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Romania: Why the Crossroads within Europe Matters

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Introduction

Reformist Nicușor Dan's victory in Romania's presidential elections, held on May 4th and 18th 2025, has provided the EU with a rare moment of respite. While illiberal forces threaten to destabilize the European project during each election across the continent, Romania seems to have kept the far right away from the presidency. Originally planned for late 2024, Romania's presidential elections were cancelled after concerns, flagged by both Romanian and French intelligence agencies,¹ following the initial success of Călin Georgescu, a historical revisionist and fascist sympathizer.² He is now facing prosecution by the State Attorney for his alleged role in an attempted coup d'état with reported Russian involvement.³ That Romania ultimately held competitive elections despite this disruption highlights the resilience of its democratic institutions. This is no small achievement in this era of political polarization – when every European election is followed closely – and has pan-European consequences.

However, while Dan's presidential campaign was hailed by the Financial Times as a possible template for containing populism,⁴ it nevertheless produced a narrow margin. The result underlined that the far right is no longer a fringe phenomenon but a consolidated electoral force. Nicușor Dan won 53.6% against George Simion, the far-right challenger and heir to Călin Georgescu, a populist with roots in Romania's ultra-nationalist ultras subculture and persona non grata in Ukraine⁵ and Moldova⁶ for irredentist rhetoric. In other words, Romania remains deeply divided, with the far right and their worldview increasingly entrenched as a lasting political force.

This outcome echoed the 2000 election, when Ion Iliescu, Romania's first '*democratically elected*' president post-Romanian Revolution, defeated Ultra-nationalist contender Vadim Tudor, Ceausescu's former 'Court Poet' and known Holocaust denier,⁷ while

¹ Jan van der Made, 'French Cyber Agency Warns TikTok Manipulation Could Hit Romania's Vote, Again', *RFI*, 12 May 2025, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20250512-french-cyber-agency-warns-tiktok-manipulation-could-hit-romania-s-vote-again>.

² Pavel Andreea, 'Călin Georgescu, despre cei care susțin legea împotriva extremismului', *G4Media*, 13 December 2024, <https://www.g4media.ro/video-calin-georgescu-despre-cei-care-sustin-legea-impotriva-extremismului-vanzatori-de-tara-trebuie-tratati-ca-atate-despre-ion-antonescu-criminal-de-razboi-un-erou.html>.

³ 'Care a fost rolul lui Călin Georgescu în tentativa de lovitură de stat din decembrie. Fostul candidat, văzut de procurori drept „autor”', *digi24*, 16 September 2025, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/care-a-fost-rolul-lui-calin-georgescu-in-tentativa-de-lovitura-de-stat-din-decembrie-fostul-candidat-vazut-de-procurori-drept-autor-3414879>; 'Prima reacție a Kremlinului la acuzațiile că Rusia a influențat alegătorii în favoarea lui Călin Georgescu', *digi24*, 17 September 2025, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/prima-reactie-a-kremlinului-la-acuzațiile-ca-rusia-a-influentat-alegătorii-in-favoarea-lui-calin-georgescu-3416255>; Kieran Guilbert, 'Romania Charges Ex-Presidential Candidate over Coup Attempt', *Euronews*, 17 September 2025, <http://www.euronews.com/2025/09/17/romania-charges-ex-presidential-candidate-calin-georgescu-over-coup-attempt>.

⁴ Nicușor Dan, 'How to Defeat Populism — a Refresher', *Financial Times*, 4 August 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/b827af55-6e80-4bd8-9f28-ba49b14bf0d3>.

⁵ Max Grier et al., 'Romanian Wild Card George Simion Sets Brussels' Nerves on Edge', *Politico*, 15 May 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/george-simion-romania-presidential-election-profile-ukraine/>.

⁶ Catalina Mihai, 'Moldova Renews 5-Year Ban on Romanian Far-Right Leader George Simion', *Euractiv*, 5 February 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/news/moldova-renews-5-year-ban-on-romanian-far-right-leader-george-simion/>.

⁷ Tom Gallagher, 'Corneliu Vadim Tudor: Court Poet to Nicolae Ceausescu Who Became an Extreme Nationalist Figure after the Fall of Communism in Romania', *The Independent*, 16 September 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/corneliu-vadim-tudor-court-poet-to>

seeking his third term in office. Yet unlike Iliescu, high-ranking member of both the Communist Nomenklatura and the post-Communist establishment, who won with 66.8%, Dan is an independent, reformist, governing in a far more volatile geopolitical environment.

Whereas the 2000 elections had NATO and EU membership at stake,⁸ today, Romania's Western memberships have been secured (since 2004 and 2007 respectively). But in some ways, the stakes are higher today. Beyond Russia's imperialistic ambitions, which have become undeniable since 2022, sovereigntist parties, the label for Romania's illiberal and non-liberal far right populist movement, now hold roughly 35% of parliamentary seats, and could grow further. In this context, assuming stability until the next electoral cycle would be a mistake. This is even more pressing as the current government faces difficult choices, especially regarding the economy and implementing unpopular measures. One such example is the recent VAT increase from 19% to 21% – a measure Dan pledged to oppose during his campaign.⁹

At present, the Romanian Government, central to policymaking in the country's semi-presidential system, leans broadly pro-EU. Led by reformist Ilie Bolojan, head of the National Liberals PNL (EPP), the coalition includes the weakened Social Democrats PSD (S&D), the Hungarian minority party UDMR (EPP), the pro-EU liberal party USR (Renew Europe), and the 'national minorities' group in Parliament – a quirk of the system guaranteeing representation to recognized minority groups. An outsider perspective will remark how ideologically diverse this coalition is, considering it spans the political spectrum from S&D to EPP. However, understanding Romanian politics becomes both easier, and at first counterintuitive, if we treat traditional party ideologies, from the Social Democrats to the National Liberals, less as genuine ideological clashes than as performative differentiations used to segment the political establishment.

Since 1989, most elections have mirrored a tug-of-war between PSD, the assumed constant of Romanian politics and unofficial successor of the Communist Party, and its opposition, which has shifted shape over time. In the 2000s, this opposition was defined by a pro-EU stance, embodied by PNL and later USR. Yet since the Covid pandemic, a reversal has emerged: the establishment presents itself as pro-European, while the opposition has increasingly embraced Euroscepticism. In short, Romanian politics are polarized into two broad camps: pro- and semi-pro-EU forces on one side, and the sovereigntists, synonymous with illiberalism, non-liberalism, and the far right, on the other.

Yet this cleavage also runs within the governing coalition itself. Most notably with the PSD which, despite being nominally pro-EU, harbours influential voices sympathetic with the sovereigntist movement.¹⁰ This internal ambiguity underscores how fragile the pro-EU consensus truly is. Nicușor Dan's victory has secured the short-term for the pro-EU camp, but complacency would be a strategic error. A more proactive approach to Romania, attentive to its unique geopolitical position, is essential to ensure that, long-term, Romania remains a pillar within the EU and Europe's security architecture.

nicolae-ceausescu-who-became-an-extreme-nationalist-figure-after-the-fall-of-communism-in-romania-10504432.html.

⁸ Eugen Tomiuc, 'Romania: Iliescu Defeats Nationalist Tudor In Runoff For President', Archive, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11 December 2000, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1095318.html>.

⁹ 'Nicușor Dan a dat în scris că TVA nu va fi majorată dacă el devine președinte: mesajul scris pe hârtie', *digi24*, 13 May 2025, <https://www.digi24.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2025/nicusor-dan-a-dat-in-scris-ca-tva-ul-nu-va-fi-majorat-daca-el-devine-presedinte-mesajul-scris-pe-hartie-3238837>.

¹⁰ Ema Stoica, 'PSD, divizat de suveranism și scandaluri interne. Doar scaunul de premier îl mai ține pe Ciolacu în fruntea partidului', *digi24*, 15 January 2025, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/psd-divizat-de-suveranism-si-scandaluri-interne-ciolacu-tinut-lider-de-fotoliul-de-la-guvern-3082355>.

Romania needs – despite its fractious politics – to be considered as a pillar in the EU and especially in its security architecture. This paper will first look at what makes Romania unique: being at the ‘Crossroads’ between Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans or, how Romanians like to define themselves, as a ‘Latin island in a Slavic Sea.’¹¹ The metaphor overlooks the unique heritage of Romania’s western neighbour, Hungary. Even so, it captures Romania’s multi-regional heritage, which enables it to play a pivotal diplomatic role.

Its geography also makes it a key player in the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine as well as a gateway to the Black Sea and Western Balkans. Ongoing discussions on security guarantees for Ukraine highlight Romania’s potential centrality not only to the Black Sea, but also as a host for NATO air assets – even in the event of enforcing a no-fly-zone. Beyond its role as a frontline state, Romania’s significance lies in its ability to act as a geopolitical bridgebuilder: connecting Central Europe, the Balkans, the Black Sea, and Eastern Europe; anchoring Moldova’s and potentially Ukraine’s European trajectories; and serving as a platform for NATO and transatlantic security.

Yet despite these factors, both Germany and the EU have tended to underinvest political capital in Romania, often treating it as a peripheral member state under the moniker of a post-2004 enlargement member state. Romania, having joined in 2007, is still too often perceived through this lens. This neglect is increasingly untenable, particularly now that Romania (and Bulgaria) have finally joined the Schengen area in full at the start of 2025, after years of delays and vetoes from Western European states such as the Netherlands and Austria.¹² Furthermore, as the Romanian Presidential elections have shown, this role is not without vulnerabilities, with Russian disinformation, populist mobilization, and potential wavering U.S. commitment in the long-term testing the resilience of Romania’s pro-Western orientation. In sum, it is precisely Romania’s under-recognised potential that makes it vulnerable to anti-Western, anti-European, and anti-liberal forces, and that is why it deserves far greater attention in Berlin and Brussels.

The Crossroads within Europe

Romania remains under-recognized and peripheral in EU thinking. This is partially due to late EU accession in 2007, coupled with a lingering perception that it has not yet fully established itself as an actor in its own right. The difficulty of placing Romania neatly within a single European region only reinforces this neglect. Romania has approximately 19 million inhabitants¹³ and a diaspora of about 5.7 million (mostly across the EU),¹⁴ yet is often filed under ‘Eastern Europe’ – a Cold War inheritance that flattens its historical, cultural,

¹¹ Andrei Terian, ‘Between the Romance World and Eastern Europe: The Geoculture of Romanian Studies’, *Center for Slavic, Eurasian and East European Studies*, 22 March 2016, <https://csees.unc.edu/event/between-the-romance-world-and-eastern-europe-the-geoculture-of-romanian-studies/>.

¹² ‘Austria and the Netherlands Blocked Romania and Bulgaria Accession to the Schengen Area’, *European Greens*, 8 December 2022, <https://europeangreens.eu/news/austriaand-netherlands-blocked-romania-and-bulgaria-accession-schengen-area/>.

¹³ Rezultate definitive RPL 2021 – Recensământul Populației și Locuintelor (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2023), <https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-rpl-2021/rezultate-definitive/>.

¹⁴ Florin Pușcaș, ‘Câți români sunt în diaspora - o analiză detaliată a populației României în străinătate’, *Stiripesurse*, 20 February 2025, https://www.stiripesurse.ro/cati-romani-sunt-in-diaspora-o-analiza-detaliata-a-populatiei-romaniei-in-strainatate_3589131.html.

political, and geopolitical complexity.¹⁵ Too often, Romania is mentally lumped together with its southern neighbour Bulgaria, a dynamic underscored by the recent Schengen saga. Yet, much like Poland, the post-2004 enlargement member state heavyweight where the imperial legacies of the German Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy, and Tsarist Russia are still invoked to explain its internal diversity, Romania, too, echoes this layered past. But whereas Poland anchors the EU's north-eastern flank, Romania mirrors it in south-east Europe – a crossroads between Central Europe, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe. This layered identity is reflected in how Romanians often describe their country as part of south-east Europe – though even this designation is contested. However, it is this very ambiguity that gives the country strategic value and underscores its under-leveraged centrality within Europe.

Romania can be understood as being part of Central Europe – a view even recognized by the German Standing Committee on Geographical Names (StAGN), whose cultural-historical mapping includes large parts of the country within Mitteleuropa. A strong German and Hungarian presence since the medieval period have anchored these ties: Nobel Prize winner Herta Müller is a Banat Swabian; Transylvania was home to a significant Siebenbürger Sachsen community, alongside the Romanian majority and a long-standing Hungarian presence; and Bukovina, today split between Romania and Ukraine, was a multiethnic province of the Habsburg Empire. Yet despite these links, Romania was denied entry into the Visegrád Group in the 1990s, rejected for instability and insufficient democratization. Its bid risked complicating Poland, Hungary, and then-Czechoslovakia's effort to 'rejoin the West' through EU membership by distancing themselves from the broader 'Eastern Europe' label.¹⁶ Romania's turbulent post-revolutionary transition thus reinforced the perception of peripherality – even though its position would later highlight Romania's potential to become central for Europe.

Romania's position also ties it to both the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Its southern regions root it in the Balkans: Țara Românească, known as Wallachia outside Romania, borders Bulgaria, Serbia, and through extension, the Western Balkans. Its easternmost region, Dobruja, serves as a strategic gateway to the increasingly vital Black Sea, with implications not only for regional stability but also for prospective EU links with the Caucasus. Romania's 'Balkan identity' is less contested, reflected in its role in launching the Craiova Group in 2015 alongside Bulgaria and Serbia (with Greece joining in 2017), a Visegrád-like initiative focused on regional connectivity and supporting Serbia's EU integration. At the same time, Romania's northeast ties it to Moldova and Ukraine and embeds it in Eastern Europe in a post-Cold War sense. Moldova was, historically, once a united Romanian province. However, this 'historical region' was divided, under Russian and Soviet imperial pressure, into what is today Romanian Moldova and the EU candidate state Republic of Moldova. While the Prut River does mark the boundary between the two, both regions remain more culturally aligned towards Eastern Europe – thus showing how Romania is part of Central Europe, the Balkans, but also Eastern Europe.

This mapping of the country becomes even more complex when we start considering its specific characteristics. Romanian is a Romance Language, while 73.6% of Romanian Citizens identify with the Romanian Orthodox Church¹⁷ – a combination that blurs the distinction between the Latin 'West' and the Orthodox 'East.' Romania has also long positioned

¹⁵ Jörg Hackmann, "The End of "East Central Europe" and the Return of "Europe in-Between", *Baltic Worlds*, 21 April 2021, <https://balticworlds.com/the-end-of-east-central-europe-and-the-return-of-europe-in-between/>.

¹⁶ Timothy Garton Ash, *The Puzzle of Central Europe*, (C) 2006-2010, International Visegrad Fund, 13 September 2006, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/the-visegrad-book/ash-timothy-garton-the>.

¹⁷ Nina Evason, *Romanian Culture: Religion* (Cultural Atlas, 2024), <https://culturalatlases.sbs.com.au/romanian-culture/romanian-culture-religion>.

itself within France's cultural orbit, as reflected in its membership of the International Organization of La Francophonie, though English has since increased in prominence. In short, the more accurate way to understand Romania is as a European crossroads where Central Europe, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and even 'Latin Europe' intersect. These overlapping layers make it difficult to box Romania into a single region – but also precisely what gives it a pivotal, if underappreciated, role in Europe.

Romania's European Path: A (Partial) Success Story

For all the debate over where Romania's regional belonging lies, its post-1989 social and political trajectory has been unmistakable: *a return to Europe*. This identity is closely tied to both EU and NATO membership, which, in Romanian political imagery, represents not merely technocratic institutionalism, but a form of *emancipation* within Europe, underpinned by Western guarantees. In the words of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, then Foreign Minister in 2007, Romania's EU accession was 'the completion of a long-promised return to Europe that started with the fall of the Iron Curtain.'¹⁸ EU membership was framed not simply as 'joining a club,' but as the institutionalization of Romania's European identity – a decisive pivot from East to West.

Since the Romanian Revolution, the only violent overthrow of a communist regime during the 1989 wave that marked the collapse of the Soviet Empire, Romania's position within Europe has remained distinct. Despite NATO and EU membership, Romania often still sees itself as in an '*endless*' period of transition, not fully part nor as prosperous as the 'West,' but firmly aligned with it. Among EU member states, Romania stands out as one of the most pro-American countries, echoing Cold War-era hopes of liberation embodied in the slogan: 'The Americans are coming.' This orientation underpins NATO membership and the strategic partnership with the U.S., which remain pillars of Romanian foreign policy.

From 2007 to 2025, Romania's Western Path remains institutionally entrenched. The country's 2025–2028 Government Programme explicitly states that 'membership in NATO, EU status, and the Strategic Partnership with the U.S. remain the basis of foreign and security policy'¹⁹ – a policy which remains popular. Looking at public polling, 60% of Romanians trust the EU, and 70% of Romanians trust NATO.²⁰ This indicates that, even among sovereigntist voters, EU and NATO membership retain a degree of legitimacy. In other words, Romania is institutionally quite entrenched within the West – even if perceptions of second-tier status within the West persist. Notably, many among Romania's diaspora, who directly benefit from EU membership, nevertheless voted for sovereigntist parties in the previous elections.²¹ While there are many speculations for why this traditionally pro-EU voting block flipped since the Covid pandemic to three-quarters

¹⁸ 'EU Gains Two New Members: Mass Celebrations as Bulgaria and Romania Join European Union', *Der Spiegel*, 2 January 2007, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/eu-gains-two-new-members-mass-celebrations-as-bulgaria-and-romania-join-european-union-a-457349.html>.

¹⁹ *Program de guvernare psd-pnl-usr-udmr-grupul parlamentar al minorităților naționale din camera deputaților 2025-2028* (n.d.), 52, https://gov.ro/fisiere/pagini_fisiere/25-06-24-11-11-52PROGRAM_DE_GUVERNARE.pdf.

²⁰ 'Peste 70% dintre români au încredere în NATO, iar peste 60% în Uniunea Europeană', *RFI*, 24 June 2025, <https://www.rfi.fr/ro/romania/20250624-sondaj-inscop-pest-70-dintre-romani-au-incredere-in-nato-iar-pest-60-in-uniunea-europeana>.

²¹ 'Why Are Romanians Abroad Voting for Far-Right Candidate Simion?', *RFI*, 15 May 2025, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20250515-why-are-romanians-abroad-voting-for-far-right-candidate-simion>.

voting for George Simion, most likely reflects the power of social media, amplifying grievances among a community both connected to and distant from Romania.²²

The domestic picture reinforces this paradox. Since the 1990s, Romania has moved from being one of Europe's poorest to a mid-tier economy by total GDP (between Czechia and Denmark in 2024),²³ even as GDP per capita still trails older EU members. OECD accession – a non-EU track running in parallel – remains pending, but the growth potential is intact: the economy continues to grow, though currently at a slower rate (0.8–2.2%)²⁴ compared to the post-Covid recovery (5.5%).²⁵ Yet this economic performance does not capture the social reality. The minimum guaranteed salary in 2025 is 793 Euros (about 504 Euros after taxes),²⁶ and the minimum guaranteed pension is 250 Euros, with pensions below 394 Euros untaxed. While cities like Bucharest, Cluj, Iași, Sibiu, Oradea, and Timișoara are relatively prosperous, Romania's rural areas lag far behind – the urban-rural cleavage being among the strongest in the Union. 45% of Romanians live in rural areas, compared to the EU average of 24%.²⁷ With an ageing society and 27.9% of Romanians at risk of poverty or social exclusion,²⁸ this is even more pronounced in underdeveloped rural areas – creating fertile ground for populist appeal. While Romania remains one of the more affordable EU countries,²⁹ rising inflation,³⁰ together with the convergence of many consumer prices with Western levels, has left large parts of the population facing persistent socio-economic hardship.

To address these structural socio-economic issues, the current Romanian government is seeking to boost the economy through infrastructure investment, domestic consumption, and exports. Yet Romania still lags in foreign direct investment (below the rate of Hungary and Poland), labour productivity, and bureaucratic efficiency – hindering competitiveness.³¹ Corruption also remains a structural problem: public perception of corruption is high, above the EU average,³² even if recent reforms show progress in addressing the phenomenon – as the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO)

²² Ovidiu Cornea, 'Cum a câștigat George Simion peste 70% în Italia, Germania și Spania. Sociolog: Prin migrație nu te mai îmbogățești, ci doar trăiești decent', *Alegeri Prezidențiale 2025, Europa Liberă România*, 7 May 2025, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/alegeri-prezidentiale-2025-mobilizare-diaspora-romani-george-simion-vot-nicutor-vot/33405156.html>.

²³ *GDP - Romania* (World Bank, n.d.), accessed 26 September 2025, <https://data.worldbank.org>.

²⁴ *Economic Forecast for Romania* (European Commission, 2025), https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-economies/romania/economic-forecast-romania_en.

²⁵ Dragoș Comache, 'Economia a crescut cu doar 0,9% anul trecut. 2024 devine unul dintre cei mai slabi ani din ultimele două decenii', *digi24*, 14 February 2025, <https://www.digi24.ro/digieconomic/macro/economia-a-crescut-cu-doar-09-anul-trecut-2024-devine-unul-dintre-cei-mai-slabi-ani-din-ultimele-doua-decenii-46149>.

²⁶ Denisa Toboșaru, 'New Changes Regarding the Minimum Gross Salary in Romania, Starting 1st of January', *Accace*, 20 December 2024, <https://accace.com/minimum-gross-salary-in-romania/>.

²⁷ *Rural Population - European Union* (World Bank, n.d.), accessed 26 September 2025, <https://data.worldbank.org>.

²⁸ 'People at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion in 2024', *Eurostat*, 30 April 2025, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250430-2>.

²⁹ *Comparative Price Levels of Consumer Goods and Services* (Eurostat, 2025), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Comparative_price_levels_of_consumer_goods_and_services.

³⁰ Judith Sib-at, 'Romania Inflation Accelerates to Over 2-Year High', *Trading Economics*, 11 September 2025, <https://tradingeconomics.com/romania/inflation-cpi/news/484531>.

³¹ 'România vs. Alte Țări Din UE: Cum Se Dezvoltă Economia 2025', *StartingUP*, 3 April 2025, <https://startingup.ro/romania-vs-alte-tari-din-ue-cum-se-dezvolta-economia-in-2025/>.

³² *Our Work in Romania* (Transparency International, 2025), <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/romania>.

noted in its 2025 report on Romania's central government and law enforcement.³³ However, the potential remains: once political reforms are implemented, economic growth could provide a stronger foundation for sustainable development while also undercutting the conditions that fuel radical currents.

Romania's economic promise is even more significant considering the country's energy potential, especially amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the EU's struggle to overcome dependence on Russian gas. Having become the EU's top natural gas producer in 2024 by overtaking the Netherlands,³⁴ Romania began drilling offshore in the Neptun Deep gas fields in the Black Sea in March 2025, with production expected to double in 2027.³⁵ Yet the potential extends further. The Bucharest-based EPG think tank, specializing in energy, highlights that Romania's strategic energy potential remains untapped. This ranges from biomethane & biogas,³⁶ hydrogen & carbon capture/storage, and offshore wind³⁷ – all of which will be 'critical for Europe's energy independence while also ensuring a cleaner, more resilient, and affordable future beyond fossil fuels.'³⁸ In this sense, Romania is not only a regional stabilizer but also a potential cornerstone of Europe's long-term energy security.

Romania's Military Position

Romania's Western orientation is also reflected in its defence and security posture. The country's accession to NATO in 2004, and the existence of two pivotal NATO military bases – Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base near the Black Sea and the Deveselu Base, which hosts the Aegis Ashore Ballistic Missile Defence System. Furthermore, Cămpia Turzii Air Base near Cluj in Transylvania represents, for the US Air Force,³⁹ an 'enduring presence in Romania.' Beyond logistics, Romania is modernising its military: its armed forces are growing from 81,000 towards a planned 100,000 active-duty troops,⁴⁰ and it plans to acquire 48 F-35s with deliveries beginning in 2031.⁴¹ While most Romanian military purchases are American, it is also important to mention that the country has close ties with Israel,

³³ 'New GRECO Report on Romania's Progress in Anti-Corruption Measures for Central Government and Law Enforcement Agencies', *Council of Europe* (Strasbourg), 5 August 2025, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/new-greco-report-on-romania-s-progress-in-anti-corruption-measures-for-central-government-and-law-enforcement-agencies>.

³⁴ *Natural Gas Supply Statistics* (Eurostat, 2025), <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/10590.pdf>.

³⁵ Luiza Ilie, 'Drilling Starts on Romanian Black Sea Offshore Gas Project That Challenges Russia', *Energy*, *Reuters*, 25 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/drilling-starts-romanian-black-sea-offshore-gas-project-that-challenges-russia-2025-03-25/>.

³⁶ Nadia Maki et al., *Untapping Romania's Biogas and Biomethane Potential*, EPG Policy Papers (EPG, 2024), https://www.epg-thinktank.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/EPG-POLICY-PAPER-Untapping-Romanias-Biogas-and-Biomethane-Potential-2025.01.08_compressed.pdf.

³⁷ *Romania's Offshore Wind Energy Resources*, Study (Energy Policy Group, 2020), https://epg-thinktank.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/EPG_Wind-Offshore-report_Final_Nov-16.pdf.

³⁸ Florian A. Schneider and Kashvi Chandok, *Powering Europe's Clean Future: Romania's Role in Hydrogen and Carbon Capture and Storage Infrastructure* (EPG, n.d.), <https://www.epg-thinktank.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Romania-Hydrogen-CCS-Future-Feb-4-1.pdf>.

³⁹ 'U.S. Air Force Establishes Enduring Presence in Romania', *USAFE-AFAFRICA*, 4 January 2021, <https://www.usafe.af.mil/News/Press-Releases/Display/Article/2461113/us-air-force-establishes-enduring-presence-in-romania/>.

⁴⁰ Joe Saballa, 'Romania Plans to Boost Army by 35,000 Troops as Tensions Rise', *The Defense Post*, 28 April 2025, <https://thedefensepost.com/2025/04/28/romania-boost-army-tensions/>.

⁴¹ 'Romanian Executive Approves Purchase of 32 US-Made F-35 Fighter Jets', *Romania Insider*, 8 November 2024, <https://www.romania-insider.com/romanian-executive-approves-f35-purchase-us-nov-2024>.

including plans on buying the SPYDER defence system, making the second-largest deal in Israel's defence-industry history after the Arrow-3 sale to Germany.⁴²

A consequence of the war in Ukraine has been the rising importance of the Black Sea. In the Baltic, Russia's invasion triggered Sweden and Finland to join NATO, consolidating the Alliance's dominance there. The same cannot be said for the Black Sea. Ukraine has significantly degraded Russia's Black Sea fleet – forcing it to withdraw significant assets from Sevastopol in Crimea⁴³ and rendering it 'functionally inactive' according to the UK's Ministry of Defence.⁴⁴ However, Moscow nonetheless remains a medium- to long-term threat to both the EU and NATO's south-eastern flank, not only through conventional means but also through hybrid tactics exemplified by its 'shadow fleet' in the Baltic⁴⁵ which could target Romania's offshore gas fields as well as future Black Sea projects. In other words, despite Ukraine's success in the Black Sea, Russia's capabilities should not be underestimated.

Geopolitical Potential

Romania's geopolitical weight stems less from its size than from its position and alignment. Among the EU's post-2004 enlargement member states, Poland remains the largest and most prosperous actor. Increasingly regarded as the Union's most important eastern power – not least through its role in the Weimar Triangle with Germany and France – Poland has become the EU's 'success story.' On the other hand, in the Balkans and Black Sea region, Turkey, a non-EU but NATO state, is the regional heavyweight by population and GDP – far larger than any of its Balkan neighbours. Romania sits between these poles. With a population of 19 million and diaspora of 5.7 million across Europe, largely in the EU, Romania is the second largest of the EU's post-2004 enlargement member states after Poland, and in south-eastern Europe after Turkey. Crucially, as both an EU- and NATO-embedded country, it is Romania's partnerships with key EU states – notably France, which currently stations approximately 4,000 military personnel in Romania,⁴⁶ as well as Germany, Italy, Poland – that reinforce this role. But it is Romania's position among its immediate neighbours that most clearly illustrates both its importance, and its under-leveraged and overlooked centrality.

In the north-east, Romania borders two crucial countries: Ukraine and Moldova. Romania has, in essence, a solid relationship with Ukraine, which has deepened after 2022 to include military support.⁴⁷ This ranges from acting as a crucial logistics hub between the West and Ukraine, to training Ukrainian pilots on F-16s, and even potentially

⁴² Tzally Greenberg, 'Romania Buys Spyder Air-Defense Suites from Israel for over \$2 Billion', *Defense News*, 23 July 2025, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-af-rica/2025/07/23/romania-buys-spyder-air-defense-suites-from-israel-for-over-2-billion/>.

⁴³ Peter Dickinson, 'Russia's Retreat from Crimea Makes a Mockery of the West's Escalation Fears', *Atlantic Council*, 16 July 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russias-retreat-from-crimea-makes-a-mockery-of-the-west-s-escalation-fears/>.

⁴⁴ Dickinson, 'Russia's Retreat from Crimea'.

⁴⁵ *Baltic Sea: The Security Risk Posed by Russia's Shadow Fleet* (Bundeswehr, 2025), <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/baltic-sea-russia-s-shadow-fleet-5892544>.

⁴⁶ Iulian Ernst, 'France to Nearly Triple Troops in Romania to 4,000', *Romania Insider*, 16 July 2025, <https://www.romania-insider.com/france-troops-romania-july-2025>.

⁴⁷ Tony Wesolowsky, 'From Neighbors To Power Partners: Romania's Deepening Ties With Ukraine', *Romania, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 22 October 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-ukraine-nato-black-sea-grain-war/33162333.html>.

collaborating, under the European SAFE program, on weapons development.⁴⁸ However, as the Romanian presidential elections have highlighted, there remain some issues that the sovereigntist movement seeks to exploit. These range from accusations that Ukraine infringes on the rights of the Romanian minority – claims largely amplified by sovereigntist actors and mirroring Russia’s wider disinformation campaign,⁴⁹ which stand in tension with Ukraine’s European ambitions – to dangerous irredentist rhetoric about territories that were part of ‘Greater Romania’ but became part of Ukraine (Northern Bukovina and Budjak) after WWII. Overall, while Romania’s support for Ukraine remains firm, these sensitivities illustrate how historical legacies, and the power of historical revisionism, can still shape regional dynamics.

On the other hand, Romania’s relationship with the Republic of Moldova is unique – both countries regard themselves as sharing the same culture, heritage, and language. A consequence of this special relationship is that around 850,000, about 35% of Moldovan citizens, including the current president Maia Sandu, also hold Romanian citizenship.⁵⁰ This means that any Russian intervention in Moldova, through its Transnistria proxy, would directly endanger EU-NATO citizens, raising sensitive questions about security guarantees. Furthermore, if there are serious steps to be taken for Moldovan EU membership, as German Chancellor Merz and Macron hinted at,⁵¹ Romania will inevitably play a pivotal role, both in supporting the process and in providing stabilization from the Kremlin’s leverage. In short, any credible path for Moldova’s accession and stabilization will inevitably run through Bucharest.

Energy illustrates this point well: The Iași-Chișinău pipeline, in service since 2014, became a lifeline for Moldova in 2022, when Gazprom reduced deliveries,⁵² with Romania’s ‘Romgaz’ aiming to cover up to ~30% of Moldova’s demand via its trading arm,⁵³ looking ahead, Neptun Deep gas which, from 2027 onward, could expand this share further. More broadly, much of Moldova’s infrastructure – from its Soviet-gauge railway system, which the EU is already moving to adapt,⁵⁴ to outdated energy links – still carries the imprint of the Soviet system. Here too, Romania can play a pivotal role in replacing those dependencies with European alternatives, reducing Moldova’s exposure to the Kremlin’s leverage. To ensure Moldova’s European path, President Nicușor Dan has confirmed that Romania

⁴⁸ ‘Romania, Ukraine to Collaborate on Weapons Development’, *The Romania Journal*, 25 August 2025, <https://www.romaniajournal.ro/politics/romania-ukraine-to-collaborate-on-weapons-development/>.

⁴⁹ ‘Disinfo: Ukraine Violates Right of Ethnic Russians to Self-Determination’, *EUvsDisinfo*, 25 October 2024, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/ukraine-violates-right-of-ethnic-russians-to-self-determination/>.

⁵⁰ Radu Dumitrescu, ‘Data Shows Roughly 850,000 Moldovans Received Romanian Citizenship so Far’, *Romania Insider*, 25 July 2025, <https://www.romania-insider.com/850000-moldovans-received-romanian-citizenship-jul-2025>.

⁵¹ “‘Door to the EU Is Open,’ Merz Tells Moldova”, *Deutsche Welle*, 27 August 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/door-to-the-eu-is-open-merz-tells-moldova/a-73786830>.

⁵² ‘Victor Parlicov: The Iasi - Chisinau Gas Pipeline Ensured Our Energy Security in 2022, When Gazprom Unilaterally Limited Deliveries to the Republic of Moldova’, *Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Moldova*, 13 September 2024, <https://energie.gov.md/en/content/victor-parlicov-iasi-chisinau-gas-pipeline-ensured-our-energy-security-2022-when-gazprom>.

⁵³ Adi Mosoiu, ‘Romgaz țintește să acopere până la 30% din necesarul de gaze al Republicii Moldova’, *Profit*, 23 May 2025, https://www.profit.ro/povesti-cu-profit/energie/romgaz-tinteste-sa-acopere-pana-la-30-din-necesarul-de-gaze-al-republicii-moldova-22043030?mc_cid=337de9b7b3.

⁵⁴ Robert Preston, ‘EIB Study Sets out First Steps for Standard-Gauge Links to Ukraine and Moldova’, *International Railway Journal*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.railjournal.com/infrastructure/eib-study-set-out-first-steps-for-standard-gauge-links-to-ukraine-and-moldova/>.

will continue supporting Moldova's EU bid diplomatically, through technical expertise, and through collaboration in energy, infrastructure, education and investment.⁵⁵

At the same time, improving security and resilience in the Black Sea region has been a major focus for Romania within NATO and the EU. Relations with Turkey, while historically complex given the Ottoman legacy – Romania gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878 – are cordial today. Furthermore, shifting towards the Caucasus, Romania was the first country to 'recognize the restoration of Georgia's independence on 27 August 1991.'⁵⁶ While the current Georgian government's authoritarian turn poses a barrier to EU accession in a country where 86% of the population supports membership,⁵⁷ initiatives such as the proposed 'Caspian-Black Sea Green Energy Corridor' – featuring both subsea electricity and fibre-optic data – demonstrate Romania's potential to act as a connector between the EU and the Caucasus via energy and data corridors.⁵⁸ While this remains a developing story, the project highlights that Romania has built a solid reputation and, if anything, significant potential – though, as alluded before, such initiatives remain vulnerable to Russian 'Shadow Fleet' tactics.

Beyond its role in the north-east and the Black Sea, Romania also plays a role, though more in terms of potential, in the Western Balkans, supported by cordial relations with Serbia,⁵⁹ a country whose ties with NATO remain historically strained. Romania is one of the five EU member states that does not recognize Kosovo's independence,⁶⁰ a stance that provides it with a degree of credibility in Belgrade. One example of bilateral collaboration is the Romania-Serbia Interreg IPA programme, which funds modest but visible cross-border projects in infrastructure, healthcare, and education.⁶¹ These examples illustrate Romania's potential to serve as a practical connector between the EU and Serbia. Regional frameworks also reflect this positioning. The Craiova Group, launched in 2015 by Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia (with Greece joining in 2017) as a Visegrád-style initiative for connectivity and EU integration, highlights Romania's convening capacity, though in practice its momentum has been limited, especially when compared to the more active Bucharest Nine and Three Seas Initiative – both of which have tended to overshadow the Craiova Group and, notably, do not include Serbia.

However, beyond its immediate region, Romania has a historical legacy of acting as a diplomatic intermediary. One of the rare constructive aspects of the Ceausescu regime was its pursuit of a more independent foreign policy beyond Moscow's dictates. This

⁵⁵ Eliza Mihalache, 'Romania Pledges Firm Support for Moldova's EU Path', *M1*, 6 October 2025, <https://moldova1.md/p/50623>.

⁵⁶ 'Brief History', *Embassy of Romania in Georgia*, n.d., accessed 26 September 2025, <https://tbi-lisi.mae.ro/en/node/764>.

⁵⁷ 'Large Majority of Georgians Support EU Membership, Survey Finds', *Commonspace*, 12 February 2025, <https://www.commonspace.eu/news/large-majority-georgians-support-eu-membership-survey-finds>.

⁵⁸ 'Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary and Romania Signed a Joint Letter on the Green Energy Corridor in Budapest', *Ministry of Energy of Azerbaijan*, 10 March 2025, <https://minenergy.gov.az/en/xeberler-arxivi/00480?utm>; 'Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, Romania Request PMI Status for "Black Sea Energy" Project', *Politics, Caucasus Watch*, 11 March 2025, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/azerbaijan-georgia-hungary-romania-request-pmi-status-for-black-sea-energy-project.html>.

⁵⁹ 'Romania', *Republic of Serbia Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, n.d., accessed 26 September 2025, <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/bilateral-cooperation/romania>.

⁶⁰ 'De ce nu recunoaște România independența Kosovo. Explicațiile oficiale ale diplomației de la București', *Adevarul*, 24 September 2023, <https://adevarul.ro/politica/de-ce-nu-recunoaste-romania-independenta-kosovo-2302672.html>.

⁶¹ 'About the Programme – Interreg IPA Romania-Serbia Programme 2021 – 2027', *Interreg IPA Romania-Serbia Programme*, n.d., accessed 26 September 2025, <https://romania-serbia.net/programme/about-the-programme/>.

began with Romania being the only Warsaw-Pact country that did not break its ties with Israel post-67,⁶² and culminated with the country's opposition to the USSR's intervention in crushing the 'Prague Spring' in Czechoslovakia, 1968.⁶³ While both moves can be interpreted as Romania desiring closer ties with the West, the Communist Regime's policies towards the then 'Third World' – which included lending money to countries such as Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Mozambique, DR Congo (to name a few)⁶⁴ – does provide a distinct approach to the world outside Europe. This went beyond the West's colonial legacy, which still hinders closer, more equal, ties between Europe and the rest of the World – especially Africa.

Challenges, from Russian Disinformation to Geopolitical Sustainability

Yet paradoxically, even with economic growth, firm Western anchoring through EU and NATO, and increasing recognition of Romania's regional role and potential, the country still nearly elected first Călin Georgescu and then George Simion. Beyond the economy, which the current pro-EU government will need to address, Romania's strategic position also makes it a target. This was demonstrated by the intense international attention during the 2024–2025 presidential elections.⁶⁵ Influential commentators such as JD Vance claimed '[y]ou don't have shared values if you cancel elections because you don't like the result.' Elon Musk, meanwhile, repeatedly used his platform to promote the disqualified candidate Călin Georgescu – who, among other controversies, faces criminal charges for fascist, Legionary-styled statements.⁶⁶ The fact that Romania came close to electing a far-right president who openly quoted Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the interwar leader of the 'Legionary Movement,' who sought to eliminate the Jews,⁶⁷ and whose movement's ideology also targeted the Roma and other minorities in Romania, underscores how precarious and fragile Romania's democratic trajectory remains.

Part of the answer lies in the structural issues exploited by the sovereigntist movement: persistent corruption, rural-urban inequalities, and the mass emigration of Romanians to Western Europe. These conditions have long fuelled anti-system sentiment, but the Covid pandemic amplified the shift. Pro-European protest parties that once mobilized frustration were eclipsed by sovereigntist forces reframing 'Europe' as the problem. As declassified documents from Romanian and French services revealed, Georgescu's campaign

⁶² Sielke Kelner, 'Ceausescu and the Six-Day War: The View from Washington and London', *Wilson Center*, 5 June 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ceausescu-and-the-six-day-war-the-view-washington-and-london>.

⁶³ *Romania's Attitude towards the "Prague Spring"* (Institute of European Network Remembrance and Solidarity, 2016), <https://hi-storylessons.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Romania's-attitude-towards-the-Prague-Spring.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Sorin Melenciuc, 'Ceausescu's Legacy: Romania Has to Recover Loans of USD 776 Million from Iraq, Libya, North Korea and Third World Countries, Granted during the Communist Regime', *Business Review*, 30 August 2018, <https://business-review.eu/investments/ceausescus-legacy-romania-has-to-recover-loans-of-usd-776-million-from-iraq-libya-north-korea-and-third-world-countries-granted-during-the-communist-regime-182660>.

⁶⁵ Adrian Ardelean, 'Călin Georgescu, inculpat în dosarul în care e acuzat de declarații fasciste și legionare, după ce a citat din Corneliu Zelea Codreanu', *Europa Liberă România*, 27 June 2025, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/calin-georgescu-inculpat-in-dosarul-in-care-e-acuzat-de-declaratii-fasciste-si-legionare-dupa-ce-a-citat-din-corneliu-zelea-codreanu/33456551.html>.

⁶⁶ Ardelean, 'Călin Georgescu, inculpat'.

⁶⁷ 'Corneliu Zelea Codreanu', *Anti-Defamation League*, n.d., accessed 26 September 2025, <https://extremismterms.adl.org/glossary/corneliu-zelea-codreanu>.

benefited from Russian disinformation efforts.⁶⁸ However, the fact that one of the first consequences of Georgescu's shock victory during the cancelled first round of the Romanian presidential elections was an uptick in internet searches for 'who were the legionaries,' or 'what is an antisemite'⁶⁹ highlights the fundamental flaw Russian disinformation is seeking to exploit: historical amnesia. Rectifying historical memory will be essential for Romania to consolidate its democracy – not least because Holocaust education only became mandatory as recently as the 2023–2024 school year.⁷⁰ More broadly, the targeting of these societal fault lines to potentially flip Romania away from its EU and NATO trajectory is a stark reminder of the country's strategic relevance – and its vulnerability. Georgescu's ongoing prosecution for his alleged role in an attempted coup d'état with reported Russian involvement only underlines how high the stakes are.⁷¹

It is in this context that the picture of Romania's geopolitical challenges emerges. While Russian disinformation campaigns could cause self-inflicted sabotage, what is currently happening in Washington, DC and Brussels can also pose a risk. While a full U.S. withdrawal from Europe is unlikely in the short term, the very fact that the idea has entered mainstream debate already undermines the credibility of NATO's security guarantees. For Romania, which relies heavily on the U.S. presence given its proximity to Russia, even the perception of wavering American commitment raises doubts about the long-term sustainability of its position within the current security architecture. Romania's security posture will increasingly need to focus on diversification if it is to ensure that European allies can compensate for any weakening of U.S. engagement. While this may not yet be a mainstream view in Bucharest, planning for such a scenario is prudent given Romania's exposure. Planning for such a scenario would build on existing assets, from MK Air Base and Aegis Ashore at Deveselu to allied deployments and F-16 training.

This also includes military and hybrid threats in the Black Sea region – a theatre that is crucial to consider given Russia's looming presence. Turkey, while formally a NATO ally, acts primarily through Realpolitik rather than shared strategic alignment. This can be seen in how the country uses the Montreux Convention to restrict allied naval access and its periodic hedging in Ukraine policy by supporting Kyiv while also deepening relations with Moscow⁷² – from refusing to sanction Russia, to continuing nuclear energy cooperation, to serving as a key node for Russian fuel imports into the EU.⁷³ In short, Turkey balances between its NATO membership, Russia, and Ukraine, rather than aligning fully with Western strategy.

⁶⁸ van der Made, 'French Cyber Agency Warns'.

⁶⁹ Norbert Nemeş, 'Cele mai căutate cuvinte din DEX și legătura cu misteriosul domn Georgescu. Ce înseamnă „legionar” sau „antisemit”', *Europa Liberă România*, 29 November 2024, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/cele-mai-cautate-cuvinte-din-dex-si-legatura-cu-misteriosul-domn-georgescu-ce-inseamna-legionar-sau-antisemit-/33220294.html>.

⁷⁰ '„Istoria Evreilor. Holocaustul”, disciplină obligatorie la clasa a XI-a din noul an școlar / Ce acuză Institutul „Elie Wiesel”', *Educatie, Hot News*, 10 August 2023, <https://hotnews.ro/istoria-evreilor-holocaustul-disciplina-obligatorie-la-clasa-a-xi-a-din-noul-an-scolar-ce-acuza-institutul-elie-wiesel-50149>.

⁷¹ *digi24*, 'Care a fost rolul lui Călin Georgescu'; *digi24*, 'Prima reacție a Kremlinului'; Guilbert, 'Romania Charges Ex-Presidential Candidate'.

⁷² Daria Isachenko, *Turkey in the Black Sea Region*, SWP Research Paper 2023/RP 12 (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2023), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/turkey-in-the-black-sea-region>.

⁷³ *Turkey Walks a Tightrope as Trump Threatens Sanctions over Russian Trade*, Rfi International Report, n.d., accessed 26 September 2025, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/podcasts/international-report/20250804-turkey-walks-a-tightrope-as-trump-threatens-sanctions-over-russian-trade>; Victor Jack, 'How Turkey Became Putin's "Pit Stop" for Selling Camouflaged Fuel to the EU', *Politico*, 15 May 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-turkey-become-vladimir-putin-pit-stop-sell-camouflage-fuel-eu/>.

At the EU level, the Black Sea was long under-recognized – mentioned only twice in the Strategic Compass⁷⁴ – but the Strategic Approach to the Black Sea published in May 2025 acknowledged its ‘significant geostrategic importance,’ outlining plans for a Maritime Security Hub, infrastructure protection, and enhanced connectivity.⁷⁵ While still a developing framework, it aligns closely with Romania’s priorities: protecting offshore energy infrastructure such as Neptun Deep, securing safe shipping lanes, including mine counter-measures, and advancing subsea energy and data corridors linking the EU with the Caucasus. However, for a more sustainable Western presence in the Black Sea that is less transactional and more deeply anchored in both EU and NATO structures, Romania would be the only medium-sized EU member state with direct access to the region, alongside the smaller but still significant presence of Bulgaria, at least until Ukraine joins the EU.

Summary and Outlook

Romania’s importance for Europe does not stem from size alone, but from location and alignment. Situated at the junction of Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Black Sea, the country connects several of the Union’s most exposed theatres. Its democratic resilience, energy and infrastructure prospects, and its role in relation to Moldova and Ukraine give developments in Romania an impact that reaches beyond national borders. In a period of uncertain transatlantic politics, the way Europe collectively engages its south-eastern flank will shape overall cohesion and security.

Across European debates, Romania is increasingly framed as a southern counterpart to the EU’s north-eastern anchor points. This lens highlights connectivity, infrastructure resilience and security linkages that run from the Danube–Black Sea corridor to the Eastern Neighbourhood. The emerging EU focus on maritime security, infrastructure protection and data-and-energy corridors in the Black Sea underscores this regional centrality. How NATO-EU coordination evolves in and around Romania – on air basing, air defence, and maritime situational awareness – will be a key indicator of Europe’s ability to turn geographical exposure into strategic depth.

A second theme concerns institutional consolidation. With Schengen accession complete, attention in Brussels and major capitals has moved to how Romania participates across EU policies and multilateral frameworks. Observers point to an expanding role in EU security and enlargement debates as well as continued steps in parallel fora. The pace and direction of these processes will signal whether Romania’s integration is leveraged for wider regional stability or remains underused.

Third, existing bilateral and societal ties provide a platform for wider cooperation. Energy transition and offshore resources, cultural and educational exchange, and newer shared priorities – counter-disinformation, prevention of extremism, and combating antisemitism – feature prominently in public discussions. As the United States recalibrates aspects of its European engagement, many analysts note the importance of sustaining normative anchoring and historical memory work through European partnerships, so that resilience is not defined only in military or economic terms, but also through efforts to

⁷⁴ *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (European External Action Service, 2022), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf.

⁷⁵ *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The European Union’s Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region*, JOIN(2025) 135 final (European Commission, 2025), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/170d9b3a-d45f-4169-80fa-9adb753c0921_en?filename=EU+Strategic+Approach+Black+Sea+Strategy.pdf.

combat historical distortions. In other words, safeguarding historical memory is key in combating disinformation – a form of vaccination against illiberalism.

Finally, Romania's relationship with the Republic of Moldova functions as a stress test for the EU's broader approach to neighbourhood stability. Moldova's European trajectory is tightly connected to developments in and through Romania – across infrastructure interconnections, energy security, customs and transport, and administrative capacity. Tri-lateral formats that link EU actors with Bucharest and Chişinău have gained visibility as practical vehicles for reducing exposure to coercion while supporting governance reforms.

Taken together, these trends suggest a reframing: from viewing Romania as a peripheral, under-recognized member state to seeing it as a hinge for Europe's south-eastern security architecture. The next years will show whether Europe can translate this potential into durable stability, connectivity and deterrence – protecting offshore and critical infrastructure in the Black Sea, embedding Moldova's European path, and ensuring that support to Ukraine is complemented by a stronger regional backbone. If successful, investment and attention directed through Romania will not merely assist one member state; they will contribute to the Union's capacity to convert vulnerabilities at its edge into sources of collective resilience.

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