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Bilateral Relations

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REBIRTH OF UKRAINIAN-ROMANIAN FRIENDSHIP: NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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This research paper aims to provide a complete analysis of Ukrainian-Romanian relations after 2004. Here, challenges that Romania and Ukraine have faced will be highlighted. Namely, their territorial dispute and the status of the Romanian minority in the Western part of Ukraine. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of the relations between the states after 2014 will be provided. In order to do so, public discourse and political statements made by the Presidents of both countries will be used. This can be considered an efficient theoretical instrument to better comprehend the relations between the states. To end with, after giving an overview of the perplexing relationship in the context of Russian aggression, we would like to outline the opportunities to rebuild trust between Ukraine and Romania that we have today.

Introduction

It is well known that Ukraine and Romania are neighbouring European states, sharing similar historical background, national transition and possessing common cultural heritage. Ideally, these two countries are supposed to have strong ties and fruitful diplomatic communication. However, exactly like two neighbours living next to each other, Ukraine and Romania are facing many challenges.

It is worth mentioning that immediately after Romanian Revolution, the relations between The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and Romania were also tense. According to Irina Angelescu, the fall of the Soviet Union brought territorial disputes to the forefront, as well as the

issue of protecting Romanian minority in the country's biggest neighbour and the condemnation of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Despite that, the credit for positive progress in bilateral relations should be given partly to the prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration. As part of the accession process, Romania had to have basic treaties with all its neighbours. As a result, in June 1997 Romania and Ukraine signed the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation. Two years later, in May 1999, President Constantinescu paid an official visit to Ukraine, which was the first official visit of a Romanian President to Ukraine.¹ It could have been a promising start in Ukrainian-Romanian relations. However, things went a different way.

From January 2005 until February 2010 the President of Ukraine was a pro-Western

¹ I. Angelescu, *New Eastern Perspectives? A Critical Analysis of Romania's Relations with Moldova, Ukraine and the Black Sea Region*, "New Perspectives", Vol.19, No.2, pp.133-134.

politician – Viktor Yushchenko. Because of the uncertain focus of the Ukrainian foreign policy, Ukraine and Romania had a *distant relationship*.


There have been many initiatives and projects regarding the cooperation of the two countries, but these projects were never conducted properly. For instance, in 2006 President Yushchenko met his counterpart President Basescu in Bucharest, in order to discuss Ukrainian- Romanian relations in the economic and political spheres, as well as forming a mixed Ukrainian – Romanian presidential commission, which aimed at solving the most challenging issues between the two states. Among other matters, two Presidents also focused on trans-border cooperation.²

The next visible step in Ukrainian-Romanian cooperation was made in 2009, when President Yushchenko held phone talks with President Basescu. This time, Ukraine and Romania had to solve the long dispute regarding the maritime delimitation in the Black Sea.

According to *UNIAN*, Ukrainian Information Agency, both leaders affirmed that Ukraine and Romania accepted the decision of the International Court of Justice on maritime delimitation of Ukrainian-Romanian border in the Black Sea, approved on February 3.³ We can conclude that it was a fruitful discussion, taking into account the fact that both parts recognized their responsibility regarding this matter.

All these steps made by both parties were a promising beginning of a new

optimistic period in Ukrainian-Romanian relations. However, everything changed in the priorities of Ukrainian-Romanian cooperation with the newly elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2010. Many political analysts agree that Yanukovich's presidential term was a damaging one for Ukrainian foreign policy and especially for relations with neighbours.



Ukraine and Romania had to solve the long dispute regarding the maritime delimitation in the Black Sea

Vladlen Makoukh and Artem Filipenko described Ukrainian – Romanian relations perfectly at that moment in the context of constructing a new foreign policy strategy. Particularly, they claim that after adopting the Law of Ukraine „On the Principles of Domestic and Foreign Policy” (July 1, 2010), which claimed Ukraine's policy of non-alignment, the issue of joining NATO was removed from Ukrainian foreign policy agenda, while cooperation on Ukraine's implementation of Euro-Atlantic integration was halted. Signing the Ukrainian-Russian agreement on prolongation of the Russian Black Sea fleet's location in the Crimea (April 21, 2010) caused a negative reaction from the Romanian side. In particular, President Traian Basescu said in October 2010 that „the fact of Russia's prolongation of agreement on basing its fleet in Sevastopol does not suit Romania”. A similar position

² President Viktor Yushchenko and his Romanian counterpart Traian Basescu discuss economic cooperation, continental shelf delimitation and construction of Danube – Black Sea Shipping Canal, “UKRINFORM”, [http://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ukrnews/363471president_viktor_yushchenko_and_his_romanian_counterpart_traian_basescu_discuss_economic_cooperation_continental_shelf_delimitation_and_construction_of_danube_black_sea_shipping_canal_76567.html access: 13 May 2016].

³ Yushchenko holds phone talks with Basescu, “UNIAN”, 6 February 2009, [<http://www.unian.info/world/188177-yushchenko-holds-phone-talks-with-basescu.html> access: 13 May 2016].

was repeatedly expressed by Romanian politicians and experts.⁴

It is a well-known fact that Viktor Yanukovich was a pro-Russian politician and his close ties with the Russian Federation caused major distancing from Romania. As stated in his profile on *BBC channel*⁵, Viktor Yanukovich's closest ties and support have always come from mainly Russian-speaking eastern and southern Ukraine. Mr. Yanukovich tried hard to shed the image of being "Moscow's man" and when he became president, he pointedly made his first foreign trip as president to Brussels, rather than to Moscow. However, with Ukraine's finances in a parlous state, he argued that free trade ties with the EU would jeopardize Ukraine's existing trade with Russia. The EU refused his demand for substantial compensation.

Taking into account a pro-Russian foreign policy distancing the country from its integration with the EU, and a halting partnership with NATO, Ukraine "has put on hold" bilateral cooperation with Romania. As a result, all the initiatives and projects developed by Viktor Yushchenko and his team regarding Ukrainian-Romanian cooperation were erased from the Ukrainian foreign policy agenda.

The next stage of Ukrainian-Romanian relations started in 2014, and this was a year of drastic changes for Ukraine. The Euromaidan or Revolution of Dignity shifted the political course of the country and the vector of its foreign policy. In 2014, Ukraine officially started to pursue NATO and EU Membership. Current events in Ukraine

have opened a window of opportunity for improving Romanian-Ukrainian relations. In this sense, our neighbouring country, Romania, can be seen as an example of the EU accession.

In terms of policy and strategy, it is worth mentioning that in 2014 preparations for the launch of one of the biggest projects aiming to improve Romanian-Ukrainian cooperation were finished. The countries started to work on a joint project entitled *The Joint Operational Program Romania-Ukraine 2014-2020*, financed by the EU⁶. This project focuses on four objectives, envisaged by European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI):

1. Support for education, research, technological development and innovation;
2. Promotion of local culture and preservation of historical heritage;
3. Improvement of accessibility to the regions, development of transport and communication networks and systems;
4. Common challenges in the field of safety and security;

The Joint Operational Program Romania-Ukraine 2014-2020 contributes to the achievement of the overall ENI objective of "progress towards an area of shared prosperity and good neighbourliness between Member states and their neighbours". As we can see, the instruments of the EU offer opportunities for further cooperation between Ukraine and Romania.

⁴ V. Makoukh, A. Filipenko, Ukraine-Romania: issues and challenges of bilateral relations, [available at http://www.umk.ro/images/documente/publicatii/Buletin222/makoukh_filipenko.pdf access: 13 May 2016].

⁵ Profile: Ukraine's ousted President Viktor Yanukovich, "BBC Europe", 28 February 2014, [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25182830>, access: 13 May 2016].

⁶ Romania Joint Operational Programme Romania – Ukraine 2014-2020, "Managing Authority Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration", [available at <http://www.ro-ua-md.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/0-Romania-Ukraine-JOP-approved.pdf> access: 13 May 2016].

Meanwhile, some drastic changes in Ukrainian internal policy were made as well. After Revolution of Dignity, Ukrainians chose a new president, a well-known pro-Western businessman, Petro Poroshenko. The newly elected President of Ukraine made a few important announcements regarding Ukrainian-Romanian relations, stressing the importance of bilateral cooperation.

Particularly, the first step was made in November 2014 when Klaus Iohannis became the President of Romania. According to the President's press service, Petro Poroshenko congratulated Klaus Iohannis with a victory during the presidential elections, and also thanked for the firm support of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. Besides, Poroshenko also said he hoped for good-neighbouring relations with Romania: "Romania was the first country, which ratified the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU, and its support of our European integration aspirations is very important," he said and invited Romanian President to visit Ukraine. For his part, Iohannis returned thanks to the Ukraine's Head of state for his congratulations and assured of backing Ukraine on its way to Europe.⁷

Very soon we saw that President's statements were put into action. On March 17 2015, Klaus Iohannis paid an official visit to Kiev where he voiced his firm support for Ukraine's getting closer to the European Union. Iohannis announced back then that he agreed with Poroshenko on two countries enhancing the visibility of Romanian

communities in Ukraine and Ukrainian communities in Romania:

*"We agreed that Romanian minority in Ukraine and Ukrainian minority in Romania should become a positive factor which has to help us in order to maintain an excellent neighbourly relationship. We would like to see a positive outcome from our collaboration in the near future. Moreover, we would like to underline that one of the most important points on Romanian-Ukrainian agenda will be the rebirth of political dialogue between our countries and Romanian support for the solution finding process in the conflict in the Eastern part of Ukraine."*⁸

It is important to mention that these statements are not on paper only. In a very short time, these declarations became a real policy. Two Presidents met on April 21, 2016 in Bucharest. During this Presidential meeting, Klaus Iohannis and Petro Poroshenko signed a protocol on the relaunch of the *Romanian-Ukrainian presidential joint committee*.

Iohannis asserted that this protocol allows taking steps to solve old files on the bilateral agenda:


*"The committee will be an instrument of imprinting the political will and the necessary impulse to solve the issues on the bilateral agenda, allowing us to fully capitalize the cooperation potential that exists between our countries. Therefore, we will be able to make steps forward to resolve some files that have been on the bilateral agenda for a long time, one of which is the Bystroe Channel."*⁹

⁷ Poroshenko hopes neighborly relations with Romania to be developed in the future, "Interfax-Ukraine", 25 November 2014, [<http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/236069.html>, access: 13 May 2016].

⁸ Iohannis, vizita in Ucraina in contextul tensiunilor cu Rusia. Romania si Germania, tratament medical pentru soldatii raniti (Iohannis, visit to Ukraine in the context of tensions with Russia. Romania and Germany, treatment for soldiers), "ProTV", 17 March 2015, [<http://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/politic/klaus-iohannis-merge-in-ucraina-in-contextul-tensiunilor-dintre-rusia-si-nato-cu-cine-se-va-intalni.html> access: 14 May 2016].

⁹ Presidents Iohannis, Poroshenko sign Protocol on Romanian-Ukrainian joint committee's relaunch, "Nineoclock", 21 April 2016, [<http://www.nineoclock.ro/presidents-iohannis-poroshenko-sign-protocol-on-romanian-ukrainian-joint-committees-relaunch/> access: 14 May 2016].

Romania's President pointed out that it is intended to intensify cooperation between the two countries both in the cultural and the educational field, and expressed hope that the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) will start to operate as soon as possible in Kiev, alongside its branch of Chernivtsi. Iohannis said that talks with his Ukrainian counterpart also focused on better enforcement of the border traffic agreement, the progress of the infrastructure projects and the opening of new border crossings. Iohannis said that such measures have a strong impact upon the life quality of the citizens of the two countries and upon the tightening of connections among them. In this respect, a fast opening of the Romanian consulate in Solotvino is very important. The Head of state also said the bilateral economic relations should be fostered.¹⁰

 ***In terms of analysing political statements, we can underline that words like cooperation, political dialogue, contribution, intensification, collaboration were used several times in both Presidents' statements. This is a clear sign of a new stage in Romanian-Ukrainian relations***

Petro Poroshenko on his side made some very important announcements as well. According to the President of Ukraine's website, Petro Poroshenko held negotiations with the President of the Chamber of Deputies of Romania Valeriu Zgonea. The parties discussed the role of the parliamentary groups of friendship of Ukraine and

Romania in enhancing and developing bilateral relations. Petro Poroshenko urged the Romanian Parliament to provide expert assistance in the harmonization of national legislation with the EU legislation in the framework of the European integration of Ukraine. The President of the Chamber of Deputies of Romania called Ukraine's path to the EU a path to the welfare of Ukrainians. He also expressed full support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine.¹¹

Another important discussion was held between President Poroshenko and the Prime Minister of Romania Dacian Cioloş during the official visit. The parties agreed to develop the opportunities related to the functioning of the free trade area between Ukraine and the EU. The President noted the importance of the experience of Romanian companies in entering the EU market and attracting foreign investments in the national economy. The parties discussed a series of bilateral issues, particularly their cooperation in agriculture, mechanical engineering and transport. Both parties noted a significant progress in the enhancement of transport connection between Ukraine and Romania. The interlocutors also urged airlines to establish direct regular flights between the capitals of the two countries. In addition, the parties discussed the importance of developing transport connection in the Danube Delta, particularly the construction of new bridges. Following the meeting, the parties agreed to accelerate the signature of documents necessary for natural gas supplies from Romania to Ukraine.¹²

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ President of Ukraine meets with President of Chamber of Deputies of Romania: Parliamentary dialogue plays important role in enhancing bilateral relations, "President of Ukraine. Official website", 21 April 2016, [http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/parlamentskij-dialog-vidigraye-vazhlivu-rol-u-zmicnenni-dvos-37018 access: 14 May 2016].

¹² Petro Poroshenko meets with Dacian Cioloş: Ukraine and Romania have great potential to develop economic cooperation, "President of Ukraine. Official website", 21 April 2016, [http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-i-rumuniya-mayut-velikij-potencial-dlya-rozvitku-ek-37016 access: 16 May 2016].

In terms of analysing political statements, we can underline that words like cooperation, political dialogue, contribution, intensification, collaboration were used several times in both Presidents' statements. This is a clear sign of a new stage in Romanian-Ukrainian relations. The context of the speeches indicates the intensification of the collaboration process between the countries.



In his opinion, Bucharest tries to counter-balance Russian influence by bringing Ukraine closer in terms of social exchange

Another challenge for bilateral relations was the annexation of the Crimea and Russian aggression in the Eastern part of Ukraine. These events were mentioned by many political analysts as a sign of the end of the "cold era" in Ukrainian-Romanian relations. As an illustration, Tomasz Dąbowski and Tadeusz Iwański in their analysis for The Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) stated the following:

"The main cause for this change is the two sides' concurrent perception of risks in the Black Sea region since Russia's annexation of the Crimea. Another impetus to this thaw is the change in the domestic political situation in both countries: the strong pro-Western course of the new authorities in Kyiv, and Klaus Iohannis's assumption of the Romanian presidency in December 2014. Although there is still a catalogue of unresolved issues, a long-time barrier of

*distrust has been broken, and this paves the way for the development of Ukrainian-Romanian cooperation."*¹³

Ukrainian Revolution and the war in the Eastern part of the country pushed forward the collaboration of its neighbours in foreign policy. In the situation of crisis, it was clear that Ukraine needs active support and strengthened cooperation with the border countries. Political analysts from both sides agreed that this situation gave the green light to the "rebirth" of Romanian-Ukrainian friendship.

As we can see, Jan Mus highlighted in his research paper the fact that Romanian approach to the Ukrainian crisis transforms into *active diplomacy*. In his opinion, Bucharest tries to counter-balance Russian influence by bringing Ukraine closer in terms of social exchange. The Ukrainian crisis and its consequences resulted in strengthening pro-European elements and anti-Russian attitude among Romanian elites. It has also had a stimulating effect on Romanian foreign policy.¹⁴

Another political analyst, Olexandra Zasmorzhuik, in her article for UNIAN stated that today the twenty-year stagnation period in the relationship between the two countries has ended. Romania joined the countries that condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine and expressed its support. The dialogue and the opinions exchange has begun. Hopefully, it is only going to develop.

¹³ T. Dąbowski, T. Iwański, Breaking through distrust in relations between Romania and Ukraine, "The Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)", 27 April 2016, [<http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-04-27/breaking-through-distrust-relations-between-romania-and-ukraine>, access: 16 May 2016].

¹⁴ J. Mus, Before the Curtain fall in the Balkans. The Ukrainian crisis from the Peripheral Perspective, 2014. Crisis in Ukraine. Perspectives, Reflections, ASLAN Publishing House: December 2015, p.215.

¹⁵ O. Zasmorzhuik, A New Friend of Ukraine, "UNIAN", 16 April 2015, [<http://www.unian.info/politics/1067966-a-new-friend-of-ukraine.html>, access: 30 May 2016].

Conclusions

Ukraine and Romania had difficulties in the past and many thought that these countries are unable to find solutions to their disputes and a common ground for further cooperation. Recent events, which took place in 2014-2015 showed a road to rediscover the potential for both countries. At this moment, Klaus Iohannis and Petro Poroshenko are very proactive in this regard; and it looks like the path of mutual distrust was left behind.

Today, it is crucial to remember and to highlight the importance of a good neighbourly partnership between the countries. Especially when we have a perfect opportunity to do so in the present context of political and economic situation. It is time to reload Ukrainian-Romanian friendship and hopefully, the good start of this collaboration

will continue to achieve new levels of trust between the two nations.

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