



Ukraine-Romania – New Regional Challenges:

Looking for a Common Solutions for Existing Problems – Accents for Strengthening the Strategic Partnership

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FOREWORD

Common for Ukraine and Romania, threats and challenges that go against their strategic interests naturally push both countries to look for common solutions. Such search for solutions naturally should bring to the common action plan, which has to define command decisions and to outline cooperation patterns for its implementation. Furthermore, such a plan has to consider strategic goals and objectives aimed at reaching them. Such an approach, alongside defining the obstacles that prevent enhanced strategic cooperation, seems to be most productive.

A common search for denominators should be supplemented by political dialogue, professional discussions, political and expert consultations. The parties' key goal is to find compromises and win-win solutions, avoid the language of ultimatums that may bring the parties into the deadlock.

If Romania and Ukraine manage to apply such a model of cooperation, it will inevitably raise the interest of Turkey, and that may result in the Black Sea security triangle. Empowered with the support of the NATO's hard power and the EU's soft power, it will decrease Russia's expansionist and geopolitical ambitions.

The regular discussions under the umbrella of the Romanian – Ukrainian Civil Society Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation usually tackle both the promising dimensions of bilateral cooperation and the sensitive issues that cause misunderstandings. However, in 2020 except for overviewing the current stage of partnership and drafting recommendations for the Roadmap of the bilateral relations for the next year the Project team decided to supplement them with the additional paper focused on the new regional challenges. Such necessity was rooted in the developments caused by the global pandemic of COVID-19 and its societal, economic and security impact, growing competition of the global powers, weaponization of the problems raised by the pandemic by Russia etc.

As a matter of fact the pandemic not only caused new global and regional challenges. It also has triggered the traditional threats, enforced protracted conflicts, led to the new wave of global and regional competition. The pandemic's consequences have been perceived by many global actors as game-changers and caused their assertiveness.

The project team took the courage to analyze the new challenges and how the old threats have transformed under the influence of the pandemic. To present both Romanian and Ukrainian views, accents, and main concerns, the authors elaborated their parts separately. The Project coordinator's task was to highlight common denominators, focal points for cooperation, and the remaining sensitive issues.

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A VIEW FROM UKRAINE

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Part 1. A VIEW FROM UKRAINE

There are several domains where the interests of Ukraine and Romania coincide. Such a statement is relevant for both global, regional, and bilateral levels and relates to traditional and new challenges. The new challenges obviously need new solutions. However, interestingly, some of them triggered protracted threats and enforced some global trends towards which the Black Sea region was immune. This part of the Report will highlight the Ukrainian view on the new challenges, old threats, and the way to counterweigh both.

The most visible and game-changing global challenge that has an impact on the region is **the coronavirus pandemic**. The countries of the region face the medical consequences of the pandemic and its economic, social, political, and even geopolitical implications.

Regarding **the healthcare-related measures**, both Ukraine and Romania expressed their willingness to join the new treaty related to the pandemic situation, which would be developed within the World Health Organization framework and is propelled by the President of the European Council Charles Michel. That means that both Romania and Ukraine rely on European and global solidarity and invest their hopes and efforts into the creation of efficient mechanisms to address future health emergencies. Further development of the respective mechanisms, proper implementation of the treaty, engaging a wider number of countries will help address emergencies in the future and ensure trust among the signatories as well as improve the reputation of the international and supranational bodies.

The European Commission coordinated a shipment of coronavirus vaccines from Romania to Moldova through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Romania also offered Ukraine health-care-related humanitarian assistance. This is a sign of growing regional cooperation both at the bilateral level and under the EU umbrella.

However, the measures undertaken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 only partly address the problems triggered by the pandemic.

First, as rightly highlighted by the [UNDP](#), COVID-19 crisis has heightened **the need to root out corruption**. The unprecedented circumstances brought about by the virus, combined with preexisting governance weaknesses, have increased the risk of acts of corruption globally. Even established democracies remain vulnerable to the problem, as has been recently proven by Germany. The challenge is even higher for the young democracies, where corruption is deeply rooted in most of the state bodies. The acts of corruption deprive people of vital health and social services.

Furthermore, **corrupt politicians are easy targets for the external actors** interested in the destabilization of the region's countries. Countries like Russia or China may benefit from a lack of integrity, whereas the vulnerability of Ukraine, Romania, other countries of the region will increase.





The anti-corruption legislative mechanisms launched in Ukraine and Romania and the respective institutions (the National Anti-Corruption Directorate in Romania and the National Anti-corruption Bureau of Ukraine, and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office in Ukraine) mostly were supported by the Western partners. However, despite certain results, additional efforts still have to be improved. However, the exchange of experience in this field can be beneficial for both countries. Cooperation between the governmental institutions and combined efforts of civil society can bring better results since it was basically civil society that ensured the respective reforms in both countries and served as a watchdog of their implementation.

The deficit of the equipment, medicines, and vaccines also has led to the vulnerability of the states vis-a-vis **"mask diplomacy" and "vaccine diplomacy" of the third parties**. Vaccine diplomacy is only a new tool for the Russian expansionist policy. It is being used to improve Russia's image, supporting Russian narratives, competing with the European and American producers of vaccines, and promoting "russkiy mir" ideas in a new form. The related Chinese activities are less visible in the region, but growing Chinese assertiveness may also convert into challenges and be used for splitting Europe. Such a split will damage Ukraine's EU aspirations and the Romanian expectations for deeper integration with the EU.

Besides, the delays with the responses towards the emergencies in the EU countries caused a lack of trust in the EU institutions and led to **national egoisms**. This trend is being exploited by populist parties in many countries of Europe, including the countries of the Black Sea region.

The combination of the volatility of the EU image in the eyes of the citizens of the member and neighboring states, **the growing popularity of the populist political parties** alongside the growing assertiveness of the third parties may eventually result in diminishing the resilience of the region. Russia and others interested in the instability of the region parties may exploit rooted historical past traumas to inspire new conflicts between the region's countries, invigorate territorial and historical disputes, support provocations, and false flag operations aimed at destabilization. The lack of open dialogue of civil society accompanied by the mainstream parties' irresponsible desire to fight with the populist at their electoral field leads to the revival of the past's phantoms. It can affect the relations between the region's countries, which the third parties can effectively exploit. Bilateral and multilateral forums of civil society are only a modest attempt to prevent such scenario and to enforce dialogue mechanisms able to prevent historical clashes between the neighboring countries, including Ukraine and Romania (but also tensions between the EU members states and between the EU member states and aspirant countries). A combination of the efforts of historians, human rights activists, politicians is needed to assure good neighborly relations between the region's countries and prevent further escalations.

The most obvious response to the problem is building and **strengthening democratic institutions**, inclusive dialogue with society, and information security, including media literacy. Although the EU's track record of helping to build effective institutions leaves much to be desired, Romania has passed it with relative success. It can serve as a role model for neighboring Ukraine and Moldova. Besides being resilient towards Russian propaganda, Romania and Ukraine can provide advice and assistance to the Republic of Moldova aimed at





increasing capacities in fighting Russian efforts to exploit “vaccine diplomacy” and by these means to support pro-Russian forces in the upcoming parliamentary campaign.

Noteworthy, Russia applies the same patterns for strengthening its influence in the region. In this regard, **early warning and exchange of information can help prevent Russian interference in internal affairs**, Russian support to the populist forces, and Russian hybrid methods of influence. By combining efforts Ukraine, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova can reach better results. This can be equally important at the level of governmental and security institutions and civil society and its experts' cluster. Moreover, Kyiv and Chisinau will also indirectly benefit from Romania's inclusion into respective NATO and EU security and prevention mechanisms.

The growing appetite of the Eastern Partnership countries for the initiative's **security pillar** also opens new windows of opportunity for Romania to engage. Being an important actor in the Black Sea area, Bucharest should consider closer cooperation with the willing EaP states and arguably Turkey. Such cooperation format will strengthen NATO's and the U.S. engagement into the region, enhance European soft security measures with the military components, and strengthen trust and common security identity of the NATO's Eastern flank and Eastern Partnership countries.

Moreover, such cooperation will create a platform for closer cooperation between the EU member states and other littoral states. The need for such a platform is growing, bearing in mind mostly the economic nature of BSEC and its limited capacities caused by Russian reluctance to cooperate.

Creating and developing wider regional formats can also be of added value. Most of the countries of the region simultaneously face new challenges and old security threats. Each of them has its own sometimes unique experience of combating them. By combining efforts, the regional alliances may gain better results. Furthermore, the so-called “**plus**” **format has to be used to a full scale**. Eastern Partnership plus Turkey, Eastern Partnership plus Romania are only a few examples of potentially fruitful formats. Also, Bucharest 9+Eastern Partnership or Three Seas Initiative+Eastern Partnership can be of added value. Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania should also explore the possibilities for strengthening the Lublin Triangle by expanding the initiative to Romania.

Such various formats and their combinations can be indispensable for addressing various challenges: new global threats, regional security challenges, multilaterally important economic and social issues, deterring Russia, and representing the region at the European and Transatlantic level. Romania as the founder of Bucharest 9 and Three Sea Initiative and Ukraine as the biggest country of the EaP with rich experience of combating Russia can be drivers of cooperation between the initiatives. The U.S.'s significant backing to Ukraine and Romania can be an asset in this regard.

The militarization of the Black Sea basin and the growing hard security risks resulted in relatively new problems: **the increase of the environmental threats**, the limitation for the production of hydro carbonates, freedom of maritime traffic, etc. On a large scale, such a situation is the indirect but essential result of the occupation of Crimea. The Crimean platform can be an excellent opportunity to discuss these issues and to find innovative asymmetric solutions. It will also be a helpful tool for combining the efforts of





governmental bodies and expert institutions. Therefore the participation of Romania and the Republic of Moldova in the Platform is immensely important.

Ukraine and Romania are accelerating and completing the work on preparing a draft bilateral agreement on transboundary EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) but should not limit their mutual efforts at this level and have to voice the concerns regarding the militarization of the Black Sea and its environmental impact. A recent World Bank [analysis](#) estimated the technical offshore wind potential for Bulgaria and Romania alone to be more than 100 GW. It equals about five times Romania's installed electricity generation capacity. The potential for Ukraine, a member of the European Energy Community, is two and half times that of Bulgaria and Romania combined. That mentioned circumstances make offshore wind far more critical for Ukraine than its coal reserves. Cooperation in this field is promising and corresponds with the Green Deal goals. However, the international community should deter Russia from hampering the environmental cooperation of the other littoral states.

Besides militarization and hard security challenges, the old foes apply **new digital tools to endanger the countries of the region**. Cybersecurity's role is growing in this regard. Romania is a solid performer in broadband internet speed rankings, whereas Ukraine has a proven track record of IT professionals. Cooperation in this field looks promising in particular bearing in mind that Romania will host the new European Cybersecurity Industrial, Technology and Research Competence Centre. The Centre will improve the coordination of research and innovation in cybersecurity in the EU but should also extend its activities to the neighborhood and Romania as a host country can promote the idea at the European level. Meanwhile Ukrainian NGOs' cooperation with the social platforms in terms of informational security can be assessed as a good practice which is also worth to be promoted.

Last but not least, the pandemic has triggered discussions regarding **the future of the global system**. The competition between the U.S. and China is growing. Unlike the ex-President Trump, Biden's administration in the U.S. is looking to build alliances both globally and regionally to address this problem. China's foreign policy is also transforming. Silent economic expansion nowadays is being accompanied by attempts to gain political influence. The so-called "wolf warrior" diplomacy, exploitation of supply chains dominated by Beijing in the time of the pandemic, and asymmetric response towards European sanctions prove the Chinese growing assertiveness which can be noticed far beyond Asia. The EU takes a more cautious position. In the European Commission's and HR/VP's contribution to the European Council released in 2020, it was mentioned that "in different policy areas [China is] a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance". The EU, however, is distancing from fully allying with the US and considers building a more defensive European industrial strategy and cherishing European champions in sectors ranging from telecoms to heavy engineering.

Both Romania and Ukraine faced the necessity to make a hard choice between the Chinese economic proposals which were hard to reject, and American security guarantees, which are necessary to acquire. Arguably, the need to find a model of balancing between the American hard and the European soft





approaches will emerge in the future. Both countries relying on the American security commitments and strong economic and institutional ties with the EU have to understand that bearing in mind the specifics of the region, they are in the same boat, and shaping common strategies can be the best solution for preserving actorness and assuring influence on the regional level.





A VIEW FROM ROMANIA

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Romania and Ukraine should continue to multiply their interaction perspectives in several fields: security, technical-military cooperation, monitoring the Black Sea potential to face the new types of challenges, political dialogue at the highest level, strategic economic cooperation, emphasising the development of commercial and energy infrastructure. In this regard, the year 2020 allowed highlighting critical moments in the bilateral dialogue. The public could observe how the definition of common interests contributed to advancing strategic communication to combat pandemic's negative impact at the regional level. A proper description of common priorities has shown that the cooperation and the communication between governmental authorities contributed to regional security, regional resilience, and border management. Both partners adopted a responsible approach to the new security challenges, contributing to the conservation of the status quo.

As a member of the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, Romania has assumed a special status in the Black Sea area, which offers multiple perspectives of cooperation and responsibilities in the security field. Thus, Romania takes challenges arising from actors in the region - military aggression, unilateral change of borders, violation of the principles of international law, propaganda, interference in the internal affairs of states during electoral processes. The pandemic added new priorities to these responsibilities: economic and social recovery, increasing national public institutions resilience - challenges associated with the decision-making process. The spread of the pandemic requires a much more rational approach in terms of bilateral cooperation priorities and a very efficient assessment of the resources available to ensure security on all its dimensions. On the other hand, as a member state of the Eastern Partnership, Ukraine continued to achieve strategic goals for integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures, which involve a profound transformation of the domestic system. These objectives (the need to promote further economic national interests) are added to the requirements related to national security and the fight for the country's territorial integrity.

The call for supranational mechanisms, which contain technical and financial assistance for Eastern Europe countries, are just some of the strategic elements needed to be developed and implemented in the coming period and sustained by Romania. However, it will also matter how much action is taken at the local or regional level to increase these international fora's capabilities and potential to strengthen their credibility. Unilateral decisions have limited the EU's abilities to act efficiently during the pandemic. The interdependencies between strategies and solutions to address bilateral and regional challenges, in which several actors are involved, are more challenging to implement. However, they should not be simplified or reduced only to the bilateral dialogue with the neighbours, in our case, to the cooperation between Bucharest and Kyiv. Many of them can be efficient only in a multilateral strategic framework. These are the arguments for which a more significant intervention in foreign policy from Romania at the European level is conducive not just for national security but also for strategic positioning in the current context of international relations.





The document's objective is to guide the main challenges in the bilateral dialogue between Romania and Ukraine to develop a plan to approach the strategic partnership, which accepts civil society's contribution and appreciates its recommendations. The civil society will make its expertise available to the decision-makers, conditioned to be more restrained at certain moments in publicly expressing creative solutions. Therefore, this is a perspective of independent experts supporting formal bilateral cooperation efforts, including areas where results are more challenging to achieve. The document communicates civil society's perspective on the bilateral dialogue most critical moments in the short and medium-term. Simultaneously, this paper only highlights the fundamental challenges of the bilateral dialogue that need to be strengthened. It also prioritises the contribution of experts from both states on the content of several strategic documents - advocacy and communication strategy, meeting calendar designed to facilitate online and offline interaction between stakeholders, positions papers.

The document's specific objective is to synchronise bilateral agendas and extend them to the trilateral format, promoted through the experts' participation from the Republic of Moldova in the Civil Society Forum's annual meetings. In this context, the main challenge is to assess the political potential of Ukraine to support the Republic of Moldova, both in terms of resolving the Transnistrian conflict and issues related to the proper management of strategic economic objectives, extending to the implementation of anti-corruption policies. In recent years, there has been a greater openness on the part of Ukraine to contribute to the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict and a better understanding of the problems and challenges facing society in the Republic of Moldova. The arguments concern the military rather than social security objectives.

The dialogue at the level of heads of state between Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova has been resumed through Maia Sandu's visit to Kyiv and the declaration of support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the neighbouring state. At the governmental level, the challenges relate more to the content of public policies that need to be implemented individually or jointly (in the context of the European integration processes) than to official statements. Another challenge in accepting a trilateral agenda for Romania - Ukraine - Republic of Moldova may be the possibility of defining an unbalanced partnership, in which Ukraine may feel lonely due to the privileged relationship between Chisinau and Bucharest. The solution is to assemble a strategic partnership based on respect for national interests, encourage qualitative economic change and promote the same democratic values. Simultaneously, it is essential to emphasise the membership status in other regional projects, such as the Danube Strategy or other cooperation areas.

Moreover, these regional initiatives provide participants with the legal framework to find optimal solutions to problems that affect human security. In this particular case, we should not avoid the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine's environmental issues. Although less relevant to political dialogue, environmental risks can have a long-term impact on regional security. Romania, as an EU member state, must promote ecological policies and assume a more significant role. Environmental protection in the region should also include European expertise, as it has the leverage to help and prevent specific projects. Although blocking projects is





not the right solution¹, if the ecological situation requires such an approach, then the state that violates the rules must be convinced to comply with environmental regulations provided by the international conventions content and regional cooperation formats. External monitoring is a temporary solution. Ukraine insists on receiving EU membership. This status also implies acceptance of the European standards, including respect for environmental safety measures. Because Ukraine is present in several regional initiatives, its selective application diminishes the partnership's credibility. Strategic economic objectives, capable of contributing to national budgets, must be coordinated with neighbouring states if the consequences it can generate from exploitation can have long-term adverse effects for partners.

Above, we mentioned the status that Romania has assumed in the Black Sea region and Ukraine's aspirations regarding its role in various cooperation formats. We also highlighted some dimensions that support the development of bilateral or even trilateral dialogue. In this context, we should emphasise that Romania promotes several European policies in the Black Sea region as a member country of the European Union, regardless of the internal political discourse's evolution. We declared our support for the European integration of Ukraine and other formats of bilateral cooperation. The Black Sea Synergy initiative of the EU is part of the same regional cooperation framework. In the pandemic context, such policies aim to explore the potential of partners to generate economic benefits, innovations, and sustainably, taking into account the latest trends in European debates: promoting Green Deal, Circular Economy, Common Maritime Agenda, Digitalization, Resilience. The decision-makers mission is to explain what opportunities are available to stakeholders in both states and empower them with the necessary tools for innovation, economic growth, and sustainable development.

The Common Maritime Agenda (CMA) concept, Blue Economy, or even the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA), are not new for the Black Sea region. For a few million people already involved in developing the effectiveness of initiatives and policies, the results are more relevant for this discussion. In this regard, one of the Romanian priorities is contributing to the implementation of these initiatives developed together with partners who expressed their willingness to be involved. The debate is evolving around the necessity of identifying new types of partnerships between different stakeholders (from decision-makers to citizens, as beneficiaries of the results), ways to address new challenges and sustain economic prosperity. For the Ukrainian part, these initiatives are opportunities to promote European integration and values and reaffirm the country's official position and support for implementing EU policies in the region.

Another advantage of implementing several initiatives in parallel for the region is that it can streamline national and supranational budgets, so financial contributions can be interconnected to support the achievement of common goals, i.e. to generate prosperity and sustainable development and economic security. The common objectives also extended our cooperation to projects such as the Tree Sea Initiative or Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. In this context, the parties' commitment to contribute individually or together to the promotion of these initiatives and policies, as well as to the advancement of a new level of economic and trade cooperation, will be most important.

¹ The Novodnestrovsk hydropower plants' operation, which affects the Republic of Moldova's national security, is considered here. Ecologists insist that the exploitation affects the Republic of Moldova people and will have negative consequences in the future and the inhabitants of Ukraine in the Odesa region.





While referring to the Romanian-Ukrainian bilateral dialogue's challenges, our attention should focus on both neighbouring states' domestic political context. Certain political phenomena are quite volatile, and they refer to perceptions about how specific electoral processes should evolve or how individual public policies are implemented. Moreover, both states have common tendencies to interpret separate political speeches or actions, which do not allow the parties to move forward in signing essential documents for cooperation. Consequently, the bilateral dialogue is affected not only by central or local public authorities. Political dialogue at the highest level is influenced negatively. The two partner states' active diplomacies are turning into ad-hoc units for settling potential dissensions and failing to advance in the correct way of deepening political or economic opportunities. Both sides perceive only one area reasonably: the Black Sea region's security. Threats and risks associated with some external actors' decisions in the area is that element of containment that "softens" the tense situations in the bilateral dialogue and forces the adoption of a responsible strategy.

However, the bilateral discussions between decision-makers can be often perceived as lifeless. We have the right platforms for interaction at both the parliamentary level (Joint Commission and working groups within it, the group of friendship at the legislative level, foreign policy commission, security, public order, and national safety commission), and government institutions. The interaction between public agencies and local authorities is more intensive due to the financial component - cross-border or bilateral cooperation programs. At the parliamentary level, the discussions are sporadic and inconsistent. They become interesting only during electoral events because they stir up citizens' feelings with the right to vote. This situation undermines the ability to perform in concrete areas. Supporting the proper functioning of working groups (agreed in 2017) should become a priority for civil society. Their importance in improving bilateral opportunities is still neglected.

Although most of the regional security issues addressed during the first edition of the Romania - Ukraine Civil Society Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation remain actual, exploring new bilateral cooperation issues, such as economic and energy cooperation, has proved to be a useful exercise. This topic completes not only the speeches of the two foreign ministers, Romanian and Ukrainian, in September 2020 (Bucharest, Annual Meeting of Romanian Diplomacy). They encourage strategic partnership through the concrete cooperation of governmental institutions, i.e. the Romanian-Ukrainian Joint Presidential Commission and working groups on various issues, thus encouraging interaction and collaboration at the experts' level of governmental institutions. Therefore, the transfer of best practices can occur, and the previously neglected cooperation mechanisms are put in place.

The initiative to create a working group for collaboration in the energy field, at the level of experts from the line ministries, is a new bilateral interaction element, which shows openness for new approaches and projects. In this context, the primary challenge is to stimulate this interaction dependent on several factors: political context, institutional development context, domestic legal framework to encourage foreign investment and provide guarantees for respect for the right to private property, technical and financial assistance mechanisms, transparency and the digitalisation of public services for economic operators, consistency in the implementation of the European directives. Discursive commitments must be accompanied by concrete actions and a lot of political will. The development of these sectors is unequal in





both states, which means that the strategic partnership depends mainly on the development of public institutions and the consistency with which citizens monitor performance in implementing reforms. Business representatives' insistence on creating institutional, logistical opportunities is not enough when political issues generate additional pressure on investment decisions. In the same context, there are insufficient measures to present economic opportunities. The pandemic context has further slowed down the decision-making process in this regard. The risks for business people are relatively high, and the authorities do not have the necessary capacity to intervene in the launch of business forums or exhibitions. Now, the priorities are the plans or strategies for relaunching national economies. Thus, the options relying on sustained regional cooperation, especially in the economic field, are omitted.

When the field of economic, trade or energy cooperation is brought to the public's attention in both countries, decision-makers only compare indicators that confirm an increase or decrease in trade interaction compared to previous periods. Usually, in the Romanian-Ukrainian bilateral dialogue, the landmark is the period before the foreign military aggression against Ukraine. However, others should be the pillars for relaunching economic cooperation because the neighbouring country has become a signatory to essential documents, such as the Association Agreement with the European Union. The factors mentioned above, which refer to the measurement of performance indicators, respect for human rights, and the rule of law, cannot be excluded from this context. Romania cannot ignore these realities. In turn, Ukraine has made specific commitments and is becoming responsible for the status it wants to achieve.

In the case of the bilateral dialogue on economic opportunities, the focus of decision-makers should be on the connections between financial resources, sustainable development priorities, the development of transport and energy infrastructure, the legal framework, digitalisation, research and innovation, so and the implementation of technological solutions to encourage the advancement of previous commitments.

Cross-border cooperation - identifying the most effective opportunities for strengthening existing and future partnerships (for the budgetary period 2021-2027) between different types of actors (local public authorities, investors, entrepreneurs, citizens), but also encouraging new areas of cooperation and interaction, the necessary financial and human resources, as well as transport, economic and commercial infrastructure projects. Previous experience has shown interest in bilateral cooperation projects and that there is too little knowledge of opportunities for cross-border cooperation or under-financing of priorities. In this regard, the managing authorities or profile agencies have launched a public consultation on the beneficiaries' views to explore new areas of common interest. The short-term challenge will be identifying these common goals, good infrastructure projects and the resources needed for them.

Another problem is the insufficient preparation of beneficiaries for accessing opportunities or their sporadic consultation for technical procedures. More active involvement of final beneficiaries in public consultations should be encouraged and not just for the start of a new financial year. Without understanding both parties' needs, some economic efforts and decisions may end without an implementation perspective. In the same case, to provide greater coherence and systematisation of outcomes, consultations should be regular. Evaluating concrete regional indicators and focus on projects sustainability is also essential. The current context can include the assessment of the risks generated by the pandemic. No one could have foreseen such a crisis, so it was impossible to include in the implementation plans measures to minimise epidemiological





risks. These needs were highlighted by the participants from both countries at the second edition of the Ukraine - Romania Civil Society Forum. The critical approach of the invited experts, who were also beneficiaries of cross-border cooperation programs, needs to be appreciated and analysed as a matter of priority, especially in defining new priorities for the next European budget year.

Basically, in terms of cross-border cooperation, the managing authority (Ministry of Public Works, Development and Administration, Romania) must focus its efforts on defining a new vision for the programs it has in its management. This vision must be fully in line with the beneficiaries' current needs and be equipped with the necessary strategy and tools to be effectively implemented.

Communication. During the second edition of Ukraine - Romania Civil Society Forum (December 2020), the invited experts proposed to develop an advocacy strategy, which could improve the bilateral dialogue between the two neighbouring states. If referring to a civil society advocacy strategy, this document must identify priorities, sensitive topics, tools and appropriate communication channels. But most importantly, it should include the human potential of both states. The aim is to identify the experts and decision-makers who may be available to communicate the strategic priorities and the right solutions to achieve them. The elaboration of an advocacy and communication strategy should become a priority in the bilateral interaction between experts by the end of 2021. The development of such a document is a complex but beneficial exercise to communicate our goals in a coordinated manner. Moreover, it could be the tool that would ensure the experts' coherence of actions and speeches for an extended period, medium-term (2-3 years), and easy to adjust to new types of challenges.

Moreover, taking a common strategic position on common interest topics, such as education, innovation, research, and economic cooperation, should become a continuous exercise that defuses sensitivities or demonstrate capacity and cohesion towards solving everyday problems. In bilateral or extended, trilateral, format, we should approach external propaganda, interference in internal affairs, undermining democratic institutions, or Euro-Atlantic values and principles.





CONCLUSIONS

The assessment of the national contributions to the paper proves that both in Ukraine and in Romania there is an understanding of the necessity to continue interaction in the essential fields of security, technical-military cooperation, monitoring the Black Sea region potential to face the new types of challenges.

Also, the Ukrainian expert community is aware that as a member of the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, Romania has assumed a special status in the Black Sea area, which offers multiple perspectives of cooperation and responsibilities in the security field, and Kyiv is eager to contribute and extend the existing possibilities by developing wider formats and engaging other strategic partners. The special relations both Ukraine and Romania have with the United States can propel further cooperation in the security domain. Moreover, both countries can enhance cooperation in the Three Seas Initiative, Bucharest 9 format (bearing in mind the American interests in reviving traditional and building new coalitions), Danube Strategy, and to initiate closer cooperation between these formats and Eastern Partnership and arguably GUAM.

Shaping an efficient multilateral strategic framework with NATO, the EU, other interested littoral states is essential. It can assist in promoting the regional interests at the European and Transatlantic levels. Besides, by combining the different interested actors' efforts, the chances to deter Russia and prevent further escalations will grow.

Indeed, the interdependencies between strategies and solutions to address bilateral and regional challenges, when several actors are involved, are challenging to implement. But elaborating them under the circumstances of the global crisis is an of immense need. Basically, the countries of the region are in the same boat. They should not only acknowledge that but also conceptualize it in the national strategies and doctrines and bilateral and multilateral agreements.

Importantly, both Ukrainian and Romanian decision-makers and experts should not underestimate the risks of corruption boosted by the pandemic. For both Ukraine and Romania, this is the vulnerability that may be exploited by the third countries, e.g., Russia or China. The third parties do not necessarily have to invest in pro-Russian or pro-Chinese parties. Paradoxically, by exploiting national egoisms and growing support to populist parties they can gain more. Galvanizing the sensitive issues and disputes in the region, invigoration of the regional splits provides the third parties with more opportunities.

Both Ukrainian and Romanian experts are on the same page regarding the necessity to keep an eye on the Republic of Moldova's developments, which is an important neighbour. Synchronizing bilateral agendas and extending them to the trilateral format can contribute to the democratic developments in Moldova and assist in its European integration. The key objective in this regard is finding common denominators. Ukrainian contribution so far is underestimated since often in the Republic of Moldova and Romania, even the efforts of Kyiv to assist in solving the Transnistrian conflict are neglected. Hypothetically, that may result from weak communication of the Ukrainian side and may result in a distorted perception of Ukraine's role as a guarantor of the Transnistrian settlement. In this regard, it is necessary to communicate to the Moldovan and Romanian expert community and decision-makers that Ukraine was the country that suggested the so-called "Yushchenko plan" back in 2005 after Victor Yushchenko's consultations in





Bucharest. Afterward Kyiv also contributed to the Transnistrian settlement. Nowadays, further consultations with the inclusions of civil society of the region are of immense importance for a better understanding of the problems and challenges facing society in the Republic of Moldova and how other countries of the region may assist in the reforms.

Both Ukrainian and Romanian expert societies are aware that environmental cooperation is getting topical (particularly in accordance with the provisions of the Green Deal). There are many opportunities for enhancing cooperation as well as for solving protracted issues. The key need is the political will of both sides and efforts to reach win-win solutions. For example, Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova can benefit from promoting energy transit routes, excluding Russia from energy supply chains, assuring the usage of the Ukrainian gas storage capacities. These energy initiatives can be supplemented with the environmental dialogue, including Dnister related issues.

Regrettably, the two partner states' active diplomacies are turning into ad-hoc units for settling potential dissensions and failing to advance in the correct way of deepening political or economic opportunities. However, it is still much better than nothing and can be a role model compared to the relations with the neighbouring countries arguably affected by third parties. That is partially the consequence of the common understanding of major threats and risks. Further efforts in this regard are needed, including enhanced cooperation of the Romanian-Ukrainian Joint Presidential Commission and working groups on various issues. The inauguration meeting of the Crimean Platform can be a good opportunity for reloading the presidential dialogue on security issues, which may invigorate the resultative dialogue in other spheres due to the spillover effect.

Developing an advocacy strategy, which could improve the bilateral dialogue between the two neighbouring states is among the key tasks for the next year. The elaboration of such advocacy and communication strategy should become a priority in the bilateral interaction between experts by the end of 2021. The development of such a document in a coordinated manner will be helpful for avoiding further misunderstandings and finding common denominators for both countries and other constructive players in the region.

It is also important to elaborate political dialogue, to unite efforts and counter growing integration pessimism in the EU, to take efforts for the political consolidation.

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