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Romanian Diplomatic Institute



MINISTERUL AFACERILOR EXTERNE

PREPARING ROMANIAN FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE GLOBAL DECADE 2025-2035

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POLICY FORUM

no. 2/2025



Preparing Romanian Foreign Policy for the global decade 2025-2035¹

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ABSTRACT: The paper calls for a strategic modernization of Romania’s foreign policy to navigate a rapidly transforming international environment marked by geopolitical realignments, technological disruption, demographic shifts, and the erosion of liberal norms. It identifies nine key priorities: Romania’s active role in post-war Ukraine; support for the EU integration of the Republic of Moldova and the Western Balkans; the internationalization of Romanian businesses; reforming Romania’s global image; strengthening resilience to future conflicts and hybrid threats; advancing leadership in cyber and regulatory diplomacy; developing new avenues of political capital through sports, regional, and disaster diplomacy; and preparing for the potential federalization of the European Union. The paper also proposes institutional reforms to enhance the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ agility through digital tools, cross-sectoral cooperation, and inclusion of non-state actors. Ultimately, it envisions a confident, globally engaged “Global Romania” capable of shaping, not merely adapting to, global change.

KEYWORDS: Romania, Romanian Foreign Policy, European Union, NATO, diplomatic reform.

¹ This publication draws exclusively on open-source materials. The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution.

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent paper for the European Institute for Romania titled “Enhancing Romania’s EU influence in a polycrisis context”³, I argued that Romania requires a “Romanian Influence Compass” in line with the various European compasses on security and defense (the Strategic Compass) or on growth, innovation, and prosperity (the Competitiveness Compass). Influence is a critical enabler of national projects and initiatives and a valuable and often fungible currency in international affairs. I made the point that Romania punches below its weight, for its population, economic size, and sophistication, as well as its geostrategic positioning. This situation is untenable in the long-term given the competitiveness of the international environment, its impact on domestic Romanian issues, and the reality that every country is pursuing similar efforts, often with much greater effect for their allocated resources. The War in Ukraine has shown us that the unraveling of previous certainties forces us to expend significant efforts not just for progress, but to maintain the accomplishments that we have made so far and their contributing factors which we have taken for granted.

I follow up on that material with some structured thoughts on the topic of Romanian Foreign Policy in the crucial next decade which I believe will set the stage for the structures, institutions and (un)certainities that will dominate the next fifty years. The effects of globalization and the growing interdependencies it has engendered, which have been spectacularly on display in the polycrises and permacrises affecting the EU, are not just clichés with which to open a conference speech or a PowerPoint presentation, but the singular transformative feature of our lives, whether we are discussing supply chain issues, digitalization, conflict management (of all kinds), and economic development. For Romania to prosper, grow and develop in some reasonable facsimile of security, stability, freedom, and agency in our affairs, we must mix the eternal verities of its position and interests with new ones and adopt a panoply (if not an arsenal) of new instruments fit for the ensuing long 21st century. The recent success with the OECD accession process that might lead to

³ <https://ier.gov.ro/en/news/editorial-release-enhancing-romania-s-eu-influence-in-a-polycrisis-context/>



membership in 2026 proves that Romania still has the capacity to pursue a concrete goal to its fruition.

A feature of the crisis of liberal democracy is the belief on the part of its citizens in a lack of agency in affecting national affairs, and a crisis of confidence in the ability of democratic institutions to identify and reliably represent their preferences. This is having a corrosive effect on Western-style governance systems and the apparent antidote in the buffet of simplified and highly controversial ideologies and governance systems at global levels is the high-agency authoritarianism of countries such as China, which, as the old saying has it, “makes the trains run on time” and builds more train tracks to boot. This siren song is already apparent in the Global South and among developing and least developed countries, prompting closer ties, but we must counteract it at home through proof that ambitious democratic agendas that deliver results for citizens are possible. We must back it with adequate and respectful strategic dialogue with the public, one that advances a narrative of prosperity and success, playing to our particular strengths and aspirations. Foreign policy plays an important role, through the natural comparative calculus of national power, influence, and prestige, as well as the obvious benefits that a successful foreign policy brings. Therefore, Romanian Foreign Policy and its implementers, on the one hand, and its instruments, on the other, must define and pursue a democratic agenda that serves the national interest in both obvious and subtle ways. It must do so in the context of significant constraints, whether through internal polarization, institutional drift, and inadequate resources, as well as the effects of competing projects stemming not just from the challengers of the current system, but also our own partners and allies.

This paper consists of four additional sections after the introduction. Section 2 provides an overview of the principal changes to the international environment, highlighting challenges which justify an ambitious foreign policy effort on the part of Romanian elites in the 2025-2035 period and beyond. Section 3 is the core of my argument and sketches the foreign policy priorities which I believe will and must dominate the Romanian policy community’s efforts in the medium and long-term. It is not an exhaustive list, as we must be open to new opportunities as well as to rise to meet new challenges. This is especially important since I would argue that uncertainty, fluidity, and iconoclasm will be defining features of the international environment. Section 4 proposes some changes to the way foreign policy objectives are pursued in order to account for both the complexity of the tasks at hand and the constraint in resources, which are



not only financial, but also human, intellectual, and organizational. Lastly, I conclude on an optimistic note and emphasize that Romania can rise to meet these challenges and formulate and pursue an ambitious foreign policy agenda that satisfies our national interests and maximizes our presence on the regional, European and world stage. The alternative is not comfortable mediocrity, but to be exposed to the direct and indirect consequences of the projects of others and to the emergent risks, vulnerabilities, and threats of a rapidly changing world.

THE CHALLENGES OF A DYNAMIC GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT IN 2025-2035 AND BEYOND

The world is undergoing massive simultaneous shifts which have undermined previous certainties and previous models for development and for the conduct of foreign affairs. These shifts are the result of globalization's unique properties in dismantling boundaries to communication, trade, influence, and the spread (if not proliferation, with its pejorative and negative connotations) of disruptive new technologies. Combined with significant demographic shifts and the exhaustion of previous development models which had seen the ascendancy of Western institutional preferences and value judgements over the rest of the world, we are on the cusp of significant changes in international affairs. Ambitious challengers with the vision, size, and sophistication see this as an opportunity for revanchism to expunge past humiliations and to promote their interests and preferred views and policies at global levels. The incumbents are grappling in their own way with relative and real decline, trying to decide how to adapt to the new world, how to preserve their self-image and privileges and how to deal with restive populations anxious about immigration, downward social mobility, and a precarious and stagnant prosperity. Some, like the US, have chosen to reject multilateralism in favor of unilateralism and minilateralism in order to renegotiate from a position of strength their role in the new world order. Others, like the EU, believe in greater multilateralism and strength through further integration but face significant structural challenges and almost an entire lost economic generation, as well as the temptation of stronger Member States to engage in their own individual or minilateral projects. The War in Ukraine has accelerated the still-reversible slide into irrelevance of the previous international system and generated new challenges that will give rise to the blueprints on which the international relations of tomorrow

will be built for Romania and others. Despite Romania’s undoubted rise to the occasion in advocating its own security interests by supporting Ukraine and engaging with others to enhance support for Ukraine, Romania’s foreign policy capacity in the wider sense has been adrift since our entry into NATO and the EU almost a generation ago. Significant reforms are needed, as well as a whole-of-society approach which does not conform with how Romanian institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, among others, have been seemingly “preserved in amber” while the world changes around us.

In the interest of brevity, I have condensed the principal arguments for a challenging future international environment in Table 1.

Challenges	Explanation
A profusion of new actors	The realist school is proven wrong. It envisioned states as the prime actors of international relations, with other stakeholders engaged in internal dialogue both formal and informal to influence the policies of the state as an exclusive interface with the world. However, we have many new actors. These include transnational corporations engaged in direct talks with governments vying with each other to attract new investment, as well as international NGOs, international organizations and more.
New issues on the agenda	New issues include the management of the effects of digitalization or the mainstreaming of digital emerging technologies such as AI or quantum computing, as well as managing and mitigating the effects of climate change, pandemics (or epidemics with pandemic potential) or various conflicts. Around the world, governments and MFAs are scrambling to adapt to the requirements of this strange, new world.
New conflicts	The pursuit of national interest through force is back on the agenda, not just through the revanchism and expansionism of Russia, but also concerns regarding China over Taiwan.
New modes of conflict	The rise of hybrid warfare as an omnipresent feature of inter-state competition plays off old and new vulnerabilities. In the new technological context, we have not only competition for new resources and economic warfare, but also cyber-attacks (and maybe drone attacks) on civilian critical infrastructures, the use of lawfare in international affairs, economic warfare, and the use of cognitive warfare as an expansion of the previous influence and propaganda operations.
Markets as an Achilles’ heel of liberal societies	The reactions of markets attuned to consumer and investor sentiment can be just as calamitous as actual supply chain disruptions, and the negotiation of burden sharing and collective action have gained new urgency and shined a spotlight on still existing cleavages, mistrust, and

	freeriding. Politicians are beholden to interest rates, investor and consumer sentiment, commodity prices, and capital flows.
Social media as an Achilles' heel of liberal societies	Social media has become a public Forum of immense power. Influence operations target it through both legitimate and illegitimate means, consensus is manufactured and even politicians cannot resist the "twitterification" of conflicts, as they take cues more from the "vox populi" than from their own advisors and strategic documents.
The new internal cleavages	The "end of history" thesis saw Liberal democratic society as the end state for development. This is being challenges by growing internal conflicts that ultimately affect not just political stability, but foreign policy options, their persistence and the approaches by politicians. These conflicts are generational, socio-economic, racial, religious, between urban and rural areas, between the winner of globalization and the losers and many more.
The disruptive cost of globalization	Globalization has shaken up previous economic models that had made the Western world the model to emulate for wealth, stability, good governance, and rule of law. The adversarial exploitation of historically unprecedented free movement of capital, goods, people, technologies, and ideas has given rise to new challenges and to significant imbalances within Western states. In the context of recently promoted high-income countries such as Romania and other Eastern European nations, the prospect of a "middle income trap" leading to secular stagnation right before their demographic decline is generating a scramble for new models for growth and development.
Demographic transitions	Whether we are discussing low birthrates or high levels of immigration, Western societies especially are experiencing rapid shifts that will ultimately impact policy preferences. We are seeing the advent of a new world in which friendly competition and cooperation ("coopetition" as the Chinese say) have been replaced by more frequent zero-sum views and by a closing of certain avenues for growth. The developing world, with its recent fertility crash, is going to get old before it gets rich, with unknown effects on the challenges of tomorrow. This includes China, but also many Latin American, MENA and SE Asian countries. Older societies are less entrepreneurial, more fearful of conflict, more redistributive. The prospect of demographic decline may galvanize elites into pursuing hard-power strategies for national objectives while they still have a demographic advantage.
The impact of new technologies	The first countries to find the formula for translating AI into explosive economic growth will gain significant structural advantage over the others, which will translate into strategic and military power, but also new risks, vulnerabilities, and threats. New technologies can be economic and strategic equalizers, or even game-changers in the competition between states. Managing the sustainable deployment of a host of new technologies, from AI to geoengineering, biotech, small modular reactors, space-based solar power and more will require new approaches in foreign policy, both collaborative and adversarial. These

	may result in new power blocs and in disruptive confrontation such as the tech sanctions implemented by the Trump and Biden Administrations on China. Countries such as Romania must also ensure that they do not miss out on these revolutions and must join with others in ensuring that basic concerns about safety, security, sustainability, and values are met while democratizing the benefits of these new technologies.
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Table 1. Challenges in the new international environment

There are other issues, which are entwined with the previously mentioned ones, such as: the globalization of organized crime, the transborder dimension of radicalization, the effects of and response to natural and man-made disasters as well as extreme phenomena both on Earth and in space. All of these represent a new environment, in which countries such as Romania must turn foreign policy into a cross-cutting governance mechanism impacting everything from health to economics and defense, as collective governance and action will be key determinants for successful outcomes.

ROMANIAN FOREIGN POLICY PROPOSALS FOR THE GLOBAL DECADE 2025-2035

With the previous section in mind and taking into account the relative weights attached to various risks both from the national perspective and in analyses such as the World Economic Forum Global Risks Report 2025⁴, the Top Risks Report 2025⁵ of the Eurasia Group and many other similar documents, this section presents some of the main foreign policy priorities for the next decade that I can envision for Romania, in no particular order since they must be pursued concurrently in any case. Figure 1 summarizes these proposals.

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/>

⁵ <https://www.eurasiagroup.net/issues/top-risks-2025>

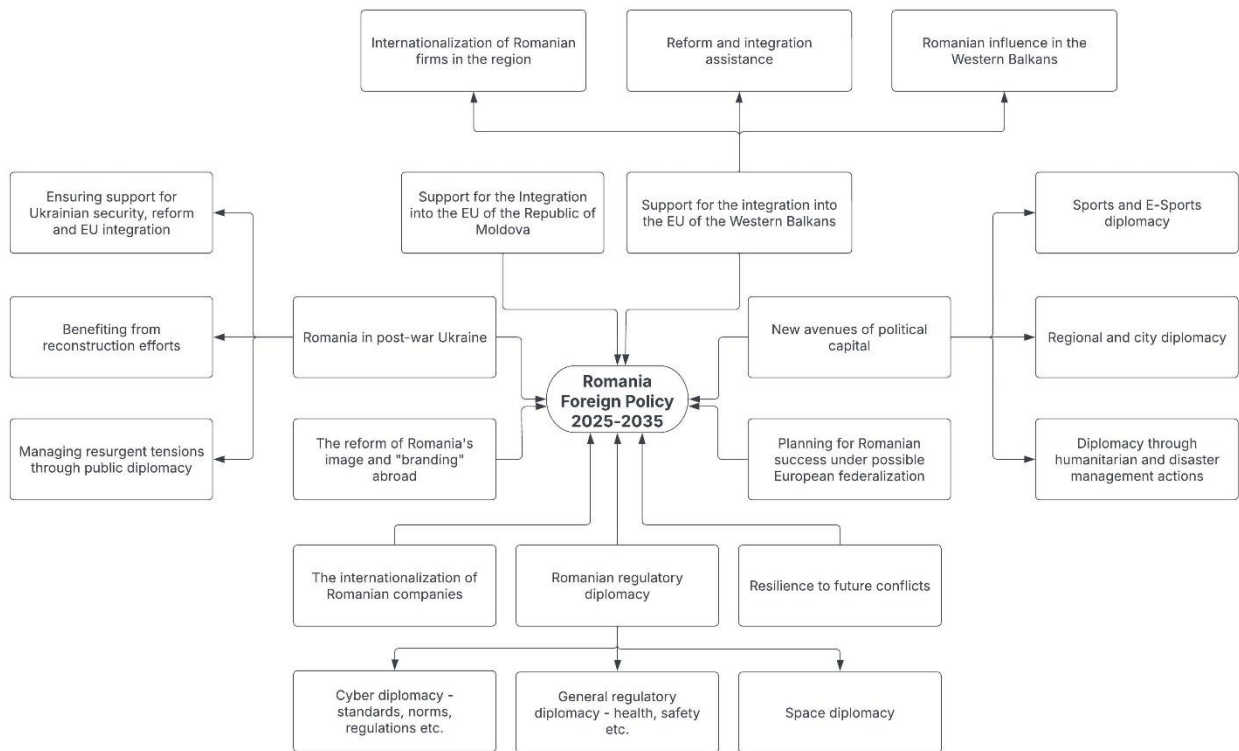


Figure 1. Romanian Foreign Policy proposals for the global decade 2025-2035

Romania's active role in post-war Ukraine

Currently, the prospect of complete Ukrainian or Russian defeat in the war started in 2014 seems remote. The most likely result will be a negotiated ceasefire or peace agreement along a continuum of more or less palatable options for Ukraine and its partners. While neither side wishes to divulge its true losses and the stresses on its capacity to continue the war, it seems likely that some form of end will come within the short and medium timeframe. This will not represent the end of the Ukraine file for Romania's foreign policy and security community, but a new beginning.

Romania's foreign policy must shift towards advocating for funds and other forms of support for Ukrainian reconstruction, while positioning Romania as a main "lily pad" for logistics and corporate basing for reconstruction efforts. Romanian diplomats and other stakeholders will find themselves advocating for: strong security guarantees for Ukraine; support for the development of the deterrence capabilities of Ukraine; support for the functioning of agreed sanctions mechanisms (including the EU Cyber and Hybrid Toolboxes for EU Member States); support for the integration of Ukraine into the EU; and the maintenance



of global pressure to see these efforts to fruition in the face of public and decisionmaker fatigue regarding Ukraine.

Other issues may also appear, such as the proliferation of small arms from the Ukrainian War among criminal groups, as happened after the Yugoslav War, which will require a sustained effort for identification, tracking and disposal. Without a doubt, some new global hotspot will capture the public attention, risking the sustainable closure of the Ukraine issue in a way that is favorable to Romanian interests. “Losing the peace” is a very real possibility that will make the resumption of the war at a later date much more likely.

It is in the interest of our country to have a secure Ukraine on its flank and no land borders with Russia for either ourselves or the Republic of Moldova. An additional challenge will be the reality that relations between Ukraine and its Eastern European neighbors were never friendly. In the post-war situation, we should expect flare-ups of disputes over: minority rights; resource issues (including the status of funds provided as loans); the potential rhetorical excesses of a zealously identitarian Ukraine; impatience regarding promised support and EU accession; specific issues such as the environmental impact of the deepening of the Bystroe Canal on the Danube Delta, with Romanian protests and concerns muted during the Ukraine War.

The sentiment of Romanian and other populations regarding Ukraine might also return to historical baselines with added tension over refugee support, the Bystroe Canal and more. These conflicts will be fanned also by Russia as part of hybrid campaigns. It will be a significant effort on the part of the Romanian foreign policy establishment to both continue to support Ukraine, to deal with a difficult Ukraine, and to pursue public diplomacy with its own people and others in order to maintain support for Ukraine in its vulnerable transition period.

Romanian support for the integration in the EU of the Republic of Moldova

Historical and pragmatic considerations compel Romania to support the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU. With the prospects of the Unionist project looking dim for the moment, the best pursuit of Romanian interests is for the EU border to shift eastwards and to use EU instruments to supercharge vital reforms and investment-led growth in the Republic of Moldova. With this and Ukrainian accession, Romania will have become an



internal EU Member State and will have finally escaped its periphery status, with the security issues and the psychological issues that this entails.

Romanian support for the integration into the EU of the Western Balkans

Just like for the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, the Western Balkans are an area of opportunity and danger. The risk of inter-state as well as ethno-sectarian conflict looms large, and the region exports instability in the form of organized crime and possible radicalization. It also has significant untapped economic potential, not to mention unlocking valuable intra-EU synergies with the solid closing of an expanded European core of which Romania would be a more secure part, with defense in depth from all manners of risks and threats.

When it comes to this region, as well as the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, the continued instability, poverty, and risk of conflict are a detriment to Romania, whose only immediate neighbor richer than itself in per capita terms has been Hungary. Romania has lacked the resources and capacity to make a significant contribution to regional stabilization on its own, and has preferred to concentrate such efforts and assistance on the Republic of Moldova for historical reasons. Therefore, the “Europeanization” of the response to the problems of these regions is a logical goal for our country. European integration, European reforms, and European funding can provide a way out of the cycle of instability and thereby alleviate the sources of regional instability that have also affected Romania’s image.

The Western Balkans are also the last major area in which Romania can secure for itself an important if not leading regional role, playing on its strengths such as its reform experience, its relatively large size and its historically good relations and remaining political capital. We should not forget also that EU accession will also have to favorably resolve the issues of Romanian minority rights which have consistently been a source of diplomatic tension with these countries.

I would envision for Romania not just the role of lobbyist and “cheerleader” for these countries’ accession, but also an active role in reform assistance which can provide a lucrative training ground for the maturation of Romania’s think tanks, universities, consultancies, and NGOs in order to develop experience for global ambitions. The region, through its proximity, historical ties, and cultural compatibility can also be an important area for the internationalization of Romanian businesses, a topic to be developed in the next subsection.



Global Romania: Foreign Policy and internationalization of Romanian business champions

As mentioned before, the prospect of a middle-income trap for Romania and its demographic decline require a shift in the model of national economic growth and development. One such shift is in the automation of Romanian enterprises, another is in digitalization as a form of labor-saving automation and greater governance capacity, and more. But where foreign policy can come into play is in the support given to Romanian companies looking to expand abroad and thereby grow beyond the narrow confines of the Romanian market (and the warm embrace of Romanian government contracts).

Internationalization can generate growth, higher added value activities, innovation, and additional resources through the repatriation of profits. Sales and other activities abroad support production, research and development, and make possible corporate structures at home that entail a larger financial, institutional, educational and tax footprint.

I mentioned before that Ukraine and the Western Balkans can be useful training grounds for the internationalization of key Romanian companies, just as it has been for Hungarian and Greek companies. Romania itself has been a key training ground for the internationalization of our neighbors' national champions. However, we should not neglect other non-EU areas of tremendous growth with moderate to high risks and barriers to entry, such as South and South-East Asia, Latin America, or Central Asia.

Companies are themselves emerging foreign policy actors and need support coordinated through foreign affairs tools in order to increase their tolerance for risk, access important resources and business intelligence, interact productively with host governments and guard themselves against hybrid threats and economic warfare. Romanian authorities and ambitious companies should also explore more competitive models globally from the German Mittelstand to East Asia's Tiger Management, particularly in the context of German consolidation as top investor in Romania and Japan and South Korea rising importance as top global partners for Romania. Other models of state support for private sector excellence can be found elsewhere



and be cherry-picked by savvy elites, such as the Brazil's Embrapa model for knowledge transfer, research, and cost-sharing in the agricultural sector⁶.

The reform of Romania's image abroad

Romania has developed a significant image problem through its own failings, the help of “friends” and an unfortunate national appetite for airing dirty laundry in public. Companies know very well the value of reputation and image as an intangible but no less real source of value, expressed as the goodwill portion of their market value. Any successful company zealously guards and develops its image, and I believe Romania should employ all possible means to do the same. This is necessary for our attractiveness to investors, to high value immigrants, to returning diaspora members, our credibility in the eyes of partners and allies and to alleviate the significant demoralization that affects many Romanians and which fuels our internal polarization.

Foreign policy actors can help improve this image by working with sector-specific actors and engaging foreign audiences and elites through: public diplomacy; cultural events; media blitzes; successful presence in international forums and expos; savvy marketing of national cultural products and aesthetic elements (including music, books, architecture, visual arts, and the much-overlooked videogame segment); and a real presence in the foreign prestige media (written, audio and video).

In this approach, it is a very good start to simply follow in the footsteps of Poland, which has exploded in the global audience's awareness, with significant positive spillover in its recognition as an emerging power with geopolitical, economic, and military heft.

Romania's resilience to the impact of future conflicts

Russia's irredentist and revanchist actions and the delayed and inadequate response to its action in 2008 and then 2014 have brought large-scale conflict between peer nations with global impact back into the minds of decisionmakers as a possible occurrence.

⁶ <https://www.nber.org/papers/w34213>



The abortive conflicts between Israel and Iran, between Pakistan and India and let's not forget the recent and recurring border clashes between India and China raise the specter of uncontrolled escalation into full conflict. In the future, we might also witness a conflict between China and Taiwan over the diminishing prospects of peaceful reunification through economic integration and the "one country, two systems" formula or between China and the US as a result of Taiwan or through a "Thucydide's trap" for the main superpower and the challenger.

A Cold War 2.0 style conflict would also prove highly disruptive to potential sources of economic growth, given the possibility of the formation of blocs with near economic exclusivity and technological incompatibility.

The developing multipolarity of the global system, with increasing economic and technological valances, also makes it more likely that countries will pursue their interests or will respond to the misjudged scope and severity of hybrid threats through escalation to military actions. The prospect of the use of nuclear weapons, biological and chemical agents is joined by the more likely risk of the use of indiscriminate disruptive action such as the destruction of spaceborne critical assets such as navigation, positioning, or communication satellites, on which many countries rely.

The War in Ukraine has shown us how non-belligerents can suffer indirectly from disruptions to global supplies of energy, food, and raw materials, as well as how their critical infrastructures can be targeted through cyber-attacks and other hybrid means as a form of coercion.

The rapid anticipated aging of the population in countries such as Iran and China, the latter especially having record low fertility after more than two generations deliberately below replacement, also makes it more likely that decisionmakers will calculate that it is better to initiate a conflict now rather than later, when available manpower will have diminished and other labor gaps will affect economic output. Similar considerations may have driven the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as well as the willingness of France to go to war with a much more rapidly growing Germany during the First World War (after France had lost its title as most populous European state in the 1870s to Germany, after holding it for almost a thousand years).

Therefore, the Romanian foreign policy community must cooperate with competent sectoral authorities in the country and with other foreign policy actors in order to increase Romania's resilience to these conflicts.



Actions include the common development of stockpiles of critical materials, common regulations on stocks and inventories in critical fields, and the harmonization of critical infrastructure protection approaches including from cyber-attacks.

However, diplomats must also work together to develop rules, norms and enforcement mechanisms that reduce the likelihood of disruption by providing, for instance, a common definition for cyber terrorism, for thresholds of military response to hybrid threats, for the attribution and collective sanctioning of disruptive actors and so on. These efforts can be made through “coalitions of the willing” based on regional or geopolitical groupings, through the EU or through the system of the United Nations. The latter is the most difficult to implement due to compounding heterogeneity, but Romania must not discount its capacity to reach out and mobilize likeminded actors from different regions who share the same vulnerabilities and anxieties.

Romania’s active contribution to international regulatory fields, especially in cyber

Following up on the previous mention of definitions, norms, and mechanisms for the attribution of cyber-attacks, the implementation of deterrence and the coordination of sanctions, we will expand the idea in this subsection to include other regulatory aspects related not just to cybersecurity issues, but digitalization in general.

Romania, through its well-developed IT industry and its various capacities and institutions built under the pressure of its security environment, has developed a strong comparative advantage in digital issues.

Engaging in cyber diplomacy, it can maximize its impact in a field in which even smaller nations may have an outsized footprint. This will provide it not just with political capital, but with the partners needed to influence the great debates in a way that advances and protects its interests on issues such as: cyber warfare; the regulation of emerging digital technologies; the taxation of digital commerce; the protection of intellectual property rights and more. It can do so by identifying like-minded partners in all areas of the globe, and cooperating on common agendas, transfers of best practices, economic cooperation and coordination and collective action in various forums and international bodies.



It is aided by its non-threatening geopolitical posture and its benign image as an international actor (which should be maintained; it is its perceived and real ineffectualness that we must reform). It is also an advantage that there is a lack of subtext to its overtures that countries are liable to see in approaches by traditional powers, which makes it and other Eastern European countries be viewed as a neutral hedge against geopolitically significant relationships.

I picked the cyber field as an example because the issues generated by digitalization are vast and diverse (from crime and warfare to child protection and prevention of radicalization). In the absence of strong cooperative formulas, it is likely that the de facto governance regimes for these issues will be set by the US and China, as the most advanced countries when it comes to the emerging digital technologies. As the US Department of Defense noted⁷:

China is on a track to repeat in 5G what happened with the United States in 4G [...] Chinese internet companies will be well-positioned to develop services and applications for their home market that take advantage of 5G speed and low latency. As 5G is deployed across the globe in similar bands of spectrum, China's handset and internet applications and services are likely to become dominant, even if they are excluded from the US [...] The rest of the world will likely be driven to implement the 5G network design and infrastructure of whichever country leads 5G. China is the current leader, and U.S. allies have taken different stances on how to respond to the Chinese drive to set 5G standards.

However, there are numerous other worthwhile fields of engagement, including some where Romania has a comparative advantage or where it can transfer some of the influence and goodwill generated through work on other issues. One such area is the governance of space as accessible to all mankind for peaceful use with economic access provided also to non-spacefaring nations. Romania's roles through key individual figures chairing technical committees on the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space and in various space industrial or exploration associations provides a useful jump point and credibility to address future regulatory issues. These issues include stronger regimes to prevent debris creation, to assign liability for accidents in space, to deter attacks against critical space infrastructures on which many countries are reliant (not just the belligerents in a conflict), to

⁷ Medin, M., Louie, G. (2019). The 5G Ecosystem: Risks & Opportunities for DoD. Defense Industrial Board, US Department of Defense, 3 April 2019, https://media.defense.gov/2019/Apr/03/2002109302/-1/-1/0/DIB_5G_STUDY_04.03.19.PDF



invest in the protection of humanity through early warning and preparation for solar storms and other space weather phenomena. While less known by the public, Romania has a thriving space-related industry that is powerfully integrated with the European one, and the Romanian Space Agency is a member of the European Space Agency and consequently involved in numerous cooperation programs.

To end this subsection, it is important to mention that the nature of globalization makes regulatory diplomacy a necessary effort in many fields, from pharmaceuticals and medical devices to agriculture. The nature of network effects and economies of scale means that transnational corporations, as the main agents of the globalized economy, will tend to implement the regulatory regime of the largest available market and lobby smaller national markets to adopt similar rules. This is in order to preserve economies of scale by not fragmenting production processes. The “Brussels Effect” whereby EU regulations are adopted by other countries through the sheer force of the European market is an attested example of this phenomenon. This means that countries that do not engage in regulatory diplomacy will ultimately still have to implement regulatory regimes defined by others or risk economic penalties. As the Americans say, it is better to be inside the tent than outside it.

The successful development of new avenues of political capital

Romania has underutilized assets with diplomatic and foreign policy potential. A process of identification, cooptation, mobilization, and mutually beneficial use would be a significant boost to the political capital with which the Romanian leadership class or even its diplomats can work in pursuing other priorities. This can be used to further deepen our strategic partnerships and develop other friendly relations.

One such avenue is sports diplomacy. Romania has become used to fame through elite sportsmen, but has not actively utilized them systematically as part of its diplomatic efforts, unlike private companies that understand the allure of sportsmen as models to consumers. Sports diplomacy is increasingly important globally and can not only lead to lucrative opportunities in this fast-developing economic domain, but can become the pretext for contacts and meetings which open other opportunities. It is not for nothing that President Xi Jinping cracked a rare smile when California Governor Gavin Newsom gave him a Golden State Warriors jersey, knowing that professional basketball is very popular in China. China has also



used sport events to enhance national prestige, for instance during the 2008 Olympic Games, which were its coming-out party as a global power. E-Sports should also be considered here as an underrated vector for diplomacy, with growing relevance not just in the West, but also in the Middle East or the Asia-Pacific region.

Another avenue is sub-national and regional diplomacy. We should study what US and German states/landers and top municipalities do, while paying competitive attention to BRICS patterns. German landers for example are top players in Brussels and globally, so are some US states. On the other geopolitical front, China has already incorporated sub-national diplomacy into the Belt and Road Initiative as part of its people-to-people contacts and economic partnership components. Provinces and cities in China feature International Affairs and Overseas Chinese Committees that sometimes have as many employees as the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The mayors of notable global (or Alpha) cities are international figures in their own right, present in international forums on sustainable urbanism, smart cities, or climate change. California Governor Jerry Brown pioneered what he called “planetary diplomacy”, which saw him visiting numerous countries and engaging in discussions with foreign policy dimensions. Gavin Newsom later continued this trend, by becoming very engaged in the organization of the US-China Summit in San Francisco and visiting China as part of the process (which afforded him visibility as a statesman for his future presidential bid). While city twinning is already a long-running phenomenon, the Romanian foreign policy establishment can engage with county authorities and mayors to liaise important counterparts in other countries in order to propose projects and initiatives with economic and cultural value or even as a source of additional prestige, influence, and awareness of Romania.

A more competitive Romania will see mayors and county councils more actively engaged in directly courting: high value immigrants; urban renewal investors; industrial investors; international institutions; high level yearly events and expos. From Tokyo and Mumbai to Sao Paulo and Lagos, Romanian authorities should aim to connect with rising megacities and their opportunities.

Lastly, I want to point out a very interesting image. During the wildfires in Greece, Romania’s firefighters were deployed there. On the road back, ordinary citizens applauded their passing vehicles. Romania has developed interesting capacities for disaster and crisis situation management. More investment is needed to keep up with the increased potential in



Romania for natural disasters and extreme weather phenomena engendered by climate change. Another risk is that of industrial disasters, especially in a hybrid threats context where debilitating damage is caused, and where malignant actors may even opportunistically aggravate the impact of a natural disaster. This already necessary additional investment can be further amortized by turning disaster response services into additional “ambassadors” for Romania, generating goodwill and prestige, like the firefighters sent to Spain, the first responders and supplies sent to Turkey after the earthquakes and more. We have developed a comparative advantage in this field, one which can not only save lives and improve our image, but which can also become the basis for economic, educational and governance partnerships with mutual benefits.

Negotiating the future status of the EU

The impact of the polycrises and permacrises affecting the EU have redoubled the calls for greater integration and the transformation of the EU into a federal state with centralized key functions such as defense and foreign affairs. This would give it the heft to become a relevant geopolitical actor along with the US and China, and enabling it to pursue coherent long-term action without acting at cross-purposes with individual Member State efforts which are sometimes even antagonistic (as seen in the support for different sides of the Libyan Civil War). This is a political question whose details have been insufficiently discussed and in which Romania has a tremendous interest because of the long-term impact on its interests of the conditions under which federalization occurs.

In contrast to expectations that such a process would be slow or cumbersome, I believe that the pressures of our present world are liable to result in an almost “overnight” revolution in European governance, if further integration is indeed possible politically. This happened with the European Banking Union, which was an important absence in the governance framework of the Eurozone during the 2011 sovereign debt crisis. By 2012, discussions were ongoing and the European Banking Union went into effect by 2014 with the Single Supervisory Mechanism centralizing euro-area central bank functions and the Single Resolution Mechanism standardizing depositor insurance. This was incredibly quick and accompanied also by less visible revolutions in European finances, such as the European Stability Mechanism established in 2012.



Romania must be ready to negotiate its interests while the European project moves forward towards a leap in integration. We could even formalize this through foresight exercises and the establishment of a Working Group to study federalization through tabletop games and formulate strategic approaches for Romanian diplomats. Romania's middle size risks ensuring the worst of both worlds in a future European construction, having neither the sheer size and economic strength of the largest EU Member States to influence policy, nor the inevitable concessions to the interests of the smaller Member States regarding additional representation and support.

TOWARDS A REFORM OF THE FOREIGN POLICY APPARATUS

The ambitious foreign policy agenda that I have outlined requires also rethinking what the best organizational form and instruments will be to answer the challenges of the next decade. Institutional inertia is a fact, as are the entrenched ways of doing things. They are nevertheless rooted in important historical lessons about how foreign policy must be conducted to provide traceability, accountability, and performance. In this section, I will sketch some ideas which future decision makers may consider in order to adapt existing institutions and ways of doing things to the new realities.

Firstly, while the privileges and norms of diplomacy are valuable and must remain, throughout this paper I have emphasize how important other actors will be in the implementation of a foreign policy agenda. Put simply, diplomatic exclusivity is gone because of the breadth of issues that states need to handle, the variety of actors that must be interacted with and the number of agents with specific knowledge that must be coordinated and coopted. It surpasses both the available knowledge of a typical MFA, as well as its resources, including human resources. The Obama-era director of policy planning for the Department of State, Anne-Marie Slaughter, wrote the following about regulatory diplomacy⁸:

Regulators are genuinely the new diplomats - on the front lines of issues that were once the exclusive preserve of domestic policy, but that now cannot be resolved by national authorities alone. These new regulators must often work side by side with the 'old diplomats', the highly trained members of national foreign services who must tackle delicate issues of statecraft. But the world of

⁸ Slaughter, A. M. (2004). A New World Order. p. 64, Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press.



ambassadors in diplomatic dress presenting their nations' views to one another on a select set of security and economic issues is gone.

This applies very well to our considerations on cyber experts acting in international standardization bodies and becoming a foreign policy resource. It also applies to many other experts, corporate executives, or officials who are becoming “diplomatized” (or maybe deputized). At the same time, the traditional diplomats themselves have to engage in lifelong learning and advanced continuing education to be able to address the wider variety of issues that have become the object of international relations, if only to provide better coordination to other assets and to become an interface for policy proposals moving up in the hierarchy⁹.

These ... sets of forces are transforming the old game of Diplomacy. No longer can national boundaries define the rules, for the game is now one where negotiation and action is carried out on a triangular basis. The traditional players in the embassies and foreign ministries are still in business, but they have been joined by members of other government ministries and by executives of firms, both local and multinational. All are now involved in both bilateral and multilateral negotiation.

Secondly, while I will not belabor this point, it is important to note that MFAs everywhere have a problem attracting high quality human resources, whose international ambitions can be satisfied in other types of organizations that provide not just better remuneration, but also more rapid advancement, meaningful ownership of useful work and flatter hierarchies. Whether one perceives it as a complaint about Millennial or Gen Z diplomats or about stuffy and hidebound organizations, the reality is that the MFAs will struggle to attract and retain top talent, especially those with valuable language or technical skills. As a result of this, a rethinking of processes within MFAs would be useful, leveraging new technologies in order to free up time for training and meaningful work while accelerating processes such as approvals and reviews (and maintaining the integrity the original processes were meant to provide).

A dedicated Large Language Model (LLM) assistant trained on diplomatic data would be very useful as a basic tool for all diplomats, including for the management of the large number of pieces of data that must be collated into actionable intelligence, for keeping track of

⁹ Stopford, J., Strange, S. (1991). *Rival States, Rival Firms*. p. 21, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

numerous initiatives, and for comparative analyses¹⁰. Combinations of AI and blockchain-based decentralized autonomous organization technology can assist in maintaining control over flatter hierarchies with ad-hoc teams composed of diplomats and representatives of other organizations working on particular projects. AI can also be of use as part of a decision support system during crisis management¹¹.

Many countries are adopting AI in a piecemeal fashion within their MFAs. AI is already being used in the EU in the visa issuance process and other consular activities¹²¹³. The Chinese MFA announced in 2018 that it would be implementing AI for data analysis and to assist in decision making. Newsweek cited Dr. Feng Shuai from the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies as saying: "The actors lacking the assistance of AI will be at an absolute disadvantage in many aspects, such as risk judgment, strategy selection, decision-making and execution efficiency, and decision-making reliability. The entire strategic game structure will be completely out of balance."¹⁴ The Shanghai Institutes for International Studies is, by the way, a Think Tank funded by the municipality of Shanghai, not by the central government, which is a nod to the relevant discussion in the previous section on sub-national diplomacy. Germany has used AI to try to collate and process data from social media, intelligence materials and from refugee-related organizations. Japan introduced Sakura in 2019, an LLM powered chatbot for consular activities to assist its citizens abroad and is especially useful in emergency situations.

The end result of applying AI in MFAs (distinct from having dedicated MFA units for regulatory diplomacy on AI) should be a faster development and review time for diplomatic briefs and policy proposals, more capacity for potential lines of cooperation and more engagement for diplomats. The future MFAs might also look to pare down, outsource or automate various administrative tasks to free up their organizational chart in order to accommodate more acting diplomats to fill the increasing number of roles required by complex international relations. Blockchain technology can be used to ensure the integrity, traceability,

¹⁰ Belosludtsev, A., Dziuba, E. (2024). Generative Artificial Intelligence in the System of International Relations: Risks, Opportunities, and Regulations. In: Bolgov, R., et al. Proceedings of Topical Issues in International Political Geography (TIPG 2023). TIPG 2022. Springer Geography. Springer, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-70886-2_16

¹¹ Pokhriyal, N., Koebe., T. (2023). AI-assisted diplomatic decision-making during crises—Challenges and opportunities. *Frontiers in Big Data, Sec. Cybersecurity and Privacy*, Volume 6, 12 May 2023,
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fdata.2023.1183313>

¹² <https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/17/diplomatic-relations-artificial-intelligence-and-cyber-threats/>

¹³ <https://www.hermescse.eu/en/artificial-intelligence-redefining-diplomacy-in-the-digital-age/>

¹⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/china-using-artificial-intelligence-help-make-diplomatic-decisions-1048734>



and auditability of communication lines, with frequent AI-based audits to detect issues backed up by humans-in-the-loop.

All of these changes are cumulatively important because distant flashpoints may require immediate action. Political decisionmakers may demand immediate proposals. Rapid technical, social, political, and economic developments make it more difficult to focus and institutionalize issue-area expertise to provide the right capabilities for a particular issue. This requires a mix of higher numbers of domain specialists and the possibility of sub-contracting outside talent on a project basis.

Thirdly, in order to navigate in this new political environment, diplomatic actors should be flexible and less dependent on established routines and traditional structures. More flexibility is required also because of the demands on the time of decisionmakers for participating in various summits and in the plethora of European meetings where ministers from various sectors will engage in what amounts to foreign policy activity that should be aided by MFA support. As we have seen (to the frustration of communications security specialists), the highest level decisionmakers increasingly make decisions surrounded by personal advisors communicating on personal phones and not going through established lines of communication and proposal validation. The chat group scandals of the Trump Administration and the Johnson Premiership in the UK underscore this trend. The use of new technologies can mediate between the need (or desire) for speed and the need for process integrity and organizational validation.

Lastly, we may begin to reconsider whether the current model for the MFA is the best possible structure in a globalized world. The model appeared in an era where high politics such as conflicts dominated international affairs and interactions between states took place through official and diplomatic networks and channels under conditions of well-defined sovereignty and slowness in communications.

MFAs are under pressure because this organizational model assumes that the MFA can still be a gatekeeper to the outside world and that there is a clear delineation between the internal and external environment that equate to different political arenas divided by national borders. Thus, the MFA deals with a completely separate and non-overlapping area of competence, like the Ministry for Health would deal with health issues and the Ministry for Agriculture with farming. The model of autonomous government departments with clearly delineated areas of competence that do not overlap is anachronistic.

Many countries, including Romania, have tried to patch this model through dedicated Secretariats, Communities of Functions (such as the Intelligence Community pioneered by the US) or Inter-institutional Working Groups or Committees. New technology, better communications, and globalization are increasing the number of interactions between stakeholders, leading to situations where every ministry impinges on the activity of others and also interacts with non-governmental actors of different types.

In the context of globalization, through its web of transborder interdependencies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can literally be tied to the activity of any other ministry, especially if we assume that it still has a gatekeeping or coordination role and that other government actors are not running an independent foreign policy. The latter issue is a risk, as has been seen in the US when President Nixon, who was suspicious of the State Department, used the National Security Council as a parallel MFA led by Henry Kissinger. This resulted in Secretary of State William Rogers finding out about the 1970 first Paris meeting between Kissinger and North Vietnamese diplomat Le Duc Tho only a year later. The first Trump Administration saw a similar sidelining of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in favor of National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, though later leaders ended up working well, such as Mike Pompeo and Robert O'Brien.

Various countries have attempted to reform their MFAs, such as Finland¹⁵, Italy¹⁶ and Cyprus¹⁷. Japan announced a reorganization of its MFA on 25 July 2025 in order to “create a cross-functional structure that will enable MOFA to carry out tasks as demanded by the times amid a rapidly changing international situation”. A special structure was also created to accelerate preparations for the GREEN×EXPO 2027.¹⁸ South Korea announced on 27 May 2024 that it would establish an Office of Strategy and Intelligence¹⁹ that would enable it to implement its governmental vision of a “Global Pivotal State” in a fast-moving international environment. Many of the bodies under this Office of Strategy and Intelligence (the Strategy and Policy Planning Bureau, the Diplomatic Intelligence Bureau, the International Security

¹⁵ https://um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/ulkoministerion-organisaatiouudistus-korostaa-joukkuepelia/35732

¹⁶ https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/2025/08/tajani-presenta-la-riforma-della-farnesina/

¹⁷ https://reform-support.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/public-administration-and-governance/digitalization-and-modernization-ministry-foreign-affairs-cyprus_en

¹⁸ https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaikenwe_000001_00180.html

¹⁹ https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do

Bureau) are cross-sector and cross-functional and will need to cooperate with a wide array of stakeholders, rather than being tied to a single geographic area or a single domain. Finland also radically reorganized its MFA to have a more regional and cross-sector focus given its resource limitations and the interconnectedness of various issues²⁰. In an earlier era, Germany used the recommendations of the Paschke Report of September 2000 to leverage ICT opportunities to develop “a seamless single diplomatic network, in place of the earlier conceptual division between the headquarters and the field units”²¹.

One possible model for radical reform was developed by Jonathan W. Moses and Torbjørn Knutsen and addressed to the Norwegian MFA²². The most salient proposal there was to turn the MFA into a coordination organization for the international affairs of every other ministry in conjunction with managing their international presence. Therefore, MFA personnel would be assigned to each ministry, while representatives of each ministry would be assigned to every embassy or consulate that needed such representation. For instance, an MFA staff would be in the Ministry for Agriculture to help coordinate its international activity, while Ministry for Agriculture staffers would be on hand (on a permanent or temporary basis) in embassies in countries that are important exporters or importers of food from the respective country in order to build relationships, gather information, identify opportunities and be immediately accessible to respond to queries. The experience of the Romanian MFA during the 2018 Presidency of the Council of the EU in coordinating the representatives of various competent Romanian institutions to lead, as diplomats, the works of specific Councils, can be instructive in this regard. This would also enable a slimmer organization since some sector specific knowledge within the MFA proper would no longer be needed, as these activities would move to the competent ministries.

I would point out the importance of increasing the representation of Romanians in Europeans and international bodies as a possible vector for influence and that a future MFA, in concert with other sector-specific bodies, should identify, train, and then support Romanians for key positions, especially at the highest level. I have thought this for some time, but it was

²⁰ <https://um.fi/the-organisation-of-the-ministry-for-foreign-affairs>

²¹ Rana, K. (2021). MFA Reform Global Trends. DiploFoundation, <https://www.diplomacy.edu/resource/mfa-reform-global-trends/>

²² Moses, J. W., Knutsen, T. (2002). Globalization and the Reorganization of Foreign Affairs' Ministries. Discussion Papers in Diplomacy, ISSN 1569-2981, Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20020500_cli_paper_dip_issue80.pdf



brought into sharp relief by the recent news that no Romanian was among the new EEAS diplomats²³.

Lastly, it is important to restore somewhere in the institutional landscape of Romania a capacity to engage in foresight exercises as a basis for long-term planning. Unfortunately, the European Union has not published any more Strategic Foresight reports, and they were never granular enough with respects to Romanian interests. Such exercises would be extremely useful when paired with a long-term planning body that can set priorities beyond one electoral cycle.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a jumping-off point for a much-needed discussion on setting an ambitious foreign policy agenda for Romania in the 2025-2035, a period in which current trends will mature and lead us into a potentially radically different and challenging international environment. The paper describes the main factors that will lead to the anticipated seismic shifts in international relations and the structures underpinning them. It then defines nine foreign policy priorities for Romania in that period, followed by some consideration on the reform of MFAs to successfully take advantage of new instruments and to coordinate a vast array of foreign policy agents and stakeholders, which can be governmental, private, and civil. This was not an exhaustive list and neither must Romania reinvent its foreign policy community in a radical way to begin to address these issues. It must maximize all of its potential advantages. For instance, if our discourse is still set (and should be) on a golden triangle of EU and NATO, similar to the one we had pre-accession, then we might as well maximize its impact by linking security, prosperity, and stability in an influence project, while upgrading our strategic communications competencies.

The next level of Romania after European and Euro-Atlantic Romania is Global Romania, but this can only be brought to fruition by an active, visionary, and well-coordinated foreign policy effort. We must build on our strategic partnerships and develop relationships with pivot-states that enable greater flexibility in using foreign policy to fill out a comprehensive cooperation and expansion agenda, embodying elements of security, defense, economics, technology, and innovation, as well as cultural aspects. Romania has a proven track

²³ <https://www.rfi.fr/ro/europa/20250904-rom%C3%A2nia-%C3%AEn-diploma%C8%9Bia-ue-niciun-rom%C3%A2n-nu-s-a-calificat-pentru-func%C8%9Bia-de-ambasador>



record of being able to navigate productive relationships with rival parties and has used that ability to contribute in a substantive way to various peace and rapprochement efforts in the past. Today, those persistent cultural competencies can be used to navigate rivalries, maximize the potential of relationships, and also deliver value to our partners.

"Rich" countries have options, and are not forced by circumstances to choose only emergency, contextual, paths. The ambition above is to provide some strategic options. A wider Romanian strategic rethink (important to read in context also RAND Corporation's impeccable 2017 Strategic Rethink Series) for the next, complicated, decade, is a must for Romania to win the 2025-2035 period, both for the country and its citizens, at home and abroad. It is decision time for Bucharest, since narratives and policies developed in the 2000s cannot last forever.

IDR

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Policy Forum features contributions authored by experts outside RDI.

IDR Policy Forum
ISSN 3119-8562
ISSN-L 3119-8562

Editor, layout, and graphics: Claudiu Codreanu

Cover photo: https://unsplash.com/photos/birds-are-perched-on-the-top-of-a-fence-9SFyRjG6_gk

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