

THE BEHAVIOURAL DYNAMICS OF ROMANIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE LATE 1990s: THE DRIVE FOR SECURITY AND THE POLITICS OF VOLUNTARY SERVITUDE

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Abstract. This article investigates the nature, the magnitude and the impact of the exogenously articulated preferences in the articulation of Romania's foreign policy agenda and behavioural dynamics during the period 1996-2000. In this context, the manuscript will explore Romania's NATO and (to a lesser extent) EU accession bids, within an analytical framework defined by an overlapped interplay of heterochthonous influences, while trying to set out for further understanding how domestic preferences can act as a transmission belt and impact on foreign policy change in small and medium states.

Keywords: *Romanian foreign policy, NATO enlargement, EU enlargement, Russian-Romanian relations, Romanian-NATO relations, Romania-EU relations*

1. Introduction

By 1995 – with the last stages of the first Yugoslav crisis confirming that Moscow cannot adequately get involved into complex security equations – and fearing the possible creation of a grey area between Russia and Western Europe, Romanian authorities embarked the country on a genuinely pro-Western path, putting a *de facto* end to the dual foreign policy focus, “*ambivalent policy*”,¹ “*double speak*”² or “*politics of ambiguity*”³ which dominated Bucharest's' diplomatic exercise throughout the early 1990s.

This spectral shift (which arguably occurred shortly after Romanian President Iliescu's visit in Washington) wasn't however the result of a newly-found democratic vocation of the indigenous government, but rather an expression of the conviction that such behaviour could help the indigenous administration in its attempts to secure the macro-stabilization of the country's unreformed economy and to acquire security guarantees in order to mitigate the effects of the political and geographical pressures generated by the Transdnistrian and Yugoslav conflicts, or by the allegedly irredentist undertones of Budapest's foreign policy praxis.

Of note, a paramount role in this spectral recalibration of the country's foreign policy, was played by the absence of real central authority attributes in the post-Soviet Kremlin – overlapped with the spinning out of control of the Russian

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economy and with the degradation of Kremlin's political and institutional architecture – which impeded the indigenous establishment in Bucharest to continue assigning Moscow a key position in Romanian politics.

2. The drive for security and prosperity and the politics of voluntary servitude

Despite of its role in paving the way towards EU and NATO and arguably in preventing the eruption of an ethnic conflict in Transylvania,⁴ incumbent President Ion Iliescu and his party failed to convince the electorate in the 1996 elections that they are capable to enact the economic and political reforms required for EU integration⁵ and to improve Romania's credentials with the North Atlantic Alliance, and thus to enhance its NATO candidature at least at the level of the other regional applicants..

The failure of the presidential party to avoid an empathic win of the opposition – significantly fuelled by the generalized disenchantment over mounting economic and social difficulties⁶ and by the omnipresent corruption or by the governmental mishandling of the economy⁷ – was also determined by the relatively widespread perception that the post-Communist ruling elite was allegedly maintaining a mutual economic dependence on Kremlin⁸ and that the oligarchical, perennial political figures dominating the political system and the all-powerful managers of the state-owned companies were hostile to genuine reform⁹ and Western integration.

Of note, a controversial thesis on the 1996 elections – launched by President Iliescu's own electoral campaign manager, Iosif Boda – highlights a very interesting situation and namely that many important figures of the ruling elite and key members of the Iliescu regime were rather keen to loose the elections and thus acted as such, during the campaign. The reasoning behind this dynamic was circumscribed, according to Boda, to the logic of expected consequences, which increased the appetite of the regime to 'pass-the-buck' of implementing the imminent economic reforms required by EU and NATO accession processes¹⁰ to an opposition-led government, than to cope itself with the expected negative electoral impacts triggered by such actions.

Tributary to a similar cognitive construction, voices from indigenous media speculated also that the regime change was – to a large extent – orchestrated by the post-Communist oligarchy, in whose assessments the election of a pro-democratic government was thought to enjoy broader support from West, a fact increasing the odds for Western-pumped financial aid to penetrate the indigenous economy and for the existent structural constraints limiting the indigenous capital to be loosened.¹¹

Nevertheless, whether the role played by various electorally-related equations of interests, the advert to power of the coalition comprised of *Convenția Democratică Româna* (Romanian Democratic Convention, CDR), *Uniunea Social Democrată* (Social Democratic Union, USD), together with *Uniunea Democrată a Maghiarilor din România* (*Democratic Union of Hungarians from Romania, UDMR*) signaled a major political change in Romanian politics – at least in the determination level of the governmental arch in achieving the country's integration into Western structures¹². The new political discourse from Bucharest eventually echoed positively in Western chancelleries and eventually contributed to the reversing of Romania's image abroad. A visible

manifestation of this phenomenon was, for instance, the nodal change¹³ manifested by Helmut Kohl cabinet towards Bucharest's NATO bid, following Romanian authorities' public apologies to Germany "*for Romania's treatment of ethnic Germans under communist regime*", which pivoted from a benign ignorance of Romania's candidacy, toward the promotion of an enlargement scenario which included Romania alongside with the Visegrad triad (Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic)¹⁴. The positive re-evaluation of Bucharest's application¹⁵, was nevertheless possible, due to a rather aggressive lobbying and intervention employed by the French government towards Romania's candidacy¹⁶.

However, despite the intensified efforts towards strengthening the eligibility of its candidature in terms of democratization and political reform – both before and after the 1996 regime change¹⁷ – the country's fragile democratic and economic systems,¹⁸ the costs of enlargement¹⁹, and most importantly, Washington's decision to counter France's challenge to its dominant position within the alliance²⁰, kept Bucharest off the list of states invited by NATO to accede to its ranks, during the North-Atlantic Alliance's 1997 Madrid Summit. In particular, as Eyal summarizes, Romania's rejection was not actually related to what Romania "*did or [...] should have been expected to do*" but rather to the fact that "*the supposedly scientific process of enlargement ended up as an exercise in alchemy*",²¹ was in fact the fruit of a political decision and not the result of a clearly articulated, unbiased evaluation.

Although Bucharest failed to catch the first enlargement wave, Romania's efforts and pro-Western discourse weren't nevertheless left without political echoes. NATO's (Washington-tailored) rhetoric²² pointed out that Romania – should it accelerate economic and political reforms in order to have fully democratic political institutions and market economy²³ – could detach itself as a '*prime*'²⁴ or '*leading*' candidate for the next wave of enlargement,²⁵ with significant chances to start NATO accession talks in 1999²⁶. However, contrary to Romanian President Constantinescu's statements²⁷, neither US President Clinton's visit to Bucharest immediately after Madrid Summit, nor the upgrading of the American-Romanian relations to the level of a Strategic Partnership, carried out real political undertones of a clear US support for Romania's accession to NATO ranks in 1999. In reality, the high-level visit and the conclusion of the bilateral Strategic Partnership, were rather political compensations for the disappointed Romanian elites – who accepted all political, social and economical concessions requested by Western epicentres of power (and US in particular), in order for the country to become a fully-fledged NATO member during the Alliance's first wave of enlargement – than an indirect recognition of a privileged Romanian candidature in the light of Madrid Declaration.

Anyway, in the post-Madrid era – characterized by the significant efforts for the political, institutional and military integration of the three states to which it issued a membership invitation in July 1997, and by a growing opposition from Kremlin towards subsequent expansions²⁸ – NATO's support for its enlargement commitments began to fade. Despite this visible trend, the West did suggest that it still had some interest in Romania. A clear signal, for instance, came with the decision of the European Council in December 1997 to include Bucharest into its "*evolutive and inclusive*" EU accession process,²⁹ scheduled for launching in March 1998. Even if

Bucharest was not invited to open accession negotiations together with Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Cyprus or Slovenia, the decision provided nonetheless “*a major fillip for Romania in realising its goal of full participation in the process of European integration*”.³⁰

Under these circumstances, official rhetoric from Bucharest recorded an unprecedented pro-Western crescendo, with various elites speaking of an organic need for the country to regain its European or even “*Western identity*”,³¹ a state of facts replicated to a high extent by the indigenous administration’s engagement into a policy of “*even greater cooperation and approximation with the West*”.³² In practice, throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, the governmental efforts to secure NATO and EU membership reached such a monopolizing magnitude, that not only prevented the development of any other foreign policy vectors, but also transformed Romania’s foreign policy into a balancing exercise between “*engagements with European and American partners*”.³³

A direct collateral effect of this interplay of overlapped influences was the degrading of the Romanian-Russian relations to the extent that Russia began to express open animosity towards Bucharest’s transformation into “*an agent of NATO and EU principles, norms and values*”.³⁴ It does however worth mentioning that, *stricto sensu*, the transformation of Bucharest into one of the recipients of Moscow’s political hostility was not exclusively tributary to Romania’s role and dynamics in regard to NATO’s Eastern expansion, but also to a residual dichotomy between the two parties over the unsettled problems of the Romanian treasury (sent to Moscow for safekeeping in 1916, but confiscated by the Bolsheviks and thus never returned³⁵), over Kremlin’s denunciation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 23, 1939 or over the collisions of interests in regard to Moldova’s statehood and security.

The 1996 regime-change in Bucharest, which induced significant identity and perspective changes in the Russo-Romanian diplomatic equation³⁶, did nevertheless play a paramount role in the dynamics of the bilateral cooperation. In contrast to the (arguably) friendly-by-default attitude, which characterized (with minimal interludes) the bilateral relations during the first Iliescu-era,³⁷ the Russian dimension of Romania’s foreign policy of the post-1996 period distinguished itself mostly through the institutionalization of the *Russophobe exacerbations* of the Democratic Convention’s electoral rhetoric. In fact, a prelude of this alignment was recorded during the 1996 crisis of the Romanian-Russian basic treaty, when the Democratic Convention (directly or through various organizations of the civil society) was able to put unprecedented political and social pressure on the incumbent government, forcing the latter to abruptly cancel the signing of the document, hours before the scheduled moment of the ceremony.

Moreover, filtered through Bucharest’s new conceptual lenses, various Russian actions – like the adoption of a resolution by the Russian Duma calling for the reconstruction of the USSR or like the designation of Transdniestria as an area of strategic interest for Moscow by the Russian Parliament – were eventually labelled as major threats against Romania’s security and vital interests.³⁸

Nevertheless, Bucharest leadership’s rhetoric – tailored upon the exploitation of a relatively large spectrum of negative feelings, aversion and prejudice of Russia³⁹

and of a broadly accepted positive image, appeal and idealization of the West (and especially of the US) in the Romanian psyche,⁴⁰ – cannot and should not be delinked from the government's endeavours aimed at obtaining financial aid in order to resuscitate the indigenous economy. The fact that by mid 1990s Romania ceased to be of particular economical interest to Kremlin made Bucharest authorities less prone to search some common ground with Moscow. Moreover, following the Russo-Ukrainian gas and oil crises over contested skyrocketing unpaid bills, illicit diversion of Russian hydrocarbon resources from transit pipelines by Ukrainian public and commercial entities and by Russian countermeasures against Kiev's siphoning,⁴¹ but also due to the structural mutations induced by Moscow within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Romania found itself bypassed by Kremlin's hydrocarbon export routes towards Western European markets. Bucharest's response to Moscow's endeavours was the June 1997 *Romania at crossroads* initiative by Romanian President Emil Constantinescu, a program aimed to include Bucharest into the future energy pipeline infrastructure designed to transport hydrocarbons from Caucasus and Asia to Europe through the Black Sea⁴² and to translate the country's geo-strategic position⁴³ into positive economic effects.

The vestigial Russo-Romanian dichotomy has been however given a fresh impetus during the Kosovo crisis – when the bilateral relation between Moscow and Bucharest reached a level of open antagonism⁴⁴ due to Romanian administration's refusal to allow Russian forces participating in KFOR to enter its air-space,⁴⁵ despite of its acceptance of a similar request by NATO. For Russia – preoccupied with securing its supremacy within Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), with developing and projecting a multipolar doctrine (and thus seeking alliances with China, Iraq, Iran and other regional non-European powers⁴⁶) and with resuscitating Pan-Slavism as a pathway to consolidate its position as a putative major regional power – Romania's actions had not only a hostile, but also an invasive dimension. As a result, the relations between Moscow and Bucharest came to a standstill, which remained unchanged till 2003,⁴⁷ when an interstate treaty was eventually signed.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, *strictu sensu*, Romania's behaviour, a flagrant violation of the terms of the 1996 Romanian - Yugoslavian Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourhood and Cooperation⁴⁹ – (arguably) tributary to the perception of the indigenous elites that the Yugoslav conflict may represent a “*window of opportunity*” for the advancement of the country's NATO and EU bids and thus such alignment might demonstrate Bucharest's “*unequivocal partnership*” with the West⁵⁰ – was in fact the prelude of a *policy of voluntary servitude* towards the West – gradually implemented by Romanian government till mid-1999 – and materialized through the development of a core-periphery matrix of interactions between Bucharest and the Transatlantic and European epicentres of power.

The first major manifestation of Romania's policy of voluntary vassalage was the country's unequivocal support for the US-led NATO campaign, despite of the substantial financial damage dealt to its frail economy and with serious effects stretched over several years. According to an assessment of the Romanian National Bank's the financial shock was translated into a negative influx of US\$ 288 million on the 1999 balance of payments,⁵¹ while according to other sources the negative effects

of the Kosovo war ranged from US\$ 50 million/week⁵² to up to a total of £580 million for the year 1999⁵³ (roughly US\$ 940 million according to the historical exchange rate⁵⁴). According to Suciu, only the blockade on the Danube induced a US\$ 1 billion loss to the indigenous economy.⁵⁵ Needless to say, West's compensation for Bucharest, consisting in a loan of US\$ 500 million from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was both insignificant and inequitable.

Another symptom suggesting the establishment of a core-periphery relation between Romania and the Western epicentres of power was represented by the *unconditional* implementation of the structural adjustment measures laid by International Financial Institutions (IFIs) as a precondition for financial and economic assistance, and considered indispensable for the domestic macroeconomic indicators to achieve full compliance with the Copenhagen criteria. Romanian government's decision to carry out IFIs tailored reforms even when it became clear that they became detrimental to the very purpose they were designed for, seem to fuel the hypothesis of exogenously influenced, rather than domestically formulated economical, political or social agendas. Nevertheless, the escalation of poverty, the decrease of the state's capability to control and strengthen the economy, the exposure of the indigenous currency to severe inflation, the massive makeshift privatizations and the closure of some state-owned enterprises (including roughly thirty coal mines that ran persistent financial losses and were regularly bailed out by the government) – led to important social clashes⁵⁶ which culminated with the fifth and sixth *Mineriads* (when thousands of miners decided to go to the capital city and carry on their protests but eventually engaging into violent confrontations with the authorities).

The fact that the unrest was directly linked with the implementation of IFI's measures – which were known to be susceptible to political considerations⁵⁷ and arguably to major shareholder's control⁵⁸, thus especially sensitive to US influence⁵⁹ and visions⁶⁰, fuelled the idea – presented by some media and political figures presented – that the *Mineriads* were in fact outcomes of alleged behind-the-scenes Russian actions, arguably aimed to divert Western (and especially US attention from Serbian crisis⁶¹.

Another aspect fuelling the West (especially US) - Romania core-periphery relation hypothesis was the precipitated signing of the Romanian-Ukrainian basic treaty from 1997 in the eve of the forthcoming NATO enlargement Madrid Summit,⁶² through which Romania “*confirmed the 'inviolability' principle of [its] borders with Ukraine*”⁶³ and thus renounced to most of its (more or less legitimate) territorial claims on Northern Bukovina, Hertza and Southern Bessarabia, occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940, following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and later attached to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

In addition, the partial dismantling of the indigenous military industry – an important source of income during the Cold-War period – allegedly as a concession made to the US weapons and ammunition manufacturers, was circumscribed – both by Romanian media and academia – to the broader policy of voluntary servitude towards Washington exhibited by the Romanian administration in order to boost Romania's candidature for NATO membership during the Alliance's 1999 Summit in Washington and to enjoy the supposed fruits of a “*latter-day Marshall Plan*”.⁶⁴ Support

for this claim, argues Lupu, can be found in the contract signed by the Romanian Government with the American Consortium *Bell Helicopter Textron* over the acquisition of 96 helicopters for a total amount of US\$ 2 billion, a high-profile defence project that, if implemented, would have stained the country's already precarious finances. The controversial dimension of the document targeted not the acquisition price, but the stipulated maintenance cost for the aircrafts, estimated at US\$ 50 million/year.⁶⁵ According to the back-then Romanian Minister of Finances Daniel Daianu, Washington did apply some leverage on Romanian authorities, with various figures from business circles situated in the close proximity of US administration pointing out that the contract would represent a ticket for an "*easier access into NATO*".⁶⁶ Nevertheless, although these (arguably) controversial aspects cannot be discounted, Romania's association to the West was, in the long run, an extremely complex process which involved, among other elements, the abandoning of the Russian model of communism-to-capitalism transition implemented in the early 1990s and the undertaking of a (more) Westernized Polish or Czech-like transition pathway.⁶⁷

In a totally different dimension, Romania's voluntary servitude towards West in the late 1990s became extremely visible also through its conceptual influence in the articulation of the strategic security and military documents, whose tone and approach renounced (for the first time after 1989) the old Cold-War inertial viewpoint, while adopting a Westernized, liberal system of values. For instance, in the 1999 Security Strategy, the individual is rendered as the main referent for security while the national security interests were confined to the respect for the rights and liberties of the citizens.⁶⁸ For the first time in the states' post-Decembrist history, the classical conventional aspects were left at the bottom of the list.⁶⁹ A similar approach is to be found in the 2000 Military Strategy – a derived strategic document from the Security Strategy, which makes an unprecedented remark and namely that the "*main mission of the army consists in guaranteeing to the Romanian citizens the strict compliance of the human rights within a sovereign, independent, unitary and indivisible state, actively engaged in the European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes, [...] in a constitutional democracy, and under a strict civilian control of the armed forces*".⁷⁰

3. 1999 - Sliding doors of opportunity: new European and Euro-Atlantic accession cycles

The positive feedback from the West during the Kosovo crisis, gave birth to subsequent waves of optimistic rhetoric in Bucharest, which eventually germinated into great political expectations, regarding the country's bid for NATO's second enlargement wave. A key role in the process was nevertheless played by the sometimes ambiguous or ambivalent discourse of the Western officials regarding Bucharest's candidacy, which arguably fuelled the impression that Western stakeholders might exhibit in Romania's case, some sort of an selective institutional amnesia and therefore to invite the country to accede NATO (and even EU) ranks, even if it won't completely fulfil the accession criteria.

For instance, during early March 1999 comments in Bucharest, US Ambassador to NATO Alexander Vershbow praised Bucharest's contributions to the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and highlighted Romania's key role in the strengthening

of the regional security.⁷¹ Moreover, during her joint press conference in Bucharest with Romania's Foreign Minister Andrei Pleșu, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright pointed out that Romania's support during the Kosovo crisis was generally conceptualized in Washington, as one of a *de facto* NATO ally.⁷² Such consistency of the US (yet also European) administration public statements is, according to Falls, "*particularly striking*" as most of the discourses come as "*close as possible to assuring the Romanians – without actually uttering the words – that their coveted dream will at some as yet defined future date become a reality*"⁷³ although, the omnipresent companion theme – namely that Romania has to enact economic reforms in order to match military performances and to set in place the means to pay for the deepening of the military restructuring and to afford the requisite military related costs – added important political undertones.

Under these circumstances, the year 1999 became a symbolic landmark of the governmental rhetoric, tributary to the shared belief and anticipation that the politics of voluntary obedience would be translated into an invitation to join NATO during the Alliance's Summit in Washington. Positive expectations were equally associated with the EU accession process, with Bucharest leadership hoping for a political minimization of the technical and economical écarts between its candidature and the membership bids of the other candidates in the EU accession process⁷⁴ and thus into a formal start of the accession negotiations at the Helsinki Summit of the European Council. In short, summarizes Popescu, aware that the country was not "*fulfilling all the necessary criteria*" the country was trying to advance its institutional goals relying on the fact that the "*ultimate verdict regarding its performance would be [...] largely political*".⁷⁵

However, as NATO's April 1999 Washington Summit "*failed to deliver the desired and anticipated invitation to Romania to join the alliance*",⁷⁶ while pointing out that a new enlargement wave was rather a distant possibility rather than a fact⁷⁷, Romanian authorities acknowledged that the country's aspirations have to be delayed at least till 2002, a prospective considered both "*unfair*" and "*remote*" by the indigenous governmental arch.⁷⁸ Moreover, the North-Atlantic Alliance's decision to bind future accession to a new admission mechanism, the Membership Action Plan (MAP) and of more importance, West's low appetite to mitigate the severe losses the caused by the embargo on oil products to Yugoslavia⁷⁹, set the stage for the abandonment of Bucharest unconditional pro-Western rhetoric (for the first time after 1996) and for its replacement with a discourse speaking about NATO's and EU's "*double standards*", biased agenda and "*unfair treatment*" of the states which acted as *de facto* NATO members, thus assuming the same risks of any member state, "*without the guarantees and benefits of actual membership*".⁸⁰

NATO's decisions to temporize the implementation of its open-door policy and to formally remove any possible *shortcut-to-membership* undertones in regard to some candidate states' participation in the Kosovo Peacekeeping Force (KFOR), dealt a serious blow to Romanian authorities, who attempted to translate Romania's accommodating attitude to all political and military cooperation requests from the West,⁸¹ into some "*immediate effects*" in terms of security guarantees⁸² and financial aid. The perspective of a new waiting period at the gates of the Euro-Atlantic club in a regional security limbo characterized by structural shifts in the existent topographies

of interests, perceptions and interactions and, even worse, the threat of a severe solvency crisis⁸³, fuelled the factionalization of the Romanian governmental arch.

The situation reached a climax in November 1999, when Romanian Prime Minister Radu Vasile (accompanied by a team of ministers and secretaries of state) paid a memorable visit in Moscow where he met his recently nominated Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin⁸⁴ and managed to score some unprecedented diplomatic points for the Romanian-Russian relations, especially in the boosting of the bilateral trade (with genuine perspectives for the two states to sign a free trade agreement⁸⁵) and cooperation in agriculture, constructions, oil exploration, hydrocarbon transportation, administration, tourism and education⁸⁶. Moreover, he pledged for an imperative conclusion and rapid ratification of a bilateral interstate treaty, relegating the till-then major issues of contention between the two states (the establishment of a clear roadmap for the repatriation of the Romanian treasury sent to Moscow in 1917 for safekeeping and never returned, and the condemnation of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact) to historical analysis.⁸⁷

Three weeks after the visit – due to the infighting sweeping through the various groups of power from the coalition⁸⁸ but also due to alleged social, economical and political pressures⁸⁹ – Radu Vasile was sacked by the Romanian President, although according to Romanian law, the President lacked the legal instruments to do so.⁹⁰ In order to put an end to the political and constitutional crisis, Vasile used his resignation as a bargaining chip, arguably when alleged walls of impeachment began to close in on the incumbent president⁹¹.

The prelude of the Prime Minister's removal from office had nevertheless important foreign policy dimensions.

First of all, his detractors – both from the parties of the opposition but also from rival factions within his own political coalition – advanced the hypothesis that his meeting with Putin in Moscow, was in fact, a geopolitical trade-off aimed to bring Bucharest closer to Kremlin. This thesis would be later employed by Tudoroiu who would speculate that behind Vasile's endeavours one might discover “*the most ambitious Russian attempt to recover Iliescu era-influence, after the fall of the neo-communist regime*” and whose “*rapid failure did not diminish its remarkable audacity*”.⁹²

Secondly, Vasile's abrupt revocation took place immediately after the European Council in Helsinki announced that it would open up accession negotiations with Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Malta in March 2000.⁹³ The inclusion of Bucharest – despite EU Commissions' concerns regarding the implementation of sound economic reforms and the country's apparent unlikeness to evolve into a “*market economy*” and to “*cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union in the medium term*”⁹⁴ – was a clear political concession for the administration's sustained efforts and support for Kosovo campaign and essentially possible, due to the explicit support of France and United Kingdom.⁹⁵ Of note, the translation of Europe's “*security and stability*” concerns⁹⁶ into the enlargement architecture simultaneously with a scaling down of the economic performance criteria (which played the key role in the Luxembourg Council decision⁹⁷) made it possible for Romania and Bulgaria to begin accession negotiations before Croatia, a significantly better candidate, both economically and institutionally than the two South-Eastern

European states.⁹⁸ A minor role in the process was however played by the fact that in October 1999, Romano Prodi – a genuine supporter of the Union's enlargement – took office as the European Commission's President. Nevertheless, Helsinki decision offered the perfect pretext to Romanian President Constantinescu (the key figure behind EU's political concession), both to get rid off Vasile and to put an end to the ambiguous rhetoric which characterized the Washington-Helsinki interlude.

Under these circumstances, the nomination of Mugur Isărescu – Romania's Central Bank Governor – for the Prime Minister office, not only that triggered significant changes in regard to EU's political positioning towards Romania⁹⁹ (arguably due to legitimate expectations that the country would eventually began to venture itself on the path to macro-economic stability) but also contributed to the development of a stronger commitment and of a more "*pro-active approach*" in helping Bucharest advance on its membership-bid.¹⁰⁰

Under these circumstances, Romania's discourse towards NATO suffered a major recalibration, with the dominant rhetoric from Bucharest speaking about the Northern Alliance's enlargement mechanism – the Membership Action Plan (MAP) – not as of an institutional time-buying instrument¹⁰¹ or a structural burden for an applicant country, in its quest for security guarantees, but as of a potential feature/tool for the Westernization and modernization of the indigenous economical, political, social or military spectra. In particular, the fact that the National Annual Plans for Accession (Romania's MAP) shared a certain complementarity and overlapping with EU accession requirements – like similar basic development patterns, norms and institutional values – could have had a contribution in the mechanism's reconceptualization and acceptance.. Moreover, due to the MAPs' specific designs – consisting in discussions, self-evaluations and feedback from NATO experts aimed to provide future members with the necessary knowledge needed in order to fulfil their accession objectives – conferred a catalytic role to the accession mechanisms in boosting Romania's democratic transformation process and in increasing its till then minimal exposure to democracy and democratic values.¹⁰² In particular, summarizes Ionescu, the recurrent MAPs became a veritable "*roadmap for westernization of all aspects of life within the state, with the main goal to implement Western values, even by transforming existent institutions or building new ones if necessary*"¹⁰³ and a major stimulus for "*internal reform and institutional modernization of Romania*".¹⁰⁴

Aside from their moulding dimension, the MAPs generated also a portfolio of foreign policy deliverables. For instance, they galvanized the revamping and development of regional security and cooperation mechanisms, partially abandoned or postponed by South-Eastern European countries, in order to avoid any divergent pressures on their EU/NATO candidacies. In Romania's case, the most visible outputs were the governmental decisions to reinvest attention and resources in security dividends like the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, in the trilateral security troikas with Bulgaria and Greece and with Bulgaria and Turkey,¹⁰⁵ but also in the development of bilateral economical partnerships with its neighbours in order to stimulate investments and regional development (the construction of a Vidin-Calafat bridge over Danube being among the landmark decisions¹⁰⁶).

In short, despite of the fact that the politics of voluntary servitude represented Bucharest's paramount design for joining Western integration structures, the consecration of Romania as a de facto NATO (and arguably, later on, EU) member, was prefaced by the "*assimilation of the Euroatlantic values*", transposed into procedures and behavioural patterns that shared a high resemblance with the allied ones, but also by the military contribution and the "*added value it brought to the stability and security of its regional environment*".¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

Romania's foreign policy alignment and dynamics from the period 1996-2000 were – in a very large extent – by-products of exogenous interplays of ideological, political, economical and security inputs and stimuli of Western origin (mostly NATO and EU-related), imported and hybridized (although in a roughly *unmediated* form) into the country's foreign policy agenda.

Tributary to the conviction that Romania's performances alone won't lead to fulfilling the necessary criteria for NATO and EU accession and that the fully-fledged membership of the two political clubs would be, in the end, the fruit of a political concession, Bucharest leadership circumscribed the country's matrix of diplomatic interactions and perspectives to the parameters, lines of action, behavioural patterns and codes of conduct of a policy of *voluntary servitude* with the West, thus attempting to buy West's benevolence in order to advance the Romania's institutional accession goals. The infrastructure for the synthesizing, projection and implementation of this policy consisted in a plethora of institutional, legal and diplomatic instruments and mechanisms, whose design and characteristics were tailored in order to generate political outcomes congruent with NATO or EU interests, goals, and perspectives, such as the Partnership for Peace (PfP), the Membership Action Plans (MAPs), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) agreements, the US-Romanian Strategic Partnership, various bilateral and multilateral treaties, the EU accession negotiations and the *acquis communautaire*, etc.

The Kosovo crisis, which gave birth to a new regional setting with continental (and even global) impacts, came to play an increasingly significant role in the Romanian policy-making, mostly because of the indigenous elites' anticipation that it would act as a shortcut for NATO accession. Although it had a role in the recalibration of the existent altercasting mechanisms, especially through the fact that it allowed NATO (and to a lesser extent EU) to provide case-specific patterns of actions or explicit lines of conduct but also to establish a swift feedback interface, the Balkan conflict did not represent – contrary to the expectations of the Romanian authorities – an alternate, timesaving accession route to NATO's fully-fledged membership.

Nevertheless, the major collateral effect of this miscalculation of the Romanian establishment was that it eventually triggered a spectral shift in the way Bucharest approached NATO and later on, EU enlargement processes, by replacing the calculations based on political compromises and alleged strategic expectations with a more hands-on integration approach, focused on the (at least partial) fulfilment of the accession criteria.

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