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Eastern Europe's Defence: How can Romania contribute to the European Defence Strategy?



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INTRODUCTION

During the first semester of 2019 Romania will take over, for the first time since becoming a EU member state in 2007, the EU rotating Council presidency. This role places our country in the foreground of the EU leadership. For a period of six months Romania will coordinate all the working groups of the Council, being mainly responsible to ensure the proper functioning of the Union and to establish its main priorities. The EU rotating presidency is a real test of human and administrative resources, but above all a great challenge for proofing and strengthening the European image and expertise of our country.

Beyond the administrative responsibilities, Romania will need to stand up to a historical EU moment and to be able to discuss from a leader perspective on any important field. Information meeting will be held both in Bucharest as well as throughout the country and the national government could benefit from the 2019 moment in order to promote even parallel priorities that do not necessarily fit into the mandate of the EU Council Presidency.

Europuls believes that a priority that should absolutely be present on Romania's agenda is the Eastern European defence consolidation. From a perspective of either EU leader, of either an innovative country, of either a trailblazer or of a Eastern Partnership or European Defence Union Summit host, Romania can take advantage of this moment in order to take over the initiative.

Following the geopolitical changes of recent years, Romania has grown in a country with a unique position on the European stage. Over the past ten years, after joining the two international organizations, NATO and the EU, Romania has enjoyed excellent bilateral relations with the United States, while consolidating its EU membership condition.

Meanwhile, over these last ten years, we have witnessed Russia's attempt to recover its condition of world power that it had during the Cold War. The intervention in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine, are some examples that Russia is willing to use force in order to defend its sphere of influence. The repetitive Russian's attacks on the territorial sovereignty of the EU's Eastern neighbours alarmed the entire European continent, especially the countries from the Eastern outskirts such as Romania or Poland.

Due to its strategic position, Romania is directly interested in creating a zone of stability and security in its neighbourhood. In this respect, Romania has the potential to play a key role due to its territorial proximity to Russia, due to its obvious pro-West orientation – both transatlantic and European – of Romanian government, but also due to the favorable public opinion towards both international organisations. The Presidency of the EU Council is an opportunity of which Romania has to take advantage, being an occasion to promote a stable and dynamic foreign EU policy. Romania can play an active role in promoting a strategy for EU defence in the East.

1. Context

The actual security context in Eastern Europe area can be defined around 3 main international trends: **a. The constant pressure of the Russian Federation** directly felt in Ukraine and Georgia and indirectly sensed in the Baltic Sea, Republic of Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan; **b. The Trump administration lack of interest** to continue the same level of NATO support to Europe as in the 2000s; **c. the opportunity to create a real European Defence Union** in the context of an increased interest for integration from both Visegrad Group and Western Europe countries such as Germany or France.

As on other occasions, we can also notice in the current situation a regular unwritten rule about how the European Union reacts when there is a fragmentation of the Atlantic Alliance. The trigger of independence desire of the European defence is produced because of a disagreement between the United States and European countries as regards the answer given to a certain international crisis. Not only once, finding itself facing a threat, the EU outlined the idea of a common European army, urge also stressed by the President of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker himself. This speech needs to be accompanied by a clear strategy with the necessary steps to be taken in order for the European defence integration to offer as soon as possible a realistic alternative to NATO. NATO has both institutional structures and the necessary budget and political will of the allies to face a security crisis, while only the idea of providing the EU with a reinforced army provokes opposite reactions among Member States. Any progress towards a deeper integration in the field of defence needs to go hand in hand with NATO and the cooperation and coordination between those

2 actors needs to grow. Any competition between the two caused by overlapping structures and competences, any political reduction of NATO importance is unfavourable to the current political and security situation in Europe.

It is necessary for the level of interoperability of Eastern Europe countries to grow, especially in this moment in which there are doubts regarding the American compromise that represents the basis of the European defence since the end of the Second World War until nowadays.

2. Recommendations for Romania

In order for Romania to play an active role in shaping the European defence policy, several elements are needed:

- at an internal level, there is a need of a **clear action plan** that involves and coordinates state's administration: the presidency, the ministry of defence and the ministry of foreign affairs. Furthermore, the facilitation of dialogues with European partners is needed, especially with neighbouring countries. This political and diplomatic dialogue could be extremely favourable to closer collaboration between Romania and its neighbouring countries in defence area.
- at an external level, Romania could promote the **pooling and coordination of member states' defence budgets**, a necessity recognized by both EU and NATO;
- the creation of **common training activities** for the staff working in the defence sector and military preparation exercises that involve armed forces of several member states;

- the initiation of **joint research and development projects** within the framework of a European Defence Agency with increased power and responsibility;
- fostering a **clear common political vision** of the threat perceptions and on the security interests of each member state;
- fostering a **prioritisation of immediate threats** and narrowing the current action priorities and channeling most of the available funding towards the selected few;
- encouraging a **joint procurement plan for military equipment**;
- encouraging the step by step the creation of **European Defence Union**, that tightly collaborates with NATO for avoiding tasks and structural overlapping.

In this debate, Romania should adopt a position that will support first of all the inter-institutional cooperation between NATO and EU, a collaboration that is trying to be encourage to develop since the last summer. Romania can use the rotating presidency of the EU Council as an opportunity to emphasize the importance of a relationship between the two organisations based on mutual support and the idea that only through coordinating their actions they are able to provide security for the entire continent. collaboration

Romania can be the voice that constantly notifies its NATO and EU's partners the concerns and difficulties encountered by the Eastern European countries, while promoting joint action of the two organisations. Consequently, Romania could become a role model for the other European countries, equally dependent on the American support, but optimistic regarding a potential European military force in the future.



Notwithstanding, we should take into account the risk of a stagnating European defense project due to a too substantial inclination towards NATO as security provider. Europuls believes that a European Defence Union is a feasible project that instead of jeopardizing the role and mission of NATO, it would consolidate the security in the East and South.

In spite this belief, there will be partizans of the traditional status-quo where the security of Europe is completely dependent on NATO, who will completely be against a deeper European integration in the defence and security sector. Furthermore, the defence community is traditionally against any permanent or temporary loss of sovereignty as far as military and security is concerned. Nonetheless, it is unquestionable the fact that **Romania cannot deal with the existent security threats alone**. Thus any stagnation in this common defence integration process can be dangerous and conveying more powers or being simply in favour of a European defence project are not only beneficial for us, but necessary too.

3. Risks

Currently there are a number of risks that Romania will have to address in the near future.

The greatest risk probably comes from the Eastern front, where Russia is trying to regain its superpower status by: **(i)** causing direct wars, like the one in Georgia in August 2008; **(ii)** annexation of territories (Crimea 2014); **(iii)** proxy wars, such as the one in the Eastern part of Ukraine; **(iv)** financing of Eurosceptic, populist forces from European policy and media; **(v)** direct and indirect influence in the elections or referendums in the advanced countries of the West.



It is important to understand that these trends are not casual or by chance. The Putin administration perfectly understands the EU system and its flaws. If we accept that his main strategy is a weak and fragmented Union, we also need to accept that any kind of contention within the Union is in favour of Russia's desires.

A second risk for Romania comes from Washington, where the American President, Donald Trump, has declared that NATO is an outdated organisation and that US is not going to defend its allies if they will not increase their defence spending. This isolationist vision could lead to a dangerous reduction of American forces on the European territory and in the worst-case scenario can contribute to the end of NATO.

The third risk comes from the centre of the EU which is and will be affected by Brexit. The exit of the United Kingdom from the EU will considerably affect it politically, economically and socially, including here the defence policy. Taking out the British troops from the CSDP missions would definitely affect the stability and security in the countries from the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia. This domino effect would cause a worsening of the security and peace in these areas and Romania will remain in the Eastern vanguard of the European Union.

The most unfavourable scenario for Romania would be that all these risks take place in the same time. In reality, this process of destabilisation of the Eastern area has already started and the question is what could Romania do to slow it down?

4. Conclusions

The main conclusion that we must draw, beyond anything else, is that **Romania cannot deal with the current problems and risks alone**. The logical consequence is that it is in Romania's benefit to create a complex defence structure in the East of the continent that would persuade and include both West and South member states but also that would obtain at least the silent support of the United States.

For such a project to be successful and long term, to focus on the East of Europe, to include Romania in a coherent way, our country must also **be extremely active** in its achievement. This implies not only the adaptation to the tendencies of the larger states in Europe but also the

initiative of the Romanian governments to get involved in the elaboration of a common European defense and security policy in the long run. Hence there is a need for **multilateral negotiations**, for the creation of a group of countries keen on the project, for open diplomatic effort towards Russia, and a firm discourse that will underline that the defence of the European Union is first and foremost a right of the Member States and not subject to Kremlin's decision.

Last but not least, Europuls believes that RO2019 moment may be the opportunity for Romania to lead this discussions to a finality. Even if defence is not an announced priority of the Romania's EU Council Presidency in 2019, it can be a key topic in all the informal meetings, side events, and why not in a possible European summit in Bucharest in 2019 for a new European Defence Treaty.

ABOUT

Europuls – Centrul of European Expertise

EUROPULS – Centre for European Expertise is a non-profit organization founded by a group of Romanian professionals in EU affairs. Its main goal is to promote the process of European integration in Romania and contribute to the creation of a real European public sphere. Europuls aims to promote debates on European topics through articles and studies but also by organizing debates, workshops and conferences which are attended by European commissioners, MEPs, political leaders, civil society representatives, researchers, business representatives, experts and journalists.

Europuls is the founder and main organiser of EUROSFAT, the main annual European affairs forum in Romania.

Europuls, founded on March 15, 2010 is registered in Romania and Belgium and is fully independent from any political body.

www.europuls.ro

AUTHORS

Raluca BĂRZU

Andrei CONSTANTIN

Oana DUMA

Affiliated Experts EUROPULS

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