

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

**Spoken and unspoken truths about the relationship between
Romania and Ukraine**

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to examine the nature of the international relations between Romania and Ukraine (including the ties between the two peoples during the long periods of time in which they did not exist as nation-states). Such an undertaking is essential today, given that, in recent years, especially following the invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, social media platforms have been flooded with the Kremlin's narratives aimed at distorting the historical truth. Through sheer constant repetition, these narratives have gained momentum and, in some cases, validation in the minds of both Romanians and Ukrainians. Our analysis employs a combination of quantitative, qualitative, and descriptive research methods, each essential for capturing the complexity of the current climate between the two countries.

The main takeaway of this study is that, in the current geopolitical context, an independent Ukrainian state is vital to Romania, serving as a safeguard against any hegemonic ambitions at the mouth of the Danube. Ukraine functions as a genuine buffer state, not only for Romania but also for other countries that are susceptible to hybrid forms of aggression. It is the author's opinion that only a deepened mutual understanding can foster stable and dynamic cooperation, free from any suspicion, that must necessarily include sustained efforts in the economic and military spheres, as well as in both cultural and scientific exchange, without neglecting, of course, the sensitive issue of the Romanian minority living in the historical territories that form part of present-day Ukraine.

Keywords: Romania, Ukraine, collaboration, war, stereotypes, history

Introduction

February 24, 2022 marked a turning point in the history of the 21st century, defined by profound geopolitical mutations, brought on by the relentless struggle of major powers for

global influence, by the attempts of newcomers to secure a place among the world's leading states, and the persistent drive to reset the Global balance based on bipolarity, following the collapse of the USSR and the United States' assuming the role of the 'world's policeman', forcing the Russian Federation to intensify its military and diplomatic initiatives in an attempt to regain its lost influence. At the same time, the geopolitical arena saw the rise of other significant players, mainly China and India, with China in particular posing a real threat to Washington's diplomacy.

Returning to the Russian Federation, it is worth remembering that the twenty-first century began with the surprising resignation of President Boris Yeltsin, who ceded the Kremlin's command to the young (at the time) Vladimir Putin. The world's hopes for the possible continuation of democratisation in the former communist empire soon proved to be unfounded. Although President Putin initially appeared to be open to the Western vision of democracy based on liberal values, non-interventionism, civil liberties, and a free-market economy, it turned out to be a bluff in the end. Putin was, actually, an admirer of Stalin and a nostalgic of the Soviet past (he famously declared that *"The collapse of the USSR was the greatest tragedy of the 20th century"* and that it represented *"the disintegration of historical Russia under the name of the Soviet Union"*)¹ His determination to restore the empire's lost glory is unmistakable. His disdain for the West has also been apparent, declaring, at a meeting of the Valdai Club, that: *"The historical period in which the West directly dominated world affairs is coming to an end"*². During an earlier session of the same forum, the Kremlin leader had stated, *"Another serious challenge to Russia's identity is closely connected to the events that are taking place in the world. Here, it is a matter of both foreign policy and moral aspects. We can see how many Euro-Atlantic states are denying their roots, abandoning Christian values, which used to constitute the foundation of Western civilisation. They deny moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They implement policies that equate extended families with same-sex unions, belief in God with belief in Satan. The excesses of political correctness have reached the point of seriously discussing the registration of political parties aimed at promoting pedophilia. In many European countries, people are embarrassed or afraid to discuss their religious affiliations. Holidays are being abolished or renamed; their essence and moral meaning are hidden."* (Voicu, 2018:32).

Coming from the KGB, Putin brought back the methods once used by the feared Soviet secret service, extending the propaganda machine, not only across Russian society but also beyond the borders of the Federation. Furthermore, since the Russians have always mastered the art of propaganda, they combined classical warfare with disinformation, resulting in a form of hybrid warfare or, as the Russians call it, asymmetrical warfare. The principles of this approach, originally formulated by the white Russian émigré Yevgeny Messner in the first half of the twentieth century, were later incorporated into both the Foreign Policy Doctrine and the Defence Doctrine of the Russian Federation. "In 2014, the head of the

¹ Europa Libera Moldova, „Destrămarea URSS a fost destrămarea Rusiei istorice”, december 13.2021, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/vladimir-putin-destr%C4%83marea-urss-a-fost-destr%C4%83marea-rusiei-istorice/31606803.html>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

² Europa Liberă România, Vladimir Putin: „Dominația Occidentului a luat sfârșit. Războiul din Ucraina, unul civil”, 27 octombrie 2022, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/discurs-putin-valdai-dominatie-occident-sfarsit/32104336.html>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

General Operations Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Army, Colonel-General Vladimir Zarudnitsky, declared [...] «It is easier to divide a state from within than to conquer it with weapons" (Klimowicz, 2020 238). The same methods were applied, with real success, during that very same year, when the whole world watched in amazement as the mysterious "*little green men*" occupied the Crimean Peninsula, while the Kremlin leader declared that he had no knowledge of who they were. Only to then say, smiling, a few days later, that the operation was a total success, because there was no bloodshed, and Crimea returned to its motherland.

Needless to say that the operation, organized years in advance, both from a military standpoint and through the systematic disinformation campaigns of Kremlin's troll farms, flagrantly violated the UN Charter, the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, adopted in Helsinki in 1975, as well as the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, by which the US, the UK and the Russian Federation guaranteed the integrity and inviolability of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, in exchange for the surrender of their nuclear arsenals, to Moscow, considered the legal successor of the defunct Soviet Union. It was then that the three world powers pledged not to use military force or economic coercion against the former Soviet republics that adhered to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

As appetite comes with eating, Putin ordered the beginning of the hostilities at the Russian-Ukrainian border in 2014, using techniques of hybrid warfare (disinformation campaigns, irregular troops, and soldiers from the Russian Federation's armed forces), while also benefiting from the help given by some of the ethnic Russians in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions. Observing the West's weak response, the Russian Federation proceeded further, devising the plan for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, masked by the use of grandiose language such as "*special military operation*", for the "*denazification*" of the country. What began with the expectation to be no more than a triumphal march towards Kiev, and the conviction that locals would greet Russian soldiers as liberators, quickly turned into a colossal unpleasant surprise. The Ukrainians hindered their efforts, and the operation that the Kremlin officials had believed would last no more than three days soon came to a standstill. Now, three and a half years later, the Russian Federation continues to struggle to prove itself to be one of the world's foremost military powers, with glaringly obvious deficiencies.

In these conditions, Moscow continued to use hybrid warfare tactics to boost the morale of its own troops. The former Soviet republic became "the enemy", "Nazi", and the Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood disappeared, as if a sponge had erased it. At the same time, the Kremlin propaganda began to employ a series of narratives that spoke of Ukraine as an artificial state (as if Moscow wasn't the one to shape it to its current dimensions), containing territories taken from its neighbours: Romania, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. The respective countries were urged to make every effort, including *manu militari*, to regain the historical territories that were lost during the Great Conflagration.

This type of rhetoric was embraced, even if unofficially, by Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán and the ruling FIDESZ party. In Romania, sovereigntists, populists and nationalists, the most vocal of whom is Diana Șoșoacă, did not hesitate to call, from the tribune of Parliament, for the reunification of Northern Bukovina and Southern Bessarabia with the mother country. Obviously, they did not indicate how the restoration of Greater Romania could be achieved.

In Poland, where Russophobia is at its highest level, such voices were isolated and ultimately insignificant.

Kremlin propaganda provided major topics for debate both in Hungarian and Romanian society, respectively, regarding relations with Ukraine, trying to determine the hostility of the inhabitants of the two countries towards their eastern neighbour, barbarically attacked by the Russians, but also towards Ukrainian refugees. Concerning Romania, the main talking points oscillated around the financial allocations for refugees, exceeding those granted to Romanian citizens, the positive discrimination extended to Ukrainians in Romania compared to the native population, the allowances being given to Ukrainian minors being higher than those given to the Romanian children and the hostile attitude of the Ukrainian authorities toward the Romanian community living in the historical territories that now form part of the neighboring state etc.

In the following, we will review the relations between the two countries (and peoples) from a historical perspective, without claiming to exhaust the topic, but only highlighting the essential elements.

Complicated stories, in white, black and (mostly) grey

Ever since the occupation of Romania by the Red Army, in the summer/autumn of 1944, the messages that were transmitted to the population spoke, among other things, about the "*old Russian Romanian friendship*". The truth is different. The "*friendship*" was not old, and it was not friendship either. The Treaty of Lutsik, signed in 1711 by Tsar Peter the Great and the Moldavian prince Dimitrie Cantemir, represented an attempt by the latter to escape the Ottoman yoke, taking advantage of the Russian presence in the region. Only the Turkish victory at Stanilești delayed the Russian seizure of the eastern half of the Principality of Moldavia by a century, proving that the prince was a brilliant scholar but a weak diplomat. The continuous Russian occupation of the Danubian Principalities, Russia's hostile gesture towards Romania in 1878, taking over the three counties in southern Bessarabia, and the threat of occupying Bucharest created a deep anti-Russian sentiment, which was accentuated by the Soviet occupation from 1944-1958 and by Moscow's watchful eye on Bucharest.

Therefore, we cannot speak of an "*old Russian-Romanian friendship*", given that the Russians only reached the Dniester in 1792. Throughout medieval and modern history, the connections between the Moldavian rulers and the Eastern Slavs, except for the rare alliances with the Principality of Muscovy, were made through the principalities ruled by those who were to become Ukrainians. These relations were either tense or of a partnership nature, depending on the circumstances.

Following the "dismountings" of Dragoș and, especially, Bogdan, Wallachian voivodes from the region of Maramureș, who brought a large number of native Romanian speakers into the medieval principality of Moldavia, the borders were constantly expanded towards the south and east as the power of the Tatars waned. The border of the new kingdom was established along the Dniester River, which separated them from the Eastern Slavic world beyond it, leading to dialogue between the two civilisations. Petru the 1st Mușat and Roman the 1st maintained relations with the Slavic principalities, which varied according to each political entity's interests. Moldavia had close ties with the Principality of Halici, which helped the Moldavian lords during conflicts with the Poles and Hungarians.

Stephen the Great enjoyed a special relationship with the Eastern Slavic rulers. He wed Evdokia, daughter of Alexander of Kiev, a cousin of the Polish king Casimir the IVth. Stephen also proved instrumental in reestablishing international relations with the Principality of Moscow (the real Russia), while creating a matrimonial alliance by marrying his daughter, Elena Voloshanka, to the son of Ivan the Third of Moscow. Even so, the Principality of Moscow was far away and was not a great power at the time.

The Moldavian Principality's connections with the Eastern Slavs, then, under Polish and, later, Polish-Lithuanian rule, enjoy a new impetus under the short-lived reign of Ioan Vodă cel Viteaz (1572-1574), who contracted the services of Cossack mercenaries, renowned for their fighting skills, albeit expensive to hire. The most notorious among them were the Zaporozhian Cossacks, Slavicized and ethnically diverse, originally from the region of Zaporozhia. They formed the Zaporozhian Sich, an entity that was created with the explicit aim of defending themselves against the Tatars and the Ottomans. In 1574, during the Battle of Roșcani, which was to be lost by the Moldavian ruler after the boyars' betrayal, the Cossack atamans Pokotilo and Swiercewski remained loyal to Ioan Vodă until their deaths.

Ioan Nicoară Potcoavă, also known as Ivan Serpeaha (Pidkova) to the Zaporozhian Cossacks, because he could break a horseshoe with his hands, was a meteoric figure on the Moldavian throne (he reigned for one month, November/December 1577). Potcoavă was the hetman of the Cossacks of the Dnieper Thresholds, a maternal half-brother of Ioan Vodă cel Viteaz and, ethnically, half-Armenian.

More than a century later, at the signing of the Treaty of Bakhchisarai on February 11, 1681, between the Russians and the Ottomans, the Moldavian prince Grigore Duca Vodă was appointed by the Turks as Hetman of Ukraine, tasked with the reconstruction and repopulation of the vast region. Duca's official title was "lord over the lands of Moldavia and of Ukraine".

One of the most important personalities for the cultures of both peoples is Petru Movilă. The Moldavian scholar made decisive contributions to the organisation of the Orthodox Church in the southeast of the continent. Petru Movilă, son of the Moldavian ruler Simion Movilă, left his military career, took monastic vows and joined the Kiev Pecherska Lavra. He was appointed metropolitan of Kiev in 1632. In this capacity, Movilă defended Orthodoxy and promoted numerous reforms. Although far from his homeland, Petru Movilă laid the foundations for the activity of the printing houses in Câmpulung (1635), Govora (1637) and Dealu (1644), with the help of which the first Romanian books were printed, and in 1640, he established the "Vasilian College" in Iași, which had the Ukrainian Sofronie Pociatki as rector. In 2005, the Bishops' Council of the Kiev Patriarchate proclaimed Petru Movilă a saint.

After the Russian Empire took control of the Ukrainian territory, its politics and administration naturally became associated with Saint Petersburg. The possibility of having direct relations between Romanians and Ukrainians became a reality only at the end of the First World War, as the Tsarist Empire collapsed, leaving the way to the formation of new republics, including the Ukrainian Democratic Republic, which contested the right of the Romanian population between the Prut and Dniester Rivers to unite with Romania. Following the proclamation of the union by the Council of the Country, on March 27 1918, the Ukrainian Central Rada, that had two Romanians from Transnistria as parliamentary representatives, declared Bessarabia the tenth Province of Ukraine and decided to send

troops to Chișinău, under the command of the Minister of War, Simon Petliura, with the clear purpose of annexing the Province to Ukraine.

Kiev's decision gave rise to protests in Chisinau, among them that of the Soldiers' Executive Committee, which declared: *"The Moldovan Central Executive Committee of the Soviet of Officers' and Soldiers' Deputies, upon learning that the Ukrainian Rada is attempting to annex Bessarabia, hereby protests against such anti-democratic, annexationist, and predatory intentions, which violate the principle of peoples right to self-determination. Given that Bessarabia has an inalienable right to complete autonomy, on the basis of historical and ethnic rights, distinctive customs, and its economic situation, we, on behalf of higher principles of law and justice, and representing all of the Moldavian organizations, declare that we will fight for Bessarabia's autonomy using all available methods, in accordance with the revolution's principles, and with full rights guarantees. At the same time, we urge Ukrainians to work together in support of Ukraine's and Bessarabia's autonomy, within the framework of cordial neighbourly ties."*³. Yet the ambitions of the Ukrainian nationalists clashed with those of both the Kingdom of Romania and the new Soviet power, led by Lenin. In the end, the Romanian army restored order in Bessarabia, and the province became a part of Romania, in accordance with the historic act of 27 March 1918.

The Ukrainian Central Rada even contested the Romanians' right in Bukovina to reunite with their motherland. Through onerous negotiations, the Ukrainians secured Vienna's support for the takeover of Bukovina in exchange for a large amount of grain, which was to temporarily satisfy the hunger that reigned on the ruins of the dual monarchy. As a result of Vienna's longstanding policy of *divide et impera*, Bukovina was gradually colonised by large numbers of Ukrainians, until they became the majority in the province's northern part. They succeeded in briefly occupying Chernivtsi, but the Romanian National Council of Bukovina requested the intervention of the Romanian army. The troops of General Iacob Zadik entered Bukovina and reached Chernivtsi, forcing the Ukrainian guards to withdraw. On the 28th of November, at the Great National Assembly of Bukovina, formerly part of the Principality of Moldavia, taken by the Habsburgs in 1775, Iancu Flondor and Ion Nistor presided over the gathering that decided upon the "forever" union with Romania.

The Soviet Union was established in 1922, and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was one of its constituent republics. The existence of this political entity, which theoretically had the right to secede from the Union, must not be permitted to mislead us. We are talking about ruthless centralism, where all of the power was concentrated in Moscow, or, better said, in the Kremlin, ruled by the all-powerful Stalin, since 1922. There was no question of direct relations between Romanians and Ukrainians. It is worth noting, however, that in 1924, the Soviet authorities decided to create the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, on the territory of Ukraine, with the transparent and deliberate aim of using this artificial construct and the notions of a "Moldavian people" or that of the "Moldavian language", in order to serve as a magnet for the population of Bessarabia, that was, at the time, a part of the Kingdom of Romania. The capital of the Moldavian ASSR was established at Balta and later moved to Tiraspol.

³ *Amintirile lui Ion Inculeț, primul președinte al Sfatului Țării*, în: *Timpul*, november 16 2021, <https://timpul.md/articol/amintirile-lui-ion-inculet-primul-presedinte-al-sfatului-tarii-124064.html>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

On June 26th, 1940, Moscow demanded that Bucharest cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina using an ultimatum note, delivered by the Soviet People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov, to Ambassador Gheorghe Davidescu, the latter claim being presented as being compensation for Romania's twenty-two years of rule over the territory between the Prut and Dniester rivers. The first paragraph of the ultimatum revived the fabrications that the Ukrainian Central Rada sustained in 1918: *"In 1918, Romania, taking advantage of Russia's military weakness, detached part of its territory, Bessarabia, from the Soviet Union (Russia), thereby violating the secular unity of Bessarabia, populated mainly by Ukrainians, with the Ukrainian Soviet Republic"*⁴.

After two Crown Councils, Bucharest decided to surrender the requested provinces without a fight. Shortly thereafter, the Moldavian SSR was formed, with its capital in Chișinău, while northern Bukovina, the Herta region, and southern Bessarabia became part of the Ukrainian SSR, as decided by the Kremlin.

Between 1941 and 1944, during Romania's intervention in World War II, Marshal Antonescu would receive a pale consolation from Hitler, in exchange for the loss of northwestern Transylvania: the administration of the region between the Bug and the Dniester, the so-called Transnistria, where the Holocaust of the Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina also took place.

After the return of Soviet rule, there were no direct relations between the communist parties in Romania and Ukraine, not even at the state level. However, the Ukrainian SSR was a founding member of the United Nations, with voting rights alongside the USSR and the Byelorussian SSR.

The dissolution of the USSR, following Mikhail Gorbachev's failed attempt to implement the *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies, and especially after the failure of the 1991 Moscow coup, which led to the decline of the Soviet leader's influence and the rise of the disobedient Boris Yeltsin, resulted in the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

This event took place during a conference between Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian leaders in Belovezhskaya Pushcha, Belarus. Ukraine declared independence, as did all of the other republics of the former "Red Empire". However, this independence remained inextricably linked to the Soviet legacy. The new subject of international law began its journey amid widespread corruption and many unresolved "skeletons" from its recent history.

The independent Ukrainian state had had a short-lived existence at the end of the First World War. Moreover, Soviet narratives spoke of Ukrainians as the "*poor relations*" of the Russians, with periods of denial of their history and language alternating with periods of relative liberalisation. It was natural for the new entity to take all measures to consolidate its own statehood, including those related to nation-building. National myths were reset, heroes became traitors and vice versa, see the Mazepa/Khmelnitsky case, and the desire of ethnic minorities to enjoy their rights was regarded with caution, if not hostility.

During Soviet rule, the propaganda promoted a negative image of Romanians, especially after Ceaușescu's "*rebellion*" against Moscow. Romanians were portrayed as "*fascist*

⁴ Dan Falcan, *Ultimatumul sovietic din 26 iunie 1940: „Să înapoieze cu orice preț Uniunii Sovietice Basarabia”/ DOCUMENT*, în: Historia, <https://historia.ro/>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

occupiers" who had murdered tens of thousands of Ukrainians, who had taken over Ukrainian territories (Transnistria), organised pogroms, and allegedly destroyed the city of Odessa. Unsurprisingly, these negative stereotypes were reinforced after Ukraine gained independence. For a long time, the perception of Romania as a poor, backward country inhabited by "gypsies" from India was maintained, and that its independence was due to Russian generosity.⁵

"The bilateral diplomatic relations were carried out within a particular psychological climate. The results of a Ukrainian sociological study conducted between 1994 and 2004 revealed an incredibly high intolerance index toward the Romanian population in Ukraine, surpassed only by the Roma population and people of colour" (Abraham, 2006: 288). The article What Romanians perceive about Ukraine and why our countries do not feel like friends⁶, published online by the Evropeiska Pravda newspaper, stated: "Before Ukraine's full-scale war with Russia, Romania was perceived by most ordinary Ukrainians as a poor, corrupt state that had problems with its Roma minority. And most importantly, Bucharest was, allegedly, constantly making claims against Ukraine: either regarding the Romanian minority or regarding territories."(Abraham, 2006: 288).

These stereotypes, related to Romania, were rolled out in the Ukrainian media until the Russian invasion of 2022. Beyond Soviet disinformation, the newly formed state was concerned by calls to denounce the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, which had arbitrarily redrawn Eastern Europe's borders at the will of two dictators in 1939-1940. It was feared that the lands it had inherited from the USSR's Supreme Soviet, specifically, the former Polish provinces, Northern Bukovina, Southern Bessarabia, and Transcarpathia, would be claimed by neighboring governments. The attitude of Romanian nationalist parties, particularly that of the Greater Romania Party, which, through the voice of its leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, advocated for a return to the 1940 borders, exacerbated these anxieties.

Beyond everything, it is necessary to define the state of the Ukrainian society in the first years after the proclamation of independence: a confused society, with Soviet mentalities, imbued with the myths of the Great Patriotic War, with an undisguised contempt for its neighbors, less so for Russians, considering itself the first among equals of the former USSR, obviously, after the Russian Federation. Joining the *Russkii Mir* was not viewed with disapproval at that time; quite the opposite. Let us not forget that, during the 1992 war on the Dniester, which pitted separatists and soldiers of the Russian 14th Army against the Chișinău forces, Ukraine constantly supported Moscow's actions and viewed Bucharest's intention to help the Republic of Moldova with disapproval. *"Taking into account some political interests that existed until the annexation of Crimea between Kiev and Moscow, it was noted that Ukraine was often on the side of the Russian Federation, and Chișinău remained powerless in the context of these agreements. Let's not forget that the neighbouring country offered Transnistrian citizens a facilitated regime for obtaining Ukrainian*

⁵ <https://nupp.edu.ua/news/rumunskiy-naukovets-prochitav-gostovu-lektsiyu-pro-mifi-v-rumunsko-ukrainskikh-vidnosinakh.html>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

⁶ <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2023/03/25/7158642/>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

*citizenship, or another example is the fact that Ukraine requested permission to open a consulate in Rabnita."*⁷

Kyiv's suspicious, if not hostile, attitude created a tense atmosphere when Romanian cultural activists crossed the border, and on more than one occasion, convoys of books destined for libraries in Ukrainian educational institutions were stopped at the border, and Romanian citizens were banned from entering the neighbouring country. Not to mention the fact that the Kiev regime perpetuated the ethnic and linguistic separation between Romanians and "Moldovan": those from Northern Bukovina and Transcarpathia are Romanians, those from Southern Barasabia, the current Odessa region, are "Moldovan".

"On February 1, 1992, diplomatic relations were established and the Romanian Embassy in Kiev was subsequently opened, replacing the Consulate General, which had been operating since 1971. (After that, Romania also opened consulates general in Odessa - in 1995, in Chernivtsi - in 1999, in Solotvino - in 2016 and an honorary consulate in Dnipro - in 2019)."⁸ Discussions regarding the signing of a basic treaty also began in 1992, but did not progress, with Bucharest rightly suspecting that Kiev was Moscow's long arm in the region. *"In September 1992, during the visit of the Ukrainian Foreign Minister to Bucharest, diplomatic negotiations began for the signing of the basic treaty between the two countries. However, the negotiations were abandoned because of Ukraine's refusal to include the denunciation of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in the treaty."*⁹

The first strategic step was taken by Romania, which was preparing to join NATO. As one of the accession clauses stipulated that candidate states should have signed basic treaties with all their neighbours, in order to eliminate any suspicion regarding the change of borders, Bucharest initiated new negotiations for the signing of such an act. On June 2, 1997, President Leonid Kuchma and President Emil Constantinescu signed, in Neptun, the "Treaty on Good-Neighbourly Relations and Cooperation between Romania and Ukraine". It was a document signed almost "on its knees", in Bucharest's desperate attempt to maximise its chances of joining the North Atlantic Alliance. Unfortunately, the Madrid moment was missed, and our country would have to wait another 7 years, until 2004, for the desired event to occur. Ukraine had something to gain from signing the document. First of all, its borders were officially recognised, including historical territories inhabited by Romanians. Although our country was among the first countries to recognise the new independent state, on December 8, 1991, "on November 28, 1991, the Romanian Parliament issued a declaration recalling the Romanian origin of the territories on the right bank of the Prut, inherited by Ukraine from the former USSR" (Abraham 2006, 292).

In an interview with the Ukrainian press, upon signing the treaty, President Emil Constantinescu would declare: *"We are willing to recognise the current borders. This recognition of reality will indeed form the basis of the Treaty [...] Snake Island is also*

⁷Simion Ciochină, *Ukraine's role in resolving the Transnistrian conflict*, Deutsche Welle, 11.06.2016, <https://www.dw.com/ro/ucraina-poate-fi-decisiv%C4%83-%C3%AEn-solu%C8%9Bionarea-conflictului-transnistrean/a-19322022>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

⁸Liliana Ruse, *Analiză. Cum au evoluat relațiile dintre România și Ucraina din 1990, până în prezent*, 22 februarie 2023, în: HotNews.ro, <https://hotnews.ro/analiza-cum-au-evoluat-relatiile-dintre-romnia-si-ucraina-din-1990-pna-n-prezent-80133>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

⁹*Ibidem*.

Ukrainian territory" ¹⁰. The signatories of the treaty were accused of secrecy in Romania, with part of the public opinion being deeply dissatisfied with the renunciation of historical territories. The Romanian negotiators were also accused of having superficially treated the clauses regarding the treatment granted by the Ukrainian authorities to ethnic Romanians from Northern Bukovina, Southern Basarabia and Transcarpathia. *"The treaty was signed at the last possible moment before the NATO summit in Madrid, where the first expansion of the Alliance was decided. Although they had committed themselves through the Snagov Declaration of 1995 to support the steps for Romania's accession to Euro-Atlantic structures, the opposition parties (PDSR, PRM, PUNR) harshly criticized the signing of the Treaty with Ukraine, accusing President Emil Constantinescu and the governing coalition (PNȚCD, PD, PSDR and UDMR) of betraying Romania's interests by ceding some territories to Ukraine."* (Ruse, 2023).

However, the signing of the Basic Treaty did not result in a meaningful reset of relations between the two countries, nor did it result in the drafting of meaningful bilateral cooperation agreements. Such conclusions were hampered by the continuing weight of prejudices that had long spread across this section of the European continent. *"After 1992, Romania was consistently listed among the threats to Ukraine's national security (according to Ukraine's National Security Strategy), against the backdrop of statements made in Bucharest regarding the historical injustice suffered by Romania through the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, thus implying potential territorial claims."* (Ruse, 2023).

In 2004, relations between the two countries experienced a sharp deterioration, driven by the delimitation of the continental shelf and the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in the Black Sea. The bone of contention was Snake Island, which could have expanded Ukraine's exclusive economic zone if it were considered an inhabited territory. However, the island, except a radar station, was uninhabited, and Kiev's hasty attempts to prove the opposite, including by setting up a "hotel", were met with Bucharest's determination, which requested arbitration at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

During the period between 1998 and 2004, 34 rounds of negotiations were held between Romania and Ukraine for the delimitation of the continental shelf and the exclusive economic zones in the Black Sea - 24 at the level of the plenum of delegations and 10 at the level of experts. Of these, 26 took place in the last phase of the negotiations (2001-2004). The negotiations failed as a result of Ukraine's non-acceptance of the application of the delimitation rules in accordance with the practice of the ICJ, proposed by Romania in accordance with the provisions of the Related Agreement of 1997." ¹¹

On February 3, 2009, *"the pronouncement in a public, solemn session, with the participation of the ICJ plenary, the delegations of the parties and the press, of the ICJ Judgment, which is handed over in original to the Agents. The Judgment is final, binding and enforceable, being immediately applicable, without any other formalities"* (Ruse, 2023) takes place. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in favour of Romania, granting it approximately 79% of the disputed area, i.e., 9,700 square kilometres of the continental shelf and exclusive economic zones in the Black Sea.

¹⁰ <https://razboiulinformational.ro/site/2020/06/2-iunie-1997-tratatul-de-la-neptun/>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

¹¹ <https://www.mae.ro/node/3109>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

Another notable crisis in Romanian-Ukrainian relations, which began in 2004, was represented by the construction of the Bîstroe Canal, a maritime infrastructure project initiated by the Kiev government in the Danube Delta, on the border with Romania. The canal was designed to shorten shipping routes between the Danube River and the Black Sea. The proposal sparked intense debate, drawing international attention due to its environmental impact on the Danube Delta, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Construction began along the Chilia and Bîstroe branches, and the first segment was inaugurated on August 26, 2004, despite repeated pleas from Bucharest to halt the project and to follow international law in the matter. Other European states, the European Commission, and UNESCO all took a negative attitude toward the Ukrainian project, expressing concern about the irreversible damage that the canal's construction could cause to one of Europe's most vital ecosystems. "The Kiev authorities, on the other hand, stated that Romania's environmental arguments were economically driven, as Bucharest would lose money if the Sulina Canal had competition. Despite several complaints from Bucharest, Kiev opened the Bîstroe Canal in 2007. Ukraine regarded Romania's objection as an attempt to dominate commercial transportation on the Danube and, implicitly, to stifle Ukraine's economic growth." (Ruse, 2023).

As it's easy to see, the Kiev authorities went, as they say in football, to the limit of offside, on the communist principle that *"it will do"*. For the Ukrainians, Romania's diplomatic victories were a real surprise, as their neighbouring country was considered a rather second-rate political actor.

During the mandates of President Traian Băsescu, the interest in Ukraine included, in addition to the issue of minorities, "economic issues - the Bîstroe Canal, Snake Island and the Krivoi Rog Plant - were constantly an occasion for conflict with Kiev. The Krivoi Rog Plant, a Soviet project to which Romania contributed, along with other socialist countries, was gradually abandoned after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the works being permanently closed by Kiev in 1998." (Ruse, 2023).

Romanian-Ukrainian bilateral relations were to change radically after the start of the Russian offensive in the neighbouring country in February 2022. Romania was among the first countries to express its unconditional support for Ukraine, immediately after the outbreak of the war. The borders were opened for hundreds of thousands of refugees, and the neighbouring country received humanitarian and medical aid, and later, weapons and ammunition. The Ukrainian press highlighted this *"change of attitude"*: *"Romania has opened up to Ukraine. Starting on February 24, Romania opened its borders to Ukrainian war refugees. Romania will send fuel, ammunition and military ammunition to Ukraine"*¹². Another source from Kiev mentioned: *"Romania was one of the first countries to start supplying Ukraine with lethal weapons"*¹³

There were also some critical accents coming from the media in the neighbouring country, which referred to the more cautious approach of Romania, in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. However, articles favourable to our country dominate the media landscape in Ukraine. The article *"From disputes to partnership. How the war changed relations between*

¹² <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2023/03/24/7158596/>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

¹³ <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3558833-rumunia-ukraina-ak-spilna-istoria-zminue-susidiv.html>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

Ukraine and Romania" talks about the evolution of bilateral relations, from territorial disputes and interethnic tensions to a strategic partnership.¹⁴ On September 10, 2023, *Kyiv Post* published an article in which it appreciates the help provided by Romania to strengthen Ukraine's air defence.¹⁵

The Romanian media perfectly understood the opportune moment for resetting relations with the neighbouring state: *"The window of opportunity opened by Russia's aggression must be used to reset the bilateral relationship between Romania and Ukraine and place it on a modern, solid foundation, reflecting the understanding of the profound transformations that Ukrainian society has undergone since 2014."*¹⁶

Vecirniy Kyiv newspaper, in turn, published an article stating that Ukraine and Romania signed a declaration on cooperation in key areas during President Zelensky's visit to Romania, and a news website reports that *"It is vital for us that the presidents agreed on the priority of training Ukrainian F-16 pilots at the Romanian training centre. Moreover, this is one of the specific results of President Zelensky's visit to Romania."*¹⁷

The same *Kyiv Post* stated that Romania has been playing an essential role as a supporter of Ukraine since the beginning of the crisis in 2022. *"One of the countries that deserves attention for significant aid is Romania, which, from the first days of the war, supported the Ukrainians in every way and helped them in their fight. It is one of the main Lend-Lease transit countries and ranks third in the transit of military equipment to Ukraine."*¹⁸

The war changed many of the Ukrainians' mentalities, which were not much different from those of the Russians. The brutal aggression of the Slavic brothers led to a reconsideration of some ideas and stereotypes towards their neighbours, primarily towards Romania. The refugees were surprised to learn of the Romanians' solidarity, whom they had been taught to despise.

In turn, the Kiev authorities were forced to change their rhetoric, largely in the face of clear evidence of Bucharest's solidarity. One of the greatest achievements is the abandonment of the phrase *"Moldovan language"* for the Romanian population of the Odessa region. Currently, efforts are underway to harmonise Ukrainian legislation with this decision, encompassing numerous normative acts. Furthermore, it is emphasised that all further acts of the Government will be consistent with these commitments. According to the official declaration addressing the usage of the term *"Romanian language"* in place of *"Moldovan language"*, all public personnel who breach the government's decision will face disciplinary action. Ukraine has replaced the name *"Moldovan language"* with *"Romanian language"*. It was Stalin, not the Ukrainians, who made the decision, but they are now the direct beneficiaries of the deals made by twentieth-century dictators.

¹⁴ <https://texty.org.ua/articles/111060/vid-superechok-do-partnerstva-jak-vijna-zminyly-vidnosyny-ukrayiny-j-rumuniyi/>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

¹⁵ <https://www.kyivpost.com/uk/post/21376>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

¹⁶ <https://www.contributors.ro/pledoar-ie-pentru-o-politica-externa-asumata-a-romaniaie-fata-de-ucraina/>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

¹⁷ <https://focus.ua/uk/opinions/598374-navishcho-ukrajini-rumuniya-u-chomu-strategichniy-sens-vizitu-prezidenta-zelenskogo-do-buharesta>, accessed at 12.03.2025.

¹⁸ <https://www.kyivpost.com/uk/post/4642>, accessed on 12.03.2025.

Unfortunately, there is still much to be done to respect minority rights. Although the neighbouring state guarantees the right of minorities to cultural autonomy, which includes the use of their languages in schools, the establishment of cultural associations, and unrestricted access to the media, the number of schools that also teach in Romanian is constantly decreasing. At the National Census of Ukraine in 2001, Romanians constituted just over 400,000 souls, of which "*Moldovan*" (Romanians from Southern Bessarabia) numbered 258,600, and Romanians from Northern Bukovina, 150,000. The ongoing downsizing of schools providing education in Romanian/Moldovan prompted intervention by the Romanian authorities. The 2017 Education Law has sparked new divergent discussions, with Bucharest once again accusing Kiev of failing to respect the rights of the Romanian minority. "For its part, Kiev accused Romania of discriminatory treatment of the Ukrainian minority. According to reports prepared by Ukrainian government agencies, Romanians in Ukraine had access to a better-developed system of primary, secondary, and higher education in their mother tongue, diversified programs on regional radio and television stations, and several publications in Romanian. According to the Ukrainian government, there are 92 schools of different educational levels in Ukraine that teach Romanian, as well as two faculties that provide Romanian courses in Chernivtsi and Uzhhorod. In contrast, only one secondary school and 63 elementary schools in Romania taught Ukrainian as an optional subject, and there are no distinct faculties for Ukrainian schooling" (Ruse, 2023).

Today, in the wake of Russian aggression in Ukraine, members of the Romanian community condemn the Ukrainian state's interventions in church affairs. Opinions regarding the future of the Romanian Orthodox Church are diverse: in Chernivtsi and Transcarpathia, discussions focus on canonical matters, while in Odesa, the debate centres on the possibility of holding services in Romanian, regardless of the local church's affiliation.

It is worth noting that Romanians in Ukraine are loyal to their country, and the Romanian-language press supports the Kiev authorities in the war against Russia, reflecting official views to counter the Kremlin's aggressive propaganda. No pro-Russian or anti-Ukrainian opinions were published during this period.

Conclusions

The dynamics of Romanian-Ukrainian relations are determined by both older and more recent historical legacies, fears, and mutual distrust, as well as attempts to eliminate clichés that were continuously disseminated throughout the Soviet era. Bucharest sees the importance of maintaining a pragmatic approach in the region: supporting Ukraine is an investment in its own security, as Ukraine serves as a buffer insulating the former socialist republics from Russia's renewed expansionist ambitions. By offering military aid to Kyiv, Romania keeps the conflict, which is wreaking havoc in the neighbouring country, away from its own borders. Negotiation, along with acts of solidarity and good faith, can help both sides overcome their demons from the past.

Furthermore, Ukrainians who have relocated to Romania are the clearest example of what genuine mutual understanding may produce. Naturally, this rapprochement must also include the defence of Romania's regional political and economic interests, as well as the protection of Romania's sizable Romanian minority still living in Ukraine.

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