

Balancing and appeasing: Bucharest's foreign policy amid transatlantic disputes

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Donald Trump's second term and the growing dispute between the United States and the core EU powers, particularly Germany and France, have placed Romania in an increasingly difficult position. Since 1989, Bucharest has based its foreign policy on two complementary pillars: a close alliance with the United States as the guarantor of Romania's hard security, and integration with the European Union in support of modernisation, economic development and the country's lasting integration into the West. During earlier periods of transatlantic tension, Romania consistently called for unity and dialogue, while avoiding the need to align itself clearly with either camp. Since early 2025, however, the widening rift between Washington and the EU's largest member states has increasingly forced Bucharest to strike a careful balance.

Romania's response to the crisis in transatlantic relations has taken two forms. On the one hand, Bucharest has made visible gestures of loyalty towards Washington, including support for US actions that some European NATO members have opposed or from which they have distanced themselves, such as operations against Iran. On the other hand, Romania has increased arms purchases and expanded defence-industrial cooperation with Europe's leading powers, especially Germany, but also France. This approach allows Bucharest both to strengthen ties with key European partners and to present itself, on both sides of the Atlantic, as a proactive ally and provider of security on NATO's eastern flank. Romania is likely to continue this strategy for the foreseeable future, although the first signs of a subtle adjustment are already apparent. At the rhetorical level, this can be seen in recent statements by President Nicușor Dan, who plays a central role in shaping foreign policy. His comments included criticism of the EU, suggesting that Bucharest is beginning to adapt its narrative to a new transatlantic reality in which the United States has become increasingly critical of European integration.

Bucharest under scrutiny

Romania's balancing strategy has become increasingly difficult to sustain, not only because of growing tensions in transatlantic relations but also due to the Romanian establishment's weak standing within MAGA (Make America Great Again) circles. In Washington, Romania's political elite is now often perceived as ideologically aligned with the West European establishment, which has become a frequent target of criticism from the current US administration. This perception deepened after Romania annulled the first round of its presidential election in December 2024, a decision openly criticised by senior figures in the Trump administration, including Vice President J.D. Vance (see '[MAGA casts a shadow on](#)

*US-Romanian relations*¹). Furthermore, neither President Nicușor Dan, who comes from the centre-right Save Romania Union (USR), nor the pro-European coalition which governed the country until recently have extensive ties to influential MAGA figures.

Against this backdrop, Bucharest interpreted at least two major decisions by the Trump administration as indications of Washington's growing dissatisfaction with Romania's leadership. On 25 March 2025, the United States suspended the implementation of the Visa Waiver Programme for Romania, despite the country having been admitted to the scheme by the Biden administration only months earlier, on 9 January. On 2 May, just two days before the first round of the rerun presidential election, Washington formally revoked Romania's participation in the programme altogether. In autumn 2025, the Pentagon decided to end the rotational deployment of the 2nd Brigade of the US 101st Airborne Division in Romania, reducing the number of American troops stationed there from around 1,700 to 1,000. The decision also affected Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria, though not Poland or the Baltic states.

For Bucharest, these developments were problematic for two reasons. It cast doubt on the long-term reliability of the US military presence and provided political ammunition to the opposition Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), which accused the government of damaging relations with Washington and putting Romania's security at risk.

Gestures towards Washington

In response, Bucharest began making visible efforts to demonstrate its loyalty to Washington. At the same time, it sought to distinguish itself from other European NATO members without provoking criticism from Berlin or Paris. This balancing act was most evident in the case of the Peace Council, established at Trump's initiative. Although Romania chose not to become a full member – with President Dan citing concerns, among other things, regarding the feasibility of paying the membership fee – it joined the format as an observer and was among the first countries to do so. Dan not only attended the Council's inaugural meeting in Washington but was also one of its speakers. During the event, he proposed a concrete Romanian contribution to stabilisation efforts in the Middle East, focused primarily on humanitarian assistance and expertise in rebuilding institutions in the Gaza Strip. This allowed Romania to avoid both financial commitments and an explicit endorsement of Trump's Middle East policy.

Bucharest took a more decisive step by granting the United States access to Romanian air bases for operations against Iran. On 11 March 2026, Romania approved the temporary use of the Mihail Kogălniceanu air base near Constanța and the Câmpia Turzii base near Cluj-Napoca. The arrangement included the deployment of tanker aircraft, reconnaissance and communications assets, as well as 400–500 troops. The speed of the decision, particularly in contrast to refusals from countries such as Spain, earned praise from Trump in a letter to the Romanian president. Soon afterwards, Dan also declared Romania's willingness to participate in a planned international mine-clearing operation in the Strait of Hormuz. Defence Minister Radu Miruță clarified that Romania's contribution would be limited to staff officers, intelligence support and mine-clearance personnel, without the deployment of naval vessels. Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan added that any Romanian participation would depend on a ceasefire being reached first.

At the same time, Bucharest has sought to demonstrate to Washington that Romania is not only a reliable political ally, but also an attractive economic partner – an area regarded by the Trump administration as particularly important. Long-standing cooperation in the nuclear sector has increasingly tied Romania's energy policy to US technology. Two projects are of particular significance. The first is the investment decision taken on 12 February 2026 regarding the Doicești project, which is set to become Europe's first power plant using American NuScale Power small modular reactors. The second is the involvement of the US engineering and construction company Fluor in the expansion of the Cernavodă nuclear power plant through the construction of two additional reactors under an EPCM contract signed in November 2024. A substantial share of the financing for the latter project is expected to come from loans provided by the US Eximbank.

The European pillar

At the same time, Bucharest has deepened cooperation with Europe's leading powers. This is particularly evident in its use of the SAFE programme, under which Romania has received €16.6 billion, making it the second-largest beneficiary after Poland. Around half of these funds are expected to be allocated to arms procurement. According to a list of planned contracts worth €8.3 billion published in April 2026, most of the funding will go to the German defence industry, with Rheinmetall alone expected to receive around 70%. The planned purchases include 232 Lynx KF41 infantry fighting vehicles. Outside the SAFE framework, Romania also intends to purchase an additional 66 Lynx vehicles from Rheinmetall for approximately €700–750 million.

Bucharest has also strengthened the institutional framework for defence cooperation with Berlin. During Prime Minister Bolojan's visit to Germany on 27–28 January this year, the two countries signed a bilateral declaration covering military logistics, joint procurement and cooperation in defence research. Romania has simultaneously expanded defence ties with France, participating in three out of 21 SAFE programmes worth a combined €1.74 billion, including projects involving Airbus H225M helicopters, Mistral missile systems and Thales radar systems.

For Bucharest, this deepening cooperation with the German and, to a lesser extent, French defence industries serves several purposes simultaneously. It reduces the likelihood that Berlin and Paris will criticise Romania for favouring the United States over its European allies, given that Romania has become an important client of their defence companies. At the same time, it strengthens the country's political and institutional ties with the EU's leading states while also enhancing Romania's military capabilities in practical terms. The government has pursued this policy despite criticism from the opposition, particularly the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). The party's leader has accused the authorities of lacking transparency in procurement decisions and has suggested corrupt motives lie behind the contracts. He has also criticised the government for directing substantial sums abroad instead of supporting Romania's domestic defence industry, while simultaneously strengthening German and French arms manufacturers.

Prospects

Bucharest is likely to continue its current balancing strategy for as long as possible. For Romania's political establishment, the logic is straightforward: the alliance with the United States is still regarded as the only credible guarantee of the country's security. At the same

time, maintaining strong defence ties with Washington helps shield the government from criticism from the opposition, particularly AUR, which regularly accuses the authorities of damaging relations with the United States.

Even so, some adjustments to this strategy are already becoming apparent, particularly at the rhetorical level. One clear example was President Dan's speech on Europe Day on 9 May 2026. Although he spoke positively overall about Romania's place in the European Union, he also openly highlighted what he described as a number of mistakes made by the EU. These included phasing out nuclear energy, becoming dependent on Russian energy supplies, pursuing climate targets that place excessive pressure on European industry, neglecting Europe's own defence capabilities and allowing some EU policies to become excessively ideological. Dan also argued that Romania had not defended its interests sufficiently within the EU. Statements of this kind had rarely, if ever, previously been made by such a senior Romanian politician.

The speech appeared to be aimed partly at Washington. Many of the criticisms raised by Dan closely echoed themes commonly promoted within MAGA circles in the United States. At the same time, the speech also reflected changing political sentiment within Romania itself. Sovereignist sentiment has been growing steadily for months, contributing to rising support for AUR, which is now polling at around 35–40%.