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Romania strengthens cooperation with Ukraine

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Romania and Ukraine have reached a level of mutual understanding hitherto unknown. The countries have managed to arrange relations on the most sensitive issues such as the problem of agricultural imports and the rights of national minorities. This provides the basis for the development of a stable security architecture in this part of the Black Sea region. The effect of the rapprochement has also been to increase Romania's importance in the international arena and strengthen its position in relations with Western partners.

Visits and agreements. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenski paid an official visit to Bucharest on September 10, 2023. It was Zelenski's first visit to Romania since the Russian invasion. During the visit, he met with President Klaus Iohannis, Prime Minister Marcel Ciolac, and the presidents of both houses of parliament. The talks included doubling the amount of Ukrainian grain exported through Romanian ports (from 2 to 4 million tons per month) and training Ukrainian F-16 fighter pilots at a NATO training centre located in Romania. President Iohannis unequivocally supported Ukraine's drive for EU and NATO integration. A joint statement by the presidents declared their will to raise the status of mutual relations to the level of a strategic partnership.

On October 18, 2023, Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu visited Kiev where a number of important intergovernmental agreements were signed: a memorandum on ensuring the safe transit of Ukrainian products and a strategy for the development of border points and road infrastructure; an agreement on the construction of a bridge over the Tisa River (linking Belaya Cerkievo and Syhot Marmaroski); a memorandum between the Romanian Ministry of Economy and the Ukrainian Ministry of Strategic Industries on cooperation between their defence industries.

Even before the visit, Prime Minister Ciolacu announced that a compromise had been reached on the rights of the Romanian population living in Ukraine. This topic had been a thorny point in mutual relations for many years; according to Bucharest, this community did not enjoy rights similar to those offered by Romania to the Ukrainians living there. Problematic from this perspective was the fact that Ukraine distinguished between the Romanian and Moldovan populations on its territory. Meanwhile, in Romanian optics, the distinctiveness of the Moldovan people, if one can speak of it at all, is the result of Soviet nationality policy. Above all, however, it was pointed out that splitting this community into two groups leaves it disadvantaged, as it cannot enjoy the privileges reserved for minorities that meet the relevant population minimum (this included education in the national language). Ukraine has now officially recognized that Romanian is the official language in Moldova. This can be seen as a departure from the Soviet legacy and a step toward treating all Romanian-speaking residents of Ukraine as a single group.

Romanian-Ukrainian relations after 1991. Relations between Bucharest and Kiev after 1991 were for a long time characterized by distance and even coldness, interspersed with periods of disagreement. On the Romanian side, the lack of interest in deepening relations with the neighbour with which it shares the longest border was due to historical, cultural, and strategic issues. A feature of Romanian national identity and political culture is its peculiar distance from eastern Slavonia. In addition, Ukraine was perceived after 1991 as one of the heirs to the Soviet Union, already remembered at the time as the aggressor that tied Romania into a close alliance after World War II, with the help of political terror. Claims for the Bukovina territories, seized by the USSR during World War II and now within Ukraine's borders, were also transferred to some extent to Kiev. The countries were also divided for many years by a territorial dispute over Snake Island (eventually settled in favour of Ukraine).

Significantly, Romania viewed Ukraine as a strategically ambivalent state, often even acting in favour of Russia. This was especially true of Kiev's agreement to the presence of the Russian fleet in Crimea and its ambiguous policy toward Transnistria, which enables the economic functioning of this separatist republic. The issue of the rights of the Romanian population in Ukraine was also the cause of numerous political disputes.

After the Russian invasion. The first breakthrough in mutual relations occurred after Russia's annexation of Crimea and hybrid aggression on Donbas in 2014. This resulted in President Petro Poroshenko's visit to Bucharest, and Romania began to see Ukraine as a potential partner on strategic issues. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 Romania offered humanitarian support and assistance to refugees. Transit channels were also quickly set up: in the second half of 2022, about 50% of the EU's agri-food exports from the invaded country went to Romania. This was served by ports on the Danube and the Black Sea port of Constanta. The breaking of the so-called grain agreement by Russia in the summer of 2023 resulted in the resumption of intensive transit through Romanian territory.

However, there was ambiguity over Bucharest's involvement in supporting the military sphere. According to official figures, assistance to the neighbouring country amounted to the transfer of a small shipment of fuel, vests, helmets, and ammunition, as well as 28 T-72 tanks (five of which were fully operational). At the same time, Romanian politicians and diplomats assured that in reality, the aid was much larger, but for security reasons, its scale could not be disclosed. This practice significantly differentiated the country from other countries in the region, which also raised discussion within Romania itself.

Imports of grain and other agricultural products from Ukraine became a separate issue. Romanian farmers, like representatives of this professional group from other countries in the region, were seriously concerned that imports would result in unfavourable price competition for them. For this reason, Bucharest began talks with Kiev even before the end of the EU ban on the import of grain and other products to Central European countries. As a result, a procedure was established under which imports of wheat, corn, sunflower, and soybeans were allowed to enter the Romanian market only under a license issued by Romania's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Conclusions. The most important pillars of Romanian foreign policy are considered to be concern for regional security, the perception of Russia as a threat to one's own security and sovereignty, and the desire to maximize the alliance with Western countries, primarily the US. The last point is related to Romania's efforts to build its own image as the basis for security on NATO's eastern flank (["IES Commentaries," No. 511](#)). The Russian aggression against Ukraine has forced Romania to break previous stereotypes in its perception of the neighbouring state. The caution towards military support is often explained by a reluctance to weaken its own military potential. There have also been opinions that this is due to concerns about Ukraine's excessive growth in importance in the region, which could undermine Romania's status as a pillar of Western influence in the Black Sea region.

The issue of the importance of grain exports to the Ukrainian economy and global food security makes the development of road and port infrastructure in Romania of great strategic importance. The current new opening in Romanian-Ukrainian relations lays the groundwork for the development of a stable security architecture in this part of the Black Sea region. It also has the effect of increasing Romania's importance in the international arena and strengthening its relations with Western partners.

Particularly noteworthy is the skilful resolution of two problematic issues. The first is the import of agricultural products from Ukraine. Bucharest, by entering into timely negotiations with Kiev, managed to gain control over the influx of competitive products for the local agricultural sector. As a result, a crisis in mutual relations was averted, and Romania positively distinguished itself from the countries of the region, presenting itself as a stable and reliable ally. The second issue was the problem of the Romanian minority in Ukraine. It is worth noting that back in late 2022 and early 2023, this issue caused tension in mutual relations; Romania's Foreign Ministry

voiced an official protest against the Law on National Minorities, adopted by Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada in December 2022. At the time, it was suggested that Ukraine's minority policy could affect Romania's stance toward European Union enlargement, an issue rooted in Romania's domestic political situation: on this issue, the radical right-wing AUR party managed to put pressure on the ruling coalition at the time. There are many indications that Bucharest managed to sensitize Kiev to its point of view, indicating that this issue must not be a further obstacle to the development of mutual relations, which are of [significant] strategic importance.