

Romania and the Policy of the New Proximity

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THE YEAR 2004 meant the beginning of the application of the European Policy of Proximity. Through this new policy, the European Union engaged itself to support the efforts of its partners and neighbors aimed at creating an area of prosperity and common values, based on high economic integration, more intense political and cultural relations, and cross-border cooperation reinforced by common conflict prevention. The European Policy of Proximity has been always seen as a compromise between the desire of the new border countries to become members of the European Union and the limits that the European Union faces in managing any new enlargement. At the same time, the European Policy of Proximity also represents a reference scale for the relationships between the European Union and the member countries, on the one hand, and the countries on its southern and eastern borders, on the other. This because the European Policy of Proximity does not create new structures or new obligations, being interested only in providing higher motivation and concentration on high priority goals and adding value to the existing regional cooper-

ation carried out in the framework of Association Agreements or of Cooperation and Partnership Agreements.

The concept of European Policy of Proximity, created by the European Parliament, has a short history, materialized pragmatically in a series of political actions that seek to change the notion of border by defining it as a space of cooperation and of political, economic and social connections that avoid the creation of a divide such as the Iron Curtain. From the beginning, the European Policy of Proximity has been both similar to and distinct from the enlargement policy, because the states that it addresses are not to be integrated in the near future.

The European Policy of Proximity includes three geographical areas: the Mediterranean Region, Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus, areas with economic vulnerabilities, suffering from the negative consequences of wars and of local or regional armed conflicts, with delays in assimilating the modern systems of democratic values, with confused developments of democratic regimes, with authoritarian tendencies on the part of their respective leaders, and plagued by political intolerance. In fact, we are talking about regions that, in ethno-cultural terms, represent a true mosaic of peoples, cultures and religions, where intolerance among the regional components has been stronger and more enduring than the constructive tolerance and cooperation.

The beginning of the 21st century also means the beginning of a new era in international policy, combining the regional perspectives with bilateral ones. At a multilateral level, the cooperation is achieved through regional programs, through organisms created at the political and at the official level with the help of cooperation networks. At bilateral level, partnerships are negotiated with each partner state, considering specific priorities.

As far as Romania is concerned, its strategic yet peripheral position in the area (in both medieval and modern times, the Black Sea Area and the South-East of Europe were believed to be a shields against the threats to European security) determined its clear need for stability and influenced its external policy, especially during the contemporary period. And if during the period immediately following the collapse of the communist regime, until 2007, the country's priorities regarding external and international policies were European integration and redefining the transatlantic relation, after 2007 the proximity policy became a special priority. This is not very comfortable for a country that is positioned at the periphery, because as a consequence of the European integration, the European Policy of Proximity had become Romania's policy as well. So the Romanian proximity policy might play an important role in the context of Europe's security, given our proximity to the countries of the ex-communist bloc (for instance the former USSR and the former Republic of Yugoslavia), as well as to

the Black Sea shore and to Turkey, with the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, a country whose importance on the international political stage has recently increased.

For Romania, situated in an area that has been experiencing strong geopolitical tensions, the development and consolidation of the European Proximity Policy does not only represent an investment in the stability and prosperity of the European Union. The security void created in the south-east of Europe, a security managed for decades in the spirit of a bipolar world, determined the transformation of this region into a space of strong instability, due to political, military and economic disputes, as well as to the obvious preoccupation of some of the global actors in reconsidering, geopolitically and geostrategically, their interests in the area. And, in this complex international context, Romania tries to undertake an important yet delicate mission concerning this area.

Having a privileged situation in the European Proximity Policy due to its positioning on the Eastern border of the European Union, Romania also plays an important part due to its quality as a new member state and because of the experience accumulated during the pre-accession period. Generally, Bucharest's actions are aimed at developing a regional policy, which could promote Euro-Atlantic values, par excellence: democracy, human rights, freedom and the fight against terrorism. In this respect, cross-border cooperation has the important role of promoting social and economic development inside and outside the frontiers of the European Union, and the country is strategically positioned in the fight against common challenges concerning environmental protection, health, organized crime, human trafficking, drugs, and so on. Thus, Romania started a successful series of initiatives in the field of cooperation in the Black Sea region, being one of the main promoters of the so-called "Black Sea Synergy" (project launched at the beginning of 2008) or of the project concerning the strategy for the Danube Region. Furthermore, as a country placed on the frontiers of the European Union, Romania was asked to bring its contribution to a better management of the eastern borders of the Union.

Romania's effort has been focused on promoting the eastern and southern areas close to the European Union (ex. the ex-communist states, the Black Sea, the Danube, the Western Balkans) as an important geopolitical area, where coherent and integrating, dynamic and anticipative policies can be achieved and developed, strongly supported by the great powers and by the neighboring countries, as well as by international organizations and organisms. Achieving these goals is extremely important, especially if we wish to put to good use the specificities and similarities of the region, the mutual cooperation and solidarity. Last but not least comes a positive and constructive "Romanian lesson" in the proximity area, the partnership with the Republic of Moldova (Romania's actions

being led on two different levels: bilateral, in the form of direct and constant assistance, and European, through the procedural actions it has taken and could take as an European Union member state). Through the encouragement of regional cooperation as well as of cultural diplomacy, the presence at the Black Sea (Romania being a “natural extension” of NATO and the EU in this area), etc., could contribute to the extension of democracy in the area, provided that Romanian external affairs go in the same direction as the European Union’s external affairs.

Lately, in the light of the events taking place in the Arab world, this has become a factor that determined a change in the European Union’s strategy for this area. The new perspective of the European Proximity Policy sets forth a deeper cooperation between the European Union and the southern and eastern countries. The bilateral dimension of the relations between the European Union and the countries at its frontiers will also encompass relations among states, with the involvement of the Union and its members in regional policies, as well as the mobilization of the efforts of the international community. A broadening of the scope and of the goals of the cooperation would imply: 1. support for the creation of a functioning and sustainable democracy; 2. support for economic and social development; 3. deepening regional dimensions (the Eastern Partnership and the Mediterranean Union, for instance); 4. the creation of some mechanisms and instruments that could make these goals attainable. This increase in the support provided by the European Union to its neighbors will take a conditional form, depending on the progress recorded in the fields that make the substance of the partnership—consolidating democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

The second Eastern Partnership Summit took place in Warsaw in September 2011, during Poland’s presidency of the Council of the European Union. On this occasion, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, the Caucasus Area—therefore Romania’s proximity area—received proposals for new economic and social assistance partnership programs meant to decrease regional discrepancies. But even more important is the development of cooperation in other important fields such as education, youth, culture, transportation, energy, environment, research, the information society, customs, law enforcement, rural development, defense and security policies, and so on. This context presents new opportunities for Romania, but in order to involve our country in the Eastern proximity policy—through European Partnerships and at a high level of efficiency—democracy, the rule of law and a functioning market economy must become a reality in Romania.

Nevertheless, we have to consider that there are still certain issues dividing Romania and some of the Eastern countries: for instance, the disputes with Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova’s failure to adopt a clear position regarding

Transnistria, while relations with Russia are still rather cold. Therefore, Romania must move from a strategic approach to concrete implementation programs, supporting the European Policy of Proximity and the European interests. This becomes even more necessary since, in time the European Policy of Proximity might gain influence, with positive consequences both for the members of the European Union (including Romania) and for its neighbors. All this in a context in which the European Union has already started to prove that it can speak with a single voice in its external affairs and that it has the capacity to take constructive actions in order to foster development in its vicinity, but also in the interest of the whole international system. For instance, we have the example of the agreement signed by the European Commission with Ukraine that involves modernizing the gas storage, transportation and distribution network in Ukraine. On the other hand, the eastern neighbors of the European Union, the Republic of Moldova and especially Ukraine, have changed their perspectives and some of their priorities in their external affairs as a consequence of the expansion of the European Union, seeking closer relations with the European Union even if this might be seen as a compensation for the cooling of relation with some of the member states. □

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Abstract**Romania and the Policy of the New Proximity**

The study looks at Romania's place in the neighborhood policy currently implemented by the European Union, a policy meant to support the efforts of the EU's partners and neighbors aimed at creating an area of prosperity and common values, based on high economic integration, more intense political and cultural relations, and cross-border cooperation. While this policy includes three geographical areas—the Mediterranean Region, Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus—the present study focuses on the second and on Romania's possible involvement, especially in light of its favorable geostrategic position.

Keywords

European Union, neighborhood policy, policy of proximity, Eastern Partnership