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ROMANIA, THE EUROPEAN UNION AND RUSSIA

Ion MUSCHEI*

Abstract: *Throughout history, international relationships have always witnessed the forming of alliances, bilateral agreements, mutual treaties, conventions, partnerships or founding organizations. All these agreements have lasted as long as all the actors involved have shared a common interest, but during conflictual periods they have been reduced to simple sheets of paper. Certainly, the very same states have, again and again, been both ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ because in international relations “nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests.”¹ Thus, in a world of growing interdependence and continuous change, globalization will not turn this world into a flat one, nor will it bring history to an end. On the contrary, it will generate new threats and will make differences more obvious and more striking. Moreover, the events that have taken place during the last few years clearly point this out. Starting with the 2013 Summit in Vilnius, the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, in particular, have brought about major direct changes in Eastern Europe and indirect ones in Bruxelles, culminating in territorial changes in the immediate proximity of Romania. Taking into account both its significant geopolitical and geostrategic location and its membership to the European Union, Romania finds itself, as always, at a crossroads. In this context, the present paper aims at determining the role the European Union plays in Romania’s relationship with Russia.*

Keywords: European Union; Eastern Partnership; European Neighbourhood Policy; globalization

JEL Classification: F51; R58; F68

Introduction

The relationship between Romania and Russia is defined by uniqueness, a feature that can be inferred from the way in which relations have fluctuated in time. One could say that they have been closer to abnormal rather than normal. A plain analysis of the geopolitical and geostrategic features shows that the two countries should have a peaceful relationship based on friendship and collaboration, especially since both of them have access to the shores of the Black Sea. History, however, proves the contrary, clearly showing that this relationship has always been antipodal. Romania and Russia have never had stable relations, either in the long or in the short term, and, whereas they were able to be good friends at times, they have been enemies most of the times. To prove this, I will only mention two examples that support my point of view.

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¹ The statement belongs to Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston, also known as Lord Palmerston, former British Prime Minister, 1855-1858 and 1859-1865, who claimed that his country had “no eternal friends and allies, only perpetual interests.”



The two countries worked in cooperation with one another for the first time between 1877-1878 during the Russo-Turkish War, which also led to Romania obtaining its independence from the Ottoman Empire, after centuries of Ottoman domination. This relationship was based on an alliance formed between the Russian Empire and the Romanian United Principalities and agreed upon through a treaty signed on the 4th of April 1877, in Bucharest. According to the treaty, the Romanian Principalities allowed Russian troops to cross their territories while the Russian Empire guaranteed to defend and maintain Romania's territorial integrity. At that time, Romania was a small state with high nationalistic ambitions, one which could not break from under the Ottoman domination on its own. To the victory won by the Russian Empire, Romania contributed with 125,000 soldiers, 12,300 horses and 190 cannons, an arsenal which could be considered quite significant for that period. At the end of the war, Russia not only acknowledged Romania's independence, but also signed over the Dobrogea region (in the south-east), the Danube Delta, including Constanta Harbor, and the Snake Island.

There followed a 4-decade period of neutral nature in the Russo-Romanian relations, except for the First World War, when Romania joined forces with the Entente, thus being an ally of the Russian Empire as well, until the latter withdrew in 1917 due to the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. A remarkable aspect of these relations during the interwar years was the special rapport between probably the greatest diplomats that the two states had, both of them former foreign ministers. One was Nicolae Titulescu, the Romanian diplomat who used to be the president of the League of Nations and the other one was Maxim Litvinov, the most influential Russian diplomat, who had a crucial contribution to the Soviet Union getting out of the post-revolutionary isolation.

Once the two foreign ministers, Ribbentrop and Molotov, signed the Non-aggression pact on the 23rd of August 1939, the relationship between Romania and the Soviet Union came to a deadlock. Starting that moment, the relations between the two states became detrimental for Romania, which became a subjugated state, while Russia turned into an aggressor state. Taking advantage of this treaty, the latter made territorial claims and presented Romania with an ultimatum to return Basarabia and the northern part of Bucovina, territories which, as a matter of fact, had always belonged to Romania. At first, Romania invited the Russian government to amiable consultations on all the issues, aimed at reaching a mutual agreement. However, this reply was interpreted without any spirit of friendship or intention of cooperation. Furthermore, it produced such discontent that V. Molotov transmitted a new ultimatum to the Romanian government demanding it to evacuate Basarabia and Northern Bucovina within no more than 4 days. Therefore, "the Romanian government, in order to avoid any severe consequences that resorting to force and aggression in this part of Europe might lead

to sees itself compelled to accept the evacuation terms stipulated in the Soviet response” (Scurtu, 2012, p. 11). The year 1940 may be actually considered the darkest in the history of modern Romania since, in addition to giving up Basarabia and Northern Bucovina, Romania also had to give up the Quadrilateral to Bulgaria and the Northeastern part of Transylvania to Hungary.

After the end of the Second World War, Romania became part of the sphere of influence of USSR. In Bucharest, a communist regime was forcefully set up and it was faithful to the politics of the Soviet Union. As a consequence, during post-war years, the Russo-Romanian relations were defined by the subordination of the Romanian communist regime to USSR. Therefore, one cannot truly speak of bilateral or friendly relations between Romanians and Russians in that period, even though the leaders of the two states frequently visited each other. Moreover, according to the Treaty of Versailles, Romania was considered a defeated state so it had to pay Russia material damage amounting to 300,000,000 USD, which was a sum far from insignificant and quite high for those times.

Afterwards, the situation changes dramatically due to two events that occurred in both states. On the one hand, there was the Romanian Revolution in 1989 which demolished the communist regime and, on the other, the fall, in 1991, of the “Evil Empire”, as Ronald Reagan called the USSR, in 1983. These two major events led to crucial changes within the two countries and therefore in their relations to one another, as well. Romania chose to move its politics towards the West, aiming at becoming part of the European Union and to integrate in the political-military structure of NATO. Whereas the Russian Federation, the rightful successor of the USSR, confronted with a large series of severe internal problems, it has oriented its politics towards economic rehabilitation and development.

Nowadays, the Russo-Romanian relations have reached a new stage with the signing of the basic Political Treaty in 2003, concerning the relations of friendship and cooperation between Romania and the Russian Federation, as well as several other collaboration agreements, shortly followed by the establishment and enforcement of the dialogue at high ranks – head of states, government, foreign affairs ministers and parliament leaders. The novelty is brought by the role that Romania was given after the events that took place in these two countries, especially in the last ten years. At present, the Russo-Romanian relationship is more complex, vaster and more ambiguous at the same time. Romania became a member of NATO in 2004 and a full member of the European Union in 2007. Meanwhile, Russia’s evolution was and still is defined by the Kremlin leader that is Vladimir Putin.

Taking all these into consideration, the Russo-Romanian relations have entered a new dimension and it is, therefore, intriguing to monitor and analyse whether Romania's membership to the European Union and NATO has any influence on these relations and to what extent, in particular. Is Romania, as member state of the European Union, an object or a subject in the Russo-Romanian relations? What can Romania do? What can the European Union do?

1. Relationship between Romania, as a EU member state, and Russia.

When Romania became a full member of the European Union on the 1st of January 2007, it adhered to the largest economic market in the world and to an international organization with a *sui generis* structure. This organization has, at present, 28 member states and its frontiers are so large that they were inconceivable to the founders at the time of its creation. Consequently, the European Union became Russia's neighbour in 2004, through the integration of the Baltic States, and in 2007 it established its eastern frontier in the immediate proximity of Russia's sphere of influence, when Romania and Bulgaria adhered to the Union. Moreover, Romania's adhering allowed the European Union direct access to the Black Sea. The integration process was a strong desideratum for the Romanians and it was considered a great success for post-revolutionary Romania. Every Romanian citizen was enthusiastic about it and had a positive perspective. However, despite all these, the Romanian state was not able to exploit to the maximum the advantages that membership to this organization brings its members, so, during the eight years since adhering to the European Community, Romanians have started to doubt its efficiency and reason. It is very difficult to say what the situation would be today if Romania had not become a member of NATO or the European Union, but it is certain that with the integration in EU, the country gave up part of its sovereignty and aligned with the politics in Bruxelles. This means that in some fields, the European Union is the one that sets up the limits and conditions under which its members can use their competences. For example, according to the Treaty of Lisbon which came into force in 2009, EU has exclusive competence concerning a potential international agreement, if closing such an agreement is regulated by a law of EU; that is, only EU can legislate and adopt legally binding acts and the member states can only do this, if they are empowered by the EU. Therefore, Romania has no chance at directly negotiating with the Russian Federation and it is forbidden to close any bilateral agreement with Russia, if European principles and values are not taking into account. Thus, the Russo-Romanian relations must now be filtered through EU, which is not at all appreciated by Russians.

In a debate governed by the Chantam House Rule which took place in Bucharest at the Titulescu European Foundation, -which I, personally attended-, the Russian ambassador in Bucharest, Oleg Malginov, declared that Romania has only to lose from avoiding direct negotiations with the Russian Federation and therefore, Russia sees itself forced to discuss Romania's interests and problems with the EU. Thus, the ambassador cannot understand how Germany or France knows better what is good and what is not good for Romania. In this respect, it can be inferred that Romania plays mostly the role of an object, not that of a subject in its relations with Russia and that these relations are directly influenced by the Russo-European relations.

During the last decade, the Russo-European relations became one of the most analysed and media-covered subjects related to the international relations area of interest, and the reasons for this are easy to understand since Russia and EU are the most important actors on the European continent. Only one thing should help consolidate a strong strategic partnership for the two actors, that is, the commercial relations created around Russia's energy resources. Unfortunately, this is not the case and all unsuccessful attempts, together with the lack of a strong stable relationship between the two, have several causes. As far as the Russo-European relations are concerned, one can notice a few unpardonable mistakes made on both parts and which were generated by each party's ego.

In international relations, an essential factor during negotiations is the status of each participant, which can vary from superpower to continental power, regional power, or - in the worst case - area of influence, as the saying goes: "when you are not invited to the negotiation table you risk being on the menu". At present, the EU is undoubtedly an international power, especially an economic one, and this is a status that it asserts in its foreign affairs and particularly in relation to Russia. What can create problems in this context is the fact the EU still considers Russia to be a regional power, which it would not have been wrong 5 or 10 years ago. However, due to the reforms initiated by the president Vladimir Putin, Russia has been making remarkable economic progress and has been developing its military-industrial complex, which according to international relations theory can be seen as a main power component, especially of a *hard-power* type of actor. Therefore, to judge an opponent based only on an economic perspective could be misleading, thus an error. This is a problem for the EU since the European political elite does not see Russia as a global power, therefore its approach of the foreign politics in the east will not be well-balanced.

In this context, one should also take into consideration the typology of the nationalistic Russian state, especially after Vladimir Putin's calling the collapse of the Soviet Union "a major geopolitical disaster of the century." The European Politics of Proximity and the Eastern Partnership, in particular, can be given as the best example in this matter, since it was not very successful. Moreover, its most

recent revision does not even mention Russia's involvement in the eastern extremity. This is an aspect that will certainly upset Kremlin to a large extent.

Aware of its geographic location, the existing threats and the current situation in the area, Romania was one of the countries which insistently requested a revision of the politics of proximity in Eastern Europe. The new politics has relied on Romania's Proposal for the Updating of the European Politics of Proximity. Romania has launched a new concept - Security Trusts, which represents permanent political dialogue platforms aimed at approaching all types of security challenges, as well as considering the objectives of each participant. This proposal also highlights and focuses on the idea of involving "our neighbours" in the process of building and maintaining a *trust* environment between EU and its neighbours (Romania's Proposal for the Updating of the European Politics of Proximity, p. 2). Thus, Romania has once again clearly stated the need for having a more careful relationship with Russia, since all 6 member states of the Eastern Partnership, except for Armenia, border Russia. However, this issue has been once again elegantly avoided when EU revised and drafted the official act of the European Politics of Proximity.

The year 2014 brought territorial changes in the immediate proximity of Romania, just a few hundred kilometres away: against the background of the protests in Ukraine, the Russian Federation incorporated Crimea, following a referendum organized in this strategic peninsula. Both the EU and the USA considered this type of action a clear violation of international norms and laws and sanctioned Russia by imposing economic penalty measures against it. These measures were applied in several stages and whether they have met their purpose or not is a matter that deserves a more elaborated analysis in a separate article. What is important to analyse, and has been a premiere for EU, is the way in which all member states were supposed to agree with these economic sanctions in the spirit of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, based on the principle of solidarity. In order to prove the strength of its foreign policy, UE had to speak with one voice and to present a single common opinion of all 28 member states, which is quite difficult to achieve since some European economies are very much interconnected with the Russian economy. For those states whose economies are weakly connected to the Russian one it was quite easy to adopt these sanctions, but for others, whose economies rely significantly on their connections to Russia or whose geostrategic and geopolitical location imposed a *modus vivendi* with Russia, applying these measures was rather difficult. Some of the founding countries of the EU and engines of the European economy, such as Germany, found themselves in this situation. But Romania did as well, since it is located at the eastern border of EU, it is a member state of NATO and has access to the Black Sea. This context was a challenge for the strength and resilience of the EU structure and also a call for ability and diplomacy

from the states that were linked to the Russian economy in one way or another. While Germany, as a member state of EU, inspite of having agreed to the imposition of the economic sanctions, continued to work with Russia and even initiate new projects, conflicting as they were. Romania failed to maximize its strategic interests and to avoid deteriorating the Russo-Romanian relations, not to mention trying to improve them. Romania chose to rally round the EU politics and strictly observe the economic sanctions imposed on Russia. From this point of view, these relations have only to suffer, but the situation is justified by the future actions of both parties. Romania is aware that its relationship with Russia is an uneven one. The country has always been surrounded by stronger and more hostile actors and this is probably one of the reasons why it sees in EU and NATO an ally that it can count on in conflictual situations, one that it can take into consideration in its relations to other countries. However, treating Russia in the same manner one treats Bulgaria is from the very beginning a case of misconception.

One issue in the Russo-Romanian relations that is interesting to determine is the role played by the press and other mass media. The matter is highly sensitive and can have a significant impact. Romanians are unaware of many important things about Russia and their opinions of this country still rely on memories of the past. Under these conditions it is extremely simple to misinform or to create the optimal background for propaganda and those involved in the pro-Russian or pro-Western propaganda know this very well. Although Romania is also aware of this, it does not act accordingly.

A recent study made by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (October, 26th-27th, 2015), entitled “The Perception of the Russian Federation in Romania,” emphasizes the dichotomy in Romanian’s perception of Russia. When asked to evaluate the current diplomatic relations between Romania and Russia, 43% of the interviewed considered them good to very good, while 45 % of the participants said they were bad to very bad and the rest said they were neither good nor bad (IRES, 2015). Moreover, 93 % of the participants see in Russia a military power, and more than half the interviewed consider Russia a real threat to Romania’s security and that of EU and the entire world, in the current geopolitical context. While the USA and Germany are considered Romania’s best friends and allies by 24%, and respectively 20% of the respondents Russians are also perceived as aggressive people, mean, fiery, cruel, determined, cold, heavy drinkers, partying, fighters, invading, expansionist, communist or uncivilized by 10-12% of the interviewed.

This study is relevant and important because it shows that, in Romania, Russia is hardly known, and consequently is highly misunderstood. Romanians’ opinions of it rely on historical past events, on what other people say or on the western media. The influence of the pro-Russian propaganda in Romania has been frequently debated. There is, indeed, pro-Russian propaganda in Romania. Yet

Russia, like any other country, has the right to develop its own media networks, to buy media networks, to set up institutions, to create financing funds, cultural organizations, within the legal framework. Romania is still very much against Russia for the pro-Russian media actions to reach their target. The few pro-Russian sites and areas are highly marginal. Russians do not need much propaganda in Romania. The state, its institutions and especially the press are relatively weak, as latest events show that a single spark can overthrow the government. Romania's problem is not the pro-Russian propaganda, but the fragility of the Romanian institutions, the inability to ponder political, strategic and tactical issues and the lack of a good- quality press. (Ernu, 2015)

At present, Romania is short of a group of excellent experts on the relationship with Russia and this is felt and has the corresponding effects. In order to be able to negotiate with Russia, Romania needs experts who know thoroughly the Russian culture and values. A country which is smaller than its neighbours is forced to have better diplomats than an "empire" does (Malita, 2014, p. 28), because the logic of the great is based on conquests and expansion. Therefore, in order to have good relations with the Russians, Romania needs a body of professional experts, like the USA, Poland or China have. In Romania, as far as the relationship with Russia is concerned, the security services, the army and the foreign affairs departments rely solely on translations from the international press and on hiring Russian translators from the Republic of Moldavia. They do not employ people with an extensive knowledge of the area, people who know to put the information in the context, to analyse and to present the situation (Gosu, 2015).

Regarding these relations, the Romanian state's position relies on negligence and lack of seriousness. Firstly, there is no Russian TV channel, newspaper or any centre for Russian studies. Secondly, the Romanian mass media rely mainly on the mainstream Anglo-Saxon press, which in turn is predominantly anti-Russian, hence the same orientation as in Romania. Romania does not have any professional institutions or experts specialized in the relations with Russia, there are only a few doubtful reports and overnight "reinvented" experts who wrap in a "civilized" manner old stereotypes and clichés while being paid from Romanian or European funds. (Ernu, 2015) So, the anti-Russian opinion and the derangement generalized by the Romanian press make any form of judgement and rational analysis of the situation practically impossible, which should be a matter of great concern. It is not enough to be a member state of NATO or of the European Community and always use this status as justification, it is not enough to comply with the politics set up in Bruxelles; Romania needs to take serious actions in order to build a stable and secure relationship with its neighbours.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is highly evident that Romania, as a member state of EU, plays the role of an object and not that of a subject in its bilateral relations with Russia, which are strongly influenced by its membership to the EU. Romania, as a country which shares access to the Black Sea and has high interests in the Republic of Moldova, same as Russia, but also lies at the borders of EU, needs to establish a *modus vivendi* with the Russian Federation, despite being under pressure sometimes if EU considers a different course of action.

Romania should take into consideration the fact that Russia has an advantage over the European Community. According to the norms of international law, Russia is a state, while EU is an organization. Consequently, this allows Russia to enjoy a more secure stability, especially now that the European structure is dealing with the biggest problems it has ever had from its creation. When speaking of geopolitics and the Russo-Romanian relations, it is necessary to understand that the solutions to all the challenges that Romania faces, do not lie in Bruxelles, Washington, Berlin, Moscow or London, just as Romania's problems are not caused by Moscow or Bruxelles. Let us not forget that, in the same context, it is advisable to look at the map and realize which is closer, Washington or Moscow. We do not choose our neighbours and that is why we need to be ready to discuss, negotiate and even argue, if that is the case; the fundamental question still remains: is Romania able to do this?

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