

The United States, Romania, and the new transatlantic security framework at the end of the Cold War (1990-1991)

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to analyze how Romania has made its own choices about its future in Europe at the end of the Cold War, in the period between the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Throughout the paper it can be observed that the first two years of post-communist Romania's political evolution were marked by a false start in relation with the West. On the one hand, the domestic events in Romania maintained a negative perception of the West, and the government in Bucharest was not able to change this image. Furthermore, the imprecision and reluctance of Romania's foreign policy gestures deepened this negative perception. Unlike other states in the region that have sent specific signals about the willingness to embrace rapidly the values of democracy and market economy, and to get closer to the Euro-Atlantic community, Romania's gestures have created confusion, causing its late integration into the new European security system.*

Keywords: Romanian foreign policy, U.S. foreign policy, European security, Post-Cold War era.

The year 1989 marked the most dramatic transformation in the history of postwar Europe. In just a few months, the communist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed like a row of dominoes, marking a symbolic end of the political and ideological division of the European continent. Thereby, the Cold War ended in exactly the same geopolitical area in which the United States and the Soviet Union began to dispute the supremacy of their own value system. Moreover, the future of the international system was covered in uncertainty. The Soviet withdrawal from its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe let a security vacuum that had to be

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covered by formulating new European security arrangements, in order to maintain stability and to reduce the threats and risks that could affect international security¹.

Setting the new transatlantic framework after 1989

Following the fall of the Berlin wall, the main goal of US foreign policy was to remain engaged in Europe and to lead the new transatlantic security architecture focused on the North Atlantic Alliance. America has rapidly chosen to lead the new international system and to avoid a premature withdrawal from Europe. Immediately after the Malta summit in December 1989, George Bush announced his vision regarding the future of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture: “I pledge today that the United States will maintain significant military forces in Europe as long as our allies desire our presence as part of a common security effort. As I said at NATO earlier this year, the United States will remain a European power. That means the United States will stay engaged in the future of Europe and in our common defence”². The vision proposed by the Bush administration, known as the New Atlanticism, tried to reconcile the European aim to foster the integration process and the American goal to lead a transatlantic security framework.

The American presence in Europe was seen as a stability factor. In June 1990, during the Washington summit, Bush asserted: “We hope a continued US presence there will be seen as something that’s stabilizing. And NATO is the existing machinery that we feel, with an expanded mission, can best provide that stability”³. President’s Bush main goal was to assure the preeminence of the Alliance in Europe and to prevent other European independent structures to emerge as a competitor for NATO.

The US determination to persist engaged in Europe collided with Europe’s own ambitions to build a security framework. This dissension had an important

¹ To understand the uncertainty of the post-Cold War reality in Europe, see Stephen Van Evera, “Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War”, *International Security*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1990-1991, pp. 7-57.

² George H. W. Bush, “Outline of Remarks at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Headquarters in Brussels”, December 4, 1989, *Public Papers: George Bush, 1989*, Book 2, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1990, p. 1647.

³ “News Conference of President Bush and President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union”, June 3, 1990, *Public Papers: George Bush, 1990*, Book 1, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1991, p.763.

impact upon the debates regarding the process of redefining the Euro-Atlantic security in the next period. France established a goal to foster the European integration and acted in the first phase according to the De Gaulle doctrine, which advocated for a lower American influence in Europe⁴. Therefore, France often collided with the U.S. objective to lead the European security system after the Cold War.

France desired a broader and strengthened role for the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and, at the same time, the development of a European security and defence identity. These were to be achieved by proposing the absorption of the Western European Union in the process of European construction, in order to function as the armed pillar of the European Union. Moreover, François Mitterrand proposed, as a personal project, to establish a European confederation with the aim to gather all the states of the continent in a joint and permanent organization⁵. Among other tasks, this confederation was supposed to fill up the security vacuum left over by the Soviet disengagement in Central and Eastern Europe. Mitterrand's project encountered a lot of skepticism and, consequently, the American alternative was preferred.

After the end of the Cold War, the US goal was to maintain NATO's dominance in the European security architecture in order to link the two sides of the Atlantic. However, until 1989, NATO was thought as a mechanism against the Soviet Union. Once the enemy was gone, however, the continued relevance of NATO was brought into question and the new framework implied rethinking NATO's role. While the collective defence guarantees provided by article 5 still remained the fundamental pillar, it was necessary to reinforce the political element and to redefine the strategic concept of the Alliance, based on a new concept of security⁶.

During the process of developing a new Euro-Atlantic security architecture in the post-Cold War era, the essential role was played by the North-Atlantic Alliance. The Alliance had to manage the new challenges determined by the Europeans' desire to build their own Security and Defence Identity and by the

⁴ Frederic Bozo, "Winners and Losers: France, the United States and the End of the Cold War", *Diplomatic History*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2009, p. 952.

⁵ Idem, "The Failure of a Grand Design: Mitterrand's European Confederation, 1989-1991", *Contemporary European History*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2008, pp. 391-412.

⁶ See Colin McInnes, "Europe's Jurassic Park? NATO and the End of the Cold War", *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1994, pp. 21-30.

security vacuum left behind by the withdrawal of the Soviets from the continent. Thus, NATO had to redefine its role and to adapt to the new international context after the end of the Cold War⁷.

At the Rome summit, between 7 and 8 November 1991, the Alliance adopted a new strategic concept, based on a broader security approach. The new concept included the ethnic rivalries and the territorial conflicts from Central and Eastern Europe among the threats to the NATO Member States⁸. Despite the security guarantees provided by article 5 of the Washington Treaty, the new strategic concept highlighted the new challenges towards the international security which outstripped the framework of collective defence. In addition, the North Atlantic Cooperation Council was established as a dialogue and cooperation mechanism with the former communist states that did not, in fact, receive the security guarantees provided by article 5. However, this was the first phase in a longer process which goal was to bring the states from Central and Eastern Europe closer to the political and security structures of the Alliance. At the time, an enlargement of NATO was difficult to imagine and could have cancelled all the efforts undertaken to assure the stability on the European continent, as the Soviet Union had not withdrawn officially from the area⁹. Neither the Alliance, nor the states from Eastern Europe were prepared to accomplish this phase.

The differences between the American and European visions in terms of relating to the new security architecture in Europe are harmonized by adopting the formula of “interlocking institutions.” According to this formula: “NATO, CSCE, the European community, the Western European Union and the Council of Europe have to complete each other”¹⁰. Thus, the European ambition to promote its own strategic vision of the post-Cold War era had limited results¹¹. The U.S. decision to

⁷ Mihail Dobre, *România la sfârșitul Războiului rece*, Bucharest, Editura Enciclopedică, 2011, pp. 199-200. Also see Robert McCalla, “NATO’s persistence after the Cold War”, *International Organization*, vol. 50, no. 3, 1996, pp. 445-475.

⁸ “The Alliance’s New Strategic Concept”, Rome, November 7-8, 1991, available at the following address http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_23847.htm.

⁹ See Jonathan Eyal, “NATO’s Enlargement: Anatomy of a Decision”, *International Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 4, 1997, pp. 695-719.

¹⁰ “Rome Declaration on Peace and Cooperation”, Press Communique, S-1(91)86, Roma, 8th of November 1991, available online at the following address <http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c911108a.htm>.

¹¹ See Jolyon Howorth, “The EU, NATO and the Origins of CFSP & ESDP: Old Thinking, False Starts and New Imperatives”, in Frederic Bozo (ed.), *Europe and the End of the Cold War: A reappraisal*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 259-270.

stay engaged in Europe centered the Euro-Atlantic security architecture on the North Atlantic Alliance under the leadership of America.

After the bold changes faced by Eastern Europe during 1989, the American leadership in Europe was envisaged by Washington as a factor of stability; both for the future of Europe and for the international system. In the end, the European security system was transformed according to the terms agreed by the officials in Washington. As the American scholar Mary Elise Sarotte asserted, America had chosen to offer Europe a prefabricated multilateralism¹². This multilateralism was anything else but a system that would assure U.S. preeminence in Europe.

“Diplomacy of the absurd”: Romania’s relationship with the West after the fall of the Communist regime

After the fall of communism, the future of the new East-European regimes was uncertain. How far would advance the processes of democratization and reform in this countries newly freed from communism? There were no guarantees that the states from Central and Eastern Europe will embrace rapidly the values of democracy and market economy. Also, there was a risk of recurrence of ethnic violence and border conflicts, kept in the background during the Cold War¹³. Hence, the Eastern democracies had to be integrated in a new European concert in order to maintain stability in the region and to prevent them to become a risk factor for the Euro-Atlantic security. In great measure, the political stability of the European continent depended on how the future of European security would be managed and the role assigned to Eastern Europe in this new security system¹⁴. Although their integration in the European system was necessary to maintain its stability, the states in the region had to prove their willingness to embrace the Western values and to move closer to the Euro-Atlantic community.

At the same time, Romania had to manage an extremely difficult context because it had known the toughest and isolated communist regime, with the most

¹² Mary E. Sarotte, “In victory, magnanimity: US Foreign Policy, 1989-1991, and the legacy of prefabricated multilateralism”, *International Politics*, vol. 48, no. 4/5, 2011, pp. 482-495.

¹³ See Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Post-Communist Nationalism”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 5, 1989/1990, pp. 1-25; Valerie Bunce, “Rising above the Past: The Struggle for Liberal Democracy in Eastern Europe”, *World Policy Journal*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1990, pp. 395-430; Jack S. Snyder, “Averting Anarchy in the New Europe”, *International Security*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1990, pp. 5-41.

¹⁴ Curt Gasteyger, “The Remaking of Eastern Europe’s Security”, *Survival*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1991, pp. 111-124.

precarious economic and social situation. Unlike other ex-communist countries, several factors have contributed for the new government in Bucharest to start with delay in its effort to improve its international image. A particular opposition to embrace the path to reform or the subsequent political and ethnic tensions, such as the ethnic conflict in Targu-Mures or the brutal repression of young students peacefully protesting in the University square, had kept the West's negative perception on Romania¹⁵.

After five months since the fall of the Berlin wall, the American intelligence community made its first analysis on the future of Eastern Europe. There was a first delimitation of the states in the region in two groups, one including Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and the other including Romania, Bulgaria and Albania. Moreover, in a worst-case scenario regarding the political evolutions in Eastern Europe, Romania was nominated along with Yugoslavia as the states with the greatest possibility to turn to "authoritarianism, growing repression of ethnic minorities, civil strife, and even the onset of greater interstate frictions"¹⁶. One can ascertain today that the Yugoslav scenario became reality. Romania stayed away from this evolution. However, the perception of its international partners at the beginning of the 1990s depended on the choices made at home.

Furthermore, in the case of Romania, the perception that the political power had been assumed by members of the ex-communist regime, combined with the decision of the National Salvation Front to become a political party, made impossible the existence of a national consensus regarding the future of Romania¹⁷. The new opposition parties did not benefit from the structures of power inherited from the former regime thus it was very difficult to gather support from a politically immature society. Nevertheless, the opposition was barely taken into account by the new government in the process of redefining the national interest of Romania. These factors have contributed to the perception that the new political

¹⁵ M. Dobre, *op.cit.*, pp. 239-240. For the evolution of the events, see Steven D. Roper, *Romania: The Unfinished Revolution*, Amsterdam, Harwood Academic, 2000, pp. 110-112.

¹⁶ "National Intelligence Estimate 12-90, The Future of Eastern Europe (key judgements only)", April 1990, in Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton (eds.), *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2010, p. 690.

¹⁷ For an analysis regarding the political evolution of post-communist Romania, see Tom Gallagher, "A feeble embrace: Romania's engagement with democracy, 1989-94", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1996, pp. 145-172.

power hesitated in moving toward political liberalization, which determined the skepticism of the West regarding the evolution of Romania.

The events of June 1990 have deepened even more Western Europe's negative perception on Romania. The American ambassador in Bucharest was recalled to Washington for consultations, an extremely severe gesture in diplomatic relations. According to an American official: "No other event affected more the American point of view than the arrival of the miners in Bucharest, an event with very negative impact. It seemed that the regime in Romania is using a part of society to repress the dissidence"¹⁸. Furthermore, even if the bilateral relationship improved, especially due to Romania's attitude towards the Persian Gulf crisis in the UN Security Council, Romania's domestic situation did not change, and, in September 1992, the prime minister Petre Roman had resigned, following a new arrival of the miners in Bucharest.

One can observe that Romania had a false start in the relationship with its Euro-Atlantic partners, and the officials in Bucharest did not have the capacity of understanding the nature of domestic changes that the West was willing to perceive in Romania. Thus, the efforts to change Romania's image, an indispensable element which influenced the development of its foreign policy in the next period, did not find a strong response from the Western governments. This discrepancy between the messages of Washington and Bucharest was labeled "diplomacy of the absurd" by Robert Hutchings, director of European Affairs at the National Security Council in 1989-1992¹⁹.

Adrian Nastase, Foreign Minister between June 1990 and October 1992, claims that one of the issues of dissatisfaction in the relationship with the West was the attempt to isolate Romania through its exclusion from the efforts to create regional organizations²⁰. Thereby, Romania was getting a discriminatory treatment, and the Americans did not support Romania openly, the relationship

¹⁸ Observation used by Lawrence Eagleburger, deputy Secretary of State, in a conversation with Adrian Nastase on November 30, 1990. See Adrian Nastase, *România după Malta. 875 de zile la Externe*, vol. 2 (November 1 – December 31, 1990), Bucharest, Titulescu European Foundation, 2006, pp. 224-225.

¹⁹ See Robert L. Hutchings, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 245-253.

²⁰ Adrian Nastase, *Romanian-American partnership: my contribution*, Bucharest, Monitorul Oficial, 2013, p. 89.

being characterized by “frustration and different interests”²¹. The Romanian government wanted fair treatment, considering that it made decisive steps towards democracy and market economy²². Also, the government considered that it had the support of the majority of the citizens in the commitment to implement radical reforms²³. Analyzing these assertions, one can observe that the two parts did not speak the same language in the bilateral relations, since the Americans did not perceive the same degree of change in Romania.

Therefore, according to Nastase, America targeted the differentiation between states from Central and Eastern Europe. The Romanian official considers that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Americans pursued to encourage the democratic processes in the region, acknowledging, at the same time, the security interests of the Soviet Union. Afterwards, when the Soviet withdrawal became more obvious, the American administration pursued to create a pro-American bloc of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, because these states offered much more advantages and could be influenced through economic support or through the promise for help in getting the Soviet troops out of their territories. Instead, Romania was left in a grey-zone, a buffer between the West and USSR. Because they could not determine the alignment of Romania’s policy, the Americans conceived in this case the “democratic differentiation” thesis and they exerted domestic pressures with the help of the political opposition²⁴.

Also, Romania’s former president, Ion Iliescu, argues that in the relationship between the US and the Soviet Union “intervened in 1990 a sort of tacit agreement that pulled out from the zone of Soviet interest only Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia”²⁵.

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyze if America had a strategy in the vein described by Năstase and Iliescu. But, at the same time, one can observe that the domestic evolution of Romania did not respect the genuine Western democratic standards, although the Romanian officials claimed the contrary. Even if the

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

²² See the conversation between Nastase and Larry Napper, Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Bucharest, in A. Nastase, *România după Malta...*, vol. 1 (June 28 – October 31, 1990), pp. 253-254.

²³ A. Nastase, *România după Malta*, vol. 2, p. 9.

²⁴ *Idem*, *Romanian-American partnership...*, pp. 24-27.

²⁵ Ion Iliescu, *Fragmente de viață și istorie trăită*, Bucharest, Litera Publishing House, 2011, p. 170.

officials from Bucharest stressed the positive aspects in Romania's political evolution, the efforts were not enough because the domestic evolution did not pass unobserved in the West, especially in Washington²⁶.

According to Robert Hutchings, the American government was considering any forward moving in its bilateral relations with Romania on the condition to perceive "demonstrable progress" in Bucharest on four main areas of concerns: free and fair elections, democratic control over the Securitate, independent media, and equal treatment of minorities²⁷. Although the situation in Romania was improving and Washington was exercising pressure to see tangible results, the progress was still very slow.

Romania and the new Euro-Atlantic security system

The majority of the Eastern states were preoccupied to redefine their position within the new Euro-Atlantic security system in order to find solutions to their security concerns²⁸. In the first years after 1989, there was an outbreak of regional organizations initiatives. The most successful initiative was the Visegrad group, formed by Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary. The Visegrad Group was not an international organization, but a mechanism of dialogue and cooperation to support the common effort of the member states to get closer to the Euro-Atlantic community. It represented a political message and, at the same time, it illustrated the availability to cooperate with the European structures²⁹. Their political will was immediately transformed into concrete measures and they made important steps towards NATO after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact.

In its effort to avoid becoming a buffer zone between East and West, Romania also attempted to propose initiatives of regional organizations. The most important was the Union of Central Europe, proposed in 1991. This organization was envisaged as a security structure of the European states, members of the Warsaw Pact, within the wider framework of CSCE, and in which could take part

²⁶ See the conversation between Năstase and Lawrence Eagleburger, the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, on May 28, 1992, in A. Năstase, *Romanian-American partnership....*, pp. 97-103.

²⁷ Robert L. Hutchings, *op.cit.*, p. 249.

²⁸ Vojtech Mastny, "Eastern Europe and the early prospect for EC/EU and NATO membership", *Cold War History*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2009, pp. 203-221; Rosser Baldwin Jr., "Addressing the security concerns, of Central Europe through NATO", *European Security*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1993, pp. 545-566.

²⁹ M. Dobre, *op.cit.*, pp. 186-187.

as observers the United States, the European Community, and USSR. This initiative was welcomed with reserves because a Central-European security organization could hamper the perspectives of getting closer to NATO and could also antagonize Russia³⁰. Therefore, the initiative did not gather the support of other states. These concerns did not lack justification, especially if we bear in mind the U.S. objectives in Europe after 1989. Thus, Washington did not perceive in a positive manner a gesture that would tried to create a new security organization Europe.

On the other hand, the first two years of Romania's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era were more hesitating that in the above-mentioned case. I already asserted the West's negative perception on Romania and the Romanian officials' failure to change it, especially due to developments in domestic politics. At the same time, Romania has chosen to implement a moderate foreign policy towards the dramatic transformations that were taking place in Europe. The Visegrad Group acted in a more decisive manner, drawing more clearly its option for Europe and NATO³¹. Instead, Romania preferred to play both ends, formulating imprecise foreign policy gestures. By the time Romania asserted firmly its Western option, it was already too late to become member of the Euro-Atlantic family, simultaneously with the Visegrad Group.

Romania's hesitation could easily be observed in its foreign policy gestures. The assertion of the new government established after the Romanian revolution to respect its commitments within the Warsaw Pact, although this alliance was generated by the former communist regime, or the support for CSCE as the fundamental pillar of the new European security system are illustrative for the strategy adopted by the new political power in Bucharest³². Romania's support for larger security arrangements, such as those promoted by the French president Mitterand, collided with the American objectives to maintain its preeminence in Europe through a redefined NATO.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 257-261.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 239-243.

The same middle way path was applied in its relationship the Soviet Union³³. Romania was the only state that accepted the Soviet proposal to conclude bilateral treaties with former communist countries in the context of Warsaw Pact's dissolution. Moreover, the article fourth of treaty mentioned that the parties will not participate in any alliances directed against any one of them³⁴. Iliescu pointed out that the purpose of this treaty was to replace the old treaty based on the old realities between USSR and Romania. Also, he stressed that the article four did not obstruct Romania's evolution towards NATO because, at the time, the Atlantic Alliance and the Soviet Union did not consider themselves adversaries³⁵.

Although Iliescu's assertion is real to some extent, unequivocally this article was able to limit Romania's discretion in foreign policy. Facing a strong opposition, the treaty was never ratified by the Romanian Parliament. But, at the same time, the failure of the Romanian diplomacy to foresee the dissolution of the Soviet state and given that Romania wanted, at least theoretically, to make precise steps towards the Euro-Atlantic community, it represented a negative foreign policy gesture for the West. It proved once again the imprecision and hesitation in Romania's foreign policy.

Conclusions

To conclude with, it is clear that the first two years of post-communist Romania's political evolution were marked by a false start in relation with the West. On the one hand, the domestic events in Romania maintained a negative perception of the West, and the government in Bucharest was not able to change this image. It was a real discrepancy between the messages of the two parts. The officials from Bucharest did not understand the nature of the domestic changes that the West wanted to see in Romania. Thus, the policy of the West in its relation to Bucharest was perceived as discriminatory in comparison to other states.

Furthermore, the imprecision and reluctance of Romania's foreign policy gestures deepened this negative perception. Unlike other states in the region that have sent specific signals about the willingness to embrace rapidly the values of

³³ Viktor B. Kirilov, Igor S. Putintev, "Relațiile dintre România și Rusia după 1989", in Laurențiu Constantiniu (ed.), *In memoriam Florin Constantiniu*, Bucharest, Editura Enciclopedică, 2013, pp. 372-375.

³⁴ See the text of the treaty in M. Dobre, *op.cit.*, pp. 350-358.

³⁵ Ion Iliescu, *Fragmente de viață...*, pp. 181-182.

democracy and market economy, and to get closer to the Euro-Atlantic community, Romania's gestures created confusion, causing its late integration into the new European security system.

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