



Weekly Briefing

Romania external relations briefing:
Romanian-Ukrainian Relations, a Strategic Outlook
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Romanian-Ukrainian Relations, a Strategic Outlook

Introduction

The beginning of October 2023 has already involved a synchronization of the efforts at the highest possible level in advancing a thorough strategic outlook upon Romanian-Ukrainian relations. Therefore, the agendas of the President, the Prime-minister (PM) as well as that of the Minister for Foreign Affairs seemed to have been at pace with one another, at a rather brisk tempo. In order to systematically bring forward some the most important developments regarding Romania's foreign policy in recent weeks in connection to Ukraine, this brief focuses on those relevant, coordinated efforts that seek to transform the bilateral relations into a Strategic Partnership.

Latest developments. Context

To begin with, the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, participated in a series of political consultations with United States President Joe Biden as well as several other NATO, EU and G7 leaders, including Olaf Scholz, the German Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, the British PM, Georgia Meloni, the Italian PM, Fumio Kishida, the Japanese PM, Justin Trudeau, the Canadian PM, Ursula von der Leyen, EU Commission President, Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of NATO, or Charles Michel, President of the European Council¹. According to the statement released by the Romanian Presidential Administration, “the consultations are part of a series of allied and transatlantic coordination efforts, and complement previous discussions in a similar format, in the context of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. This new round of consultations took place in the context of recent developments [...] in Ukraine, including attacks on civilian infrastructure near Romania”². In line with these consultations, Romania’s position remains that of a supporter of Ukraine against Russia’s “illegal and irresponsible war and actions”, as the statement read, whilst two very important issues, in particular, have been noted: one regarding the measures taken by Romania in order to facilitate the transit of over 27 million tons of Ukrainian grain, and the other, efforts in supporting the

¹ *Participarea Președintelui României, Klaus Iohannis, la consultările politice organizate de Președintele Statelor Unite ale Americii, Joseph R. Biden Jr., cu lideri internaționali din state membre UE, Nato și G7.* <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/participarea-presedintelui-romaniei-klaus-iohannis-la-consultarile-politice-organizate-de-presedintele-statelor-unite-ale-americii-joseph-r-biden-jr-cu-lideri-internationali-din-state-membre-ue-nato-si-g7>, 03 October 2023, (accessed 13 October 2023).

² *Ibidem.*

initiative to train Ukrainian F-16 pilots in Romania³. Whilst the first issue has echoed concerns at the level of the EU over the past several months, the European Commission has “decided not to extend the restrictive measures on Ukrainian exports of grain and other foodstuff to the EU”⁴, paving the way for a coordinated plan to “improve logistical conditions of transit [...] with the aim of doubling the transit capacity”⁵.

Given the latest developments in Ukraine, the President of Romania called on Russia, during the consultations, according to the National News Agency of Romania, to “stop the attacks on the Ukrainian ports on the Danube, in the immediate vicinity of Romania”, considering the attacks war crimes aimed at destroying “grain warehouses and critical supply infrastructure, [thus] affecting transport on the Danube”⁶. Additionally, the President of Romania has pointed out a series of lines of action that had been undertaken in order to strengthen surveillance on the Danube and in the Black Sea region, thanking NATO leaders for the help provided in this sense⁷. In the meantime, the President of Romania asked allies to intensify their efforts in order to ensure the deterrence and the defense positioning of NATO on the Eastern Flank and the Black Sea Region “more efficiently”, emphasizing the need for “increased capabilities [that] are needed for the detection and interception of drones as well as for a stronger air defense”, in accordance with the decisions of the NATO 2023 Vilnius Summit⁸.

In congruence with the President’s agenda, Foreign Minister Luminița Odobescu travelled to Kyiv exactly one day before the consultations held with US President Joe Biden and other NATO, EU, and G7 leaders. According to one of the two official press reports, released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Minister Luminița Odobescu participated at the informal meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of EU Member States, respectively the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), citing that the idea of organizing a FAC meeting “in a third country” as Romania’s “idea [...] initially launched... as early as the beginning of 2022”⁹. Associated Press reported, for example, that the FAC meeting, “though

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ EU NeighboursEast, *EU to lift restrictive measures on Ukrainian exports of grains and other foodstuff*, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/eu-to-lift-restrictive-measures-on-ukrainian-exports-of-grain-and-other-foodstuff/>, 18 September 2023, (accessed 13 October 2023).

⁵ *Participarea Președintelui României, Klaus Iohannis, la consultările politice organizate de Președintele Statelor Unite ale Americii, Joseph R. Biden Jr., cu lideri internaționali din state membre UE, Nato și G7, op. cit.*

⁶ Agerpres, *Iohannis – consultări în format restrâns cu lideri aliați; a vorbit despre atacurile Rusiei asupra porturilor ucrainene de la Dunăre*, 03 October 2023, (accessed 14 October 2023).

⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, *Participarea ministrului afacerilor externe, Luminița Odobescu, la reuniunea informală a miniștrilor afacerilor externe din statele membre UE*, <https://www.mae.ro/node/63015>, 02 October 2023, (accessed 14 October 2023).

largely symbolic”, had the purpose of displaying a “clear commitment” – this time citing Josep Borrell, EU’s top diplomat, – for Ukraine¹⁰. Moreover, Le Monde reported on the FAC meeting in Kyiv as “historic”, although it noted that “foreign ministers of Hungary, Poland and Latvia did not attend...”¹¹

According to the first official statement¹², during the FAC meeting, Volodymyr Zelenskyy delivered a speech, whilst EU Foreign Affairs Ministers exchanged views with Denis Shmyhal, Ukrainian PM. Thus, the FAC meeting agenda included discussions regarding the situation and its evolution in Ukraine as a result of Russia’s aggression, “the multidimensional and long-term support of the EU and its Member States for security in Ukraine as well as the diplomatic efforts to support the Peace Plan proposed by the President of Ukraine...” In this regard, Minister Odobescu highlighted Romania’s position in regards to the current situation in Ukraine, praising “the strong political message”¹³ which reconfirms “the commitment of the EU, the unity and solidarity of its Member States towards Ukraine”. She also “highlighted the need to accelerate efforts at the European level to ensure the flexibility and predictability of the EU’s military support for Ukraine, including through the creation of a military fund dedicated to Ukraine within the European Peace Facility. In the context of Romania’s joining the G7 Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine, on the occasion of the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius, she expressed Romania’s openness to continue discussions on long-term support for Ukraine’s security”. Nonetheless, she referred to “the continuation of Russia’s attacks on civilian infrastructure in Ukraine”, in the immediate vicinity of Romania, which “generates security risks” for Romania as well, therefore “emphasizing the need for a long-term strategic regional approach, in which the Republic of Moldova is also included”.

Discussions on the sidelines of the FAC meeting in Kyiv included issues pertaining to “Ukraine’s European course” and some diplomatic actions carried out on the occasion of the high-level week at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly. In this regard, the statement of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlights the fact that Minister Odobescu “expressed support for the adoption, by the end of the year, of the decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova and welcomed the progress made in

¹⁰ Associated Press, *Europe Union’s top diplomat dismisses concern about bloc’s long-term support for Ukraine*, 02 October 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-russia-war-kyiv-eu-congress-aid-9fe7150d40e1944ec3c08b04b99df060>, (accessed 14 October 2023).

¹¹ Le Monde, *EU convenes “historic meeting” of foreign minister in Kyiv*, 02 October 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/10/02/eu-convenes-historic-meeting-of-foreign-ministers-in-kyiv_6142911_4.html, (accessed 14 October 2023).

¹² See *Participarea ministrului afacerilor externe, Luminița Odobescu, la reuniunea informală a miniștrilor afacerilor externe din statele membre UE*, op. cit.

¹³ Also see Agerpres, *Luminița odobescu – la Kiev, la reuniunea informală a miniștrilor de Externe din UE*, <https://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2023/10/02/luminita-odobescu-la-kiev-la-reuniunea-informala-a-ministrilor-de-externe-din-ue--1178850>, 02 October 2023, (accessed 15 October 2023).

Ukraine’s implementation of the recommendations” advanced by the European Commission. Furthermore, the FAC meeting in Kyiv “also provided the occasion for the staged evaluation of the diplomatic actions carried out, on the occasion of the high-level week of the 78th session of the UN General Assembly, by the member states and [the] European institutions in support of the Ukrainian cause, and the implementation of the *Formula of Peace* proposed by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy”. As a result, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs discussed Romania’s diplomatic efforts within those bilateral meetings held on the sidelines of the 78th UN General Assembly, addressing “the need for support for Ukraine and the global consequences of the war”, with an emphasis on Romania’s contribution to food security. In this context, she “reiterated [Romania’s] support for *the Peace Formula* proposed by President Zelenskyy, highlighted the need to continue efforts based on the results of the meetings in Saudi Arabia” (Jeddah, 05 August 2023) and “the discussions on the sidelines of the 78th UN General Assembly”.

Whilst in Kyiv, Minister Odobescu discussed, on the sidelines of the FAC meeting¹⁴, with Olha Stefanishyna, Ukrainian Deputy PM for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. According to the translation of the official press statement, “the two officials had an extensive exchange” on multilateral and bilateral topics, agreeing “to continue joint efforts to further deepen and boost the sectoral collaboration between the two states”. Thus, the “importance of the training courses organized by the Romanian side for senior Ukrainian civil servants in Uzhhorod was highlighted”. In addition to this, Minister Odobescu “reconfirmed Romania’s consistent support for a decision to open accession negotiations to the EU with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova until the end of 2023”, welcoming those “efforts made by the Ukrainian authorities in the implementation of reforms necessary for joining the EU, in the particularly difficult context generated by the war of aggression launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”. In line with these, Romanian Minister Odobescu also emphasized “the importance of the full implementation of the recommendations of the Venice Commission” within the legislation on the protection of the rights of citizens belonging to national minorities in Ukraine, reiterating the Romanian request according to which Ukrainian authorities recognize the non-existence of the so-called “Moldovan language”. On the Ukrainian side, Deputy PM Stefanishyna presented the legislative proposals in preparation for the implementation of reforms necessary for the opening of accession negotiations to the EU, expressing “confidence

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, *Întrevederea ministrului afacerilor externe Luminița Odobescu cu vice-prim-ministrul pentru integrare europeană și euro-atlantică a Ucrainei, Olha Stefanishyna, în marja reuniunii informale a Consiliului Afaceri Externe (CAE) al UE de la Kiev, 02 October 2023*, <https://www.mae.ro/node/63021>, (accessed 15 October 2023).

that the Ukrainian authorities will succeed in completing the reforms, in compliance with all the recommendations of international bodies” in the upcoming period.

Building a Romanian-Ukrainian Strategic Partnership

Paving the way for a Strategic Romanian-Ukrainian Partnership, Volodymyr Zelenskyy paid an official visit to Bucharest. The visit has attracted a lot of media attention (at least) in Romania, generating much debate as a matter of fact. In the Joint Statement released by the Romanian Presidential Administration, the first and foremost point reads that both sides “underlined that they share the vision of relations between Romania and Ukraine as a Strategic Partnership based on the principles of good neighborliness, shared democratic values and respect for international law [...] decided to build a Strategic Partnership between Ukraine and Romania, and asked their teams to begin working on this, without delay”¹⁵. This has been probably the most successful objective achieved during Zelenskyy’s official visit to Romania¹⁶. However, issues regarding the Romanian minority in Ukraine and Zelenskyy’s response to journalists in this direction have disappointed some media outlets as well as part of the general public¹⁷, whilst many raised questions as to why the Ukrainian President “refused” to deliver a speech in the Parliament of Romania. Zelenskyy reassured journalists and deputies that, “next time” he will be delivering the speech in the Parliament, given that security issues had been raised during his visit to Romania. In reality, Romanian authorities sought to avoid any controversies due to the extremists in the Parliament that had threatened Zelenskyy indeed if he would deliver the speech¹⁸.

In spite of this, Romanian-Ukrainian relations are now transitioning a period never seen before, being perhaps at their all-time peak, a context which also highlights the more important role Romania is playing in Central and Eastern Europe. For example, beyond elevating the bilateral relations to a strategic level, the Joint Statement of the two Presidents notes, among many other bilateral, regional and international matters, a resolution to the following three very

¹⁵ *Declarația Comună a Președintelui României Klaus Iohannis și a Președintelui Ucrainei Volodîmîr Zelenski*, 10 October 2023, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/joint-statement-by-the-president-of-romania-klaus-iohannis-and-the-president-of-ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskyy>, (accessed 15 October 2023).

¹⁶ *Primirea de către Președintele României, Klaus Iohannis, a Președintelui Ucrainei, Volodîmîr Zelenski*, 09 October 2023, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/primirea-de-catre-presedintele-romaniei-klaus-iohannis-a-presedintelui-ucrainei-volodimir-zelenski>, (accessed 15 October 2023).

¹⁷ For context, see Clarice Dinu, Hotnews.ro, *Iohannis a vorbit cu Zelenski despre legea minorităților care a stârnit indignare la București. Promisiunea președintelui Ucrainei*, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26002894-iohannis-vorbit-zelenski-despre-legea-minoritatilor-care-starnit-indignare-bucuresti-promisiunea-presedintelui-ucrainei.htm>, 04 January 2023, (accessed 15 October 2023).

¹⁸ See Andreea Pora, Europa Liberă România, *Victoria rusofililor și slăbiciunea instituțiilor. Discursul lui Zelenski din Parlament, anulat*, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/rusofili-institutii-zelenski-discurs-parlament/32631697.html>, 11 October 2023, (accessed 15 October 2023).

important issues which have dominated the bilateral agenda for the past decades, since the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992:

1. “reaffirmed mutual determination to strengthen practical cooperation between Romania and Ukraine in all spheres of mutual interest. The Presidents emphasized that the first Joint session of the Government of Romania and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, in October 2023, in Kyiv, should make a new impetus in fostering such cooperation”;
2. “noted the importance of effective cooperation aimed at ensuring the rights of the persons belonging to the Ukrainian national minority in Romania, and of the persons belonging to the Romanian national minority in Ukraine, including by developing the bilateral legal framework, based on the principle of equivalent level of protection of the rights of persons belonging to the Romanian minority in Ukraine and the persons belonging to the Ukrainian minority in Romania, taking into account international obligations and standards”;
3. “tasked the Governments to resolve, without delay, the issue of the artificial distinction between the Romanian and ‘Moldovan’ languages, with due regard to all legal aspects”,¹⁹

After discussions with the President of Romania, Zelenskyy met, at the Parliament of Romania, with the Presidents of the two Chambers – the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. Journalists reported that the President of the Senate had reassured Zelenskyy of Romania’s continuous support for Ukraine, stating that “Romania has been with Ukraine since the first day of the war and will continue to be so, [for] as long as it takes”²⁰. Zelenskyy also met with the Romanian PM Marcel Ciolacu, the latter announcing, after the meeting, that “he requested the President of Ukraine that the Ukrainian authorities recognize, as soon as possible, the non-existence of the so-called ‘Moldovan language’”²¹. Nonetheless, the Ukrainian President, according to journalist Andreea Ofițeru, gave interviews to four national televisions whilst visiting Romania, and talked about the “Moldovan language”, stating “Honestly, if I can answer

¹⁹ *Declarația Comună a Președintelui României Klaus Iohannis și a Președintelui Ucrainei Volodîmir Zelenski, op. cit.*

²⁰ Andreea Ofițeru, Radio Europa Liberă România, *Momente-cheie ale vizitei lui Volodimir Zelenski la București: întâlniri cu autoritățile și interviuri pentru televiziuni*, 11 October 2023, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/zelenski-la-bucuresti-principalele-momente/32632432.html>, (accessed 15 October 2023).

²¹ *Ibidem.*

honestly, I do not see any global problem with it. I see no problem with this. I understand. Some people would say that Moldova is Romania. For me, this issue is not urgent²².

Conclusions. Implications of the *future* (of the) Romanian-Ukrainian Strategic Partnership

Generally assessing, Romanian-Ukrainian relations have not always been at their (very) best. For example, after the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, Romania and Ukraine had taken the issue of maritime delimitation of continental shelf and exclusive economic zones to the International Court of Justice, in the first decade of the 2000s. Other issues such as minority rights (especially of Romanian ethnics in Ukraine) or the construction of the Bystroye Canal determined tensions between the two nations. As a result, the proposed bilateral Strategic Partnership is meant to reflect the intensity of cooperation and coordination, and could become for generations to come a symbol of the resistance against any future aggression, especially Russian, aimed at violating the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of countries. In this context, it is important to note that the Strategic Partnership is based on two main components. First, it is a display of solidarity against the persistent and historic threat imposed by Russia against countries in Central and Eastern Europe, aimed at discouraging any potential engagement in violent attacks on sovereign nations. Second, it could be technically considered as an extension of the Friendship Treaty signed in 1997 between Romania and Ukraine which had settled post-World War II differences over the borders and increased Romania's prospects for its NATO membership.

Nonetheless, it is imperative to argue the fact that this future Strategic Partnership could significantly contribute to Ukrainian efforts designated for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, i.e. EU accession and NATO membership. Without any doubt, it was the war in Ukraine that had triggered *a speeding* of Romanian-Ukrainian cooperation in the sense that it determined leaders on both sides to accelerate and extend the dimension of bilateral relations as well as multilateral coordination, including with other countries in the region, especially the Republic of Moldova. For Romania, certain bilateral relations are regarded either as *Strategic Partnership(s)* or fall under the category of *Special Relations*. Therefore, after the 2002 Romanian-Hungarian Strategic Partnership, the 2010 Romanian-Moldovan Strategic Partnership, Romanian-Bulgarian relations had been elevated to the level of Strategic Partnership in March 2023, being *now* the moment when Romania and Ukraine decide to build a Strategic Partnership as well.

²² *Ibid.*