

European interview

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“Russia’s war in Eastern Europe is a central threat to the international architecture”

In the short, medium and long term, what dangers does Russia’s attack on Ukraine pose to the European Union? Is there a different perception of these dangers/threats in Eastern Europe?

The Russian aggression in Ukraine, which began more than three months ago, has come at a complex time at both European and global level. Dealing with the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic already required a great deal of effort, imagination and mobilisation on the part of states and citizens. Transformations and reforms have been launched to respond to the new reality and to allow for a sustainable, environmentally friendly recovery. It was in this context that we witnessed the return of war to the European continent after 77 years of peace, with unprecedented suddenness and violence.

Russia’s war in Eastern Europe is not a conflict relegated to the periphery of political reality, but in its present form is a central threat to the international architecture as we know it.

Russia presents several dangers to Europe at the moment. On the one hand, there are the most visible and direct threats: armed threats, destruction and war - as we are already seeing on the ground and also with a potential extension of the conflict. There is also an element of uncertainty, as this is a war to, supposedly, make others pay for perceived offences of the past ...and to cover up one’s own mistakes of the present. On the other hand, there are also more subtle elements related to the energy dependencies of some EU member states, the economic and social pressure of refugees, the global food crisis, and the consequences of the economic turns imposed by the imperatives of the moment. The combination of these, together with wear and tear and fatigue in the face of a situation whose duration cannot be predicted, is in fact the real danger for the European

Union. The temptation to give easy answers to existing problems and to turn inward is causing disunity. We must remain vigilant and bridge the cracks, so that we can remain united, faithful to Europe and its values.

The countries of Eastern Europe are on the front line against Russia. They have been the first to suffer the expansionist consequences caused by Moscow and they have pioneered increased and permanent vigilance. Romania has been one of the most consistent voices in highlighting the danger of Russia’s stance. And we have not been alone in this assessment. In 2015, on Romania and Poland’s initiative, the countries on NATO’s Eastern flank^[1] created the Bucharest 9 format within the Alliance to deepen dialogue and support the importance of an Allied military presence in this part of Europe. The creation of four new Alliance battlegroups in the B9 countries is a result of the accuracy of this assessment.

What are the consequences of the war that are already visible for Europe?

In this crisis, the European Union has been able to respond according to its international weight and strength. In its entirety and without exception, the EU has mobilised in an absolutely impressive way. In an attempt to stop Russia and to support Ukraine and the Ukrainians, the Heads of State and Government have adopted decisions that could be considered historic: sanctions of unprecedented scope and complexity against Russia and Belarus, but also the welcoming of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia into the European family, with the admission of the possibility of their EU path.

The sanctions that have been adopted, or in the process of being adopted, have also highlighted our own vulnerabilities and dependencies. Europe has had to adapt and show more flexibility, including the gradual

[1] Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia

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renunciation of Russian oil and gas imports. The purchase of gas sold by the United States is an important first step, as is the diversification of supply sources and the use of climate protection solutions.

At the same time, Europe will have to give serious thought to energy, food and digital sovereignty, which are key points towards greater European resilience.

Security in Europe is another subject for reflection, to which we will have to devote all the necessary time and resources. We need a Europe that can tackle multiple challenges, while maintaining a balance with NATO and with our transatlantic partners. The stability and sustainability of the model identified will shape our future.

Has the possibility of an escalation of the conflict strengthened NATO and made it imperative to build European defence? How will the two fit together?

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has turned the structure of European security upside down, forcing us to rethink and enrich its foundations. The Allies have reasserted their cohesion and unity to a remarkable degree. At the same time, they have accelerated the process of transformation and long-term consolidation of NATO’s deterrence and defence posture on the Eastern flank and in the Black Sea basin.

The establishment of four new Battle Groups, including one in Romania with France as the lead nation, is a concrete step of this development. It is an important and direct contribution to the strengthening of security with the guarantee of a united, balanced and integrated approach along the entire Eastern flank.

In addition, the deteriorating security environment has prompted two neutral states - Finland and Sweden - to apply for NATO membership. The enlargement of the Alliance with these two new members would make it a stronger player.

The European Strategic Compass, adopted by the 27 Heads of State and Government at the European Council on 24 March 2022, states that the increasingly hostile security environment requires us to increase our

capabilities and resolve to act, to strengthen our resilience, solidarity and mutual assistance. The Compass has a significant potential to strengthen EU-NATO cooperation, building on the central role of the North Atlantic Alliance in collective defence. Stronger interaction should target effective practical measures, bypassing parallelisms and ensuring the inclusiveness of European cooperation.

In response to Finland and Sweden’s official request to join NATO, Vladimir Putin maintained that this decision «will lead to a response» on Russia’s part. In your opinion, should this be seen as a real threat or as an attempt to intimidate?

The Russian President’s position once again betrays his ignorance of the fact that no country should be intimidated or threatened due to the sovereign decisions it makes about its own future.

Finland and Sweden are Member States of the European Union and therefore enjoy real European solidarity. In practice, EU member states, like NATO member states, already use the same set of forces and capabilities.

In the natural logic of things, these elements should be inhibitors of any possible intention to engage Russia in irresponsible military adventures in northern Europe. It is also true that Vladimir Putin is a rather unpredictable leader, as he has proven, including in the case of the invasion of Ukraine.

What is certain at the moment is that the Russian president is using non-military means - in the arsenal of rhetoric, in the field of energy, perhaps in cyber security - to try to discourage Finland and Sweden from continuing along the path they have democratically chosen.

How can France and Romania work together in their efforts to support Ukraine and how can French engagement in Central and Eastern Europe be strengthened?

Romania and France are working together to support Ukraine through bilateral cooperation, and the European and allied dimensions. The dialogue between Bucharest and Paris shows our common will to work towards

stabilising the region and consolidating its security. Both countries have mobilised, at all levels, to send humanitarian aid to Ukraine, as well as equipment and intervention vehicles.

At European level, Bucharest and Paris have acted together to support Ukraine. Together, we have contributed to decisions to provide humanitarian, economic, civil protection and energy assistance. This mobilisation has not been limited to Ukraine alone. The effects of the war and the sustained flow of refugees have had significant impact on the Republic of Moldova, located between Ukraine and Romania. The joint Romania-France-Germany Platform for Support to R. of Moldova (PSM) initiative launched last April brings together states, financial institutions and international organisations to provide coordinated responses to the needs expressed by the Moldovan authorities.

Ukraine has applied for membership of the Union. At the Versailles Summit on 10 and 11 March, the Heads of State and Government recognised Ukraine’s membership of the European family. They also mentioned the Council’s request to the Commission to present its opinions on the membership applications of the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. Of course, there are nuances in our views on this subject. But we are ready to work together to identify the best approach to the European perspective of our three Eastern associate partners, in line with their strategic choice, which requires a unified response from the European Union.

In the field of security, Romania and France will continue to consolidate defence capabilities in the region. The NATO Summit of 24 March - the second since the Russian invasion of Ukraine - provided an opportunity for the Allies to demonstrate their unity and their resolve to coordinate and act. And I would like to take this occasion to thank France which, in the aftermath of the conflict, decided to send several hundred troops to Romania, following President Emmanuel Macron’s January announcement to strengthen the Alliance’s Eastern flank. The first French soldiers of this new contingent arrived in early March. France, by the way, is the framework nation for the Allied battle group on Romanian territory. Its size will be further expanded before the end of the year.

France and Romania are cooperating together also in informal structures such as the B9/Bucharest9 format, or the “Quint+”^[2].

All of this is also reflected in an extremely intense bilateral agenda, with many visits by French officials to Bucharest and vice versa. Our strategic partnership has become even more strategic, in every sense of the word.

As the annexation of Crimea in 2014 showed that the Black Sea is a strategic geopolitical, commercial and military location for Russia. From a Romanian perspective, what are the current issues in the Black Sea, in the context of the conflict in Ukraine?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine turned the Black Sea into the hottest spot on the planet in 2022, a geopolitical crossroads generating challenges with multiple stakes. Since the beginning of its membership of the European Union, Romania has been the promoter of stronger cooperation around the Black Sea and of a more active European policy in this respect. This is because of the region’s development potential, but also because of the threats posed by the «frozen conflicts», which Russia has been fuelling for several decades.

Since 2008, and Russia’s invasion of Georgia, Romania has highlighted the need to recalibrate the EU and NATO’s position in the region. In relation to the new security reality, it is now vital to transform and consolidate NATO’s long-term deterrence and defence position, especially on the Eastern flank and the Black Sea.

Romania now has a real opportunity to stimulate a strengthening of NATO’s position and, consequently, to attract to its territory several military contingents and permanent equipment that will offer the region real protection. The new Allied posture would turn the Black Sea and the surrounding states into a key point for the defensive position of the Allied countries. The security of the Black Sea is inextricably linked to the reinforcement of permanent NATO troops and military equipment in Romania itself and, consequently, on the Alliance’s Eastern flank.

^[2] The classic Quint format (Germany, France, Italy, UK, USA,) occasionally invites Romania and Poland to discuss the war in Ukraine.

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Coming back to Romania’s priorities on the Black Sea, I would like to add that the Romanian Foreign Minister, Bogdan Aurescu, always stressed, before the war, the need for a long-term strategy for the region, based on several dimensions: strengthening and adapting NATO’s deterrence and defence position on the Eastern flank; an enhanced engagement with the EU and NATO’s Eastern partners, including a strengthened dimension of security cooperation, as part of a broader approach to strengthening Euro-Atlantic values and the security community; advancing economic development opportunities in the region; developing strategic transport infrastructure for increased European interconnectivity; promoting and defending democratic values, the rule of law and the fight against corruption; and systematically pursuing the resolution of protracted conflicts. Now we see how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has accelerated all of these dynamics and objectives, to Russia’s dismay.

Based on your experience, what role can diplomacy play at a time when peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia have stalled?

Diplomacy must remain the main instrument for resolving conflicts. Unfortunately, diplomatic values and norms have been flouted by the Russians. In times of war, diplomacy can only play its role when one side gives in, or when both sides are at their wits’ end. This is not the case in Ukraine.

It is clear that a substantive negotiation for the settlement of the conflict between the two sides can only take place if there is a complete ceasefire in Ukraine and if, in part or in full, as requested by the Ukrainian side, Russia withdraws from at least where it was on 24 February. However, we note that these conditions are not met at present. It is therefore difficult at this stage to analyse and draw conclusions on the prospects for negotiations. Of course, the two sides are still in contact with each other, at a distance, in various forms, but it is clear that we cannot talk about real negotiations. For the time being, there is still deadlock. Each party is asking for its own guarantees, which the other party considers impossible to negotiate, which are insurmountable, in other words a red line. And in diplomacy, when there is a red line, you have to identify a compromise at some point.

There must always be room for negotiation, diplomacy must always have a chance. What is very important is that the negotiation process continues, when, of course, the conditions are right.

In my opinion, one of the most important conditions for the resumption of the negotiation process and the chances of achieving a substantial result is a general ceasefire in Ukraine and also a withdrawal of Russian troops at least to the positions prior to 24 February. This would be the beginning of a context that would favour the resumption of negotiations and their development in a much more serious logic than before. Diplomacy has not said its last word.

How is Romania dealing with the reception of Ukrainian refugees on its soil? How do you envisage this reception in the long term?

Russia’s aggression in Ukraine has created the largest humanitarian crisis in the world: 8 million people displaced within Ukraine and more than 13 million people stranded in war-affected areas. In addition, over 6.3 million people have left Ukraine.

Romania has witnessed the entry of more than one million people from Ukraine, of whom almost 100,000 have chosen to stay. These are mostly women, children and the elderly. More than 65,000 citizens of other countries, residents or students in Ukraine, have passed through Romania and received assistance to return home. Representatives of more than 20 diplomatic missions in Kyiv were also safely evacuated to Romania.

The measures introduced by the Romanian authorities range from accommodation, access to employment, education - at all levels, including university, health and social welfare services. Temporary protection has been established and is being managed in cooperation with the European Asylum Agency. Those who chose not to stay were provided with free rail transport that was coordinated with neighbouring countries. A humanitarian logistics centre has been set up in northern Romania to collect and deliver international humanitarian aid to those who have stayed in Ukraine. More than 125 trucks of humanitarian convoys have already passed through this centre.

The conflict has generated an extraordinary response from Romanians to the suffering of their unjustly war-torn neighbours. They have welcomed refugees into their own homes, opened their hearts to them and mobilised like never before to help them.

How do you view the recent proposals, following the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe, concerning the revision of the treaties, the end of unanimity and the constitution of a «European political community»?

Romania has always had a constructive position in the EU reform process, supporting the deepening of European integration. We support a follow-up to the Conference that is in line with citizens’ expectations. This is first of all the need for a pragmatic approach.

The priorities of the moment are their concrete concerns: recovery, employment, a fair climate transition process, effective health systems, determined action in the neighbourhood and, in the context of the war in Ukraine, dealing with the developments and the negative impact of the war. Existing treaties have allowed for complex and rapid responses to challenges. We support an approach, based on citizens’ concerns and the outcome of the Conference, starting with the framework of degrees of flexibility allowed for by the current treaties.

We do not exclude a priori a modification of the Treaties if this proves necessary. At the same time, the opening of the renegotiation of the Treaties is a complex, complicated and time-consuming exercise, which requires a concentrated effort on the part of the European institutions and the Member States. This could affect our ability to focus on the issues of the moment and to identify the most appropriate solutions. We do not want to rule out treaty reform, but to avoid hastening this kind of difficult and lengthy process, which can divert our energies.

The parallel idea of a European Political Community is a proposal that will be more clearly defined in the coming weeks. The project must be developed and put into perspective, with the contribution of all Member States and in dialogue with partners. It is necessary to better understand its implications and to safeguard the idea of European unity and cohesion, without privileging different circles of European integration. Therefore, Romania will certainly support steps that contribute to a more cohesive, inclusive and solidarity-based Union, as well as one that moves forward with its successful policies as a bloc of 27, defending its fundamental values and projecting them beyond its borders.

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