania's recent efforts to combat corruption and Bucharest's newly acquired experience in this regard are perceived in Ukraine as positive examples.

As shown by the survey data, 53.1% of Ukrainians consider that in fighting corruption, their own country is somewhat or significantly worse compared to Romania. 29.4% believe that Romania could be considered an anti-corruption

model for other countries in the region. Overall, when asked whether Romania could be regarded as a positive example for other countries in the region in various fields (such as democracy, rule of law, human rights, political stability, etc.), the positive answers among respondents in Ukraine varied between 19.3-29%. Romania's transition from an authoritarian regime to a market economy, the country's achievement in complying with the NATO/EU standards, and the use of a single state language were indicated by the experts as successful and important to be considered by Ukraine.

Finally, the majority of experts positively assessed Romania's diplomacy and the country's foreign policy, which has remained constantly pro-Western regardless of the changes in the country's leadership.

### **Membership in international organizations**

Romania was the first state to ratify the AA between Ukraine and the EU, which, according to the former president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, "will be forever written down in the history of the Ukrainian-Romanian relations. This also reflects Romania's attitude towards the European perspective, the perspective of Ukraine's membership in the European Union"<sup>10</sup>. Thus, Romania is seen as the country that could become a bridge between Ukraine and the EU<sup>11</sup>.

Membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures is generally perceived in Ukraine as the main incentive for Romania's progress. For instance, 44.5% of Ukrainians believe or

<sup>10</sup> "Румунія може стати мостом для України та Молдови на шляху до ЄС – П. Порошенко", УНН, 2014, <https://www.unn.com.ua/uk/news/1391770-rumuniya-mozhe-stati-mostom-dlya-ukrayini-ta-moldovi-na-shlyakhu-do-yes-p-poroshenko>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

somewhat believe that the EU membership has positively contributed to Romania's development. 39.7% of respondents consider or somewhat consider that Romania's membership in NATO positively impacted the country's security. However, only 24.3% and 22.2% of Ukrainians perceive or somewhat perceive Romania as a model for integration into the EU and, respectively, into NATO.

Concurrently, a rather moderate assessment of Romania's capacity to advocate the interests of the region in the EU and NATO was indicated by the population. The number of those positively or somewhat positively assessing Romania's capacity to represent the interests of the region in the EU was 24.3%, while in NATO, it was 22.1%.

Romania's role in international organizations (namely, in the EU and NATO) is ranked as moderate by Ukrainians, given the complexity and competitive environment existing in the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea regions. According to the experts, there are two main reasons for this result. First, other ambitious state actors are present in these regions whose leadership capacities are more solid and better cemented than those of Romania (with reference mainly to Poland and Turkey). Second, the economic and military weight of Romania, despite its recent advancements, is still lagging behind other actors in the region. With EU and NATO support, Romania's regional potential has been growing; however, in order to play a visible role in regional affairs, a strong political determination is also required at the level of the Romanian foreign policy establishment. Meanwhile, Romania could become more visible in the sectoral cooperation with other countries from the

region (including non-EU/NATO states) in fields such as cybersecurity and/or energy.

## **Romania's actorness in its eastern vicinity: external perceptions from Moldova**

### **Size (surface and population) and geographic location**

In Moldova, Romania's size and geographic location are largely associated with the country's access to natural resources and the Black Sea, whereas the country's significant population translates into human resources. Size- and population-wise, Romania is perceived as important enough to play an important role in the region. However, experts highlight that in spite of the relevant size, available natural resources, and population, these assets are partially untapped.

At the societal level, 57.3% of Moldovans consider or somewhat consider that Romania's size and geographic location allow the country to play a more influential role in its eastern vicinity. Yet, Romania's ability to exert influence in the region appears to be obstructed by external factors. While the general perception is that Romania's geographic positioning is advantageous or somewhat advantageous for the country (77.8% of respondents), the geopolitical location in which the country is situated is defined by the experts as rather problematic, with an array of regional security complexes that induces additional pressure and costs.

Moreover, the experts highlight that there are other important actors in the region, such as Turkey or the Russian Federation, which are directly interested in influencing regional developments. Therefore, Romania's capacity to become an important actor at the regional level hinges very much on its diplomatic ability to interact with the afore-

mentioned two states. In addition, Poland and Ukraine are also seen as influential in the region.

### **Economic weight**

Romania is perceived as the most important economic partner of Moldova. Over the past decade, Romania has managed to overtake Russia, and since 2014, when Moldova signed the AA with the EU, Romania has become its most important trading partner<sup>12</sup>. The overall economic cooperation between the two countries is currently intense, with various channels of cooperation on both sides. Joint projects are underway, many of them funded by the Romanian government, which further consolidate the bilateral relationship (see, for instance, the activities carried out by SMURD<sup>13</sup> in Moldova, the Iași-Ungheni-Chișinău gas pipeline, the restoration of Stânca-Costești Hydropower plant, etc.). Moreover, Romania is directly offering financial assistance and support to its neighbour in the form of public investments, financial aid, and non-reimbursable grants aimed at reaching the business community in Moldova or at advancing large projects (from the rehabilitation of cultural sites monuments, schools and kindergartens, to over 5000 annual scholarships to students in Moldova<sup>14</sup>, etc.).

<sup>12</sup> In 2014, Romania exceeded Russia and became the most important commercial partner of Moldova, with 1.23 billion USD, according to Moldovan National Bureau of Statistics (see, for instance, <https://bit.ly/32pMBs9> and <https://bit.ly/2U6f3dQ>).

<sup>13</sup> SMURD is Romania's emergency rescue service, which since 2014 has been operating also in Moldova.

<sup>14</sup> For more details, please see Ministry of Education, "Protocol de colaborare între Ministerul Educației Naționale și Cercetării Științifice din România și Ministerul Educației din Republica Moldova pentru anii de învățământ 2016-2019", 2016, [http://www.ccdcluj.ro/Fisiere/2016-2017/Prima\\_pagina/Informatii\\_interes\\_general/Protocol\\_MEN-ME\\_Moldova.pdf](http://www.ccdcluj.ro/Fisiere/2016-2017/Prima_pagina/Informatii_interes_general/Protocol_MEN-ME_Moldova.pdf).

Romania's economic capacity is overall positively perceived by the population of Moldova. According to the survey data, Moldovans perceive or somewhat perceive Romania's economy as developed (47%), diverse (47.2%), and prosperous (46.9%) and plays an important economic role at the regional level (46.8%). Furthermore, Romania's model of economic development appears to be attractive, considering that 48.9% of the Moldovan population believe or somewhat believe that Romania could be a model for economic development for other countries in the region.

Most Moldovan citizens find Romanian investments in Moldova very important or important (70.3%). Economic cooperation with Romania is evaluated similarly high (68.2%). However, in the experts' opinion, Romania has shown a rather limited capacity to influence Moldova's agenda economically. In spite of the current economic partnership, Romania seems not sufficiently able to translate the economic leverage into political influence. Such an observation was recurrent among the experts, who perceive and acknowledge Romania as being the most important economic partner of Moldova, but whose potential is poorly exploited. Moreover, in practical terms, the limited amount of foreign direct investments originating from Romania and the small number of Romanian companies on the Moldovan market (namely, in strategic fields such as insurances, finances, postal, telecommunication services, energy, etc.) do not seem to support a visible role played by Romania in the economy of Moldova. Meanwhile, Russia's direct investments in the economy of Moldova are perceived as well targeted at strategic economic sectors.

### **Military capabilities**

The official discourse of Moldova depicts the Moldovan – Romanian relationship in the field of defence and security as constant, efficient, and generally pragmatic, with extended cooperation in several fields, from staff exchanges to joint military exercises and training. It also revolves around acknowledging and appreciating Romania's constant support for the development of the Moldovan military sector. As such, Romania proves to be proactive in supporting the modernization of the Moldovan army via donations, transfer of know-how, and joint projects.

This approach is also shared by the experts, who consider Romania an important security and military actor in the region. Moreover, they acknowledge Romania's interest and active role in strengthening military cooperation with Moldova and perceive Romania as an example of how the Moldovan army should be modernized.

However, at the societal level, the perception of Romania's military capacity is not that high – Romania is seen as a very strong or considerably strong military power in the region by 28.3% of population; 30.9% of respondents find it to be a very reliable or considerably reliable military partner.

Furthermore, when assessing the military dimension of Moldovan – Romanian relations, most experts highlight the importance of Romania's membership in international organizations. Mainly, participation in NATO is seen as the one significantly strengthening Romania's capabilities, credibility, and military expertise. In fact, the experts point out that in defence- and security-related matters, Romania's actorness depends entirely on NATO's security umbrella and on its partnership with the U.S. In this regard, Romania is

perceived as an important NATO member and a strategic partner of the U.S. in the region with solid expertise and capabilities which contribute to strengthening regional security.

However, from a different perspective, some experts believe that Romania is a “security-consumer” rather than a “security-provider” in the region, while Bucharest’s membership in the transatlantic organizations has not only generated a backlash from the Russian Federation, but, in fact, also exposed Moldova, which now finds itself between two major geopolitical blocs, the transatlantic community and Russia.

Finally, the expert community in Moldova underlines the importance of strengthening the bilateral defence co-operation between the two countries. A bilateral approach, according to the experts, would decrease dependency on the Euro-Atlantic structures, thus rendering irrelevant the divergent approaches of other EU/NATO members states vis-à-vis Moldova, which for geopolitical reasons (i.e. the risk of angering Russia) may not want to see an enhanced relation with Chişinău.

The necessity of strengthening military collaboration between their country and Romania (largely or considerably) was also underpinned by the survey data (48.9%). Military cooperation between the two countries is considered desirable by 47.4% of respondents. Moreover, regarding the Transnistrian dossier, Moldovan society would welcome more involvement from Romania in safeguarding Moldova’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, mainly though involvement at the diplomatic level (44.1%) and more assistance (47.2%).

### Historical experience and culture

Culture and history represent an important dimension of Moldovan – Romanian bilateral relations. The countries' special ties' "based on the historical traditions of common culture"<sup>15</sup> are not only outlined in the official discourse, but also acknowledged by the general public. As such, at the societal level, roughly 2/3 of the respondents consider Moldovan culture (74.4%), history (71.9%), and traditions (75.4%) to be very close or close to those of Romania. Likewise, Romanian art is largely known or considerably known by 40% of respondents, literature by 48.8%, cuisine by 51.3%, and music by 62.3%.

Yet, the expert community in Moldova highlights Romania's inability to take proper advantage of its soft power, since it acts in a rather timid manner in relation to Chișinău. Therefore, the future of bilateral relations seems to depend on how Romania will be able to promote coherent policies in relation to culture and identity in Moldova and how active the country will be in supporting and promoting these policies.

Romania is not seen as assertive in terms of information dissemination and lacks a well thought out strategy in this regard, while investments in mass media in Moldova should represent a priority for the Romanian foreign policy establishment.

Finally, the interviewed experts disagree on how two of Bucharest's flagship policies have been designed. First, pro-

<sup>15</sup> Moldovan Presidential Administration, "Poziția Președintelui Republicii Moldova privind asigurarea securității țării și a cetățenilor ei prin fortificarea statutului constituțional de neutralitate permanentă al Republicii Moldova", 2018, <https://bit.ly/38tsdKr>.

viding academic grants to the Moldovan students has had adverse effects on the Moldovan human capital, generating a considerable “brain drain” from Moldova to Romania and other EU countries. Second, according to the experts, the process of granting Romanian citizenship to foreigners who had Romanian ancestors has been inaccurately framed, since the procedure for applying for Romanian citizenship is faulty and is not sufficiently underpinned by rigorous checks.

### **Domestic institutional capacity and expertise**

Particularly since joining the Euro-Atlantic structures, Romania has been frequently referred to in Moldova as a model of democratic reforms, economic performance, and rule of law. At the societal level, Romania is perceived or somewhat perceived as an example to follow when it comes to the rule of law (45.4%), democracy (44.1%), the fight against corruption (47.5 %), respect for human rights (46.8%), political stability (40.6%), administrative capacity (40.6%), freedom of speech (47.8%), and policies towards minorities (42.9%).

These findings are even more telling when respondents are asked to compare the domestic institutional capacity in the aforementioned fields in the two countries – between 58.3% and 71.9% of respondents consider that the situation in Moldova is much worse or somewhat worse compared to Romania.

Romania's expertise in the military, education, the economy, and, in particular, the fight against corruption is perceived as useful for implementing reform in Moldova. In spite of Romania's progress in a domestic institutional capacity, according to the experts, the country is lacking vis-

ibility in the region and is not well promoted. Moreover, although Romania possesses valuable human resources, it does not efficiently capitalize on them. For instance, Romania does not have any noticeable institutes (think-tanks) specializing in Eastern affairs, unlike Poland, the Czech Republic, or the Baltic countries. In addition, in Romania there is insufficient expertise on the post-Soviet space, since lately most Romanian expertise has largely focused on the West, on securing membership in the Euro-Atlantic organizations, and on learning to act in an institutionalized arena. Consequently, this came at the expense of other areas and priorities in foreign policies, such as the immediate eastern neighbourhood, where Romania so far does not manage to make a visible impact. Last but not least, in foreign policy matters the Romanian political class and institutions are perceived as not sufficiently coherent in relation to Moldova. Contradictory political messages coming from Bucharest have, according to the experts, affected Romania's actorness capacity towards Chişinău.

### **Membership in international organizations**

The official discourse in Moldova largely acknowledges Romania's support to Chişinău's European integration efforts. Similarly, at the societal level, more than half of the respondents (57.4%) highly appreciate Romania's role in advocating for Moldova's European trajectory, while Romania is perceived to have the capacity to represent the interests of the region in the EU (55.6%) and NATO (45.9%).

Furthermore, Romania's contribution to keeping the eastern neighbourhood on the agenda of its Western allies is highlighted by the Moldovan experts. However, according

to the experts, Romania has been less successful in advancing its priorities to EU/NATO policies, preferring instead to maintain a rather inactive stance, primarily following the cues of other major member states (such as France, Germany, or the United States). When assessing Romania's contribution to the two organizations in relation to the eastern neighbourhood, experts believe that Romania's input to NATO is much more consistent than the one provided to the EU. In fact, Romania is perceived as somewhat under-represented in the EU, where, according to the experts, it punches below its weight.

Most of the time experts indicate a preference for direct contact between Romania and Moldova, not necessarily intermediated by EU/NATO frameworks. Thus, the experts displayed strong support for the strengthening of bilateral relations, since Romania is much more willing and motivated to act in Moldova's best interests than other EU/NATO member states. A specific example where the two countries need to strengthen bilateral cooperation is referenced in the Transnistrian dossier.

In the same vein, the survey data indicate societal preferences (63%) for a direct, bilateral relationship with Romania to the multilateral one, intermediated by the EU or NATO structures.

Overall, most of the respondents (66.4%) consider or somewhat consider that membership in the EU has had a positive impact on Romania's development. Concurrently, 46.1% perceive or somewhat perceive membership in NATO to positively contribute to Romania's security profile. Thus, 57.6% and 44.4% of the population of Moldova perceive or

somewhat perceive Romania as a model for integration into the EU and, respectively, into NATO.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Some concluding remarks and practical recommendations on how to improve Romania's relations with Ukraine and Moldova have been drawn from this study:

### **Romania - Ukraine**

The general impression is that there is untapped potential at the level of the bilateral relationship whereby the benefits of closer relations clearly outweigh the current status quo, which is characterized by modest cooperation. Currently, increased cooperation appears to be still contingent on solving the divergences over minority issues. Yet, Romania could choose to pursue its interests in parallel with displaying political determination and initiative in other fields of mutual interest: economic (e.g. increased attractiveness/improved access to Ukrainian companies on the Romanian market, which should be linked to reciprocal measures on the Ukrainian side; increased people-to-people contacts at joint business forums), political (e.g. assistance in the domains where Romania has proved it accumulated expertise, such as in the fight against corruption), security (e.g. show availability to support Ukraine in various defence-related matters based on Romania's NATO experience and considering the existing Russian threat to the wider region).

There is an acute need for better transport connection between the two countries since the existing infrastructure is poor (including here, also, the maritime transport over the

Black Sea and the fluvial transport on the Danube River). This would not only contribute to the improvement of economic ties, but also to the development of tourism. At the time being, Romania is not even in the top ten of Ukraine's trading partners<sup>16</sup>, which is surprising considering the fact that Ukraine is Romania's largest neighbour, with whom it shares its longest border (roughly 610km). Moreover, according to our findings, Romania is mostly unknown to Ukrainians, which underscores the need to invest more resources in advertising Romania in Ukraine.

Romania should initiate bilateral discussions to tackle some of the sensitive historical events which affected the relations between the two countries; develop institutional capacity to promote Romanian culture at the national level in Ukraine, not merely limit promotion to the Romanian minority living in the borderlands; generate more opportunities for common projects where stakeholders across the entire territory of Ukraine could participate<sup>17</sup>.

Joint projects for Ukrainian and Romanian journalists should also be considered. This would potentially broaden media coverage about the other country and, most importantly, would provide objective reporting and counter the tendency to politicize sensitive issues (such as minority rights, alleged territorial claims, etc.). Furthermore, joint media projects could extend the journalistic scope and cover

<sup>16</sup> Ukraine is not among Romania's top 10 trading partners either (currently Ukraine is Romania's 25<sup>th</sup> export destination, and 20th for imported products): Ministerul Pentru Mediul de Afaceri, Comerț și Antreprenariat, "România: Comerțul Internațional", *Buletin informativ*, lunar 9, 2018, [http://www.imm.gov.ro/adaugare\\_fisiere\\_imm/2019/01/RO-Comert-international-09-2018.pdf](http://www.imm.gov.ro/adaugare_fisiere_imm/2019/01/RO-Comert-international-09-2018.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Currently, the Joint Operational Programme Romania–Ukraine 2014–2020 covers only the border area between the two countries.

a larger number of topics (e.g., the economy, culture, geography, and tourism, etc.).

Another avenue of cooperation involves the expertise that the two countries boast. At the expert level, increased cooperation should constantly tackle ways to consolidate bilateral security ties (i.e. Romania's experience of complying with the NATO standards can be beneficial also for Ukraine and, in this regard, the transfer of knowledge from Romania to Ukraine is useful), to establish institutionalized frameworks for common matters of interest (such as the diversification of the energy supplies, consolidation of the civil society, minority rights, support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic efforts, etc.). This joint expertise can be used by national and local authorities to develop better-suited policies to strengthen bilateral relations.

### **Romania – Moldova**

A blueprint for consolidating Romania's ties in the political, economic, cultural, and societal fields for Moldova should exist (i.e. "a country action plan"). Such a roadmap could constitute a medium/long-term vision for Moldova and needs first to be agreed upon and shared by all the political forces in Romania. Second, the application of such a plan should be consistent and perennial, regardless of the leadership in Chişinău. Since the present study was begun in autumn 2018, a positive step has already been undertaken in Romania; in February 2020, the Department for the Relations with the Republic of Moldova (DRRM) was created within the Romanian Government. Yet, apart from financing educational, cultural, and mass-media activities, mostly

aimed at preserving the Romanian identity in Moldova<sup>18</sup>, DRRM might take the lead in drafting a 10-year comprehensive plan to guide Romania's foreign policy towards Moldova by including other concrete areas of common interest (economic development, infrastructure, private investments, diversification of the energy supplies, etc.). This plan would serve as a basis for public debate in the Romanian political and societal environment. The outcome of this joint endeavour should afterwards be translated into a 10-year strategic framework for cooperation between Romania and Moldova, which could be correlated also with the EU's ENP Action Plan.

In relation to both the EU and NATO, Romania needs to capitalize more on its self-assumed "middleman" role between Moldova and the Euro-Atlantic structures. Although the multilateral formats of cooperation between Moldova and the West are extremely useful, Romania should consolidate its voice at the EU level by advancing its foreign policy preferences in a much more visible way. Similar to the "Trio 2030 Strategy" initiative proposed by Lithuania to enable better sector-by-sector integration with the EU for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova<sup>19</sup>, Romania could come up with a 10-year plan to strengthen cooperation with Moldova. This would signal additional determination on the Romanian

<sup>18</sup> These are the priority fields financed by the Romanian Government in 2020, <https://bit.ly/2GN6Ulw>.

<sup>19</sup> The "Trio 2030 Strategy" was proposed in November 2019 by the Lithuanian delegation in the European People's Party and should pave the way for the Lithuanian Presidency of the EU Council in 2027, V. Maksimov, "Future of Eastern Partnership: EPP backs trio plan, Commission cautious", *Euractiv*, 21 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/32uaPl8>.

side to assume concrete responsibility at the EU level for supporting Moldova's European aspirations.

So far, Romania has not appeared to be able to sufficiently communicate its financial support for Moldova, since Moldovan society seems to be not fully aware of Romania's contribution to various projects (such as the refurbishment of schools and kindergartens and cultural monuments, etc.). Therefore, Romania should increase the visibility of its actions in Moldova through a much wider dissemination of information. Moreover, Romania should consider reorienting some of the resources to other destinations, which are likely to carry more impact on its public perception, such as road infrastructure. For instance, the repair of roads could be chosen based on their critical importance for the transportation system in Moldova. Similarly, an immediate preoccupation for Romania would be to focus on providing accessibility between the two countries (namely, by building or repairing national roads and bridges across the Prut river). Another salient field in which Romania should redirect investments is the media segment in Moldova, which is strongly affected by the quality of information (i.e. numerous cases of disinformation have been recently reported in Moldova<sup>20</sup>). Such a move would entail support for the diversification of the sources of information, support for the independent press, technical assistance for independent journalism, and the transfer of know-how and expertise to improve the legal and regulatory press environment in Moldova. This support

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, "Moldova. Covid-19 disinformation response index", <https://dri.org.ua/countries/moldova>.

should not be limited to the media sources having pro-Romanian/pro-unionist views.

Romania should reconsider its economic potential and concentrate its efforts on important investments in some of the main economic and financial sectors in Moldova (such as the Moldovan electric network, postal services, telecommunications, IT, consultancy, insurance and financial services, establishment of joint agricultural and industrial clusters, assistance to establish a stock-exchange in Chişinău), particularly since Romania has already acquired the expertise and the necessary experience in the EU's market and has some key advantages, such as geographic proximity to Moldova and a common language and culture. In this regard, apart from public investments, Romanian private entrepreneurs should be also incentivized to play a much more active role in the Moldovan market.

Another important course of action for Romania, linked to the previous recommendations, is to increase staff exchanges in order to strengthen the institutional capacities of Moldova, foster mobilities to enhance peer-to-peer relations at the level of the expert community, business community, civil society representatives, researchers and/or journalists.

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Romania's strategic location by the Black Sea is undoubtedly a great asset for the country, and has for centuries been one of the most important geostrategic points on the European continent, situated as it is at the junction of three cultural and civilisational areas – United Europe representing the Western world, Orthodox Russia, and Turkey which, despite its pro-European leanings, still belongs to the Middle East and the Muslim world.

The significance of the Black Sea region increased as a result of the aforementioned NATO and EU expansions, the USA gained loyal allies, while Russia, the successor to the USSR which once dominated the region, was faced with the necessity to share political influences. This requirement to take into account the actions of other players is due to the fact that the influences of the major actors on the world political stage overlap in the Black Sea region.

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