

PEACE AND SECURITY

# ZEITENWENDE

Time for a Reassessment of Romania's Foreign Policy?

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Romania's foreign policy consensus has provided substantial benefits for the country over the past two decades, but is no longer in sync with current global and regional transformations.



Its prevailing symbolic schema – a set of assumptions, ideas, and predispositions – constrains its scope, limits the potential for deepening relations with key actors, and hinders the attainment of non-security foreign policy aims and initiatives.



Shifting to an active and targeted de-securitisation strategy may in a counterintuitive manner enhance the country's security by creating conditions for increased cooperation with a larger group of regional actors.

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Romania's foreign policy consensus has proven successful over the past three decades: it has allowed the country to remain an island of relative domestic stability, a predictable partner, and a bulwark of the liberal world in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region. The certainties on which this consensus has been built are no longer so secure, however, and Romania's current foreign policy »climate of ideas« may be constraining the country's true potential in the face of current global transformations.



With its reliance on a hierarchical and narrow worldview, Romanian foreign-policy thinking tends to underrate the importance of horizontal interdependencies, of mutual support between European and Transatlantic allies, and the value of broadening partnerships. In addition to maintaining strong relations with the U.S., Romania needs to deepen its partnerships with its European allies. It should also diversify its partnerships and engagements with like-minded countries beyond the West to tackle global concerns that may affect Romania, especially with emerging powers.



Romanian foreign policy is overly focused on security, promoting a high politics security agenda that could be seen as bringing about the opposite of its intended effects. This could affect the country's standing in the region and amplify a possible security dilemma between Russia and NATO. Shifting to an active and targeted de-securitisation strategy may counterintuitively enough enhance the country's security in the medium to long term by reducing bilateral tensions and by improving Romania's relations with regional actors.

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## 1

## INTRODUCTION

Romania finds itself in a world caught up in a *Zeitenwende* – at a turning point – as the 2020 special edition of the Munich Security Report put it (Bunde *et al.* 2020). The post-Cold War international order and its liberal narrative are eroding in the face of internal and external challenges. Russia and China are seeking to re-assert a sovereign-territorial order against the liberal international order promoted by the U.S. by proposing alternative political, economic, and cultural narratives and frameworks. Russia has become more assertive in the Black Sea region and beyond its »near abroad«, while simultaneously promoting a traditionalist socio-cultural agenda (Ivan 2016; Anghelescu 2011). China is increasingly seen as a challenge to U.S. primacy and is engaged in ambitious global institutional and network-building efforts. The Chinese challenge is also perceptible in Central and Eastern Europe, especially in the guise of the 17+1 cooperation format (Ghincea, Volintiru, and Nikolovski 2021). Inside the West, xenophobic nationalism and populism are on the rise, while economic inequality and cultural conflicts are polarising Western societies. In the U.S., the Biden administration is displaying ambivalent tendencies between restraint and engagement that mirror the current debates dominating the American foreign policy establishment (Ashford 2021; Deudney and Ikenberry 2021). However, these worrying global transformations exist alongside cooperative trends.

Multilateral cooperation has not completely given way to zero-sum world politics, despite the pervasiveness of a competitive logic in large areas of international politics. Over the past decade, a plurality of multilateral and regional cooperation frameworks and institutions have been created, increasing regional and global engagement and interdependence. While »great power competition« and »restraint« are both circulating as new buzzwords in Washington, the Biden administration is also seeking to re-engage with the world and to enhance multilateral cooperation based on shared values. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a net positive impact on the functioning of the European Union, underscoring the importance of cooperation and solidarity (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2021; Bremer *et al.* 2021). Most importantly, no major power is actively seeking to undermine multilateral cooperation, the current conflict being not over the merits of cooperation *per se*, but over its *terms and conditions*. Hence, the global picture is not as straightforward as some analysts argue. What is clear is that we are living in times of watershed global changes.

Against this backdrop, a rather conservative approach can be seen to underly Romanian foreign policy, which appears to hinge on a »more of the same« logic. This approach translates into both benefits and costs for the country's foreign policy. On the one hand, Romanian foreign policy remains staunchly predictable, reliable, and able to provide competent expertise in niche areas and on issues involving its immediate interests. Romania has proven to be an eloquent and stable partner to its Western allies and a staunch advocate of a rules-based international order. The foreign policy consensus among Romanian elites and the general public has proven immensely successful over the past three decades, making its »more of the same« logic understandable and legitimate. Romania remains an island of relative domestic stability, a predictable partner, a bulwark of the liberal world in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region. This is a commendable situation and a compelling reason to aspire for more of the same.

On the other hand, this conservative approach also translates into some less than desirable tendencies in Romanian foreign policy. At least three key elements can be identified in this regard. First, a lack of initiative and ambition, even in the region. For example, Romania does not seem to have carefully elaborated strategies *vis-à-vis* the Western Balkans or the other members of the Eastern Partnership aside from Moldova, quite in contrast to other regional players (Goşu 2021; Moga, Bureiko, and Siminov 2021). Other scholars have also observed that Romania lacks initiative and activism when it comes to the articulation of EU foreign policy (Niţoiu and Moga 2021). Romania also seems to have little to say about key issues and topics that are at the core of the struggle over the terms and conditions of global governance, which will invariably affect the country.

Second, a *narrow* focus on defence and security matters as the primary foreign-policy concern. Faced with Russia's increased assertiveness, Bucharest seems to operate on the basis of a hawkish logic that any military vulnerability should primarily be remedied by military means. This leads to a high degree of overlap between the foreign policy and defence policy of the country. Faced with the increasing assertiveness of Russia in the Black Sea region, this is both legitimate and understandable. However, by focusing its foreign policy on defence and security concerns, it has narrowed its parameters. Its preoccupation for defence issues affects the breadth and depth of its foreign policy, limiting Romania's ability to engage in *substantive* terms on a

larger and varied number of global and regional issues. Moreover, this »securitisation« of Romanian foreign policy has not necessarily helped it correctly and accurately assess the security environment in the Black Sea region, as some scholars have previously noted (Dungaci and Dumitrescu 2019). In fact, it would appear that its narrow focus on security concerns has caused regional actors with more dovish ambitions to resist strategic initiatives proposed by Bucharest.

Third, an underappreciation for the strategic importance of enhancing partnerships with European powers such as France and Germany. Romania seems to privilege its strategic partnership with the U.S. to such an extent that it does not provide sufficient attention and resources to its equally important allies and partners in Europe, especially France and Germany. Considering the growing tensions between the key transatlantic partners, Romania's insufficient credibility as an honest broker makes it more difficult to contribute to an improvement in relations between the two sides of the Atlantic. This is particularly relevant today, considering that Central and Eastern Europe are fading as a main focus of U.S. foreign policy in the context of its diminishing presence in the Middle East and the pivot towards Asia (Anghel 2021).

What explains this puzzling situation and its policy implications? Much of the foreign-policy analysis literature focuses either on bureaucratic-institutional or on systemic factors that constrain and shape foreign policy, which rely on a rather unpalatable assumption of full rationality (e.g., Allison and Zelikow 1999). This paper instead adopts a socio-cognitivist approach to foreign-policy analysis (Jervis 2017; Malici 2017; Beach and Pedersen 2019: 149). Along these lines, it is argued in the following that this situation is the product of a *symbolic schema* – a set of assumptions, ideas, and predispositions – through which world and regional affairs are interpreted and rendered meaningful, staking out the parameters of Romania's foreign policy 'climate of ideas.' The sources of this symbolic schema originate either in the Cold War strategic thinking that was perpetuated after 1989, or in the post-Cold War period dominated by the U.S.'s »unipolar moment« that shaped Romanian strategic culture. Romania's foreign-policy actors still interpret the world according to a cognitive template of the past. In view of current global transformations, this paper argues that this symbolic schema is insufficient. It relies on assumptions that may no longer be completely helpful, it narrows the main concerns and style of Romanian foreign policy to mere status-seeking and security enhancement, but for the most part in a rather reactive fashion.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to carve out a new space where the intellectual foundations of Romanian foreign policy can be examined and constructively debated. Following a brief overview of the context of Romanian foreign policy, the main elements of the ideational foundation of Romania's foreign policy concept will be traced out. Based on this map of Romania's foreign policy concept, the paper shall then suggest some potential corrective measures with regard to some of the key issues identified in the analysis. The objective is to enhance and better capitalise on valuable existing resources and potential present in Romania to the benefit of its foreign policy and the

welfare of its citizens. These suggestions are being made in the spirit of reform, not revolution. It is not the aim of this paper to challenge the main geostrategic commitments in Romanian foreign policy, but to improve the country's foreign policy performance and efficacy while paying heed to these commitments.

## 2

## ROMANIAN FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 1989: CONTEXT AND SETTING

### 1.1 THE AMERICAN »UNIPOLAR MOMENT«

The post-Communist history of Romanian foreign policy has been marked by what scholars have dubbed the »unipolar moment«: a period when the United States enjoyed unquestioned and uncontested world hegemony (Krauthammer 1990; Cooley and Nexon 2020). During this period, the United States and its Western partners actively sought to expand the constrained liberal order crafted after WWII with Western allies to the global level, creating what John Ikenberry has termed the »liberal international order« (Ikenberry 2020; Mearsheimer 2018). In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Romanian political elite gradually realigned, embracing the American-sponsored liberal international order. The most visible manifestation of this shift was the signing of the Snagov Declaration in 1995, signalling an elite consensus for a pro-Western foreign policy direction. This was the point when Romania started to actively seek to embed itself in the core of the liberal international order. It did so by seeking admission to NATO, the European Union, and by building strategic partnerships with the U.S. and other Western allies.

### 1.2 THE MECHANISMS OF AMERICAN HEGEMONY

Following Cooley and Nexon (2020) and Ikenberry (2020, 8th chapter), three mechanisms facilitated the American »unipolar moment« after the end of the Cold War. First, the disappearance of the Soviet Union provided the U.S. and its Western allies a *monopoly* on the provision of patronage and international *public goods*. Countries that wanted to engage in international trade, obtain international capital, or development grants had no alternative but to rely on U.S.-sponsored options, making them subject to American and Western terms and conditions (Anderson, Cooley, and Nexon 2021). This facilitated the liberalisation of international trade, reduction in regional conflicts, and the diffusion of neoliberal economic ideas worldwide (Ikenberry 2020). Notwithstanding its effects on (re)distributional aspects, Romania has benefited from this both directly – through infusion of capital, trade liberalisation, and liberal conditionality – and indirectly through the regional and global stability that has been created.

Second, the post-Cold War order has been defined by the implosion of alternative ordering projects and security configurations. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the repudiation of its Communist ideology and its associated ordering project. It brought down intellectual alternatives to the Western liberal model of development and political organisation. At the same time, it for the most part eliminated any alternative format for *security guarantees*, leaving only the one provided by the U.S., its Western partners, or U.S.-sponsored institutions. Thus, political elites had to choose either to join the U.S. or to be labelled as »rogue« states and thus be relegated to a marginal and highly stigmatised position in world politics (Cooley and Nexon 2020; Ikenberry 2020). For Central and Eastern Europe, the near monopoly of the liberal ordering project and ideology meant that for a time even Russia followed the liberal prescriptions of the U.S.-led order, especially until the Great Recession. Grievances and disgruntlement with this order soon began turning into open criticism, however, as was visible during the 2007 Munich Security Conference.

The third mechanism through which the liberal international order functioned was a transnational network of Western IGOs and NGOs promoting liberal, democratic, and pro-Western values, ideas, and political projects. Organisations such as Transparency International, the Open Society Foundations, Amnesty International and the like are an integral part of the ordering infrastructure spearheaded by the United States and its Western partners. Their main task was to *diffuse liberal ideas*, institutions, and political projects from the international to the domestic level and to legitimise the liberal international order through proactive projects focused on reform and development (Cooley and Nexon 2020). The democratisation and liberalisation of Central and Eastern societies after the collapse of Communism has been shaped not only by Western governments, but also to a high degree by this type of non-governmental organisations, shaping domestic expectations, framing policy agendas, and defining legitimate political objectives and behaviours.

The Romanian transition from communism to democracy has been defined by the converging effects of these three ordering processes, facilitating the expansion and reproduction of the liberal international order. It has had immense effects on Romania's economic, political, and overall societal development

over the last three decades. The achievements of the last three decades would not have been possible without these three converging transnational processes.

### 1.3 CHALLENGES TO AMERICAN HEGEMONY

These three mechanisms are increasingly being eroded by countervailing forces at the regional and global level, however. Challenges to the liberal international order have been manifested in emerging counter-hegemonic forces questioning the three mechanisms discussed here that have been spearheading the global transformations observable on a global scale. First, the patronage monopoly that the U.S. enjoyed during the first two decades after the Cold War has almost completely evaporated. Both China and Russia, at the global level, and several other powers at the regional level, are competing with the U.S. in the provision of global public goods and patronage. This is leading to the emergence of alternative trade and economic institutions and frameworks, such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative sponsored by China, or the Eurasian Union developing around Russia. These extend far beyond their respective regions, with China offering investments and patronage in Africa and Latin America and Russia providing support *inter alia* to Syria.

Second, previously subdued rivals of the U.S. and its Western partners are starting to articulate credible and potentially ascendant alternative ordering projects at the global and regional levels. Both China and Russia are forwarding alternative ideological, normative, and political proposals for political and societal organisation. China is using its increasing economic clout to promote a Chinese political and economic model that seeks to challenge and replace the Western liberal model of organisation (Drewski and Gerhards 2020). Russia has increasingly articulated a societal and political model defined by authoritarian governance, traditional values, and state-driven capitalism. Moscow has been trying to export the components of this model abroad, either directly to post-Soviet territory through a nascent transnational movement, or via Russian-sponsored media. It has also engaged in institutional development, including constructing the Eurasian Union as an alternative to the European Union and various security cooperation and defence agreements, especially in post-Soviet territory.

Third, the liberal transnational network of IGOs and NGOs has been increasingly supplanted by competing alternative transnational networks, sometimes including non-mainstream Western organisations. Non-Western powers are developing increasingly dense networks of transnational actors that seek to influence domestic politics across the world and promote illiberal and authoritarian political models and values.

With the erosion of the American and Western monopoly over the provision of public goods, security guarantees, and transnational advocacy networks, the certainties and precepts upon which Romania's foreign policy consensus has been built over the last three decades are no longer so solid and secure. In

view of these transformations, the ideas and notions upon which Romanian foreign policy is founded may warrant reassessment.

### 1.4 A CONTEST OVER THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

There is widespread agreement that this liberal international order is under immense pressure both from within and without. At the global level, scholars and practitioners alike are increasingly acknowledging that the world is at a turning point. Some analysts believe that the erosion of this order will automatically produce a return to great-power *realpolitik*. This would entail the demise of multilateral cooperation and a substantial increase in uncertainty and conflict. Other analysts argue that the world is experiencing a paradoxical increase in multilateral cooperation. They cite the fact that the last decade has seen an explosion of transnational and multilateral cooperation frameworks, as well as the establishment of new regional and global institutions. These two highly contrasting perspectives on current global transformations both constitute incomplete portrayals of current processes. Contrary to these views, the world is experiencing increasing levels of contestation over the terms and conditions of multilateral cooperation – over the nature and rules of tomorrow's global governance. There is no certainty that the terms and conditions of the U.S.-led international order that governed the Romanian transition from communism to liberalism and a free market will survive current challenges unscathed. These challenges are coming not only from the outside, but also from within the liberal core itself. More specifically, they are coming especially from assertive powers such as China and Russia, but also from within the West.

The terms and conditions of the liberal international order are being challenged from inside American society, where strong forces, both on the right and the left, are contesting the grand strategy of the U.S. over the past three decades and are gradually gaining relevance domestically. The transatlantic relationship has been affected by a growing lack of trust among Western powers, with Angela Merkel even stating that »the times we could completely rely on others are, to a certain extent, over. [...] We Europeans must really take our own fate in our own hands« after the 2017 G7 talks. While the dissensus between the U.S. and its European partners subsided after the election of Joe Biden, tensions and disagreements are still visible. The diplomatic rift between France and the Anglophone countries, Australia and the U.S., as well as the displeasure shown in Berlin about the approach adopted by the Biden administration towards Europe reveals tensions that are still there and growing. This is despite substantive actions undertaken by both sides to improve relations. This is particularly relevant in the analysis here because Romanian foreign policy rests on the premise that the Western core will remain united and unscathed in the face of increasing challenges from outside the West. Growing tensions between the two sides of the Atlantic are putting into question some of Romania's key assumptions about the indivisibility of the West.

## 3

## THE PREMISES OF ROMANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

A close analysis of Romania's strategic documents and public debates on salient foreign policy issues indicates a prevalence of a particular symbolic schema – a set of assumptions, ideas, and predispositions – that shape the way that both elites and the public interpret world politics and Romania's place in it. This symbolic schema underpins the »foreign policy consensus« in Romanian society. By shaping the way both elites and the public interpret international relations, it sets the boundaries of what is possible and acceptable, defining state preferences – what we colloquially refer to as the »national interest« – and directly shaping foreign policy behaviour. The main purpose of this section is to map out the main elements of this symbolic schema, but not necessarily with the intention of criticising their presence.

Iulia Joja (2019) has persuasively argued that the source of this symbolic schema derives from the prevalent (but also morphing) strategic culture, which has been shaped by norm entrepreneurs instrumentalising historical memory for new purposes. This paper supports this assessment and challenges the predominant narrative offered on the causal factors behind Romanian foreign policy, which is grounded in historical determinism. Contrary to what most practitioners and some analysts say, historical memory plays a rather limited causal role in shaping foreign policy and we need to avoid becoming captives of a rather reductionist philosophy of history. History is meaningless in the absence of political and social interpretation. Political elites construct historical narratives to rationalise, legitimise and make contemporary policy preferences meaningful and coherent. Historical determinism is thus a cheap analytical tool that does not have much explanatory power. A more plausible account is that political elites, already intent on a certain course of action, instrumentalise historical narratives to legitimise and reinforce their policy choices, thus making them appear to be both common sense and inevitable<sup>1</sup>. In the end, history is what people make of it.

Having its sources in the prevalent strategic culture, this symbolic schema can be taxonomised in three broad categories. The first category consists of the key assumptions and notions regarding the nature of international relations and world politics. These key concepts provide compelling tools to interpret how the world is, shaping what could be called a 'worldview.' The second category consists of assumptions and ideas about the

role of Romania in world politics, defining its foreign policy identity and *role conception*. Finally, the third category consists of ideas and predispositions about what Romania should desire and seek in international relations, predicating the boundaries of what constitutes *appropriate priorities and preferences* in world politics.

The main argument forwarded in this paper is that this symbolic schema produces both benefits and costs for Romanian foreign policy. In view of the global transformations that are taking place, this paper aims to suggest ways that the (potentially growing) costs that derive from this schema can be mitigated through targeted solutions. In some respects, this symbolic schema may have become insufficient, and it may require a certain updating. This is particularly evident when we observe that Romania has rather cold relations with most neighbouring countries, including NATO and EU partners. This symbolic schema, while providing excellent intellectual foundations for enhancing the strategic partnership with the U.S., which it is argued here deserves to be continued, has constrained the deepening of strategic partnerships with major European powers, such as France and Germany. Finally, it has narrowed the parameters of Romanian foreign policy, devoting most of its efforts and resources to its hierarchical relationship with the U.S. and revolving around a small number of existential interests linked to security and status.

### 3.1 WORLDVIEW: ORDER, HIERARCHY, POWER, AND LIMITED REACH

Through its strategic documents and key statements, Romania's foreign policy worldview turns out to be primarily defined in terms of order, hierarchy, power, and rather narrow horizons. Romania appears to view the international system of which it is a part not as a decentralised system ruled by states, but as a relatively orderly system governed by international law and institutions with legitimate authority (see chapter 3 of the National Defence Strategy or the chapter on Foreign Affairs on

<sup>1</sup> Joja (2019) eloquently illustrates how securitising actors and policy entrepreneurs have sought to shape the ideas and notions upon which Romanian foreign policy has rested between 1990 and 2014.

the Government platform)<sup>2</sup>. This global order is defined according to Western liberal prescriptions and tenets, structured by *hierarchical* relations between providers of »public goods« and subordinate states, which consume the »public goods« provided by the dominant powers. Their hierarchical conception seems to be one of the key elements in Romania's worldview. Importantly, *law* and *power* play key roles in this conception of the international system. International law regulates the parameters of state behaviour and power constitutes the mechanism enforcing these arrangements.

The key element of interest here is Romania's hierarchical conception of the global order. The international system is understood as a stratified global order with producers and consumers of international public goods, where the U.S. retains a key position as the security provider of last resort. As a liberal democracy, it perceives this order as desirable due to its positive implications for the country and rejects alternative ordering projects proposed by illiberal actors. References to this understanding of the international system can be found in all strategic documents and key statements issued by the Minister of Foreign Affairs or the President, as evidenced by President Iohannis' UNGA 2019 address, which starts off by proclaiming a »renewed commitment by Romania to multilateralism and the rules-based international order.« Romania is concerned about states behaving in ways contravening the prescriptions and rules of this legitimate order, however, and in particular about Russia's assertiveness in its immediate backyard.

Both because of its highly stratified and hierarchical conception of international relations and because of its perception of threat, Bucharest has focused on developing a strategic partnership with the U.S. as Romania's security provider of last resort. However, this hierarchical conception is responsible not only for a desirable enhancement of relations with the U.S., but also an underappreciation of equally important partnerships with European powers such as France and Germany.

Romania's continuous push to enhance U.S.-Romanian engagement is a legitimate pursuit, which should be continued. But it should also be joined with a coordinated enhancement of its engagement with key European partners. This is not intended to imply that there are no such relations with European partners, but rather to suggest that these may not have sufficient depth. The perceptible asymmetry between the way Romania treats its partnership with the U.S. compared with European powers may be particularly problematic, with growing tensions appearing in the transatlantic partnership. Romania cannot play any credible role as an honest broker between the two sides in managing emerging conflicts, despite its interest in the unity of the alliance. Recent public remarks by individuals intricately linked to the Romanian foreign policy establishment regarding the French reaction to the creation of AUKUS are merely the most recent examples of this failure to adequately appreciate European partnerships.

Besides this conception of the international system as resting on a legitimate and normally stratified global order, Romania's worldview has a rather *limited reach*, being almost exclusively concerned with political and strategic dynamics inside the extended Black Sea region and Central-Eastern Europe. Take, for example, Aurescu's speech at the 2021 Reunion of Romania's Diplomacy, where besides the ample space devoted to relations with the EU and the U.S., regional matters dominated the agenda, while actors and issues beyond the immediate proximity were mentioned only in passing. This is not particularly surprising, considering that most small powers are particularly concerned with their immediate surroundings, as the international relations literature shows. However, this concern for regional matters does not seem to translate into concrete strategies for dealing with neighbours and regional issues that go beyond security. There seems to be no carefully defined strategy towards the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership countries, or vis-à-vis EU members in Eastern Europe. It is even unclear whether Romania has a coherent strategy regarding Moldova. Moreover, this rather narrow outlook makes it less interested in global trends and world issues. Bucharest has not been engaging substantively on issues such as the climate crisis or global challenges to the international trade regime.

To sum up, Romania's worldview conceives the international system as primarily defined by a stratified order based on Western liberal prescriptions, governed by international institutions with legitimate authority, and possessing the necessary power to enforce and reproduce the order against actors engaged in »illicit« behaviour. Overall, this worldview would be unproblematic if not for its reliance on a hierarchical and narrow worldview that tends to underrate the importance of horizontal interdependencies, mutual reliance between European allies, and the value of broadening partnerships. It is important to note that broadening partnerships does not mean reducing the depth of the strategic partnership with the U.S., but rather a need to complement it by means of a greater emphasis on European and non-European engagement. Considering the persistent rifts between the European and the American pillars of the transatlantic bridge, Romania would be well advised to attempt to not simply serve as a proxy, but as an honest broker, and it can only do this if it has the requisite credibility.

### 3.2 ROLE CONCEPTION: DEMOCRATIC AND ATLANTICIST

Romania's conception of its role is the product of the prevalent worldview held by the country's foreign policy establishment and has its sources in the national strategic culture. According to the texts analysed, Romania conceives itself as a *democratic* country that has internalised and continues to adopt Western liberal models and prescriptions. References to its democratic, liberal, rule-of-law-based characteristics abound in all strategic documents and in key speeches delivered by foreign policy officials. For example, the 2020-24 National Defence Strategy begins by positing that the »Romanian people have stated, on numerous occasions, their commitment to safeguarding the rule of law and democracy« (p. 4). The term democracy and its variants crop up twenty-two times in the text on the strategy

<sup>2</sup> This goes against much of scholarly works on international relations, resting on the premise of an anarchical and decentralised international system.

and eleven times in the government's platform chapter on foreign policy. This role conception would appear to be partly descriptive, partly aspirational in an attempt to buttress the democratic regime, which may still be perceived as not embedded deeply enough.

Another key element that can be identified in the texts is the Atlanticist conception and Romania's role in the transatlantic community. This confirms previous studies showcasing that Romania has internalised a role conception that attaches a high value to its Atlanticist identity (Joja 2015). This role conception as an Atlanticist nation implies persistent and consensual support for the improvement and perpetuation of transatlantic security and political relations. However, Romania's Atlanticism translates for the most part into major support for U.S. involvement in Europe and enhancement of its strategic partnership with the U.S. without paying comparable heed to the European 'shore' of the Atlantic in its strategic thinking.

It can be said that Romania's Atlanticism is the product of its hierarchical worldview. Bucharest correctly assessed that the U.S. was and still is the preeminent power in the world, putting it at the top of the global hierarchy, thereby focusing excessively on the American shore of the Atlantic. This seems highly justified if we view the U.S. as the most capable and credible actor that is able to ensure Romania's security. This emphasis on the U.S. has meant less interest and emphasis on deepening and broadening partnerships with other allies, however, especially those that do not necessarily share the same threat perception about Russia in the short term. Because it underrates the importance of European partners, it underplays the risks posed by the tensions and problems arising between the U.S. and other major European partners. This renders it unable to come up with an optimal foreign policy reaction in the face of increasing tensions between the two sides of the Atlantic, especially when the EU is drawn into them. It also irritates other European allies and precludes opportunities to play the role of a mediator or honest broker between the two sides, all the more so considering Romania's interest in a united West.

Another key role conception, yet until now seemingly overlooked, is that of a consumer of international public goods, which is strongly linked with its worldview of the global order as a hierarchical political organisation. Romania sees itself as a net *consumer* of international public goods produced by the U.S., NATO, and the EU. In its strategic documents and in key statements, Romanian foreign policy elites call for increased allocation of resources and public goods related to security, economic investment, and political capital to the country. This can be seen in repeated publicly voiced expectations that the U.S. will increase its investments in the Romanian economy. This was indeed one of the first foreign policy messages issued by Klaus Iohannis in 2015. In this regard, Romania conceives itself mostly as dependent power, even if the language used is often framed in a way that gives the impression of formal equality. While it is a consumer of international public goods produced by the U.S. or the EU, Romania also casually proclaims itself to be a »*security provider*«, which is partly aspirational, partly based on concrete commitments and resource allocation. On the one side, Romania is one of the few NATO members that allocates 2% of

GDP to defence and has sought to contribute to international efforts towards peace and stability around the world. Driven by increasing demands for burden-sharing coming from the U.S. and a desire to be seen as a reliable partner, Romania has invested considerable resources in supporting security initiatives led by its Western partners. On the other side, the rhetoric about Romania as a »*security provider*« is often translated as a »*stability vector*«, meaning that it is seeking to assure domestic stability and, by extension, to contribute to the stability of the region. Romania's role conception as a security consumer and, increasingly, as a producer is strongly linked to its security anxieties in the region, particularly when it comes to Russia. This anxiety translates into a focus on security enhancement as the main preoccupation of Romanian foreign policy.

### 3.3 MAJOR AIMS AND PREOCCUPATIONS: SECURITY ENHANCEMENT AND STATUS-SEEKING

Two main themes appear to dominate Romanian foreign policy when it comes to its aims: enhancing its security posture in the region, especially regarding Russia, and status-seeking. The first major preoccupation of Romanian foreign policy is enhancing the country's security. Other analysts have previously argued that Romania's foreign policy is security-driven, being dominated by a security anxiety fixated on Russia (Joja 2018). Most of the initiatives and projects undertaken by Romania regionally and internationally would appear to narrowly focus on security. This includes most of its strategic initiatives and regional projects, such as *Bucharest 9* and the *Three Seas Initiative*. Romania's symbolic schema portrays Russia as a potentially existential threat, yet this does not necessarily help it in correctly assessing the security environment in the Black Sea region. As Dungaciu and Dumitrescu (2019) show, the failure of Romania's strategic initiatives in the region have been mostly due to misperceptions and misjudgements of the security environment in the Black Sea region. Its security anxiety, which it shares with Poland, produces a rather hawkish rhetoric and posturing vis-à-vis Russia that makes other regional actors with more dovish tendencies resist strategic initiatives proposed by Bucharest. This has been witnessed almost every time Romania has proposed security-driven initiatives in the Black Sea, either within NATO (e.g., the Black Sea flotilla) or outside it.

Romanian foreign policy is overly focused on security, promoting a high politics security agenda that could be construed as bringing about the opposite of its intended effects, negatively affecting the country's standing in the region and heightening a possible security dilemma between Russia and NATO. More importantly, a country's foreign policy needs to be more wide-ranging and differentiated, instead of strictly focused on security and defence.

If this first major preoccupation of Romania's foreign policy seems straightforward, the second one is more of a puzzle: why is *status-seeking* so important? The 2020-24 National Defence Strategy proclaims that »[t]he essential objective of our foreign and security policy, which we will further promote, is to enhance Romania's international *profile*.« In his speech at the 2021 Reunion of Romanian Diplomacy, Bogdan Aurescu declared that

the aims of Romania's foreign policy are the »improvement of the country's role and influence« and to increase the country's »profile.« The term »profile« can be found nine times in the 2020-24 National Defence Strategy, and strengthening its profile internationally constitutes one of the key national security interests mentioned in the strategy. In terms of its meaning, the term *profile* designates social status and social standing internationally. Thus, an »essential objective« of Romania's foreign policy is *status-seeking* and the improvement of its social standing internationally. Conceiving the global order in hierarchical – not necessarily anarchical – terms means that Romania is seeking to climb the social ladder of the U.S.-led order in order to improve its standing.

What does this mean concretely? It means that Romania is overly sensitive to how its allies and partners perceive it, especially in the United States. Thus, much of its diplomatic foreign policy efforts are targeted on improving the perception and image of the country in other capitals. It could be argued that other countries are doing the same thing. The question nevertheless deserves to be raised because it is unclear whether status-seeking is an end in itself or a means to higher ends. This is particularly important because sometimes this status-seeking behaviour overrides other foreign policy considerations and may produce sub-optimal results if it becomes an end in itself. These status-seeking endeavours, while desirable and necessary, risk being perceived as simple self-promotion if they are not matched by substantive contributions. They may even alienate partners in the region that perhaps see a gap between words and deeds.

To sum up, Romania's foreign policy is focused on two broad themes: security enhancement and status-seeking. It seeks to advance its security in the region while simultaneously seeking to improve its social standing and climb the social ladder of the U.S.-led global order. Its status-seeking endeavours seem to be the product of a lack of trust in its own strengths and capabilities vis-à-vis Russia and its elevated threat perception in the region. Overall, Romania's foreign policy remains rather constrained in terms of reach, with limited aims that are relatively narrow in geographic scope.

## 4

## ROMANIA IN THE WORLD? A SEA CHANGE IN ROMANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

What can be done to improve Romania's foreign policy in the face of present-day global transformations? This paper argues that there are at least three potential areas where changes are warranted and from where substantial benefits can emerge. Romania's foreign policy should expand its narrow outlook and overcome its reactive tendency to merely make a contribution wherever and whenever it is asked to. This involves widening and deepening its focus and building expertise in regional and global matters so as to allow it to become proactive regionally and internationally while defining its priorities and strategies more clearly and concretely. Second, Romanian foreign policy would greatly benefit from engaging in an active and targeted »de-securitisation« of key issues. Finally, a third aspect is related to its reliance on a highly hierarchical conception of world politics. Romania should deepen its partnerships *inter alia* with Germany and France, while simultaneously maintaining strong ties with the U.S.

Romania needs to aim to move beyond its narrow mindset and predilection for a reactive foreign policy. The country lacks carefully elaborated strategies for managing bilateral and multilateral relations with most of its neighbours, with the doubtful exception of Moldova. At the global level, Romania's involvement and influence is rather indirect, through the EU and NATO, but with limited input from Bucharest there, as Nițoiu and Moga (2021) show. Romania ought to adopt a more ambitious and active foreign policy to assure that the country's interests are well defended in the face of current global transformations.

Inside the transatlantic community, Romania is well advised to continue its deep engagement with the United States, but should also renew, balance, and deepen its partnerships with countries such as France and Germany. Romania should contribute to the consolidation of NATO and the EU, mediating and mitigating transatlantic rifts by building its credibility as an honest broker. It should also diversify its partnerships and engagements with like-minded countries beyond the West to tackle global concerns that may affect Romania, especially with emerging powers.

The future of the international trade regime, which is currently in question, has the potential to bring significant benefits or costs to Romania as an emerging economy. The growing influence of the developing world, the trade conflicts between the U.S. and

China, as well as the deterioration of the EU's relative economic standing globally will have significant implications for Romania. Above and beyond its Paris Agreement commitments, the climate crisis, the key existential risk to all humankind, is receiving insufficient attention in Bucharest. Recent domestic debates on resource allocation of Next Generation EU funding reveals the limited interest on the part of the political establishment in what is globally perceived as the key issue today. Finally, competition over the terms and conditions of the global order, with its implications for collective security, institutional framework, and liberal normative foundations will shape Romania's security and standing in the world. So far, Romania has appeared to prefer to fall in line behind positions crafted in Washington and Brussels or to delay action, without investing a bit more ambition in its own particularities and potential preferences.

While enhancing the country's security remains a priority, given regional dynamics, Romania would benefit from de-securitizing its foreign policy and its key strategic initiatives in the region. As has also been shown by Dungaciu and Dumitrescu (2019) and Joja (2018), Romania needs to carefully consider the priorities on its security agenda and how it frames its security rhetoric in the region. As other observers have argued, it may indeed be the case that an exclusive focus on security topics is ultimately counterproductive to Romania's foreign policy aims. Shifting to an active and targeted de-securitisation strategy may produce more optimal results and create conditions for increased cooperation with a larger segment of regional actors. This does not mean that Romania should not continue to invest in its defensive and deterrence capabilities. Quite the opposite. But it should simultaneously seek to de-securitize key issues in the region. This has the counterintuitive potential to actually enhance the country's security in the medium to long term by reducing bilateral tensions and improving Romania's relations with regional actors.

Finally, Romania should continue its status-seeking ambitions through substantive contributions to joint initiatives at EU and NATO levels. The current illiberal challenges surfacing in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and Hungary, offer Romania a significant opportunity window to improve its status not only *vis-à-vis* the U.S., but also in relation to other liberal nations. President Iohannis has been pursuing these ambitions,

but substantially more is possible and needed, especially through a coordinated effort between state and non-profit actors. Status should be a means to an end, not an end in itself. Romania needs to contribute to improving societal and institutional resilience both domestically and internationally. Providing substantive new initiatives and commitments related to democratic resilience in the Eastern Partnership and in the Western Balkans, for example, can serve as a venue both with which to enhance Romania's international status and to use this status to strengthen regional stability and democratic resilience.

of key producers of expertise, such as the Romanian Diplomatic Institute, or by supporting the development and consolidation of a think-tank community that produces relevant, qualitative, and novel policy ideas, visions, and strategies with the support of public grants.

#### 4.1 HOW TO ACHIEVE THESE AIMS?

There are potentially two ways to achieve these aims. First, Romania's foreign policy is defined by the prevalent symbolic schema shaping the way decision-makers and foreign policy professionals interpret the world and Romania's role and ambitions. A reform of this symbolic schema must start by adopting a bifurcate strategy that seeks to (1) reform the organisational culture inside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other strategic institutions and by (2) opening the foreign policy black box to expertise and input from the think-tank and civil society community. Reflectivity, a genuine exchange of ideas, and exposure to independent views on foreign policy coming from outside institutional frameworks should be the main mechanisms through which a reform of this symbolic schema can be operated.

Romanian decision-makers should open new venues of interaction and intellectual cross-pollination by actively seeking to involve think-thanks, independent researchers and academics. This can also be done through a mixture between institutional reflection and targeted changes in mission statements, policy planification, and an injection of a reflexive outlook in the direction of diplomats and key decision-makers. A change in the symbolic schema can also take place through generational changes, with new cohorts of diplomats and foreign policy professionals being socialised into new ideas and outlooks on foreign policy. Thus, the current process of institutional reform and reflection that is presently under way at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs offers the perfect context for a sea change in the prevalent symbolic schema.

Second, these aims cannot be achieved without increased resources and expertise. Key here is the development and expansion of the Romanian foreign policy knowledge regime – the constellation of institutions, organisations and actors involved in the production, dissemination, and implementation of knowledge and policy ideas. Going beyond a limited and reactive outlook requires experts with in-depth knowledge of issues and regions or country-specific expertise. For example, Goşu (2021), one of the few reputed Romanian experts on Russia, recently complained that the Romanian government lacks experts on Russia that speak Russian, which may explain recurring misjudgements and misperceptions affecting Romanian foreign policy towards Russia and beyond. This can be managed in several ways, including by enhancing the resources

# 4

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the world is at a turning point, with a series of potentially systemic transformations affecting the standing and interests of Romania. Little has changed when it comes to the country's foreign policy, however. Displaying a limited scope, security-driven, and status-seeking, Romania's ambitions and international preoccupations remain dismally below its potential, which is rather substantial. Why is this? This paper argues that the key factor explaining it all is to be found in the prevailing symbolic schema – a set of ideas, assumptions, and predispositions – through which Romanian decision-makers interpret the world and Romania's role and status in it.

This symbolic schema produces both benefits and costs for Romanian foreign policy. Over the past two decades, it has provided substantial advantages and registered foreign policy and societal successes, especially through integration in the European Union and NATO, and Romania has become highly embedded in the liberal international order. Romania's rather conservative approach to foreign affairs has earned the country a positive perception as a stabilising factor in the region. As the country's foreign policy has remained predictable and reliable, Romania has proven to be an eloquent and stable partner for its Western allies and a staunch advocate of a rules-based international order.

However, this same set of ideas, assumptions and predispositions also limits the scope of Romanian foreign policy, constrains the potential for deepening relations with key actors, and downplays non-security foreign policy aims and initiatives. Without challenging the key geostrategic choices and direction of the country's foreign policy, this paper posits that some changes are warranted. Romania ought to broaden and deepen its foreign policy ambitions and interests, engage on issues and in areas beyond its immediate proximity and narrow interests, while emphasising civil and non-security issues. By reaching out and engaging on issues and with actors from outside its region, it has good chances of improving both its global standing and its security by making substantive and competent contributions to global issues.

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