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Breaking through distrust in relations between Romania and Ukraine

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On 21 April, Petro Poroshenko paid the first official visit by a President of Ukraine to Bucharest in nine years. He met his Romanian counterpart Klaus Iohannis, the country's Prime Minister, the leaders of both chambers of parliament, and the patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, among others. Although the visit resulted in declarations of closer cooperation rather than specific agreements, the thaw in bilateral relations observed over the last two years was confirmed. After decades of mutual friction, contacts at the highest political level have been intensified, and institutions for bilateral cooperation have been revived, including in the security sphere. This has been accompanied by declarations of willingness to deepen contacts in the economic, border, educational and cultural fields, as well as by gestures from both sides towards resolving sensitive issues.

The main cause for this change is the two sides' concurrent perception of risks in the Black Sea region since Russia's annexation of Crimea. Another impetus to this thaw is the change in the domestic political situation in both countries: the strongly pro-Western course of the new authorities in Kyiv, and Klaus Iohannis's assumption of the Romanian presidency in December 2014. Although there is still a catalogue of unresolved issues, a long-time barrier of distrust has been broken through, which paves the way for the development of Ukrainian-Romanian cooperation.

A new dynamic in bilateral cooperation

Kyiv and Bucharest had cool relations from the foundation of independent Ukraine until 2014. The main points of dispute concerned the observance of the rights of the Ukrainian minority in Romania and of the Romanian minority in Ukraine. According to data from 2001, each constitutes around 0.3% of the population in both countries (they mainly inhabit border areas). The problem for Bucharest is Kyiv's recognition of Ukraine's Moldovan minority as a community distinct from the Romanian. Simplified procedures for 'restoring' Romanian citizenship have also bred controversy in Ukraine, where the possession of dual citizenship is against the law. Romanian rhetoric of unification with neighbouring Moldova has given birth in Ukraine to suspicions of possible Romanian territorial claims to the Bugeac (the western part of the Odessa oblast) and northern Bukovina, areas which were part of so-called 'Greater Romania' in the interwar period. These tensions were also caused by the territorial dispute over the status of Snake Island (Fidonisi, or *Insula șerpilor*), and the dividing lines between the economic zones on the Black Sea shelf (which were settled in

favour of Romania in 2009), as well as a dispute over Ukraine's expansion of the deep-water Black Sea-Danube track along the Bystre canal in the Ukrainian part of the Danube delta. As a consequence, political contacts have been rare and characterised by suspicion; at times Romania's policy has been characterised in Ukraine as hostile.

Although none of the key problems in bilateral relations have been resolved, cooperation between Romania and Ukraine has become closer since Russia's annexation of Crimea. A strong signal of this new opening came when Romania was the first EU state to ratify the EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine. Moreover in 2014, after many years of resistance from Romania, an agreement on small border traffic was concluded. Political contacts have also intensified: in the last year Presidents Poroshenko and Iohannis have met four times; meetings between the two countries' prime ministers and the heads of diplomacy have been relatively frequent as well. During the Ukrainian president's last visit to Romania, work was resumed (after nearly a decade's break) on the Ukraine-Romania Joint Presidential Commission, an intergovernmental committee on the national minorities, and a committee on military matters. Another result of Poroshenko's latest visit is the promise to cancel long-term visa fees by Romania for Ukrainian citizens.

Both states have consistently updated and developed the legal framework for their bilateral cooperation in the fields of security and defence. Agreements on the joint protection of proprietary information, on joint border patrols and military transportation, and on giving Ukraine a symbolic amount of technical-military assistance (€250,000) have been signed. After the NATO summit in Wales, Romania has also became a coordinator state of the NATO trust fund to strengthen Ukraine's cyber-security, and its state-owned company Rasirom has supported the cyber-protection of some Ukrainian state institutions.

Bucharest's motives

For Romania, the main impulse to improve its relations with Ukraine was the annexation of Crimea and the increasing militarisation of the peninsula. The Russian-Ukrainian war has altered the relative political and military balance in the Black Sea to Russia's benefit. As a consequence, the sense of insecurity in Romania has increased significantly, all the more so as Crimea is less than 300 km from its shores, and Russia (through its maritime economic zones) has become a *de facto* neighbour of Romania. The perception of Ukraine in Romania is also changing. Over the last two decades, the Romanian political elite has had a lasting image of Ukraine as a pro-Russian country, and it is only the Russian-Ukrainian war which has given Kyiv the image of a potential ally. The realisation is also slowly growing that a stable Ukraine is a prerequisite for a stable Moldova, which hitherto has been almost the only area of interest for Romania's eastern policy.

Changes on the Romanian political scene also contributed to the opening of a new chapter in relations with Kyiv. The new President, Klaus Iohannis – as opposed to his predecessor Traian Băsescu (who completed his second term in December 2014) – has not emphasised the question of the Romanian minority in Ukraine. The development of bilateral cooperation has also been fostered by the gradual softening of the disputes over foreign policy on the Romanian domestic scene, as observed since Băsescu left office and the technocratic government of Dacian Cioloș was appointed in November 2015. Foreign issues have been almost absent from the campaigning for Romania's parliamentary elections this autumn.

Bucharest is currently looking for new forms of regional cooperation, which also gives it the opportunity to strengthen contacts with Kyiv. Romania proposed the idea of establishing a permanent NATO maritime group in the Black Sea which would be open to cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia. During a visit to Bucharest, President Poroshenko expressed his support for this initiative and reported on continuing discussions on establishing a Ukrainian-Romanian-Bulgarian brigade.

Kyiv's motives

The Revolution of Dignity and Russia's aggression in 2014 meant that the Ukrainian authorities could no longer continue their policy of balancing between Russia and the EU. Kyiv made a decisive turn westwards, the aim of which was to obtain political and financial support; in turn, the militarisation of occupied Crimea forced the Ukrainian authorities to strengthen their cooperation with NATO's Black Sea members in the security sphere. These factors made it necessary to deepen cooperation with Turkey (President Poroshenko visited in March) and improve relations with Romania. To this end, the Ukrainian government has decided on a series of gestures aimed at restoring confidence in bilateral relations (an agreement to open a Romanian consulate in Solotvyno; joint border patrols to combat smuggling) and activating social and business contacts (proposals for air and road connections, cross-border infrastructure construction). Kyiv's aim is to enhance its cooperation with Bucharest in the security field, and through doing so with NATO. It is also significant that Romania is seen primarily as a key ally of the United States in the Black Sea region.

An important factor for Ukraine is the activation of cooperation in the energy sphere. Kyiv intends to sign an interconnection agreement as soon as possible, in order to start reverse gas supplies from Romania, and is working to win Bucharest over to the idea of creating a gas hub in western Ukraine.

Prospects

The new geopolitical context since Russia's aggression towards Ukraine has become the catalyst for the revision of the previously cool relations between Ukraine and Romania. Over the past two years, they have managed to build an atmosphere of trust, and the agenda of positive cooperation has put aside the list of their mutual claims and accusations. In future, it is expected that both sides will make the effort to reduce the delays in their mutual cooperation and strengthen trade exchange. However, the implementation of these ambitious plans will require determination and consistency in both capital cities. Furthermore the construction of new border crossings, and the expansion of energy and transport infrastructure will require major financial expenditures. A breakthrough in the disputes relating to the national minorities should not be expected; even if Bucharest and Kyiv reached an agreement in this area, they may face social resistance on both sides of the border. The two countries' new political climate and their community of interests in the field of security will probably strengthen their cooperation on the international stage, although this will not simply remove the disputed issues from their bilateral relations.