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Challenges and Changes in Military and Defense Policy of Romania after the Outbreak of War in Ukraine¹

Abstract: After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Romania faced the imminent threat of an escalation of the armed conflict. The geographical proximity of military operations caused this, as the Black Sea location and the self-proclaimed republic of Transnistria located in neighboring Moldova. For this reason, Romania, like other European countries, faced the consequences of the outbreak of war and met economic, political, and military challenges. After the outbreak of war, the Romanian government had to take appropriate steps to help Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees who crossed the border into Romania. Although Romania adopted a distant attitude towards Ukraine, it did not block any aid projects and acted following NATO's strategic actions. The outbreak of war in Ukraine contributed to rapid changes in the scope of the Romanian army. Several decisions were made to purchase new equipment and strengthen the armed forces.

Keywords: *Romania, War in Ukraine, Romanian Military Forces*

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, shocked the whole world. Until now, it had not been imagined that there would be a massive war in Europe. Bombings of Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities influenced rapid security decisions by Ukraine's neighboring states, the European Union, and NATO. A complete withdrawal from the supply of Russian energy resources has become a significant challenge. The European Union countries faced the dilemma of rapid diversification of crude oil and natural gas supplies, which was also directly related to the imposition of sanctions on Russia by the European Union.

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Like other countries neighboring Ukraine, including Poland and Lithuania, Romania faced a high threat to its security. A particular factor affecting Romania's security was the unresolved issues of the self-proclaimed Republic of Transnistria, the existence of which contributed to the permanent destabilization of neighboring Moldova.

The central hypothesis put forward in the article is that the outbreak of war forced the Romanian government to reformulate geostrategic assumptions and thus strengthen its armed forces so that they would play an essential role on NATO's eastern flank.

Several research questions were posed to the hypothesis:

- What were the consequences of the outbreak of war in Ukraine for Romania?
- What was the significance of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for Romania's geostrategy?
- What measures has the Romanian government taken to strengthen and develop the Romanian Armed Forces?
- What role and importance will Romania have in the changing geopolitical reality, considering various war scenarios?

In the article, elements of the comparative method are employed in terms of government and political actions and public reaction and approach to the conflict in Ukraine. The genetic method was used to outline the history of Romanian-Ukrainian relations. A qualitative method was also used, directly related to various types of analysis, e.g., Romanian foreign policy decisions, and also elements of the statistical method, which allows for a numerical presentation of the analyzed phenomena.

The subject of the article fills the existing research gap in Polish science. At present, which is somewhat understandable, researchers focus on Poland and the most critical entities (the European Union and NATO) concerning the existing war beyond our eastern border. Socio-political analysis in the context of individual and smaller European Union countries occupies a marginal place. Only publicity materials compensate for this. The text was prepared based on materials and sources in Romanian, Polish, and English.

Consequences of the Russian Invasion in Ukraine for Romania

Romania, like other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, faced the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. Like Poland or the Baltic states, Romania was aware of the threat. Geographical proximity to hostilities and neighboring Moldova, burdened by the post-Soviet unresolved dispute over Transnistria, compounded this threat.

The war in Ukraine has previously exacerbated the difficulties and economic problems that had already arisen due to pandemics and disruption of supply chains. Like other Central and Eastern European countries, Romania had to face the challenge of high inflation. 2022 inflation was difficult to control, and in January 2023, it reached 13.4%. This placed Romania in 19th place among the countries of the European Union. Only Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Latvia and Hungary fared worse. According to data

from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, the annual inflation rate fell in January 2023 to 15.1%, compared to 16.4% in December 2022. In turn, the National Bank of Romania has not presented too optimistic forecasts recently. An apparent decrease in inflation is expected only at the end of 2023 to the level of approx. – 7%. Inflation is expected to return to 4% at the end of 2024 (Economedica.ro, 2023).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine significantly deepened the supply shocks. This concerned energy resources, food products, and fertilizers. This phenomenon did not bypass Romania, although it is worth pointing to the analysis of Silviu Cerna, who emphasized that Romania imported much less from Ukraine and Russia than some European Union countries, which should allow Romania to survive this war crisis easily. This phenomenon did not bypass Romania, although it is worth pointing to the analysis of Silviu Cerna, who emphasized that Romania imported much less from Ukraine and Russia than some European Union countries, which should allow Romania to survive this war crisis easily. Despite that, the Romanian economy is full of problems (the biggest dilemmas are the budget deficit, public debt, and inflation); all difficulties are justified by “warfare,” although, according to Cerna, no one is at war in Romania and the state has fundamental security guarantees (Cerna, 2022).

After the outbreak of war, Romania did not buy Russian gas directly. Hence, its dependence was utterly different than that of Hungary, Bulgaria, or Poland. This did not mean, however, that it was not a recipient of Russian gas. The annual gas demand in Romania is about 11-12 billion cubic meters. This demand will undoubtedly increase in the future. Currently, Romania continues to obtain Russian gas through intermediaries. First, imports are made from Bulgaria and Hungary via the Turk Stream gas pipeline, which was created to bypass Ukraine in the transit of gas from Russia. In April last year, experts estimated that the Russian gas obtained by Romania accounts for about 20-30% of the total demand. It was pointed out that Russian gas reaches Romania through intermediaries, such as Imex Oil Limited, a company registered in Cyprus, or Axpo Bulgaria EAD, a Swiss company (Andrei, 2022).

Despite a relatively limited dependence on energy resources from Russia, Romanian households have not been spared increases in gas and electricity prices. According to data, in October 2022, gas prices increased by 55% and electricity prices by 95% (Restea, 2022). In this situation, the Romanian government decided to make Romania’s energy independent as soon as possible. The example given was Poland, which had long ago started becoming independent from Russian gas supplies and building a gas pipeline from Norway (Baltic Pipe). Thus, the exploitation of Romanian gas from resources located under the Black Sea has started. These resources are estimated at 42-84 billion cubic meters. The entire gas extraction process has been accelerated due to legislative changes in Romania. The first deliveries of Romanian gas cover domestic needs, but the government believes that over time, Romania will become a gas exporter (forsal.pl, 2023).

However, the main consequence of the outbreak of war in Ukraine was a radical reduction in the security level of Romania, a country located on NATO's eastern flank. The hostilities are taking place close to Romania's borders. Rockets have repeatedly landed on Odessa, a city located not much more than 150 km from the Romanian border. Snake Island, located 35 km from the Danube Delta, was also an area of fierce fighting in the Black Sea. The fighting for this island, which was still in Romanian possession before World War II, was alarming for the Romanian government. An additional problem was the threat in Moldova, where from the beginning of its existence after the collapse of the USSR, there was a quasi-state of Transnistria inhabited by a Russian-speaking population.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a geostrategic problem for Romania. The hostilities concern the Black Sea basin, of which Romania is a part. Any military actions that impede free movement in this basin threaten the possible blockade of Romanian seaports or impede the permeability of sea routes. Therefore, due to the geopolitical conditions and the proximity of Moldova, the threat to the security of the Romanian state is exceptionally high. It can be said that geopolitical conditions are as unfavorable for Romania as for Poland and the Baltic states.

Romanian government's position against Russian aggression in Ukraine

At the outset, it should be emphasized that unlike, for example, Poland, Romania did not show such far-reaching involvement in the Russian-Ukrainian war and willingness to help Ukrainian citizens who decided to leave their country. In the analysis of Jakub Pieńkowski from the Polish Institute of International Affairs, the author even pointed out the protracted behavior of Romania. The reason for this behavior is historically complex Romanian-Ukrainian relations. Although a good-neighborhood treaty was concluded in 1997, under which northern Bukovina and part of Bessarabia were finally confirmed as part of Ukraine, this did not solve the problems in mutual relations (Pieńkowski, 2022, p.1).

In 2009, the dispute over the continental shelf went to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). According to the judgment of the ICJ, Snake Island remained within the borders of Ukraine, but the disputed areas of the shelf belonged to 80% of Romania. In Ukraine, the announcement of the verdict was perceived as a threat to further Romanian claims against Ukraine. Romania, however, did not question the course of the Ukrainian-Romanian border but questioned the legality of its establishment in 1940. In addition, in 2009, Romanian-Ukrainian relations were rocked by a diplomatic scandal. The military attaché and his assistant were expelled from the Ukrainian embassy in Bucharest on espionage charges. This froze many initiatives to improve mutual relations for a long time. In addition, mutual relations were aggravated by the issues of national minorities and the accusation of Romania by the Ukrainian authorities of treating them asymmetrically (Iwański, 2011).

In such circumstances, and with many unsettled neighborly issues, Romania's distancing itself from Ukraine after the Russian aggression would seem logical. However, Romania

cannot be denied the lack of any action against the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian population in the first period after the start of the war. In the beginning, Romania sent two convoys with medicines, fuel, and ammunition worth about three million USD. About 139,000 Ukrainian refugees found themselves on the territory of Romania at that time, fleeing their country in various directions. Romania also, from the beginning, supported the imposition of sanctions by the European Union on Russia for starting its aggression against Ukraine. In addition, Romania quickly blocked the Russia Today channel and other Russian Internet portals (Pieńkowski, 2022).

However, Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă did not arrive in Kyiv until late April, when many European leaders had already visited Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky. In turn, President Klaus Iohannis did not arrive in Kyiv until June, on the occasion of a visit by other leaders of European countries (Pieńkowski, 2022, p.1). It was hard not to see the political distance of the Romanian leaders. Indeed, the problematic Romanian-Ukrainian relations in the last 20 years were reflected here. Nevertheless, despite its conservativeness, Romania continued its support for Ukraine to the extent that it aligned with the strategic activities of NATO or the European Union.

The transit of NATO armaments for Ukraine passes through the territory of Romania. This was approved at the Romanian Supreme State Defense Council meeting on March 1, 2022. At that time, President Iohannis gave a speech condemning Russian aggression and announced the creation of a logistics center on Romanian territory. It was also announced that spending on armaments and defense would increase to 2.5% of GDP (csat.presidency.ro, 2023). In this way, Romania joined Slovakia, Poland, and the Baltic states – the countries on NATO's eastern flank, whose military spending exceeded 2% of GDP.

In recent months, much has been said in Romania about rapprochement with Moldova, which is a historical part of Romania. There was even a narrative in which the possible “rapprochement” of the two countries was compared to the fall of the Berlin Wall. They talked about the fall of the “wall” on the Prut River. Many political circles in Romania saw the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an opportunity to push Russian influence out of the neighboring areas (Blanaru, 2022). In addition, Romania supported the request to the International Criminal Court to prosecute Russian war criminals and donated 100,000. Euros for the activities of the Prosecutor of the ICC (Pieńkowski, 2022, p.1)

Regarding the issue of refugees, in the first months after the start of the war, more and more Ukrainian refugees began to arrive on Romanian territory. In April 2022, there were 700,000 refugees. The Romanian government initiated assistance activities and, together with numerous NGOs, made efforts to provide the refugees with essential means of subsistence. At that time, 120 RON per day was allocated to each Ukrainian refugee (conference-board.org, 2022). According to the latest data (as of January 2023), 107,241 Ukrainian refugees (including children) were officially staying in Romania (ec.europa.eu, 2023).

Military reinforcements and plans to develop Romania's defense after the start of the war in Ukraine

Before the topic is presented, it is necessary to focus on the current state and equipment of the Romanian army (Forțele Armate Române). According to the “global firepower” portal, the Romanian armed forces are ranked 47th in the world regarding potential and strength. Currently, the armed forces of Romania, including the reserve, are 132 thousand soldiers. The air force has 30 fighters, 61 helicopters, and 11 transport units. The ground forces consist of 413 tanks, while the naval forces consist of 3 frigates and seven corvettes (Romania Military Strength, 2023). The Romanian army is one of the most important on NATO's eastern flank but still requires strengthening and development. The outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 provided an excellent opportunity for this.

Like other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Romania reacted quickly to the outbreak of war right on its borders. Several government decisions were made regarding strengthening military power, and further development of the Romanian army and the state's defense system was planned. The initiation of the expansion program of the Romanian armored forces resounded loudly.

The media described this as building an “armored fist.” The program of acquiring new main battle tanks for the Romanian land forces was divided into several stages. The first stage involved the purchase of 54 M1A2 (Abrams) tanks and 12 support vehicles. The first part of the plan is expected to cost around 1 billion EUR. As for the M1A2 tanks, General Tomescu stated that the Romanian ground forces needed about five battalions of new tanks, which is about 250 machines. This year, Romania will try to sign a contract for the 54 tanks mentioned above and, in 2024, for another 50 units. The others would be purchased after 2026 (Ratka, 2023).

The development of armored forces entails the need to train tank crews, which requires time and professional training centers. Romanian generals point to potential cooperation with Poland in this regard, e.g., at the training ground in Biedrusko, where tank crews are trained (Ratka, 2023).

Another element strengthening Romania's defense system is the construction of a multi-layer anti-aircraft shield. The highest value of the system will be Patriot missiles. Romania received the first battery of Patriots in 2020. In 2023, another three systems were received. There are still 4 Patriot systems left to complete the 2017 order. The project cost about 3.9 billion USD (romania-insider.com, 2023). Romania (like Poland) already signed a contract in 2019 to supply high-mobility rocket artillery systems – HIMARS. At that time, Romania purchased 3 HIMARS systems with a total of 54 launchers. The first system has already entered service in 2021 (Muresan, 2023). These launchers, as it turned out, “passed the exam” in the equipment of the Ukrainian army during the ongoing war with Russia.

The purchase of HIMARS has become an added value in yet another aspect. This enabled Romania to fully participate in the ASCA (Artillery Systems Cooperation Activities)

community, which connects the artillery command and control systems of NATO member states. This system has a unique operating interface that eliminates language differences and significantly speeds up communication. ASCA transmits messages about the location of targets or weather information in real-time. In 2018, Romania had already initiated the process of joining the ASCA and then became an “observer state.” A year later, the US recognized Romania in the context of the ASCA as a “sponsored state,” a timetable was set for Romania’s accession to this community. In the final stage, the specialized 8th Tactical Missile Brigade had to demonstrate the technical interoperability of the command system and the ability to use the ASCA interface (Orjanu, 2023).

The reinforcement of the Romanian army also concerns armored vehicles. In 2017, Romania concluded a framework contract for the supply of 227 “Piranha 5” armored vehicles. The contract was concluded with General Dynamics Land Systems (GDLS) for almost 900 million EUR. The first 36 armored carriers were delivered to the Romanian army in 2020. In May 2023, information was released that Romania is preparing another contract for 150 “Piranha 5” transporters. Therefore, the Romanian armed forces will have over 370 “Piranha 5” armored vehicles in the short term. These vehicles will also consider other configurations – biological, chemical, radiological, nuclear, medical, and rescue assistance (Dumitrache, 2023).

In addition, the Romanian Supreme Council of National Defense approved the purchase of the 5th generation F-35A multi-role aircraft. Romania has long wanted to purchase the F-35, but it has only procured second-hand F-16 AM/BM 4th generation aircraft due to financial constraints. Seventeen of these machines were acquired mainly from Portugal and partly from the United States. Last year, another 32 units of a similar standard were obtained from Norway. It was a powerful injection that enabled Romania to withdraw the last obsolete MiG-21 LanceR, a far-reaching modernization of the dramatically obsolete MiG-21 (Szopa, 2023).

It is also worth emphasizing that Romania is becoming increasingly active in its cooperation with South Korea. In February 2023, the National Company Romarm SA and the South Korean Hanhwa Aerospace signed an agreement on industrial cooperation. This is an essential step towards the implementation of various arms contacts. There is already talk of purchasing the 155 mm K9 Thunder self-propelled howitzers to replace the aging MLI-84 Jderul. According to official data, the program involves acquiring five battalion self-propelled 155 mm howitzer systems. The program’s total value is estimated at USD 1.923 trillion (Voicu, 2023).

The position and geostrategic and military importance of Romania in the perspective of ending the war in Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a massive blow to the security of Central and Eastern Europe. It turned out that security is not a condition given once and for all, even if you are a member of the North Atlantic Alliance. For this reason, Romania was forced to react quickly and significantly to strengthen and develop its military potential. The effects will not be visible immediately, but the actions have been taken quickly and efficiently.

Therefore, the question remains: What role and importance will Romania have in the changing geopolitical reality, considering various war scenarios?

In one of the comments, Wladimir Mitev pointed out that the war in Ukraine had significantly strengthened Romania's position in NATO, which may allow it to prepare for the various consequences of the ongoing conflict. The conflict in Ukraine has contributed to the strengthening of Romania's influence with Moldova, as well as with Georgia, which is present in the Black Sea basin. Despite tightening cooperation with the West and NATO, Mitev pointed out one more thing that in Romanian society, however, one can sense that the so-called "sovereignty tendency," which is a political tendency that looks at the liberal West with distaste, sees Romania as a colony of Western capital, and demands that Romanian politicians pursue a foreign policy more in line with Romanian national interests – for example, as regards the protection of Romanian minorities abroad or to protect the Orthodox Church from the encroachment of so-called "Cultural Marxism." This tendency does not apply to the liberalized elites of large Romanian cities, who prefer rapprochement with the West (Mitev, 2023).

The war revealed many social discourses about the role and direction of Romania's foreign policy. One thing, however, is taken for granted: the war showed the strategic importance of the Black Sea region. Therefore, after the war, this region will need to be reconstructed. The region's economic importance was revealed, among others, in the aspect of grain exports by Ukraine and the demand for grain from other countries, including North Africa. The energy resource potential of the Black Sea region is also under discussion. Gas deposits next to Romania are on the sea shelves of many countries, including Turkey and Ukraine (Aligica, 2023).

Unfortunately, the war limited the possibilities of cooperation. This can be seen in the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation example, whose activity was severely limited due to the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, in many cases, as statistical data shows, even the war could not limit economic cooperation in the region. For example, Turkish trade with Russia and Ukraine is more than \$40 billion annually. These trade flows are so crucial that no armed conflict could suppress them (Aligica, 2023). At the moment, it is difficult to imagine a complete reconstruction of the Black Sea region, but after the war's end, wide gates may open to far-reaching cooperation. If so, Romania can play an essential role in this region.

The geostrategic position of Romania in the Black Sea region and in the region of Central and Eastern Europe is closely related to the final outcome of the war in Ukraine. Assuming any scenario of ending this conflict, Romania will still have to continue strengthening its armed forces and developing close cooperation within NATO to become an essential partner for the alliance in a crucial part of Europe. However, the best scenario is to end the war with a clear Ukrainian victory, weakening Russian influence in the Black Sea basin and throughout Central and Eastern Europe and limiting or eliminating any Russian imperial aspirations in this area. Another step to strengthen Romania's security could be Moldova's further integration with European structures and, perhaps, at the very end, a successful solution to the Transnistrian problem.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine surprised everyone around the world and forced states to take quick and decisive reactions. Romania, Poland, and the Baltic states found themselves in particular danger as countries bordering on or close to Ukraine. Due to its location, Romania was particularly vulnerable to the consequences of the war. Despite the distance resulting from the history of Ukrainian-Romanian relations, the Romanian government cooperated with NATO, especially with the US, for military assistance to Ukraine. At the same time, decisive steps were taken to strengthen and modernize the Romanian armed forces so that Romania would become an essential partner on NATO's eastern flank. Shortly, it is difficult to predict the outcome of the war and its duration. Nevertheless, Romania has strengthened its security in the existing geopolitical system. Various scenarios can be considered for the Black Sea region, but one thing is sure: this region must be reconstructed. Therefore, we cannot rule out that in the future, there will be a reconstruction of the network of partnership and cooperation, which is limited in the current circumstances.

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