



Weekly Briefing

**Romania external relations briefing:
A new leadership at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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A new leadership at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

A new minister took the lead of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after the switch of functions agreed by the members of the governing coalition at the beginning of June. Luminița Odobescu built her diplomatic career in dealing with Romania's EU accession process and managing Romania's first presidency of the EU Council. The benchmarks of the foreign policy stay the same, Romania showing strong support for the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in their EU accession path. Romania's adhesion to the Schengen area remains a hot issue which might be solved at meeting of the Council of Justice and Internal Affairs in October.

Introduction

The agreement of the parties in the coalition to switch the ministers at the beginning of June also affected the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a result, Bogdan Aurescu, the former minister, was replaced by Luminița Odobescu, a diplomat strongly involved in Romania's collaboration with the EU. Despite the change in ministers, Romania's foreign policy continues to be guided by the three fundamental principles: strengthening and consolidating Romania's role within the EU and NATO, deepening the Strategic Partnership with the USA and promoting and respecting democratic principles, the rule of law, values and order international¹. Romania also showed support for the recalibration of EU relations with China, idea which was presented at the European Council meeting² at the end of June by the President Klaus Iohannis.

Brief details about the new minister

Luminița Odobescu has been a presidential adviser in the European Affairs department since November 2021 and has a doctorate in international economic relations since 2003. Luminița Odobescu is a career diplomat and was the Permanent Representative of Romania to the EU during September 2015 and November 2021³. From this position, she participated

¹ ***, 2023. *Luminița Odobescu, ministrul propus la Externe: Obiectivul prioritar este aderarea României la Schengen până la finalul anului*, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/luminita-odobescu-ministrul-propus-la-externe-obiectivul-prioritar-este-aderarea-romaniei-la-schengen-pana-la-finalul-anului-2386059> (accessed 17 July 2023).

² Romanian Presidency, 2023. *Participarea Președintelui României, Klaus Iohannis, la reuniunea Consiliului European*, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/participarea-presedintelui-romaniei-klaus-iohannis-la-reuniunea-consiliului-european1688128432> (accessed 19 July 2023).

³ Rubica, A., 2023. *Cine este Luminița Odobescu, propusă ministru de Externe. Are 5 case și este diplomat de carieră*, <https://adevarul.ro/politica/cine-este-luminita-odobescu-propusa-ministru-de-2275648.html> (accessed 18 July 2023).

in the meetings of the Committee of Permanent Representatives, which allows for an in-depth discussion of the topics furtherly debated in the European Council. She had an important contribution in managing both Romania's EU accession process and Romania's first presidency of the EU Council which took place in the first semester of 2019. As a result of her activity, she was she was decorated in 2007 with the "Diplomatic Merit" for her contribution to Romania's EU accession process.

Given her experience, it is expected to be versed in the EU main priorities and interests and especially in the meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council, the format which addresses issues related to the EU's political relationship with the rest of the world. Also, experts count on her ability to understand in detail even other issues that are not related to foreign policy, especially economic themes⁴.

The priorities of the external agenda

Luminița Odobescu inherits one of the hot issues of Romania's foreign policy: the adhesion to the Schengen area. According to the new minister, the topic is among Romania's priorities. All needs involved institutions must join their efforts to prove that Romania "is a security provider that responsibly ensures the protection of its external borders"⁵. So far, Romania started working closely with all partners to reach a positive decision for its accession to the Schengen area, showing the contribution to the protection of the Union's external border. For example, a pilot project in cooperation with the European Commission was launched to demonstrate the good practices and the way in which Romania manages the external border of the EU. Moreover, Romania implemented a pilot project on the border with Serbia⁶. The registration procedures at the border with Serbia applied in this pilot project can serve as a model for improving these processes at European level. In addition, the Minister of the Internal Affairs has agreed a concrete action plan with the counterparts in Austria, hoping to provide enough arguments in the dialogue with the Austrian side for identify a solution for Romania's accession to the Schengen Area as soon as possible⁷. The extension of the Schengen Area is also among the main political objectives of the Spanish Presidency which was launched in June. Spain took a proactive and engaging approach to unlock this problem and build consensus.

⁴ Dirdala, L., 2023. Schimbare la vârful ministerului de Externe, <https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/stiri/schimbare-la-varful-ministerului-de-externe--355972.html> (accessed 18 July 2023).

⁵ Idem 1

⁶ Idem 2

⁷ Idem 1

There is the intention to open the subject again at the meeting of the Council of Justice and Internal Affairs in October 2023⁸.

Romania initiated the process of reflection on the EU's joint action for crisis preparedness and response, through the essential tool of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. The events in Ukraine, and the growing challenges generated by climate change, are arguments that make it necessary to develop a medium and long-term strategic approach to the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, increase institutional capacity at EU level, further develop European capacities of emergency preparedness and response, as well as strengthening the role of national civil protection and crisis management authorities⁹.

The support for Ukraine is meant to continue, aspect that was stated by the actual minister with the occasion of the start of the Spanish Presidency of the EU, when she highlighted the importance¹⁰ of maintaining support for Ukraine and its citizens, including for the preparation of steps aimed at the reconstruction process of Ukraine. There remains the issues of the Bastroe Canal and that of the minorities as unresolved problems between Romania and Ukraine. In the first case, the intention is to identify solutions that answer the challenges by involving other ministers, such those of the Environment and of Transport. In the second case, the intention is to provide "mirror rights" for the Romanian minority in Ukraine, just as Romania grants rights to the Ukrainian minority¹¹. For example, Romania expect a decision by Ukraine related to the recognition of the non-existence of the "Moldovan language", given that there is only the Romanian language. The minister participated in the Ukraine Recovery Conference¹², which took place in London at the end of June. In her speech, the minister emphasized the connection between the reconstruction of Ukraine and the process of accession to the European Union, reconfirming Romania's full and unwavering support for Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. She also mentioned the importance of developing physical channels for improving the connectivity of Ukraine with the EU and the neighboring member states. There is the need of a regional approach, in which the essential role of the Republic Moldova should be taken into account.

In the reunion of the European Council, President Klaus Iohannis also showed that Romania plays an active role in the reconstruction of Ukraine, one of the first steps being the

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023. *Participarea ministrului afacerilor externe Luminița Odobescu la evenimentul de lansare la București a Președinției spaniole a Consiliului UE*, <https://mae.ro/node/62303> (accessed 19 July 2023).

⁹ Idem 2

¹⁰ Idem 8

¹¹ Idem 1

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023. *Participarea ministrului afacerilor externe Luminița Odobescu la Conferința privind reconstrucția Ucrainei de la Londra*, <https://mae.ro/node/62182> (accessed 17 July 2023).

participation in the recent London Conference dedicated to this topic. Romania will assume this role “as a neighboring state that contributes to sustainable alternatives for Ukraine’s long-term trade and economic development”¹³. Also, Romania will host the Summit of the Three Seas Initiative between September 6-7, the strategic projects developed under the auspices of this initiative having the possibility to contribute to improving Ukraine’s connectivity with the EU.

The new minister also continues to support the Republic of Moldova in its path to the EU accession, by providing multidimensional assistance. In fact, Romania supports the open of the negotiations for the adhesion starting with this year, given the progresses so far¹⁴, among which the fulfilment of the recommendations formulated by the European Commission in June 2022 related to the reform efforts and progress in justice, strengthening the rule of law and fighting corruption, when the status of candidate country envisaging European integration was granted. Moreover, Luminița Odobescu’s first foreign trip since assuming the mandate of Minister of Foreign Affairs was in Chișinău, Moldova’s capital city. It was a good opportunity to debate topics regarding bilateral political dialogue, bilateral cooperation, Chișinău’s European agenda and the regional security situation¹⁵. So far, there is an intense political dialogue which allows consolidating stability and supporting the overall development of the Republic of Moldova. In addition, Romania provided so far several forms of support¹⁶:

- fuel delivery amounted to EUR 3.8 billion since March 2022;
- direct budgetary assistance of more than 10 million euros, mainly to support citizens in the context of a deep energy crisis;
- the commercial transport of natural gas through a new gas pipeline since December 2022;
- the development of transport infrastructure between the two countries and opening a new a new border crossing point;
- the development of bilateral trade, which reached a record level of over EUR 3 billion, which is equivalent to an increase of almost 50% compared to the previous year;
- organizing the fourth meeting of the Support Platform for the Republic of Moldova, together with Germany and France, in the fall of 2023;

¹³ Idem 2

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023. *Participarea ministrului afacerilor externe Luminița Odobescu la reuniunea miniștrilor afacerilor externe din statele membre ale UE*, <https://mae.ro/node/62239> (accessed 17 July 2023).

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023. *Primirea ministrului afacerilor externe Luminița Odobescu de către Președintele Republicii Moldova, Maia Sandu*, <https://mae.ro/node/62159> (accessed 17 July 2023).

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023. *Vizita oficială la Chișinău a ministrului afacerilor externe Luminița Odobescu* <https://mae.ro/node/62169> (accessed 17 July 2023).

- discussions for the transfer of expertise in the field of European affairs, with the participation of specialists from ministries and other governmental institutions from Bucharest, and providing training courses in the perspective of accession negotiations, courses provided by Romania and dedicated to public administration experts from the Republic of Moldova.

Conclusion

The change in ministers is not supposed to have a high effect on the Romania's foreign policy, given that this is conducted based on the collaboration between the minister and the President, with the involvement of the parties' leadership, which support its direction. However, the new minister is expected to show a rigorous attitude towards fulfilling the main aims of the external policy and to deal with the issues of Schengen adhesion and negotiate with member states for achieving a positive result for Romania.