

THE BALKAN AREA AND ROMANIA'S NEIGHBORHOOD AS EU MEMBER STATE

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Abstract: Supporting the European and Euro-Atlantic path of the Western Balkan states is one of the major priorities of Romania's foreign policy. Romania's status as an EU and NATO member country, as well as its proximity to the Western Balkans, require a special relationship between Bucharest and the states in this region. Romania, situated in the southeastern part of Europe, plays a significant role in the Balkan region due to its historical, geographic, and geopolitical importance. With its diverse cultural heritage and strategic location, Romania serves as a bridge between Central and Southeastern Europe. Historically, Romania has been intertwined with the Balkans, sharing cultural and historical ties with neighboring countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia, and Moldova. These connections have influenced Romania's political and economic engagements in the Balkan area. Geopolitically, Romania is a member of the European Union (EU) and NATO, serving as a stable and secure partner in the region. It actively participates in regional initiatives and contributes to fostering stability and cooperation in the Balkans. Romania's support for EU enlargement in the Balkans reflects its commitment to the region's European integration. Economically, Romania's strong trade relationships and investment in the Balkans promote economic growth and development, further solidifying its role as a key player in the area. Romania's involvement in infrastructure projects and energy initiatives bolsters regional connectivity and energy security. In conclusion, Romania's historical, geographic, and geopolitical attributes make it a pivotal actor in the Balkan region, contributing to regional stability, economic growth, and European integration.

Keywords: Romania, the Balkan area, foreign policy, geopolitical, European Union.

ROMANIA AS A MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union is a complex alliance between European states, aiming to promote peace, stability and prosperity in the region, continuing to adapt and develop its institutions and policy to respond to current challenges and opportunities. The European Union developed as a result of World War II, when Europe was devastated and political leaders sought ways to prevent the recurrence of devastating armed

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conflicts. The promotion of economic cooperation was seen as a crucial first step for the stabilization of European states. Over time, the European Union has expanded, due to the accession of other member states, their number being 27, following the withdrawal of the United Kingdom on January 31, 2020. The expansion of this alliance was a truly complex process that represented the alignment with European standards and values as well as fulfillment of the accession criteria¹.

Romania's accession to the European Union took place on January 7, 2007, marking a moment of great importance in the history of our country and in the evolution of European integration. The European Union is built on the basis of three main pillars, the first is represented by the area of economic integration, operating on the principle of supranationality, the decisions being taken jointly by the European institutions, the common legislation takes precedence over the national one. The second pillar is represented by the Common Security Policy (CSP), the third being represented by the cooperation in the field of justice and Internal Affairs, which aims at the cooperation of the member states in the field of internal justice, police and judicial affairs, with the aim of ensuring a high level of security and justice throughout the European Union². By integrating into the European Union, Romania became part of a larger community, which promotes the values of democracy, the rule of law and economic prosperity in Europe, contributing to the consolidation of peace in the region³. This accession of Romania to the European Union involved both potential advantages and numerous duties that the country must fulfil in order to be a responsible member of the European community⁴. The first thing highlighted after this event is the reconsideration of Romania's role in the European geostrategic landscape. The country becoming an important node in controlling the extremities of the continent and contributing to the strength and mobility of the EU. Romania protects and promotes its national interests in accordance with the obligations and responsibilities assumed following accession. It involves the development of an integrated national system for the management of possible crises, based on a rapid reaction and with an adequate logistics network.

By participating in the activities of the European Defense Agency, Romania contributes to the development of its own defense and crisis management capacity and the strengthening of the industrial and technological bases and not only that. The

¹ Finn Laursen, *The Founding Treaties of the European Union and Their Reform*, in "Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics", 2016, Retrieved 2 June 2024, from <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-151>.

² European Commission, *Scurt istoric al relațiilor dintre România și Uniunea Europeană*, available online at <https://romania.representation.ec.europa.eu>, accessed on June, 4th, 2024.

³ Alexandra Porumbescu, *Sociological institutionalism arguments in explaining EU integration*, in "Soc. & Soc. Work Rev.", no. 2, 2018, p. 17.

⁴ Constantin Moștofleu, *Strategii de apărare și securitate la frontiera răsăriteană a NATO și Uniunea Europeană*, Bucharest, The National Defense University "Carol I" Publishing House, 2006, pp. 28–30.

reform process of the Romanian Army, the public order forces and the civil protection is redirected towards fulfilling at the same time the principles of interoperability, sustainability and rapid deployment capacity in the theaters of operations. By actively engaging in these fields, our country not only highlights its status as a responsible participant of the European Union, but also contributes to increasing security and stability in the region and strengthening the position of the European Union on the international stage⁵. The Security and Defense Policy of the European Union, CFSP, was created following the signing of the European Union Treaty and represents the continuation and development of the previous one, the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Through the PSAC, member states coordinate their efforts and consolidate resources in order to emancipate military and civilian capacity, but also the strategies through which crises are managed and armed conflicts are prevented. Through the Security and Defense Policy, the European Union has the ability to conduct both military and civilian operations, to provide support, stability and security in vulnerable regions or affected by various conflicts⁶. The Global Strategy for Foreign Security Policy serves as a key document that establishes the orientations and priorities of the European Union's external action in the long or medium term. This strategy defines the vision, values and objectives of the European Union in its external relations and manages security in the context of a constantly changing global environment with a multitude of challenges. Through it, the EU aims to intensify its role as a responsible global actor, promoting its principles and values on which it is based, such as democracy, the principles of multilateralism and human rights.

One of the objectives of the Security and Defense Policy is the establishment of a defense capacity at the European level, achieved through the contribution of the member states of the European Union, with military and civilian capabilities. Under PSAC's leadership, significant joint progress has been made in developing conceptual frameworks and launching security and protection capability development initiatives⁷. At the present time, it can be observed that the commitment that Romania has in promoting and strengthening the role that the European Union has in the field of defense and security is remarkable. Romania demonstrates that it pays special attention to security at the global and European level through its involvement in the implementation of the objectives of the European Union's Global Foreign and Security Policy Strategy and in the practical development of what the Common Security and Defense Policy means. According to the provisions of the

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 19-20.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Politica de Securitate si Apărare Comună (PSAC)*, available online at <https://www.mae.ro>, consulted on June 10th, 2024.

⁷ Nato, *NATO Handbook 50th anniversary 1998 - NATO Handbook. 50th Anniversary Edition, Manualul NATO, Ediția celei de a 50-a aniversări*, available online at <https://archives.nato.int/nato-handbook-50th-anniversary-edition>, consulted on June 10th, 2024, p. 347.

Government Decision no. 16\2017, it concerns the way in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is organized and functions, from which it is clear that it has many roles, including the coordination and especially the implementation of a common security policies of the European Union. More specifically, the Ministry of Internal Affairs participates in the realization and implementation of the common foreign and security policy of the European Union, coordinating, at the national level, Romania's participation, including in the missions carried out under the leadership of the European Union. (1) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hereinafter referred to as the MAE, is a specialized body of the central public administration subordinate to the Government, with legal personality, with headquarters in the city of Bucharest, Modrojan alley no. 14, sector 1.(2) MAE carries out the foreign policy of the Romanian state, including by fulfilling the tasks within its sphere of competence that fall to Romania as a member state of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and participates in the promotion of Romania's economic interests. (3) To achieve the objectives from his field of activity, MAE exercises the following functions: a) strategic, through which it pursues the elaboration and application of the Government Program in its field of activity; b) regulatory, through which it ensures the elaboration of the normative framework and public policies for the achievement of the objectives in its field of activity; c) of representation, through which it ensures, on behalf of the state and the Government of Romania, internal and external representation in its field of activity⁸.

Regarding Romania's participation in the civilian dimension of the Security and Defense Policy of the European Union (PSAC), it means involvement in various initiatives and missions at civilian level carried out under the leadership of the Union, with the aim of promoting stability, security and development in vulnerable or damaged areas different conflicts. This involvement is carried out in accordance with the commitments and values of the EU and in close cooperation with other member states of the European Union. Civilian missions coordinated by the Union cover a wide range of activities, such as election monitoring, border management and security sector reform. These missions are deployed in regions such as the Western Balkans, Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, contributing to the consolidation of peace and stability in these areas. Romania actively participates in the civilian dimension of the Security and Defense Policy of the European Union by contributing to the planning and implementation of EU civilian missions, as well as by providing experts, police officers, judges or medical personnel for these missions. Also, Romania supports the EU's efforts in promoting regional and international cooperation for the management of crises and conflicts and in strengthening the capacity to prevent and resolve them. Romania's participation in the civilian dimension of the CSDP reflects its commitment to the EU's common values and

⁸ Romanian Government, *Hotărârea Guvernului nr. 16\2017*, published in Monitorul Oficial no. 44/ January 16th, 2017.

objectives in the field of security and defense and contributes to strengthening the Union's role and influence in crisis management and the promotion of peace and stability worldwide⁹. Extending security efforts beyond the borders of the European Union is vital. Many threats to the security of the Union and Romania, threats such as terrorism, organized crime, illegal migration and regional instability, have their origins and effects outside the borders of the EU, therefore it is crucial to address these threats at source or to prevent their spread to the alliance¹⁰. The objective of this strategy, PSAC, is to ensure an environment free from these threats for all citizens of partner states within the EU, regardless of racial or ethnic origin, religion, beliefs, gender, age or sexual orientation. This strategy covers the period 2020-2025 and aims to emphasize capacity building and the development of an integrated and well-coordinated approach to respond to security threats that are constantly changing¹¹.

Romania also supports the path towards a future accession of all the states of the Western Balkans to the European Union, thereby aiming to contribute to shaping a climate of long-term stability. Accession to the Union gave Romania access to numerous new resources and additional capabilities in this area of security, through Romania's integration into the Common Security and Defense Policy, it benefits from the development and modernization of military and civilian capabilities, as well as from increasing interoperability and effectiveness operational within joint security efforts. This also includes the possibility for Romania to benefit from European funds and programs intended for the development of civil and military capacity. Romania supports and supports the accession path of the Balkan states to the European Union, this factor being one of great importance in the stability of prosperity in the entire region. EU integration brings numerous political and social as well as economic benefits, including increased investment and infrastructure development. Overall, Romania's participation as a member state in the European Union and its security and defense strategies bring numerous benefits, contributing to increasing security and stability skills in the region, as well as at the national level, in strengthening partnerships and emancipating operational effectiveness in terms of managing a crisis of any kind, at the same time promoting a collective security¹².

⁹ Romanian Parliament, *Strategie Națională de Apărare a Țării din 30 iunie 2020*, published in Monitorul Oficial no. 574/July 1st, 2020.

¹⁰ European Commission, *Comunicare Comisiei Către Parlamentul European, Consiliul European, Consiliu, Comitetul Economic Și Social Și Comitetul Regiunilor, referitoare la Strategia Uniunii Europene privind uniunea securității*, Bruxelles, 24.07.2020, COM (2020), available online at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/LSU/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0343>, consulted on June 15th, 2024.

¹¹ European Commission, *Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions – A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*, available online at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152>, consulted on June 15th, 2024.

¹² Romanian Parliament, *Strategie Națională de Apărare a Țării din 30 iunie 2020*, published in Monitorul Oficial no. 574/July 1st 2020, p.16.

ROMANIA'S NEIGHBORHOOD AS AN EU MEMBER STATE

As a member state of the European Union (EU), Romania plays a strategic role in the EU's neighborhood policy, having significant interests in its proximity region. Romania's neighborhood of interest mainly includes the states of Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. This involvement is motivated by geopolitical, economic and security factors, aiming to promote regional stability and development. Located on the eastern border of the EU, Romania is in a strategic position connecting Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. This geographical position makes Romania an important actor in the EU neighborhood policy, having direct interests in the stability and security of the neighboring regions. In this context, Romania constantly promoted the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership¹³. Romania has been a fervent supporter of the Eastern Partnership, an EU initiative launched in 2009 that aims to strengthen relations with six Eastern European states: Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Romania has a special interest in the stability and prosperity of these countries, considering that their European integration can contribute to the security and development of the entire region. In particular, Romania was actively involved in supporting the Republic of Moldova, with which it has deep historical and cultural ties, constantly promoting its integration into European structures¹⁴.

Romania also plays an important role in the process of integration of the countries of the Western Balkans into the EU. It has been a vocal supporter of the accession of Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania, believing that the European integration of these states is essential for the stability and development of South-Eastern Europe. Romania has promoted regional initiatives aimed at improving economic and political cooperation in the Balkans, such as the EU Strategy for the Danube Region¹⁵. The Black Sea region is of particular strategic importance for Romania, being an area with multiple security challenges, but also with significant economic opportunities. Romania has constantly promoted an active policy within the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization and other regional forums, trying to strengthen security and stability in this region. In addition, Romania supported the diversification of energy routes and sources, promoting projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor, which aims to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas¹⁶. Romania has been a promoter of

¹³ Alexandra Porumbescu, *Theoretical approaches to international security in the European post-communist space*, in "Analele Universității din Craiova. Istorie", no. 2(30)/2016, p. 119.

¹⁴ Vasile Rotaru, *Russia, the EU, and the Eastern Partnership*, BoD–Books on Demand, 2018, pp. 25–35.

¹⁵ Adam Varga, *Making the European Union strategy for the Danube region matter: chances and challenges from Romanian perspective (An outsider's view)*, in "Strategic Impact", no. 43, 2012, pp. 98–104.

¹⁶ Vasile Rotaru, *Russia, the EU, and the Eastern Partnership*, BoD–Books on Demand, 2018, p. 35.

economic cooperation and regional development in its neighborhood. Through various initiatives and projects, Romania has tried to improve infrastructure and connectivity in the region, promoting trade and investment.

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region, of which Romania is a co-initiator, is a relevant example of the efforts to economically and infrastructurally integrate the states in the region. Despite its efforts, Romania faces numerous challenges in its neighbourhood. Political instability, frozen conflicts and ethnic tensions in the region remain major obstacles to regional stability and development. However, Romania continues to actively promote European integration and support the necessary reforms in neighboring states, considering that a stable and prosperous neighborhood is essential for its security and development¹⁷.

In conclusion, Romania's neighborhood of interest as an EU member state includes Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region, and its involvement in these regions is motivated by geopolitical, economic and security factors. Romania plays an active role in promoting regional stability and development, supporting European integration and economic collaboration. Through these efforts, Romania contributes to the consolidation of security and prosperity in its neighborhood and to the strengthening of the European project.

ROMANIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE EU ACCESSION OF THE BALKAN STATES

Romania plays a significant role in the accession process of the Balkan states to the European Union, acting both as a fervent supporter of EU enlargement and as a successful model of the post-communist transition¹⁸. This involvement is motivated by geopolitical, economic and historical factors. Historically, Romania has strong cultural and historical ties with many of the Balkan states. After the fall of communism, Romania went through a complex process of economic and political reforms, culminating in joining NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. This successful path is seen as a model for other states in the region, which have gone through similar challenges in their transition to democracy and market economy¹⁹. Romania has been a vocal supporter of EU expansion towards the Western Balkans, considering that the stability and prosperity of the region are essential for the security and development of South-Eastern Europe. Within the European Council and other

¹⁷ Alexandra Porumbescu, *Theoretical approaches to international security in the European post-communist space*, in "Analele Universității din Craiova. Istorie", no. 2(30)/2016, pp. 120–123.

¹⁸ Gabriela Motoi, Mihaela Bărbieru, *A Comparative Analysis on the Regional Policy and Coordinating of Structural Instruments before and after Romania's Accession to EU*, in "Is There Enough Europe and Union in the European Union?", Sofia, 2016, pp. 264–273.

¹⁹ Nicholas Ross Smith, Nina Markovic Khaze, Maja Kovacevic, *The EU's stability-democracy dilemma in the context of the problematic accession of the Western Balkan states*, in "Journal of Contemporary European Studies", no. 29(2), 2021, pp. 169–172.

international forums, Romania constantly promoted the cause of the Western Balkans, insisting on the importance of the enlargement process for regional stability and security. A notable example is the support for the accession of Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania, countries that have made significant progress on the EU accession path²⁰.

Romania has been an important economic partner for the Balkan states, promoting cross-border trade and investment. Initiatives such as the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, of which Romania is a co-initiator, are concrete examples of efforts to integrate the Balkan states into the European network in terms of economy and infrastructure. Romania also supported various regional infrastructure projects, aimed at improving connectivity and promoting economic development in the Balkans²¹. Another aspect of Romania's involvement consists in the provision of technical assistance and exchange of experience in the field of institutional reforms and the strengthening of administrative capacities. Romania offered expertise in areas such as justice reform, fighting corruption, strengthening democratic institutions and aligning national legislation with the community acquis. This type of support was essential for the Balkan states in their efforts to meet the EU accession criteria.

Despite efforts and progress, the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans faces numerous challenges. Political instability, economic problems and ethnic tensions remain major obstacles. Romania, as an EU member state, continues to use its influence to promote reforms and ensure that the commitments made by the candidate states are respected²². In conclusion, Romania's involvement in the accession process of the Balkan states to the EU is multifaceted, involving diplomatic, economic and technical efforts. Romania sees in the expansion of the EU towards the Balkans not only an opportunity to ensure stability and prosperity in its neighborhood, but also a means to strengthen the European project and demonstrate European solidarity. By actively supporting EU enlargement, Romania contributes to building a more united and stronger Europe.

CONCLUSIONS

As a member of the EU, Romania adhered to the values of democracy, the rule of law and economic prosperity. This membership involved potential advantages and numerous obligations, such as the development of an integrated national crisis

²⁰ Mirna Vlašić Feketija, Adam Łazowski, *The Seventh EU Enlargement and Beyond: Pre-Accession Policy vis-à-vis the Western Balkans Revisited*, in "Croatian Yearbook of European Law & Policy", no. 10(1), 2014, pp. 2–8.

²¹ Tanja Mišćević, Mojmir Mrak, *The EU accession process: Western Balkans vs EU-10*, in "Politička misao: časopis za politologiju", no. 54(4), 2017, pp. 187–188.

²² Cristian Nitoiu, Teodor Lucian Moga, *Change and continuity in Bulgaria and Romania's foreign policies post-EU accession*, in "European Politics and Society", no. 22(2), 2021, pp. 279–281.

management system and contribution to the Common Security and Defense Policy. Romania's active participation in European defense agencies and in civilian operations under the auspices of the EU demonstrates the country's commitment to regional and international security. EU accession allowed Romania access to additional resources and capabilities, thus contributing to the modernization of the country's civil and military capabilities.

Regarding the regional geopolitical landscape, Romania plays a strategic role in the neighborhood policy of the European Union, having major interests in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. Its strategic geographical position makes Romania an important actor in promoting regional stability and development. Romania firmly supported the European integration of the countries of the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans, actively contributing to regional initiatives aimed at improving economic and political cooperation. In the Black Sea region, Romania promotes security and stability, supporting the diversification of energy routes and sources. However, political instability and frozen conflicts in the neighborhood remain major challenges to regional stability.

In addition, Romania is playing a significant role in the accession process of the Balkan states to the European Union, acting as a fervent supporter of European enlargement and as a successful model of the post-communist transition. Romania actively supported the European integration of Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania, promoting the necessary reforms to meet the accession criteria. Furthermore, Romania provided technical assistance and expertise in key areas such as justice reform, the fight against corruption and the strengthening of democratic institutions. Romania's active involvement in the EU enlargement process reflects its commitment to the stability and prosperity of the region and to the strengthening of the European project.

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