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# European Sovereignty

Commentary on the Findings  
of the Survey in Romania

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## PERIPHERAL SOVEREIGNTY IN EUROPE – A LONG HISTORY OF FRAGILITY

When it comes to the perceptions of Romanians highlighted by the survey of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) und der Fondation Jean-Jaurès (FJJ), what first strikes the observer is the ambivalent and mixed – if not contradictory – set of ideas and positions on sovereignty. Romanians seem to maintain a positive view of European sovereignty, while at the same time tending to oppose it to national sovereignty. How could this be accounted for? A partial explanation may lie in Romania's historical evolution and that of the region. In Central and Eastern Europe, independence and effective sovereignty have been the central issues in political history. Similar to other countries in the region, Romania's quest for effective sovereignty throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a story of deeply felt positive aspirations, as well as of fragility.

With roots in the medieval period, the struggle to build and preserve statehood was used as a unifying principle first by the dynastic and landowning elites and later on by the modernizing liberal bourgeois ones. Up until the First World War Romania, and the region, had been a space for expansion, authority and extraction for the Ottoman, Tsarist Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Romania navigated the changing geopolitical tides with great difficulty, trying to assert its sovereignty, while building internally both the state and the nation.

Each entity projecting power and control over the region met not only resistance, but also forms of collaboration. Imperial

power and control were never achieved purely through coercion. Tsarist Russia portrayed itself as the protector of Christianity against the Ottomans and also pursued modernizing reforms, as is the case of the Romanian proto-Constitution issued in 1831–1832 under occupation. The Austro-Hungarian Empire and later on Germany, provided markets, technology and investments. The ambivalence of imperial influence shaped the political memory of Romanians and created a set of seemingly contradictory responses: in any given period, one can find different groups in Romanian society and elite supporting alliances and enhanced cooperation with major powers, and others fiercely opposing them.

The First World War destroyed the large multinational empires. Romania, like other countries in the region, obtained independence, but not without overcoming obstacles: territorial disputes with neighbours, proximity to power-hungry and ideologically motivated countries, and a weak economic and administrative base to support independence. Before the Second World War virtually all countries in the region had their parliamentary regimes swept aside by various royal, military and fascist authoritarians. Romania experienced all three in a very short period of time, starting with King Carol II assuming almost full executive powers and then a military-fascist regime allied with Nazi Germany. The Cold War period was no different, with the majority of countries experiencing early regime change by force and a few occupied by Soviet troops, Romania included. It is thus understandable that sovereignty and independence remained fundamental issues throughout contemporary history.

Related to the central issue of independence and effective sovereignty was capitalist and industrial development. Romania was a late comer in European and world capitalist markets. For a long time, it retained the features of a predominantly rural economy, resiliently feudal, in which the land-owning elite coerced large peasant populations into submission and quasi-forced labour. The dual agrarian-industrial economy had its own dilemmas: what to produce, export and import? How to build an economy capable of financing the development of the state? The landowning elites wanted to maintain an export-led agrarian economy, centred around big estates. The bourgeoisie wanted rapid jumps into financial and industrial capitalism, with some foreign investment, but mainly building a national productive sector which would substitute imports. All these perspectives have had implications for how Romanians tend to define sovereignty and independence.

The Second World War took a disproportionate toll on the region, with all countries suffering major human and infrastructural destruction. The socialist economic and political system imposed by the Soviet Union after the war pushed the region into a rapid and intensive industrialization process. The running of the planned socialist economy rested partially on the existence of the Soviet Union-led economic space. Yet Romania refused the predominantly agricultural role assigned to it and maintained economic relations outside the socialist camp.

Late state-building and capitalist development, coupled with foreign-led regime change, shaped collective memory, popular attitudes and strategic choices. Given the size of the territory, population and economy, and the persistent influence of powerful expansionist states, sovereignty for Romania in the Central and Eastern periphery was conditional, relational and fragile. In its internal dimension, it was supported by rather ineffective and sometimes brutal state institutions. The historical experiences of the region, too, created an ambivalence, with consistent support for foreign-led modernizations and integration coexisting with a significant nationalistic opposition.

## THE CONCEPT OF EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY HARBOURS RISKS

The answers of Romanian respondents to questions on European sovereignty reflect the country's complicated history. Overall, Romanians support strengthening both national and European sovereignty, but this support conceals some structural tensions.

First, respondents are more positive towards national sovereignty than towards European sovereignty and a significant part of the population sees sovereignty as linked more to the nation state than to a European community of nations. The answers are consistent with the dominant narratives built around Romania's limited historical sovereignty. They also show a significant resistance to moving sovereignty upwards from the nation state. From this perspective, using the term »sovereignty«, at least in Romania's case, is risky, as it conjures up intense support for national sovereignty. Thus, framing the policy agenda around the concept of European sovereignty

might be a semantic trap as the concept has very different connotations and meanings in the various EU countries.

Second, regarding the actual meaning of sovereignty, most Romanian respondents (66 per cent) consider that sovereignty largely means »Living in accordance with one's own values and preferences«, than »Freely determined cooperation with one's partners« (29 per cent), as is the case for other countries studied. This perception might be shaped by the historical experiences with the Communist regime, popularly portrayed as a foreign imposition. It could also mean a more recent and reserved attitude toward cultural models transferred from the West, framed as eroding traditional spiritual and religious values. This marked distinction is visible especially among those who tend to affiliate themselves with the radical right, who associate the word »sovereignty« more consistently with »nationalism« than other Romanians. In the increasingly assertive nationalist-conservative discourse, EU values are not viewed as the same as Romanian ones.

For the time being, pro-European progressive voices in Romanian society are still stronger and the level of support for EU membership is high enough, definitely higher than in other countries. However, enthusiasm for deepening European integration appears to have diminished. This may have some significance for the Europe-wide debate on European values and foundational principles, but also on the future configuration of the political architecture of the EU, as in future forces that question the distribution of competencies in favour of the EU level may gather strength in Romania.

## THE EU MEMBERSHIP IS VIEWED IN AN INSTRUMENTAL WAY

When Romanian respondents were asked what would enhance Europe's sovereignty, a significant proportion pointed to the economic dimension (a prosperous economy), consistent with the general way in which Europe and Brussels are referred to primarily in national debates. Again, this resonates with the historical experiences of underdevelopment and partial economic modernization presented in the previous section, but also with a particularly instrumental view of EU membership, which has been a strong component of Romania's pro-European enthusiasm. Economic development and catching-up with the West have been integral and resilient parts of the collective memory. Moreover, Romanian public opinion acknowledges the precarious state of the economic system since 1989, with very high levels of poverty and inequality, and massive migration. The direction is confirmed in the FES-FJJ survey results by the indication of enhanced production in strategic domains such as food and health, highlighting a possible preference for a developmental path to more sovereignty.

These signals from a new member, Romania, feeds into the wider policy priorities of the EU. In March 2020 the European Commission launched a new industrial strategy, moving in a more pro-active direction, by building internal industrial alliances and monitoring strategic dependencies. The strategy, with its underlying vision shared by other policy instruments

such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, sparked a lively debate in Romania. The vision aims to guide the European economy into the future by pursuing the twin transition towards a digital and a green economy. But this vision ignores the fact that large parts of Europe still suffer from basic problems of underdevelopment, and the chances of significant economic and technological progress are undermined by poor infrastructure, declining educational performance, migration and weak institutional capacity. In this respect, Romania and other CEE countries may require a more basic industrial focus, taking into consideration their context and economic models.

In a similar way, the new Commission Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, when plotted against Romania's harsh economic and social conditions, is perceived to lack ambition and as somewhat belated. The basic structures of the post-socialist welfare system have already been dismantled, leaving millions at risk of poverty and social exclusion, poorly paid and default candidates for migration. For example, in 2019 one in three jobs in Romania was paid at the minimum level, approximately 280 euros a month after tax.<sup>1</sup> Although fiercely opposed by employers' associations, neoliberal parties and media outlets, the Romanian public would support the uphill battle to strengthen a socially just Europe in a more coordinated European approach. Thus, the recent call from the European Council launched at the Social Summit in Porto, is highly relevant. This is where Romanians show more confidence in European structures than in their national institutions, as it is commonly believed that the EU can and should act where national elites have failed and provide an impetus to social reforms. A more pronounced economic and social dimension, with concrete proposals adapted to the specific features of a country like Romania, would certainly improve the popular traction of the notion of consolidating European sovereignty. All the signals are already pointing in this direction.

## SECURITY CONCERNS WEIGH HEAVY ON THE AGENDA

When asked what the biggest obstacle to European sovereignty is, 36 per cent of Romanians indicate »Pressure from a number of foreign countries who have no interest in the emergence of a strong Europe«. Coming after a long period of submission to the Soviet Union, it is very likely that the respondents are concerned primarily with Russia's role in the region. This is consistent with discussions in national fora.

The annexation of Crimea and the de facto partition of Ukraine only aggravated the feeling of distrust and insecurity, which for Romania came on top of Russia's perceived meddling in the breakaway province of Transnistria in the neighbouring Republic of Moldova. The menacing presence of Russia in the region was the reason Romania sought NATO membership early in the post-communist transition. It is also the

reason why Romania attaches capital importance to its special relationship with the United States. If European sovereignty and/or strategic autonomy are defined as a departure from the security umbrella of the United States, Romanian citizens and governing elites could be faced with an impossible choice. Any proposals in this direction would be met with fierce opposition in Bucharest.

A separate topic of dispute would be the recent initiatives at EU level to consolidate the European defence industry, as well as related research and development infrastructure, an area in which Romania has a special interest. To the point that these efforts are perceived as not duplicating similar planning from NATO or not introducing unnecessary additional competition (and tensions) with US defence firms, Romania will support a common European approach that will boost collective defence capabilities and would make European deterrence more credible. However, Bucharest remains sceptical about the possibility of harmonizing different competing economic interests in the defence industry at European level, especially those of the larger EU countries such as France or Germany.

The country's NATO membership is perceived not only as providing security and a geopolitical anchor, but also as a validation of Romania's efforts to be part of the Western world, as well as a »badge of honour« for Romania's contribution to regional stability. For years Romanian foreign policy elites have tried to draw more attention to the security situation in the Black Sea region in European security discussions. Current foreign policy initiatives from Bucharest are geared towards establishing Romania's leading role in NATO's – and to a lesser extent the EU's – forward presence at the Black Sea. The region should be given more consideration not only because of Russia's aggressive stance, but also because it connects East European shores with other regions of immediate strategic importance for Europe's security and economy, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the Caucasus and the Greater Middle East. These perceptions play a prominent role in how Romania positions itself on issues related to the EU's external relations with third countries, such as Turkey, with whom it might prefer to engage bilaterally or through the strong NATO relationship than through EU institutions.

## (POST-)PANDEMIC OUTCOMES

It is difficult to assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on perceptions of sovereignty in the absence of a longitudinal study. However, it is fair to consider it a major intervening factor for Romanian society.

First, many Romanians, mainly working abroad in Europe, have been directly affected by the initial measures taken in the face of a rapidly spreading pandemic. The European governments imposed restrictions on mobility and travel and, in many cases, various forms of lockdown. Mobility within EU countries, previously taken for granted, became difficult, if not impossible. Ironically, because of the pandemic, states became sovereign *again*, drawing hard borders and limiting movement. In the first phases of the pandemic, European countries seemed to have to protect themselves against each other.

<sup>1</sup> Guga, Stefan: Salariul minim si traiul decent. De la mituri la oportunități (The minimum wage and decent minimum living standards. From myths to opportunities): Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung România, București: April 2021. Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/17786.pdf>



Second, as a result of the crisis the world and the continent saw the emergence of a harsh race for treatment, for medical equipment and supplies, and for vaccines. The initial European response was individualistic and uncoordinated. After the initial shock, the EU institutions responded, providing emergency logistical and financial support. This coordinated action at EU level was perceived very positively in Romania, as the national authorities seemed especially ill-prepared to face the crisis alone. Then, when the cooperation was further enhanced by the creation of the Resilience and Recovery Facility designed to help the member states to mitigate the social and economic effects of the pandemic, the news was received in Bucharest with great relief and appreciation. Later on, the EU coordination ensured that Romania, along with the other member states, had access to sufficient quantities of the existing vaccines.

Romania's own response to the pandemic was slow, for political reasons, as the governing party sought to organize early elections. The risks became clear when Italy and Spain, two countries hosting large Romanian diaspora communities, went early into crisis and lockdown. Long queues formed at the borders, with hundreds of thousands of Romanians returning home. The response of the medical sector was effective, but immediately the results of neoliberal cuts from past decades became clear. The country had significant shortages of staff due to insufficient pay and sustained migration, and hospital infrastructure was severely underprepared for a pandemic. The lockdown imposed in early 2020 in order to avoid overstretching medical infrastructure proved to have very severe and unequal effects. Large parts of the population were left without any kind of support. The assistance from the EU was welcome, but insufficient in the face of such major systemic failures. Against this background, new right-wing populist forces tried to capitalise on the crisis and even succeeded in entering Parliament following the December 2020 elections. This development is unprecedented since the failure of the far-right Greater Romania Party to enter Parliament in 2008.

The efforts and coordination at European level have so far helped the country through the crisis, but many Romanian voices have started to ask why not only Romania, but other European countries as well, including the EU institutions, were so ill-prepared for it? The public has started to ask why the public health sector has been under continuous pressure to cut costs and reduce coverage? Why has Europe lost its industrial capacity to produce medical equipment? Why are vaccine creation and production private and profit-oriented and not a public effort? All these concerns are directly related to the nuts and bolts of sovereignty, both national and European. The Romanian respondents to the survey pointed in this direction more markedly than others. When asked what the elements of European sovereignty are, 75 per cent indicated »safeguards on European production in such strategic areas as food and health« (compared with 65 per cent on average).

## MORE SPACE FOR PROGRESSIVE ANSWERS

The answers are consistent with general calls – in Romania's case more so from civil society rather than from the political

parties themselves – to bring the »state« and the »public« back in, as the pandemic has highlighted the systemic failures of welfare retrenchment, privatization of public services and social dumping under globalization. It might also prove to be a vindication of progressive and left-wing voices in Europe that have, to date unsuccessfully, defended the welfare state and the public sector against vicious attacks from neoliberal and business elites. But if this is not followed by political mobilization and some degree of electoral success, the pandemic will prove once again an opportunity for predatory elites, not deserving citizens. This direction has a special significance for Romania and for the Central and Eastern European periphery in general.

After decades of brutal economic restructuring and neoliberal experimentation, the pandemic presents an opportunity for a re-evaluation and possibly a change of trajectory. But this is just one possible scenario. Social democratic forces first have to convince themselves to roll back the destruction of health and social protection systems, and newer groups and organizations must find a voice and a constituency for their call.

## CONCLUSIONS

The overall state of Romanian public opinion is one of enthusiasm for both Europe and sovereignty, even though to date the term »European sovereignty« itself has been absent from the public debate. More difficult to trace is Romanians' underlying preference for a stronger and more independent EU. One important reason for this is the need to disentangle the Western geopolitical complex referred to as »the West«, within the framework of which integration in NATO and in the EU overlap. This is one of the main challenges in Romania and the region, namely, defining a European sovereignty distinct from a US-led NATO.

Having noted that, the intensity of pro-national sovereignty is significant. It taps into historical traumas and narratives that could seriously undermine adherence to the European project. More specifically, perceptions of sovereignty are dominated by economic and security fears, each involving trade-offs and tensions between the need for protection and unhappiness with Romania's perceived subordinate status.

How can the tension between wanting more national and more European sovereignty be resolved? First, the term »strategic autonomy« seems more appropriate, conjuring up positive attitudes for more respondents (+4 %) in Romania than in the case of European sovereignty. That implies that sovereignty would be left to the member (nation) states. Another strategy would be to maintain both terms, but to develop them as complementary and even indispensable to one another. For example, national economic prosperity and European sovereignty can be linked, as well as the apparent lack of clout of individual countries that a stronger EU could compensate. In the case of Romania, the desire to safeguard production in such strategic domains as food and health yields a notion of a *national-European sovereignty continuum* set on a developmental path.

For Romanians, after centuries of seeking independence, national sovereignty is a value in itself. Not so European sovereignty, which for the time being is perceived as something instrumental. For a peripheral and – by European standards – still underdeveloped country, European sovereignty could be brought to the foreground more readily if it leads to more prosperity, safety, equality and public capacity to act for the common good.

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