

Extremely cautious. Romania's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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On 8 October 2022, Romania's Minister of National Defence Vasile Dîncu gave a controversial interview whose content contradicted the pro-Ukrainian stance which had been adopted by his country regarding the prospects for ending the ongoing war. Dîncu stated that the Kremlin has the means enabling it to prolong the conflict and that Ukraine's only chance of achieving peace is to engage in negotiations with Russia. Alongside this, he stressed that these negotiations should be conducted on behalf of the Ukrainians by other international actors, including NATO and the US, as Ukraine – if it acted on its own – would not be able to accept the loss of a portion of its territory for political and image-related reasons. Dîncu also said that even if the negotiations resulted in the conflict being frozen, this solution would still be better than the continuation of the war.

Dîncu's statement was widely publicised by the Russian media, but also provoked a series of negative comments in Ukraine and at home in Romania. Reactions to his interview were offered for example by David Arakhamia, the head of the Servant of the People parliamentary grouping, who stressed that Kyiv was interested in negotiating with the West rather than with Moscow, and the topic of such negotiations should involve Ukraine joining NATO as soon as possible. The proposal to launch talks with Russia was also commented on by the Ukrainian President's advisor Mykhailo Podolyak, who addressed all those calling for peace and said that first Russian troops must withdraw from Ukraine and war criminals must be brought to trial. On the same day, President Volodymyr Zelensky addressed the supporters of the negotiations and stressed that it was Russia that did not want peace, as demonstrated by the recent rocket attacks on Ukrainian cities, among other things.

It was only on 11 October 2022 that President Klaus Iohannis offered critical comments regarding Mr Dîncu's statements. He said that Romania's official stance (as well as the EU's official position, he stressed) is that "Ukraine will decide on its own when, what and how it will negotiate". Previously, he had explicitly declared that the only scenario for resolving the conflict acceptable to Bucharest involved the launch of peace talks once Russian troops have withdrawn from Ukrainian territory. In addition, at the beginning of October 2022 Iohannis signed a joint letter from the presidents of the region's states supporting Ukraine's accession to NATO. On 13 October 2022, when asked by journalists about the possible dismissal of Dîncu due to his views, Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă replied that it would be necessary to "hold a discussion, as open as possible, on his views which are not convergent with the government's stance". One day earlier the leader of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and President of the Chamber of Deputies of Romania (the lower house of the

Romanian parliament) Marcel Ciolacu had also commented on the situation, saying that Dîncu was wrong.

Commentary

- Although Dîncu's words do not spell any change in Romania's official stance regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine, it cannot be ruled out that they reflect the line of thinking supported by a portion of the Romanian elite that wants the present conflict to end as soon as possible. Furthermore, his statement, although contrary to Bucharest's official stance adopted so far, was not met with a quick response from representatives of the country's top-level authorities. The comments by President Iohannis and Prime Minister Ciucă, in which these politicians distanced themselves from Dîncu's statements, were offered as late as three and five days following the controversial interview, respectively. The reaction from the Save Romania Union (USR) opposition party happened much faster – on 10 October 2022 it criticised Dîncu's statements and called on him to explain the situation in parliament. It seems that the main reason behind the absence of a quick and decisive reaction to Dîncu's words involves the intention to avoid destabilisation of the ruling coalition (which is already fragile) composed of the centre-right National Liberal Party (with which President Iohannis is affiliated), the centre-left PSD and the UDMR party which represents Romania's Hungarian minority.
- Despite Bucharest's unwavering political support for Kyiv, including harsh and consistent criticism of the Kremlin's actions and appeals for a toughening of sanctions against Russia, Romania's policy towards the ongoing conflict can be referred to as extremely cautious. Clear political declarations contrast with the insignificant scale of official military support that has been offered to Ukraine since 24 February 2022; the Kiel Institute for the World Economy estimates it at around 3 million euros. According to available data, so far Bucharest has only sent a small shipment of fuel, vests, helmets and ammunition, which contrasts with the size of assistance provided to Kyiv by other states of the region (except Hungary). It was only in the mid-June 2022 that the Romanian government passed a legal amendment enabling them to provide weapons from Romania's military stockpile to allied and partner countries. As a result of this amendment, Romania possibly donated 28 T-72 tanks to Ukraine, of which five were fully operational. In August 2022, Ukraine's Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov mentioned five assistance packages provided by Bucharest (including rifles, ammunition and spare parts). However, none of the above-mentioned information has ever been officially confirmed by the Romanian government. Other manifestations of the Romanian leadership's cautious approach included their decision not to sign the 28 February 2022 letter from eight NATO eastern flank countries calling on the EU to grant candidate status to Ukraine as soon as possible (Bucharest likely wanted Moldova to also be granted this status) and the relatively late visit by President Iohannis to Kyiv (compared with the timing of the visits paid by the region's other heads of states) held on 16 June 2022.
- Bucharest is consistently suggesting that the actual military assistance which it provided to Ukraine is considerably greater, but it cannot be revealed for security reasons. It seems that the Romanian government would like to avoid a situation in which Moscow could interpret their moves as manifestations of Romania's direct involvement in the present conflict. Not only does Bucharest decline to comment on possible Romanian

arms deliveries to Kyiv, it also refuses to confirm that Romania's territory is being used for effecting shipments provided by other NATO countries. Bucharest is probably citing security reasons due both to genuine concern about a possible Russian reaction and its intention to conceal the scale of Romanian military aid provided to Kyiv (in fact this aid is probably limited compared to the involvement of other states in the region).

- It may be assumed that Romania's restraint in sending arms supplies to Ukraine is mainly due to its reluctance to help Kyiv at the expense of its own military potential. Romania has relatively small reserves of armaments and equipment that it could donate to other countries without undermining its own defence capabilities (it seems that the armaments it has likely supplied to Ukraine mainly include decommissioned equipment no longer used by the Romanian army). In addition, Romania fears that deliveries of this kind could be perceived by Moscow as provocation and could pose a threat to the security of Moldova, as Russian troops (around 1,600 individuals) are stationed on Moldovan territory – in the separatist region of Transnistria. Another reason behind Romania's stance may be its traditionally cautious attitude towards Ukraine.
- Bucharest has focused its activity on humanitarian aid – since the beginning of March 2022 an EU logistics hub has been in operation near Suceava that distributes and coordinates support for Ukraine. Regular shipments of aid from Romania to Ukraine for those most in need are organised. 80,000 Ukrainians have found refuge in Romania, they were offered free public transport, medical services, access to education, simplified legal employment procedures and other forms of assistance. According to the Interior Ministry, from the beginning of the conflict until the end of August 2022 the institutions it supervises spent around 60 million euros on “services targeted at refugees”. Alongside this, Bucharest has offered material and humanitarian aid to Moldova, which is struggling with a major influx of migrants (the number of migrants hosted by Moldova is the same as that in Romania, despite the vast difference in the populations of the two countries). It has also organised so-called green corridors to facilitate the quick transit of refugees from the Moldovan-Ukrainian border further into Moldova. Romania has been involved in assisting in the export of Ukrainian-grown grain. According to the European Commission, Romania (mainly the Danube) accounts for around 50% of all Ukrainian produce exported via the EU. Moreover, the Romanian government has implemented infrastructural investments worth tens of millions of euros in order to be able to forward even greater amounts of Ukrainian goods.
- In the few official statements given by Ukrainian decision-makers, the dominant tone is gratitude for Romania's assistance, especially humanitarian assistance (taking in refugees) and logistical assistance (exporting Ukrainian goods via the Danube ports to Constanța). Kyiv has also expressed its appreciation to Bucharest for its support for President Zelensky's application for Ukraine's NATO membership, submitted at the end of September 2022. Furthermore, Kyiv has never criticised the size of military aid provided by Romania (as it is likely aware of its limited potential in this field). The positive comments from the Ukrainian government on the support provided by Romania should be interpreted as statements motivated by a desire to maintain good neighbourly relations which are necessary for the development of economic and transport cooperation.

- Finally, the government in Bucharest fear that the potential success of a Russian offensive in Ukraine could result in a profound change in Romania's strategic situation. In a pessimistic scenario, this would equate to Russian troops appearing on the Romanian border and, equally importantly, would jeopardise Moldova's sovereignty. This is why, in the context of the ongoing war, Romania consistently views NATO as its key guarantor of security and seeks to strengthen NATO's military presence on its territory and in the Black Sea. For this reason, Bucharest has enthusiastically welcomed the decision to increase the US contingent (by 1,000 troops) and to bring in 500 French soldiers (the first group of US and French troops arrived in Romania on 8 and 28 February 2022, respectively). Already after 24 February 2022, Belgium decided to send another 300 soldiers as part of the NATO Response Force (NRF); the first group left for Romania at the beginning of March 2022. Since 1 May 2022, a NATO Battle Group (composed of France – acting as the framework nation – as well as Belgium, Poland and the US) has been formed on the basis of NATO states units stationed in Romania. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also prompted the government in Bucharest to decide to increase Romania's defence spending from 2% to 2.5% of GDP starting from 2023. The additional funds are expected to speed up the Romanian army's ongoing modernisation.