ROMANIAN DEFENSE AND SECURITY: 
AN IN-DEPTH PERSPECTIVE

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NOTE

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Cover photo: Reuters, Arnd Wiegmann
Romanian defense and security: An in-depth perspective

This essay deals with the security challenges faced by Romania in the near and medium term, both at regional and global level. Outside security risks can be augmented by internal vulnerabilities, therefore Romania’s security situation is assessed from the perspective of its internal political dynamic as well as that of current external threat such as the Ukrainian crisis, a resurgent Russia, the migrant crisis and combating terrorism. A special attention is given to defense issues, in particular: defense planning, strategic partnerships and defense procurement. The analysis offers an honest review of positive and negative developments, strengths and weaknesses alike, successful as well as failed initiatives, and offers a set of recommendations for improving Romania’s security policy and strengthening existing partnerships.

by George Vișan, Research Associate at Romania Energy Center (ROEC), June 25, 2016

Democracy at risk

Romanian officials and politicians like to describe their country to foreign interlocutors or international media as “an oasis of stability in a troubled region”. These “troubles” occur in Romania’s neighborhood, but seem not to affect seriously the country. This narrative tends to gloss over the rise of “illiberal democracy” in Central Europe, popular reactions to the migrant crisis and, to a certain extent, the conflict in Ukraine.

Although Romania did not emulate Hungary’s example in building an illiberal democracy, the 2012 political crisis showed that there is potential for such a development taking place. This observation comes with a caveat: there is no political force in Romania, for the time being, willing to emulate FIDESZ’s illiberal model. The risk of illiberal developments taking place in Romania comes mainly from three sources.

First and foremost, the people’s lack of trust in democratic institutions. The Parliament and political parties constantly enjoy the least trust, with the army and National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) taking the lead in the polls, with around 60% public trust.¹ The figures are backed by electoral participation, which rarely exceeds half the electorate. The reasons behind the public’s disillusionment with politics in Romania revolve around two major issues, political corruption and the lack of representation – Romanians do not feel that their elected representatives are interested in promoting the public’s agenda and concerns.

Domestically, Romanian institutions are generally weak and cooperation does not come naturally to them. The difficult cohabitation period (2012-2014) hampered what little institutional cooperation existed. National security was not exempted from this trend despite politicians professing publically a consensus on this issue. According to the former president’s national security adviser, Iulian Fota, an inter-institutional in depth analysis of the Ukrainian crisis and subsequent military conflict was affected by the refusal of the Interior Ministry to contribute because the process was coordinated by the Presidential Administration.²

The second source is corruption which undermines the rule of law and denies citizens the full exercise of their right as well as access to public services. Romania has been praised both inside and outside the Euro-Atlantic community for its tough approach to corruption over the past years. The anticorruption campaign turns out almost on a daily basis a corrupt member of the political elite or a civil servant. Yet, corruption is still rampant. Although the public sympathizes with the actions of prosecutors and courts, the political elite perceives the

² Speech by Iulian Fota, during the debate “Conflicte globale și crize regionale”, March 28, 2016.
anticorruption campaign as a direct challenge to its preferential access to public resources. In its mildest form, opposition to the anticorruption drive takes the shape of accusations of political motivated investigations and selective prosecuting. More serious threats to the rule of law and combatting corruption come from attempts to curtail the activities and investigative powers of the law enforcement agency. Laws and amendments aimed at rolling back the progress that has been made in the fight against corruption are regularly proposed and discussed in parliamentary committees and sometimes reach the floor of Parliament. Some of these proposals have a good chance of becoming legislation as the current government enjoys little support in parliament and political parties have little motivation to enforce party discipline against those in their ranks that undertake such efforts. Furthermore, members of parliament even hamper the prosecution of their suspected colleagues for corruption and graft by refusing to allow the prosecutors to detain or investigate cases.

In public statements, the political elite pays lip service to the fight against corruption and sometimes praises the actions of prosecutors and courts – especially in the aftermath the Colectiv tragedy – however, it has little interest to sustain the anticorruption drive. The anticorruption campaign is seen by the political elite as a threat to its wealth and power, as a destabilizing force. Moreover, the anticorruption campaign affects the internal cohesiveness of the political parties. Of the 588 MPs elected in 2012-2016 legislature, over 80 have been investigated or sentenced for corruption or for conflict of interests. As more and more party leaders and key cadres are sentenced and sent to jail, or simply investigated, organizational cohesiveness is affected. Romanian political parties are not institutionalized political forces and personal connections matter deeply to the inner workings of these institutions. Party positions are owed much more to political patronage than to internal democratic processes. Consequently, it is very hard to vote for the investigation or arrest of a fellow party member.

A further weakness of the anticorruption campaign is its strong foreign support, in contrast with the knee jerk response of local politicians and the public’s belated support. Such support attracts criticism from those who oppose judicial reforms or the combat against corruption and fits into the nationalist agenda. Opponents paint the effort as a foreign intrusion in the country’s “internal affairs” and the combat against corruption as being imposed from the outside rather than an internal process. To an extent, the latter is true. Without EU integration and the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) which ensures that Romania reforms its justice system to the standards demanded by Brussels, the efforts aimed at combatting corruption would not have been possible. The political elite would like to see the CVM lifted as soon as possible as it is considered a political tool used by Brussels to interfere in local politics. Moreover, the maintenance of CVM is seen as singling out Romania among the rest of the member states, thus making the country a sort of second rate member of EU. A case in point is Romania’s accession to the Schengen Agreement -- France and Holland have used the mechanism as a tool to oppose the country’s bid to join.

Further foreign support for combating corruption comes from the United States, Romania’s main security and defense partner. After the Ukrainian crisis, Romanians have started to attribute the intensification of efforts to combat corruption to American pressure, as Washington did not want one of its closest allies on the Eastern flank to follow Kiev’s example in terms of rule of law and public institutions.

Finally, the third possible source of illiberal democracy is the rise of nationalism. The effects of the 2008 economic crisis, the 2012 political crisis, coupled with the refugee crisis, has led to a rise in nationalism and Euroscepticism in Romania. Although there is no credible nationalist political party, mainstream political forces have gradually picked up parts of the

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nationalist agenda. The roots of the current resurgence of nationalism in Romania date back to the 2012 political crisis which required the mediation of EU and the United States. Those who wished to see president Băsescu impeached deeply resented the intervention of international actors in the crisis and played the nationalist card going as far as to promote even anti-Western discourses.

Nationalism surged again during the 2014 presidential election which pitted PM Victor Ponta against Klaus Iohannis. During the ensuing second cohabitation, Victor Ponta played to an extent the nationalist card against the newly elected president. The social-democrats tried to use Iohannis’ ethnicity in order to portray him as unfit to become president (“Romanians will never elect a ‘foreigner’ as president”). The election of Klaus Iohannis as president of Romania, by a wide margin, showed that the nationalist trend was not as strong as originally thought. Although the election as president of an individual that hails from a different ethnic group than most of Romanians was a “ray of light” considering recent European trends, it was not a political development that has been capitalized upon by Romania’s diplomacy at regional level.

Romania’s complex relationship with neighboring Moldova has also become a strong source of nationalist feeling and has a potential of affecting Bucharest’s foreign policy. In recent times, calls for unification with Moldova have multiplied. In 2012 a grassroots movement called “Acțiunea 2012” commemorated 200 years since the region had been annexed by Russia and called for the reunification of the two countries. The movement has some following in Romania and Moldova and is known for organizing street protests in both countries. Recently, it has proposed a calendar for the re-unification of Romania and Moldova by 2018, the year of Greater Romania’s centenary.

A poll taken in 2015 suggested that two thirds of Romanians favor a union with the Republic of Moldova – such numbers cannot be ignored by politicians which use the “reunification” project for electoral purposes. The “reunification” slogan has been picked up by politicians – 41 MPs formed an informal parliamentary group called “Friends of the Union” and former president Traian Băsescu has placed it in its party’s platform and reputedly proposed the re-unification of Moldova and Romania to president Vladimir Voronin. Unfortunately, movements such as “Acțiunea 2012” or statements like those of former president Băsescu, validate Russian propaganda in Moldova concerning Romania’s “imperialist ambitions”.

Recently, the greatest source of nationalist resurgence has been the migrant crisis coupled with the terrorist attacks in France and Belgium. Moreover, the publicity surrounding the atrocities perpetrated by Daesh in the Middle East may have influenced Romanians to fear possible acts of terrorism by migrants coming from that region. The overwhelming majority of Romanians, over 75% in December 2015, rejected the compulsory quota system proposed by the EU Commission to accommodate the influx of refugees and migrants from the Middle East and

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North Africa. Faced with strong popular opposition to the quota system, Romania was among the 4 countries that rejected in 2015 the quota during the European Council.

Another issue that highlights the rising nationalist and islamophobic trend was the public rejection of building a new mosque in Bucharest. Romania and Turkey agreed to build a mosque in Bucharest to serve the fledgling Muslim community of the city. Although, the project has not been cancelled yet, it has to be pursued cautiously and with as little publicity as possible after numerous and vocal protests by nationalists. Turkey is Romania’s main strategic partner in the Black Sea and the rise of islamophobia poses a threat to the bilateral relationship.

The panoply of external threats

The 2015, Romanian National Defense Strategy describes in rather awkward and dull manner the current international environment as being “characterized by dynamism and complexity, following some states’ reconceptualization of their strategic and military postures, as well as political, economic and technological interdependencies caused by globalization.” The document goes on to say in the same vein that “the future security environment will be influenced by multiple challenges, that will manifest in predictable and linear ways, while other challenges will develop unpredictably, will be profoundly disruptive and will manifest in a non-linear fashion, which can generate strategic surprises.” In simpler language, Romania faces conventional and unconventional threats from state and non-state actors, in a dynamic and volatile international system.

The greatest conventional threat for Romania in the short and medium term comes from a resurgent and aggressive Russia. Although not mentioned in the document and only hinted at by the formula “some states’ reconceptualization of their strategic and military postures”, the Russian threat is the only conventional threat that can seriously affect and disrupt Romania’s security.

Unconventional threats take the shape of political instability in the Middle East and North Africa – from Libya, Egypt and Syria. Weak states, failed states and disintegrating states engender terrorism, civil war and encourage mass migration. Romania is among the countries that took on international terrorism after 9/11. However, it was not yet targeted by terrorist attacks despite sending and maintaining troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. Islamic extremists have tried to raise funds and recruit fighters in Romania, but their plans have been disrupted by the quick reaction of the security services.

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13 Strategia națională de apărare a țării pentru perioada 2015-2019, p. 11.
14 Ibid., p.11.
The only terrorist plot unraveled by the Romanian Intelligence Service recently was, ironically, a local affair. A group of nationalist ethnic Hungarians tried to disrupt Romania’s national day military parade that took place in Târgu Secuiescu, a Transylvanian town inhabited mostly by Hungarians, with a homemade explosive device. Further unconventional threats are more diffuse like cyberattacks and cyberwarfare. In 2014 and 2015, Romania has been the target of several attacks attributed by the Romanian Intelligence Service to non-state actors. Since September 2014, Bucharest has been advising and mentoring Kiev on cybersecurity as part of NATO’s non-lethal aide to Ukraine in the aftermath of the 2014 crisis.

Another unconventional threat that can affect Romania is the risk of a new global economic crisis. The 2008-2014 Great Recession has severely affected Romania and the recovery has been quite slow. For a medium sized country, such negative economic developments can have a disproportionate impact on the local economy, increase social costs and bring about political instability.

External threats can unfortunately be augmented by internal vulnerabilities that require mitigation in the medium and long run. A case in point is the state of Romania’s critical infrastructure. The quality of Romania’s roads and railroad links undermine its economic development as well as its security. Romania’s energy security is affected by the poor quality of its energy infrastructure and the lack of adequate gas deposit capacity.

Shoring up defenses

The Ukrainian crisis represents the biggest foreign policy challenge faced by Romania since 1990. For Romania, the Ukrainian crisis could not have come at a worse time. In 2014, while still recovering from the 2008 economic crisis, Romania was gripped by the animosities of the 2012 political crisis. Over the past 25 years, Russia and Romania did not enjoy close relations, both countries viewing each other with suspicion. For Moscow, Romania is just another U.S. “satellite” in its vicinity which promotes Washington’s foreign policy goals. Bucharest is the first country in Europe to host the U.S. ballistic missile defense system put forward under the European Phased Adaptive Approach, it supports NATO and EU membership for Eastern European states, it is a promoter of energy security - thus undermining Gazprom’s near monopoly on gas distribution in the region, it has argued in favor of a stronger presence of NATO on the Eastern Flank, it plays host to U.S. forces on the shores of the Black Sea, it has tried to increase U.S. and NATO presence in the Black Sea and has been a fervent supporter of Moldova’s “European path” that may eventually lead to EU membership.

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20 Research Interview with an international security expert, speaking on condition of anonymity, Bucharest, April 26, 2016.
On the other hand, Romania views Russia’s actions and activities in Eastern Europe with suspicion and alarm. Although at the end of the Cold War Romania was much more inclined than other former Warsaw Pact members to maintain close relations with the USSR and later with the Russian Federation, the ensuing conflict in the Republic of Moldova in 1992, and internal pressures for charting a pro-western diplomatic course after the fall of communism meant that a strong bilateral relationship could not be developed.

The persistence of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, especially in Transnistria, caused Romania to view the Russian Federation as a destabilizing actor in the region, rather than a responsible stakeholder. This view was confirmed by the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. The 2014 Ukrainian crisis further demonstrated that the Kremlin posed a far greater threat to European security than originally thought. Russia was not just a mere spoiling power, resentful of her neighbors’ foreign policy ambitions, but also a revisionist power, albeit at a regional level. Ukraine is Romania’s biggest neighbor and although Bucharest and Kiev did not share a close diplomatic relationship following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the latter acted as a geopolitical buffer for the former against Russia’s influence. A weak and “rump” Ukraine, without any western prospects, represents a threat to Romania’s regional interests.

In the aftermath of Russia’s annexations of Crimea, Romanian policy makers feared that Russia’s regional ambitions extended as far as the mouths of the Danube22 however, subsequent developments proved that fear misplaced. Control of the Crimean peninsula has drastically changed the regional military balance in Moscow’s favor. Russia has secured quickly its newly “acquired” territory and has moved to fortify the peninsula and upgrade its military presence. Over the last two years, Russia has transformed Crimea into a naval bastion23 that can effectively deter NATO in the Black Sea and at the same time project power in the region and in the Eastern Mediterranean. For example, Crimea played a pivotal role in Russia’s intervention in Syria in October 2015, demonstrating its significance for Kremlin’s power projections capabilities. Therefore, Russia’s seizure of Crimea has strategic implications that go beyond the regional level – it affects the entire Euro-Atlantic community.

The key to deterring NATO in the Black Sea region is the deployment of anti-access and area denial weapon systems in Crimea. Long range cruise missiles and supersonic anti-ship missiles combined with long range surface to air missiles make the reinforcement of the Eastern flank costly for NATO and the United States in case of an Article 5 scenario.24 For Romania, this threat is somewhat offset by the fact that NATO and American forces can reinforce the Eastern flank via land connections. However, there is a caveat to this approach: the poor quality of the country’s rail and road infrastructure.

Romania was taken by surprise, as most western powers were, by Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Although one of the advocates of greater western involvement in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, Bucharest failed to anticipate Russia’s reaction’s to Ukraine’s DCFTA and Association Agreement with the EU and subsequent Euromaidan protests. Bucharest’s belated reaction to the developments in its vicinity shows two things: analytical shortcomings at institutional level and a certain lack of understanding of Kremlin’s past behavior. The 2008


Russo-Georgian war should have acted as an early warning for Russian behavior in Eastern Europe.

While relying on the United States and NATO for most of its security needs, Romania began reinforcing its relations with regional partners, Poland and Turkey. In December 2015, an Eastern flank mini-summit was held in Bucharest, under the joint chairmanship of the Romanian and Polish presidents. The participating countries: Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic agreed on a common agenda for the Eastern flank mini-Force (VJTF) to augment the NRF and 7 NFIU, which have started to become operational. 25

When faced with an external threat, states usually pursue two courses of action, either simultaneously or separately: external balancing – finding willing and capable allies to balance the threat and share the cost of doing so, and internal balancing – mobilizing internal resources to face up to the challenge. In the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis, Romania pursued both courses of action however, prioritizing diplomacy inside NATO and the EU over an internal balancing process. The reasons for this decision are twofold: first of all, Romania is committed to the principle of collective defense as embodied in the NATO treaty and, second, it cannot balance alone the Russian threat.

Russia may not be a great power anymore 27, but it is clearly more than a match for a medium actor like Romania. Along with other countries on the Eastern flank, Romania argued and obtained at the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014 the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) to augment the NRF and 7 NFIU, which have started to become operational. 28 In parallel, the United States allocated $1 billion in 2014 for the defense and security of the Eastern flank 29 as well as deployed on a rotational basis the equivalent of a mechanized brigade. 30 In 2016, when it became clear that the Russian threat was greater than originally estimated 31, the U.S. announced that it will augment its presence in Central and Eastern Europe starting with 2017 and will allocate $3.4 billion dollars to support this effort. 32

25 Research Interview with an international security expert, speaking on condition of anonymity, Bucharest, April 26, 2016.
26 Idem
NATO Summit in Warsaw to be held in July 2016 that emphasizes increased defense posture on the Eastern flank. Romania and Poland used the opportunity to rekindle their strategic partnership and to agree on an agenda concerning Eastern Europe. The results of this diplomatic offensive should become visible in the near future.

As a response to Russia’s growing military capabilities, Bucharest came up with its own initiative at the Black Sea in 2016: a “NATO fleet” to patrol and ensure the security of the region. The project is supported by Turkey, which has demanded that the Alliance increase its regional presence in order to offset Kremlin’s military buildup, and by Ukraine. Talks have also been held concerning a joint Romanian, Bulgarian and Ukrainian multinational brigade modelled on the Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian multinational brigade.

Although a member of NATO since 2004, Romania neglected its defense sector even when the economy was booming in 2006-2008. With NATO membership secured, it appeared that defense and security could either be put on the back burner or outsourced to the alliance. The Great Recession of 2008-2014 made defense expenditure economically unsound and politically dubious. This trend was echoed among most of NATO’s European allies. Romania had to postpone, interrupt or cancel military contracts or programs aimed at modernizing and upgrading its armed forces in order to meet NATO standards. Furthermore, because of Romania’s participation in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the emphasis placed upon out of area operation, territorial defense became a secondary priority for the armed forces of Romania, even if the Russo-Georgian war showed the importance of this type of defense mission for national security. As a result of budget cuts and low spending, military readiness suffered. In many respects, Russia’s military aggression in Ukraine demonstrated how unprepared was Romania for such a development. After 2012, the defense expenditure gradually started to rise as the economy began to recover but it still fell well below NATO’s standard of 2% of GDP. In early 2015, the newly sworn in president Klaus Iohannis negotiated a consensus among the main political forces in order to ensure that the target of 2% of GDP for defense will be respected. The cross party agreement ensures that starting with 2017, the government will allocate 2% of GDP to defense and will do so for the following ten years.


38 Idem.


Following the Ukrainian crisis, defense became a priority. Military exercises were organized in order to cure some of the readiness issues the years of “defense holyday” created. Over 400 national and multinational military exercises were organized in 2015 alone according to the Ministry of Defense.\(^{42}\) Modernization programs have begun to take shape such as the belated modernization of Romania’s Type 22 frigates or the acquisition of a second F-16 squadron.\(^{43}\) The Ministry of Defense has issued request for information regarding weapons systems such as tanks, self-propelled artillery and long range multiple launch rocket systems.\(^{44}\) Negotiations with international suppliers started in order to find ways to fulfill some of the more urgent needs of the Romanian armed forces such as the acquisition in the near future of long range air defense system\(^{45}\) or the acquisition of a new wheeled armored personal carrier for the mechanized infantry.\(^{46}\)

However, there are caveats to this renewed interest and investment in the defense sector. First of all is the issue of credibility – why wait until 2017 to allocate 2% of GDP for defense expenditure when the need for serious investments are painfully clear? For example, by the end of 2016 Russia will have deployed in the Black Sea 6 Kilo class submarines, 3 Admiral Grigorovich guided missile frigates and at least 2 Buyan-M corvettes.\(^{47}\) Moreover, the shipyards in the Crimean Peninsula have recently started work on two new missile corvettes for the Russian Black Sea Fleet.\(^{48}\) In comparison, by the end of 2016, Romania will just have started the modernization process of its two elderly Type 22 frigates. In truth, most of Romania’s defense acquisitions are scheduled to come to fruition sometime between 2019 and 2025. This outcome is the result of inadequate resource allocation for defense expenditure as well the slow pace of economic recovery.

Second, there is the issue of operationalizing military units, not just simply modernization or upgrading existing equipment.\(^{49}\) The bulk of the troops deployed by NATO on the Eastern flank in the near future will mostly be drawn from the armed forces of the host nations. In order for this to take shape, the modernization process is not enough, units have to be able to be integrated in NATO’s command structure and operate in the same manner as the rest of the allies. This is a far more challenging process than just simply modernization of existing structures. Consequently, resources have to be adequately allotted in order to deter aggression and foster security.

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\(^{44}\) ACTM, “Cereri de informații”, http://www.acttm.ro/ro/proiecte-i-activitati/sereri-de-informatii


\(^{49}\) Research Interview with an international security expert, speaking on condition of anonymity, Bucharest, April 26, 2016.
Conclusions

Internally, Romania faces the threat of political instability in the short and medium term. This is not a situation that is specific to Romania and is both the result of internal dynamics and the rise of “illiberal democracy” at regional level. There is a serious risk of illiberal contagion if democratic institutions are not strengthened. Corruption still affects institutional performance and undermines the rule of law despite efforts to curb it. Political polarization over combatting corruption endangers the entire effort and there is a serious risk of rolling back reforms undertaken until now. Weak institutions, nationalism and corruption increase the risks of illiberal outcomes in Romania in the future, as well as calling into question the state authority and the legitimacy of the democratic system. Furthermore, it increases the vulnerability to hybrid warfare – for example, Russian propaganda may target Romanians’ disenchantment with the political elite and democratic system. In order to avoid an illiberal outcome or another serious political crisis, a substantive reform of the political system should be undertaken.

Externally, Romania faces a host of threats, both conventional and unconventional, in a dynamic and increasingly volatile international system. The greatest threat to Romania’s security in the near future is a resurgent and aggressive Russia which is willing to forego the norms and rules of the international community in order to promote its national interests. Further threats to national security are less conspicuous and distant such as the effects of political instability in the Middle East and North Africa, migration, terrorism and cyberwarfare. Romania has taken up the Russian challenge on the diplomatic and military front, but efforts need to be fine-tuned and far more resources need to be allocated to make these efforts credible. In the short and medium term, Romania should concentrate on strengthening its regional partnerships and promoting regional projects. Bucharest should increase its analytic capabilities in order to better estimate and deal with international crisis. Defense investments should be more credible, increase deterrence and take shorter time to implement.