

Soul search, national and European identity and politics in a time of trouble

Highlights

- ★ Despite almost ten years within the European Union, Romania's accession is not yet complete. It is not part of the Schengen zone and has yet to enter the Eurozone (planned for 2019). Moreover, a core problem remains in the ownership of the necessary reforms to catch up with the rest of the EU and to reform the public authorities.
- ★ Romanian attitudes vis-à-vis the EU are consistently favourable but this is not sufficient evidence of an appreciation for the European Union as it reflects a distrust in national institutions. Nevertheless, more could be done in the national curricula at school to better promote the EU. A greater knowledge base in Romania would help the country reach its true potential within the EU.
- ★ Romania is a firm believer in further integration. It supports an EU energy policy, common foreign policy and a strengthened Eurozone. There is also a belief that the EU should better defend its achievements, such as the four freedoms, as it helps better legitimise the European Union in the eyes of citizens.

Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



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About Building Bridges

Called "Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union", the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others' from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



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What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?

Romania's accession to the European Union has been a long standing dream of a traumatised society after more than half a century of either right wing or left wing dictatorships. The late 1930s found Romania in a precarious geopolitical position with no real allies and at the mercy of two great continental superpowers (Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia). Following the 1939 Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the country was partitioned, and, at the end of WWII, the country was forced into communism under Soviet rule. Since the 1989 Revolution, the Romanian elite has striven to secure a more favourable bargaining position.

The Romanian leadership thereafter tried to join the two major democratic blocks that could secure a free and democratic future: NATO and the European Union.¹ If the security concerns were satisfied by gaining access into NATO in 2004, the more complex socio-economic stability is yet to be fully achieved, even after more than seven years since joining the European Union in 2007.

For many Romanians belonging to the European Union has now become a daily reality with a high number of advantages – both economic and social ones that have started to become so common that we tend to ignore them. Moreover, European Union accession has also offered security and diplomatic advantages.²

Even if opposition leaders such as Alina Gorghiu, co-president of the National Liberal Party, the main opposition party, share a rosy outlook, the process of obtaining advantages from the European Union and full integration is not yet complete. The main objective of any future liberal government will be the “reduction

of the development differences to zero” between Romania and the European Union.³

From official speeches it is clear that there are still two main issues to be solved that can be defined as key gains from the European Union membership – the euro adoption and access to the Schengen Area.

The Eurozone accession statements of the Romanian Government now advance the date of 2019 as a set goal for adopting the single currency. Romania also needs to join the banking union to ensure a more disciplined fiscal and financial system.⁴

As for the Schengen Area, it is a reminder of the existence of a two speed Europe – where the periphery (Romania) is held apart from the more developed core (Western Europe). For many officials it has become a symbol of Romania's lack of full integration into the European Union. It is a visible element of the differentiation that still exists and of the risks that threaten the freedom of movement. For a former communist country whose economy and social stability often depended on the remittances sent by Romanians working abroad, it is also a sign of the still frail role Romania has in the European Union – whereby its level of influence does not match the size of its population nor territory.

The former chief negotiator for Romania's accession to the EU, Vasile Puscaş summarised, in 2015, the three main reasons why Romanians wanted to join the European Union: cease being a *cordon sanitaire* (buffer zone) between two geopolitical blocks; become a part of the internal market; and be part of an area where the chances for development are higher for our citizens.⁵

Yet years later there are still things that need to be done. The main problem is the

ownership of necessary reforms and working procedures within Romania's authorities. Relatedly, the management and therefore absorption of Structural Funds remain a sensitive issue.

Being a part of the European Union means being part of a larger framework meant to ensure prosperity and economic welfare. The security dimension only emerged with the Ukraine crisis, which led Romanians to see the EU as an additional layer to their security.

In that sense reinvigorating the Eastern Partnership and basing it on sound principles while keeping all the options on the table is a good solution. Moreover, the EU sanctions on the Russian Federation proved to be a good deterrent by causing economic stress that severely affects its assertive foreign policy.

Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?

Romania has always been a Europhile country. Polls suggest a high rate of confidence in the European Union institutions, higher even than for national authorities. Yet, this may not be a clear sign regarding what the EU really means, but rather a sign of distrust in the national administrative system.

With a large percentage of the population living in rural areas, high unemployment and poverty problems and often a low interest in political issues, the Romanian public has not been subjected to much information regarding the European Union, which is often coloured by politicians' views.

What characterises the Romanian attitude is its favourable impression and strong support of the European Union as seen by various opinion polls⁶ even if Romanians' perception of the

European Union is somewhat misleading – for many, the EU is associated with human rights and freedom of movement and with peace with neighbouring countries.

One of the last European Union polls show that 37% of Romanians tend to trust the European Union as opposed to only 30% who trust the Romanian Parliament, while only 29% trust the national government.⁷

Yet, the European Union is not only about human rights and freedom of movement nor is it only about economic security. It is also about values and the fight for promoting the national interest. This is not yet fully understood and this is perhaps why the feeling of being pro-European Union is so strong. Romania, unlike other countries, has entered the Union with a poor socio-economic background, marked by rising inequalities and poor administration that have made Romanians perceive European Union integration as a positive development.

Moreover all the current difficulties are being blamed on national politicians.

Yet, we must remember that it takes two to tango, and step by step the younger generation will take into consideration the way the European Union family relates to us in addition to national feedback.

This will also necessitate the debunking of a common misunderstanding, widely spread in Romania, that the European Union brings benefits without constraints. This is, in my opinion, another sign of the misunderstanding of the European Union project – that too many hopes and expectations are invested in it. If we put an end to these illusions, Romania will be able to formulate a more realistic policy vis-à-vis the European Union.

Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?

Romania has yet to attain the full degree of influence it deserves within the EU, given its size and population. What is important is never being left behind, a prognosis that remains difficult to attain considering the country is not yet part of the Eurozone and the Schengen area.

In regard to the European Union, the official position of the new government repeatedly stated by the incoming Prime Minister Dacian Cioloş is: “Romania is a part of the European Union and not an annex”.⁸ The country’s main problem in his opinion is not the European Union process as such, but rather the lack of efforts made to understand it.

First and foremost Romania must create some sort of political mechanism that would prevent internal political debates from continuing to influence our European Union politics. Too often internal political debates affect foreign policy decisions, which creates confusion among Romania’s partners.

A clear example is the current refugee crisis whereby the internal political discourse as well as the internal power games (impending local and parliamentary elections in 2016) have made the entire public discourse very reserved. Romania’s government opposed the idea of “compulsory quotas” of refugees, talking instead of “voluntary quotas”, leaving the country in the company of other Member States, such as Hungary. This attitude also had a direct effect over the Schengen Area negotiations as the inability to have a pro-European position hampered our negotiation advantages.⁹

Romania also has an important decision to take with regard to the “Brexit” issue. A first

answer was provided by Romanian president Klaus Iohannis at his meeting in Bucharest with Donald Tusk, president of the European Council. The main position presented was that the Romanian administration fully endorses Tusk’s Proposal, having reservations only with the chapter on freedom of movement and social benefits, as the Romanian president clearly underlined that it must not affect the rights of the Romanian workers in the United Kingdom.¹⁰

Things are fluid in the current context, but Romanian politics must strive for more consistency at the European Union level in order to insulate internal political disputes as much as possible, so that they do not interfere with negotiations at the European Union level.¹¹

According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European Union public sphere among your national citizens?

Education is and remains essential for creating a common core of educated citizens to strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European Union public sphere

We need to develop activities that promote the European Union spirit and values among our youth. We should pay more attention to creating an adequate curriculum for all stages of the educational cycle and promote EU studies.

The European Union also needs to be more present in the day to day debates. The EU institutions must amplify their efforts to better communicate directly with national citizens, without the mediation of national authorities. All too often we see local leaders claiming that good decisions taken at the European Union level and applied nationally are theirs, while they blame the European Union for all the negative decisions that need to be taken.

Also the European Union needs to tackle its democratic deficit by engaging ordinary citizens in the decision-making process from the very beginning. It must develop flexible communication and interaction procedures that can be accessed by anyone no matter their level of education or knowledge.

Also the European Union must stand firm and protect what has already been achieved, such as the Schengen Area and the four freedoms. One of the best incentives for creating a sense of belonging is to allow people to travel and circulate freely throughout the European Union. This may be undermined as a result of the Brexit debate since the social rights of Romanian workers in the United Kingdom may come under threat. The European Union must act decisively so that there is no discrimination between EU citizens.

Last but not least, the European Union must try to have a Eurozone which contains all the willing European Member States. Having a single currency is a great stimulus for the perception that we are all together in the same family. Efforts should be made to consolidate the Eurozone governance in order to avoid further problems.

The European Union must also try to develop some common symbols – other than the ones already in place - that may be propagated among the national citizens and thus create a sense of belonging and of a European Union identity.

And this brings us to another delicate topic regarding Romanians working in European Union institutions (according to some unofficial estimates there are approximately 2,000 in the European Union institutions and 500 in lobbying organisations),¹² and that is the question of creating a core of leading experts

that might take part in any European Union project - a group of experts that besides promoting the European Union values would also act as a liaison between the country and the rest of European Union institutions.

Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the European Union level in order to better legitimise the European Union project?

Trying to identify which policies should be conducted at the European Union level in order to better legitimise the European Union project is a tricky endeavour given the fact that priorities differ for each country.

In my opinion, it is crucial to start with those basic policies that ensure mutual knowledge and an increase in the level of tolerance among European Union citizens.

It is essential to develop and enforce the four major liberties and create a truly unique European Union economy. It is important to have an integrated labour market where Romanian (as well as Polish, British etc.) workers can go and work anywhere within the European Union without fear of losing basic social rights and salary. Labour legislation should be harmonised to create a minimum set of common standards for all employees.

There is also a role to play for the so-called “Erasmus generation”, which needs to do more at the European Union level to instigate the mutual recognition of diplomas and eliminate the national “monopolies” on education and recognition of diplomas. A doctor from Romania must be able to have the same basic skills and competences as a doctor from any other country. He or she must be able to work anywhere in the European Union without

having to pass lengthy equivalence exams or other time-consuming and expensive courses.

The European Union must also be about solidarity, in energy for instance. In a world where we are both the actors and the victims of a “game of pipelines”, we need secure energy sources all year long. We need to develop a European Union level energy policy that ensures fair treatment for all member states and common rules for negotiations with third parties.

The European Union must also do more to develop a strong common foreign policy. In a world where the voice of the Member States may slowly fade away, we need to develop common resources for creating an effective foreign policy for the benefit of European citizens.

The European Union is also about democracy and the representative character of its main institution. We must try to develop an electoral reform of the European Parliament elections that would satisfy all the needs of more representation and democratic legitimacy. European Union citizens must feel like they are real stakeholders in the democratic process and that decisions come from the grassroots and not top down.

The last couple of years have marked a sad wave of high level criticism regarding the way the EU functions. In the context of the refugee crisis we have seen a crumbling of EU rules and

norms to an unimaginable level. We have thus seen in Romania the recurrence of some keywords that have become real mantras in regard to policy elites’ rhetoric on the European Union: vision, coherence, rigour, better planning etc.

“As President, however, I must be honest and say that I expect more from the functioning of the European mechanisms. I want more coherence from the European Union, more vision, and more strategy. The European project is not just a slogan, and the European Union is not just a set of bureaucratic mechanisms. A united Europe is the materialised vision of a world that is more prosperous, more united and closer to its citizens. I want more efficient management within the European institutions, greater coherence, better planning, and more rigour in what concerns the European agenda.”¹³

We also need continuous and well-developed security policies at the EU level in conjunction with NATO and the USA in order to ensure security and prosperity. The next EU Global Strategy must therefore take into consideration the sensibilities of the Eastern Member States and ensure a comprehensive action pack for the extended Black Sea Region. The Ukrainian crisis and the Russian economic sanctions revealed a European Union where, all too often, the interests of Member States regarding necessary actions are divergent.

Endnotes

1. For the European Union accession it is worth mentioning what is now known as the Snagov Statement from June 1995 when all the leaders of the Parliamentary parties declared the accession to the European Union to be a “strategic objective” creating the necessary national consensus for any future reforms. See more at *Din lucrările comisiei de la Snagov – martie – iunie 1995* (From the works of Snagov Commission – March – June 1995), 2000, <http://www.cdep.ro/>.
2. Adina VLAD, “Ponta: UE este deja o parte integrată a vieții noastre, iar acest statut ne oferă avantaje economice și sociale, precum și beneficii de securitate sau diplomatice” (Ponta: European Union is already an integrated part of our life, and this status offers us economic and social advantages, and also security and diplomacy benefits), *Adevărul*, 25 April 2015, <http://adevarul.ro/>.
3. Adina Vlad, “Ponta: UE este deja o parte integrată a vieții noastre, iar acest statut ne oferă avantaje economice și sociale, precum și beneficii de securitate sau diplomatice” (Ponta: European Union is already an integrated part of our life, and this status offers us economic and social advantages, and also security and diplomacy benefits), *Adevărul*, 25 April 2015, <http://adevarul.ro/>.
4. Florin Georgescu, Speech held at the conference “European Banking Union: recent evolutions and implication at the level of the Romanian banking sector”, 15 October 2014, <http://www.bnr.ro/>.
5. Interview with Vasile Pușcaș, “The political class wanted the adhesion to the European Union just as trifle of acceptance in the Western family”, *Calea Europeana*, 27 April 2015, <http://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/>.
6. “European Union in Romanian’s Perception”, INSCOP Opinion poll, 8 May 2015, <http://www.ziare.com/>.
7. European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer, Romania Country Report, No. 82, December 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/.
8. Interview of Dacian Cioloș, “Romania is a part of the European Union, not an appendix”, *Agerpres*, 22 November 2015, <http://www.agerpres.ro/>.
9. Mihai Sebe, “Romania’s stance in the issue of the Refugees crisis: Preliminary Observations”, *IED Working Paper*, December 2015, <http://www.iedonline.eu/>.
10. Klaus Iohannis and Donald Tusk, Joint Press Statement, 15 February 2016, available online at <http://www.presidency.ro/>.
11. Foreign Policy Debate: “How can be increased Romania’s Role in the European Policies?”, *Adevărul*, 20 March 2015, <http://adevarul.ro/>.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Klaus Iohannis, Speech on the occasion of the annual meeting with the representatives of the diplomatic corps accredited in Bucharest, 21 January 2016, available online at <http://www.presidency.ro/>.