

# COUNTRY CHAPTER ON ROMANIA

by Matthias Dembinski

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# THE ROMANIAN DEBATE ON THE FUTURE OF NATO

**Matthias Dembinski**

Romanian discourse on foreign affairs and security is characterized by a general consensus that (i) the country's place is with the United States and within the transatlantic and European security institutions, and (ii) Russia's »aggressive behaviour« and »actions to militarize the Black Sea region« constitute the main threats to Romanian security.<sup>1</sup> The general agreement that the future of Romania lies in integration in European and transatlantic structures emerged during the transformation period in the 1990s and expressed itself for the first time in the so-called Snagov consensus of 1995.<sup>2</sup> When Romania was left out of the first round of NATO enlargement, the United States offered to establish a Strategic Partnership in 1997. This partnership was substantially enhanced in 2011 with the adoption of the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership for the Twenty-First Century. Since then, both countries consult each other and work together in a close-knit network of working groups (Stanciu et al. 2019). The partnership has gathered even more steam in recent years (see below), culminating in the adoption of a »Roadmap for Defense Cooperation« in October 2020.<sup>3</sup> Since the establishment of the Strategic Partnership in 1997, the United States has been the most important reference point of Romania's foreign and security policy. Romania has looked to the United States for protection and has done its part to cement the relationship by supporting the US diplomatically and militarily. Bucharest sided with the Bush administration in the conflict over the Iraq war in 2003 and contributed troops to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

With very few exceptions, Romanian think tanks and research centres still share the »spirit of Snagov« (Naumescu 2017: 196). Romanian scholars support their country's Western orientation and call for a robust NATO and US presence in the Black Sea region. Slight differences arise over the repercussions of the close partnership with the United States with regard to relations with China and Russia. These differences remain subdued, however – also among political parties – mirroring opinions within the strategic community, generally speaking.<sup>5</sup>

## THREAT PERCEPTION

Romanian scholars perceive Russia as the main security threat. Romania's foreign policy community became suspicious of Russia's intentions after Moscow's intervention in the civil war in Moldova and started to perceive Russia as an outright threat after the interventions in Georgia 2008 and Ukraine 2014. The annexation of Crimea in particular is widely regarded as a game changer. George Visan, fellow at the Romanian Energy Centre, summarizes this widely shared threat perception: »The greatest conventional threat for Romania in the short and medium term comes from a resurgent and aggressive Russia« (Visan 2016: 6).

Russia is no longer perceived merely as a spoiler but as a revisionist power, albeit at a regional level. According to Romanian experts, the fortification and militarization of Crimea since 2014 is changing the military balance in the Black Sea region (Dinu 2020). The military threat has superseded security risks that were given more prominence in discussions among Romanian scholars prior to 2008, such as a possible backsliding of democratic reforms, a lack of trust in democratic institutions, corruption and possible threats resulting from regional instability or a possible resurgence of minority conflicts. Domestic challenges are still being dis-

1 Jean Patrick Clancy, *European Security Journal*, citing the Romanian National Defence Strategy 2020–2024 (<https://www.esjnews.com/romania-s-new-national-defence-strategy-a-call-for-greater-black-sea-nato-presence>).

2 At a meeting at the Snagov resort outside Bucharest in that year, representatives of the state, the government and all political parties agreed to strive for a Euro-Atlantic orientation. An English version of the Snagov declaration of 21 June 1995 is reprinted in Dimitris Papadimitriou and David Phinnemore: *Romania and The European Union: From Marginalisation to Membership?* London, Routledge, 2008, p. 74.

3 <https://ro.usembassy.gov/roadmap-for-defense-cooperation/>. Under the agreement, the United States will »continue to support the modernization and interoperability of Romania's armed forces and continue to assist Romania to defend itself and the Black Sea region, including continued rotation of U.S. forces into the region«.

4 Romania signed the letter of the Vilnius-10. It also supported the war on terror by allowing the CIA to set up secret camps for the interrogation of prisoners, using well-documented harsh methods. The programme is another example of the »Snagov consensus«. It began during the reign of President Ion Iliescu of the Social Democratic

Party and was continued under his successor Traian Băsescu who had been elected on the ticket of the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL) and the Democratic Party (Partidul Democrat, PD).

5 For instance, representatives of the Romanian Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat (PSD) usually advocate friendlier relations with Russia and China and have always emphasized the importance of a functioning dialogue with these countries, whereas the other parties take a more critical stance towards Russia.

## »Romania is the most pro-American country in Europe, if not in the world«

Iulian Chifu: Romania – Outlook on Security Policy Development and National Expectations Until 2025, Working paper (Chifu 2020: 4)

cussed, and the National Defence Strategy addresses them as security risks. However, they pale in comparison with the conventional threat emanating from Russia.

Romanian scholars concur in their positive assessments of NATO's contribution in quelling past and present risks. During the 1990s and the early 2000s, the prospect of membership stabilized the Romanian transformation process (Olteanu 2020), guided military reforms and provided a framework for regional cooperation. Scholars also agree that NATO and the partnership with the United States have been instrumental in checking the new threat stemming from Russia. Romania's threat assessment and self-proclaimed role as NATO's bulwark on the South-Eastern flank has a strong bearing on Romania's relations with other countries, such as China.

### NATO AND CHINA

Romania's bilateral relations with China have developed within the EU framework and the 16+1 structure of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and China. Romania hopes to diversify export markets and to gain access to financing for infrastructure projects and has welcomed China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, Romania kept a relatively low profile (except during Victor Ponta's tenure).<sup>6</sup> Since then, however, the high-flying expectations have been disappointed as many investment projects have not materialized or have been delayed (Popescu and Brinza 2018: 30).

In the pull test created by the increasing tensions between China's advances and the American call for solidarity, China stands to lose. In line with Romania's »America first« policy, the government has positioned itself against Huawei. In fact, Romania was the first central and eastern European country to sign a memorandum of understanding with the United States on this issue on the occasion of a state visit to Washington in August 2019 (Leonte 2021).<sup>7</sup> Following the adoption of the memorandum, prime minister Ludovic Orban, leader of the centre-right National Liberal Party (PNL), introduced legislation banning companies from taking part in the construction of the 5G network that do not respect transatlantic values.<sup>8</sup> Even more important has been the

construction of units 3 and 4 of the Cernavoda Nuclear Power Plant. Negotiations with China on the financing and construction of the units came to naught when the United States agreed to provide financing to modernize Romania's nuclear infrastructure with Western technology. Both sides also agreed to work together on other infrastructure projects, such as a highway and rail-link that, if realized, will connect ports on the Black Sea and on the Baltic Sea (Popovici 2020). In addition, the United States is contributing USD 1 billion to the Three Seas Initiative, an institution of Eastern European states initiated by Poland and Romania that will create a network for the distribution of LNG. In January 2021, the government adopted a memorandum that, if enacted, would ban Chinese companies from bidding for public infrastructure projects.<sup>9</sup> Most Romanian think tankers welcome this development. They agree that NATO should develop a response to China's increasing presence in Europe, for example, by monitoring Chinese investments in critical infrastructure. Moreover, they support the development of an EU and/or NATO Indo-Pacific strategy. The lone critics of the de facto exclusion of Huawei were Florin Pasatoiu, Director of the Centre for Foreign Policy and Security Studies, and Cristian Nitoiu, who argued that a confrontational approach towards China will come at the expense of economic opportunities (Pasatoiu and Nitoiu 2020).

### COUNTERING THE RUSSIAN THREAT

Debates among Romanian think tanks focus on one issue: maximizing deterrence against Russia. This involves first and foremost attempts to anchor the United States firmly within the Southeast European region. The big price, as Manea and Gosu (2016: 6) put it, has been »U.S. boots on the ground, as the working assumption was that countries that have U.S. soldiers on their territory do not get invaded«. A major opportunity arose when the Obama administration reconfigured Bush's plans for a European-based ballistic missile defence architecture and decided in 2011 to build a BMD facility in Deveselu, Romania. Romanian scholars such as Valentin Naumescu, associate professor at Babes-Bolyai University and founder of the think tank Citadel, have been rather candid in their assessment that Romanian support for the missile defence programme is not related to an Iranian missile threat – the official NATO justification – but has everything to do with Russia.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the base in Deveselu, approximately 1,500 US troops are stationed at the Mihail Kogalniceanu air force base and at

<sup>6</sup> Romania signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) regarding the BRI in 2015, but did so only at the level of secretary of state. Another example is Romania's delayed accession to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Romania joined the AIIB not with the first wave of EU states in March 2015 but started the procedure to join only in 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Romania, US sign memorandum on 5G technologies »in line with rule of law principles«, Romania Insider, 22 August 2019; <https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-us-5g-memorandum>

<sup>8</sup> Romania Rejects Partnering With China's Huawei On 5G, Prime Minister Says, November 01, 2020, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Romanian Service; <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-rejects-partnering-with-china-s-huawei-on-5g-prime-minister-says/30924414.html>

<sup>9</sup> Available at: [https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/romania-issues-memorandum-blocking-chinese-firms-from-public-infrastructure-projects/?mc\\_cid=7c9613bbe6&mc\\_eid=2db9ef5256](https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/romania-issues-memorandum-blocking-chinese-firms-from-public-infrastructure-projects/?mc_cid=7c9613bbe6&mc_eid=2db9ef5256)

<sup>10</sup> Valentin Naumescu, Scutul antirachetă, Rusia și ordinea europeană. O tensiune insolubilă?; <https://www.contributors.ro/scutul-antiracheta-rusia-si-ordinea-europeana-o-tensiune-insolubila/>

Campia Turzii on a rotational basis. Since 2017, a US armoured battalion has been stationed on a rotational basis in Romania.

Pundits also support the enhancement of NATO's presence in the region. Scholars such as Iulian Fota and Mihail Ionescu, former Director of the Institute for Political Studies of Defense and Military History, welcomed NATO's Warsaw summit decision to increase NATO's forward presence (for example, by creating a Multinational Headquarters in Romania), but criticized the distinction drawn between the »Enhanced Forward Presence« on the northern flank and NATO's »Tailored Presence« on the south-eastern flank (Puri forthcoming: 6f.) Moreover, instead of rotating deployments from NATO states, Romanian scholars support the government's insistence that NATO troops should be permanently deployed along the Eastern flank (Manea and Gosu 2016: 6).<sup>11</sup> Ahead of the Warsaw summit, Romania had pushed the project of a permanent NATO naval presence in the Black Sea. This project was supported by the United States but fell on deaf ears in Bulgaria and did not materialize (Visan 2016). The corollary of abandoning the **NATO-Russia Founding Act** should be accepted as this act has lost its relevance anyway. Instead, Romanian experts argue that the artificial division inside NATO between areas of higher and lower security should come to an end and that NATO's integrated military structure should be extended to cover the new members. At the Bucharest summit in 2008, Romania supported the admission of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. However, think tankers acknowledge that the two countries did not and still do not fulfil NATO's accession criteria. Given their entanglement in frozen conflicts, there is no easy way for these countries to join NATO in the foreseeable future. NATO should nevertheless expand its military assistance to Ukraine. Romania is a staunch advocate of Moldova's and Ukraine's accession to the EU.

To advance its views within NATO, Romania is forging closer ties with like-minded member-states. In December 2015, a first Eastern flank summit in Bucharest under joint Romanian and Polish chairmanship brought together nine NATO states in the so-called Bucharest 9 (B9) format (Gerasymchuk 2019). Another step in this regard is the Three Seas Initiative. Romanian think tanks have accompanied diplomatic outreach activities by forging networks with institutes particularly in Moldova and Ukraine, but also in Poland, Italy and other NATO states.<sup>12</sup>

Except for some lonely voices such as Florin Pasatoiu, Romanian think tankers do not see much room for **dialogue**

**with Russia** at the present time.<sup>13</sup> **Arms control**, too, is not on the agenda of most think tanks.

Instead, think tanks are debating the nature of threats and focusing on ways to strengthen defence and modernize the armed forces (Visan 2019). According to Iulian Chifu, President of the Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Centre, Romania faces primarily conventional military threats. Unconventional threats, such as cyber attacks, have recently gained more prominence (Chifu 2020: 18f), and the United States has agreed to extend cooperation in the field. Since 2014, Romania has contributed to the NATO Ukraine Cyber Defense Trust Fund and has taken the lead in supporting Ukraine on cybersecurity. Given the numerous weaknesses of the Romanian media, the issue of (Russian) disinformation campaigns has gained prominence, and institutions such as the Bucharest-based Global Focus Centre and the Laboratory for the Analysis of Information War and Strategic Communications track and analyse such disinformation.

Another field in which Romania, in cooperation with the United States, is trying to counter Russian influence in the region is energy cooperation. Both sides are committed to »creating a single European energy market, diversifying energy routes and supplies, bolstering competitiveness and transparency, and advancing interconnectivity in the energy infrastructure«.<sup>14</sup>

Romanian scholars emphasize the character of NATO as a **values-based alliance** which has helped Romania in the reform process. In the same vein, pundits support the proposal for a code of conduct. However, this affirmation of NATO's democratic values is mixed with a dose of pragmatism, as expressed for example in Romania's efforts to forge a closer relationship with Turkey. Scholars perceive membership of the European Union as an additional anchor of Romanian security but are wary of French and German attempts to upgrade the **EU's defence policy**. Concepts such as European autonomy or a European army not only overextend European capabilities but would also split Europe. Moreover, Romanian scholars such as Iulian Chifu suspect that France is advancing these projects with a view to preserving its military-industrial base and solving »its post-colonial issues in Africa« (Chifu 2020: 11). In fact, Romania is pursuing a strict NATO-first policy. The programme to modernize the armed forces rests almost completely on

<sup>11</sup> Romania is upgrading the Mihail Kogalniceanu base to NATO standards capable of hosting up to 10,000 troops.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the cooperative project FLANKS involving the New Strategy Centre and the Norwegian NUPI. See also the cooperation between the Romanian NGO Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association (ESGA) and the Ukrainian Prism (Degeratu and Leca 2019).

<sup>13</sup> This unity among think tanks contrasts with the differences among Romania's political parties. For example, while former President Iliescu signed a political treaty with Russia in 2003 aimed at improving relations, his successor Traian Basescu resorted to more aggressive rhetoric (Manea and Gosu 2016: 10f). Victor Ponta's attempt to improve relations with Russia during his brief tenure as prime minister of a Social Democratic Party government (May 2012 till November 2015) did not gain traction and was not well received by the Romanian strategic community.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Embassy in Romania: Joint Statement on the Implementation of the Joint Declaration on the Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century between Romania and the United States, 19 June 2018 (<https://ro.usembassy.gov/joint-declaration-on-the-strategic-partnership-for-the-21st-century-between-romania-and-the-united-states/>).

cooperation with US defence companies. Romania is pursuing the multilateralization of its military forces but only under the NATO umbrella. Romania sees itself as a reliable ally that **bears its share of the burden**. When Klaus Iohannis took office as President in 2015, he forged a consensus among the political parties on the implementation of NATO's 2 per cent goal (Visan 2016: 10). In 2019, Romania surpassed this threshold.

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