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The strategic partnership between Romania and Bulgaria

An instrument for regional policy and integration in international organisations

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**ROMANIA-BULGARIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP
INSTRUMENT FOR REGIONAL POLICY AND INTEGRATION IN INTERNATIONAL
ORGANISATIONS**

The political and legal framework. International context and analytical approach

According to Art. 2 para. (1) of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969), the strategic partnership is a written agreement concluded between states and governed by international law, whether recorded in a single instrument, or in two or more related instruments, and whichever be its name. Its purpose is to produce legal effects (create, modify, or extinguish rights and obligations in relations between subjects of international law). A strategic partnership entails rights, obligations and commitments for both signatory parties.

After their return to democracy in 1989, relations between Romania and Bulgaria were regulated by two diplomatic documents. First, on January 27, 1992, the *Treaty of Friendship, Collaboration, and Good Neighbourliness between Romania and the Republic of Bulgaria* was concluded. It constituted the legal basis for bilateral relations until March 15, 2023, when it advanced to the level of strategic partnership through the Joint Political Declaration, signed by the two countries' presidents, Klaus Iohannis and Rumen Radev, respectively. Although it is inferior to the treaty in terms of legal force, the Joint Declaration includes objectives and mutual commitments covering common strategic aspects of Romanian and Bulgarian foreign policies regarding European affairs, regional cooperation, and security.

The increasingly visible interest in strategic partnerships is fully justified, primarily due to the rise of bilateralism as a tool to facilitate the achievement of common goals within regional and global organisations. Strategic partnerships can also be described as “anchors” for better integrating small and medium states in cooperation formats dominated by global powers. This material represents an analytical summary of the concrete directions in the development of Romanian-Bulgarian relations and highlights advantages and opportunities arising from the Strategic Partnership.

The international context of the last decade has been dominated by two developments, treated here as **independent variables**: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Both set precedents in relations between states and shaped policies of international organisations with lasting consequences.

In the evolution of the pandemic, decisions were made with significant consequences at the global level. This exposed and exacerbated some existing trends in world politics (McNamara & Newman 2020, 61), such as discrimination against otherness and exclusion (Dionne & Turkmen 2020, 215). Also, the pandemic revealed vulnerabilities of the international order (Barnett 2020, 133) and new impediments in cooperation between states (Pevehouse 2020, 196), but also regarding the nature of leadership in democratic and authoritarian regimes (Johnson 2020, 151). To an appreciable extent, the pandemic demonstrated the need for in-depth reflections on the reform of some institutions in liberal democracies (Applebaum 2020, 226).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine represents the second decisive factor in the last two years, and is treated here as an **independent variable** that massively reshapes international relations and the geopolitical calculations of states. With the global environment increasingly affected by military conflicts (in Eastern Europe and the Middle East), governments make decisions based on relative gain potential. In a neorealist keynote, the zero-sum, lose-lose game with all actors having losses is reconsidered, while war brings about a political climate that can discourage some aspects of international cooperation. As recently written, “In Eastern Europe, Moscow’s imperial ambitions have already resulted in war and undermined all visions for a cooperative security order for the foreseeable future” (Bunde et al. 2024).

The central **working hypothesis** in the present analysis is that Romania and Bulgaria perceive and treat their strategic partnership in a unique way, as a tool to take more advantage, together, of the opportunities and perspectives offered by the multilateral organisations in which they are already members, or of which they want to be part. The two states contextualise the strategic partnership to achieve joint long-term foreign policy objectives, which gives them the advantage of more effective immersion in international cooperation networks: joining international economic organisations (OECD), deepening cooperation within NATO, and more European integration (adherence to the Schengen Area). The strategic partnership brings a surplus to the common achievements after the end of the Cold War. It is an appropriate political-diplomatic tool to face the challenges of reshaping international order trends.

The **hypothesis** is based on the intentional character of the Joint Declaration, which contains the projects envisaged by the two countries for the future and analysed here. The working hypothesis is also supported by the adoption, in an international context marked by conflicts and tensions, of a firm position by the two countries towards the proliferation of war as a means of resolving disputes, and by the active involvement in organisations they belong to. Romania and Bulgaria adopted the doctrine of political, economic, social, and military resilience promoted by the European Union and NATO, which was also mentioned in the Joint Declaration.

Reasons for the strategic partnership

From Bucharest's viewpoint, establishing strategic partnerships and special relations is one of the priority directions on Romania's long-term foreign policy agenda ([Romanian MFA 2024a](#)). Historical arguments justify the move to this level, but it has also occurred due to the flourishing of bilateralism as a strategic option in times of crisis. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania (MFA) argues that "the dynamism of Romanian-Bulgarian political relations at the highest level, very good sectoral cooperation, as well as cooperation at the regional level, within the EU and NATO, were the factors that contributed to both strengthening the bilateral relationship, as well as advancing the goals and common interests of the two countries".

Second, the international context requires strategic and anticipatory calculations in foreign policy and the re-evaluation of relations. The Romanian MFA emphasises that "the new security context and the multiple consequences at the regional, European and global level have imposed the need to adapt and reorient the strategic objectives of the two countries to manage the current challenges successfully" ([Romanian MFA 2024b](#)). The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a turning point in international relations. The same thing had happened after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the post-pandemic period, too, the states recalibrated their existing relations. They built new political-diplomatic and economic ties, depending on their positioning towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (main independent variable now) and the level of involvement, directly or indirectly, in solving this crisis.

The Joint Declaration mentions, as motivations for signing the strategic partnership, the following aspects ([Romanian MFA 2023](#), 1):

- The degradation of the international climate established on the rule of law (international treaties): "Reaffirming the unwavering support for the principles of the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter, which underpin the rules-based international order"; "Considering that Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has resulted into a deteriorated security context, including in our region, while reaffirming the goals for peace, prosperity, and security of their peoples".
- The EU and NATO membership status of the two countries, with mutual opportunities and advantages: "Their commitment to the fundamental values and the common interests that Romania and the Republic of Bulgaria share at European, regional and international level";
- The deepening bilateral cooperation in specific areas: "Building upon the solid cooperation developed in the fields of common interest and taking into account the existing potential to further increase and expand it in a mutually beneficial way";



- Last, the concern for developing a shared vision and strategies at the regional level is “Emphasizing the importance of active regional cooperation as the basis for lasting stability and security in Southeast Europe.”

The intentionality and forward-looking nature of the Joint Declaration is evident. Notable is also the importance given to participation in the strategies of international organisations to achieve the objectives of the strategic partnership. In other words, the strategic partnership aims at deepening bilateralism with the explicit objective of integration into the multilateralism dominated by the great democratic powers, especially the USA.

Analytical coordinates – Objectives of the study

The general **objective** of this work is a synthetic assessment of the Strategic Partnership between Romania and Bulgaria one year after its formalisation in 2023, and the evaluation of the intermediate impact regarding the intentions of the two states to assert themselves regionally and to contribute to the policies of the organisations of which they are members.

To achieve the overall objective, the analysis is guided by the following **secondary questions**:

1. What are the structural and contextual determinants of Romanian-Bulgarian cooperation in the political, economic and security fields?
2. What are the prospects for developing the partnership and formulating recommendations for the analysed sectors?

Areas of cooperation

The analysis of the areas of collaboration follows the structure and contents of the Joint Declaration. The major strategic areas under analysis are primarily included in the chapters on bilateral cooperation, European affairs, regional cooperation, security cooperation and common international affairs.

Bilateral cooperation

The Joint Declaration provides for bilateral cooperation in several subfields: political dialogue, economic ties, cross-border connectivity, energy cooperation, and cooperation in internal affairs by identifying common solutions to challenges affecting European integration. Special attention is paid to cross-border crime.

The *political dialogue* was reset with the establishment of the High-Level Cooperation Council through the Joint Declaration signed in October 2011. The most recent joint meeting of the two Governments in this format took place on March 29, 2019 ([Government of Romania 2019](#)). Energy

interconnectivity projects were discussed - the BRUA gas pipeline and cooperation with CESEC (Central and South-Eastern European Energy Connection Initiative), as well as trans-European transport networks, especially the East-Eastern Mediterranean corridors and the Rhine-Danube connection ([Government of Romania 2019](#)).

On a *diplomatic level*, the Consulate of Romania was established in Plovdiv in February 2024. According to the Romanian Embassy in Sofia, the event “constitutes the expression of Romania’s commitment to strengthening relations with Bulgaria, thus confirming the ascending character of the Romanian-Bulgarian relationship offered by the Strategic Partnership Declaration between Romania and the Republic of Bulgaria” ([Radio Bulgaria 2024](#)).

In terms of *connectivity*, Romania and Bulgaria are running joint development projects coordinated through the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. The largest is the Interreg VI-A Romania-Bulgaria cross-border cooperation program, financed by the European Regional Development Fund. The European Commission approved it on November 30, 2022. The program’s purpose is to continue the development of the Romanian-Bulgarian border area in the 2021-2027. The administrative-territorial units included in the program are the Bulgarian districts of Vidin, Montana, Varna, Pleven, Veliko Tîrnovo, Ruse, Silistra, Dobrich, and Romanian counties of Constanța, Călărași, Giurgiu, Teleorman, Dolj, Mehedinți and Olt ([Inter - Reg Programme VI-A 2021](#)).

This cross-border project mainly aims to alleviate the development differences compared to other regions in the two countries. The area along the Danube on the Romanian-Bulgarian border did not experience a continuous and sustainable investment process until the accession to the European Union (EU). In effect, it is one of the poorly developed territories of the EU and the overall low level of development discourages the business environment and encourages outward migration, all of which prevent the region from reaching its potential. As described in the language of the Inter-Reg Program, “The hard border of the Danube causes a North-South divide in terms of physical accessibility and connectivity, while the different languages and administrative barriers add up to the structural challenges affecting the cross-border area.” ([Inter-Reg Program VI-A 2021](#)).

The [Fast Danube](#) project and the construction of a new bridge over the Danube between Giurgiu and Ruse are the objectives being implemented. They are also part of the strategy to “optimise cross-border connectivity in terms of transport, infrastructure, energy, telecommunications” ([Romanian MFA 2023](#), 2). Despite some setbacks, the Fast Danube Project has already facilitated the start of essential operations, such as the dredging of the Danube on the Bulgarian side, to ensure the river’s navigability on both sides in all seasons.

The *value of trade exchanges* is an essential indicator of the degree of deepening of economic cooperation. We considered the period 2019-2023, which includes the two massive international shocks, namely the Covid-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine.

The impact of the health crisis was strongly felt in Romania’s trade with its partners in the EU, “given its dependence on global economic mechanisms and its integration into European and global

value chains” (Kubinschi 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has generated an unprecedented syncope in world trade, affecting Romanian and Bulgarian companies that trade with foreign partners. They were forced to deal with restrictions and rule changes while benefiting from limited aid.

The most recent data for Romanian-Bulgarian trade come from the Romanian Agency for Investments and Foreign Trade (ARICE), subordinate to the Government of Romania. The statistics regarding Romania’s trade in the EU-27 space are predominant because “Romania’s export and import are carried out, mainly, with European states: 87.8% of total export, respectively 86.9% of total import” (Sfetcu & Trofim 2024, 4).

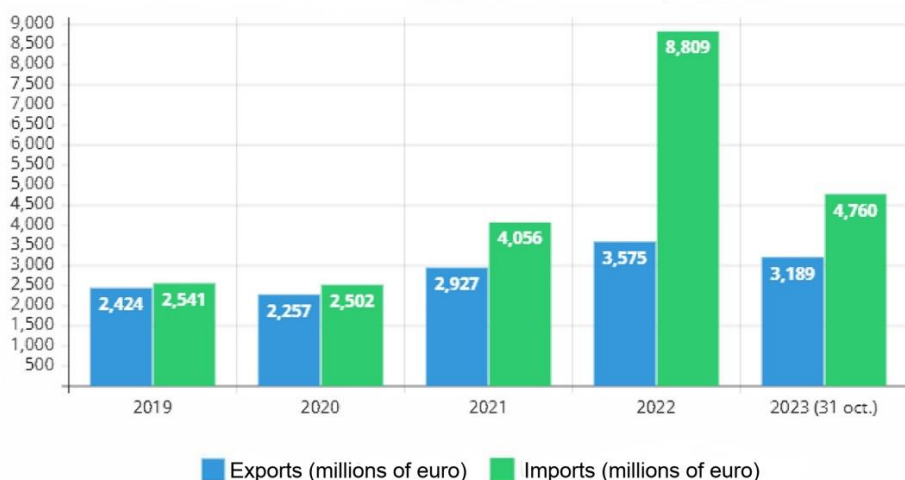
According to the provisional data from October 2023, the most recent available, “intra-community trade (Romania with the 26 EU member countries) represents a share of 72.7% in exports and 73.3% in imports”. In the first ten months of 2023, “the percentage value of exports to Bulgaria was 4.05%, which places the southern neighbour in the 5th place in the ranking of our country’s trade partners” (Sfetcu & Trofim 2024, 6). The percentage translated into monetary value represents 3189.59 million euros. It is a slight increase compared to the same period in 2022, when exports to Bulgaria cumulated 2954.20 million euros, i.e. 3.84% of total intra- and extra-community exports (Sfetcu & Trofim 2024, 28). Regarding imports, for the same period of 2023, the percentage value was 4.67%, i.e. 4760.58 million euros. This represents a decrease compared to the same interval in 2022 when the figures showed 6.88%, i.e. 7237.12 million euros (Sfetcu & Trofim 2024, 32).

A summary of Romanian-Bulgarian intra-community trade from Romania’s perspective until October 31, 2023, offers the data below ([ARICE 2024](#)):

Trade values between Romania and Bulgaria, 01.01.2019 – 31.10.2023

Year	Exports /millions of euro	Imports / millions of euro
2023 (October 31)	3,189.59	4,760.58
2022	3,575.14	8,809.21
2021	2,927.15	4,056.35
2020	2,257.93	2,502.85
2019	2,424.54	2,541.30

Trade values between Romania and Bulgaria 01.01.2019 - 31.10.2023



According to one recent analysis, the bilateral production and trade relations follow a pattern. “Bulgaria imports more intermediate goods to produce a certain type of item, while this indicator is lower for Romania. Both economies invest more in imported values added in the production of a given product compared to the Eurozone and EU countries. Local Romania’s value-added, as part of the gross exports, is higher” (Christova-Balkanska 2023, 100).

It can be concluded that both countries “both countries have registered significant benefits after joining the European Union, a fact highlighted by the statistics on the processes of growth, development and European economic convergence” (Rădulescu 2023, 78). These dimensions are also pursued in the Strategic Partnership. In the case of Bulgaria and Romania, “the performance of their trade and innovative potential could be much better, if policies of attracting strategic investors were applied and if more efforts were done to overcome the accumulated disbalances in the economy after the Covid-19 crisis, and now with the war in Ukraine” (Christova-Balkanska 2023, 79).

European affairs

The two states have a pro-European foreign policy agenda, with the objective of improving integration into the Union. The rise of extremist ideas and movements and Moscow’s hybrid war against democratic countries have led Romania and Bulgaria to include in their strategic partnership a variety of common working points regarding the EU: supporting the single market as a starting point for socio-economic development, supporting balanced economic governance, taking into account the

inherent differences between member states; the contribution to the internal security of the Union by integration in the Schengen Area; joint consultations to express positions towards the institutional development of the EU and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP); actively supporting the expansion of the Union in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans ([Romanian MFA 2023](#), 3-4). The rationale behind this pro-European strategy lies in the benefits already brought by the single market, with the value of trade between Romania and Bulgaria increasing yearly, despite the disruptions brought by the pandemic crisis and the conflict in Ukraine.

Security projects at the European level are approached prospectively. Romania and Bulgaria are among the 22 countries in the EU-NATO cooperation program established in 2002. The two states set out to “contribute to European security and defence at the political-military and operational level, as well as regarding EU initiatives complementary to those of NATO, avoiding duplication and aiming to maintain interoperability” ([Romanian MFA 2023](#), 4). This objective was adopted in line with the EU and NATO response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Also, the EU-NATO Joint Declaration of January 10, 2023, played a decisive role. It inaugurates “a common vision on how the EU and NATO will act together against common security threats” ([Council of the European Union 2024](#)).

An imperative *internal security* issue for the two countries is *accession to the Schengen Treaty*. During the visit to Sofia of the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luminița Odobescu on February 5, 2024, at the invitation of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria, Mariya Gabriel, it was agreed to “maintain close coordination for the implementation of the Decision regarding the full application by Romania and Bulgaria of the Schengen *acquis*, as well as to obtain, as soon as possible, the Decision regarding the lifting of controls at the land borders” ([Romanian MFA 2024c](#)). Previously, on January 12, 2024, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs reconfirmed for *Agerpres* that “accession to air and maritime space is a positive step with important, positive consequences for Romanian citizens, and the process is irreversible”. the only step remaining is the lifting of controls at land borders ([Agerpres 2024](#)).

The import of grain from Ukraine on the single market is a relevant topic for Romanian and Bulgarian perceptions of the economic security and commercial policies of the European Union. In September 2023, Bulgaria removed the restrictions and allowed access to Ukrainian grain to cover the consumption needs of the population and combat rising inflation ([Euractiv 2023](#)). Romania maintains restrictions on selling grain from Ukraine on its markets, but allows transit to other states. The issue of grain imports from Ukraine triggered large-scale protests by European farmers, including in Romania and Bulgaria, thus triggering government decisions in response, to a limited extent.

Regional cooperation

The most important aspects of regional cooperation are the Common Maritime Agenda (CMA) under the auspices of the European Commission, the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda for

the Black Sea (SRIA), the North-South connectivity through the trilateral Romania-Bulgaria-Greece, as well as cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative.

The Common Maritime Agenda (CMA) is an initiative of the European Commission to strengthen regional cooperation to achieve a “blue” ecological economy in the Black Sea basin. It is implemented in the broader framework of the Black Sea Synergy. On May 21, 2019, the ministers from the seven member countries approved the Agenda, namely Romania, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, the Russian Federation, Turkey and Ukraine. The commitments in this sense assumed through the Ministerial Declaration of 2018, signed in Burgas ([Common Maritime Agenda 2024](#)), were thus fulfilled. The coordination structure is two-dimensional – political (through ministerial meetings) and operational (a steering group comprising senior officials from each member country). The Black Sea Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) is the academic pillar of the CMA. It is complementary to it and provides valid arguments for science-based decision-making.

For Romania and Bulgaria, participation in the Common Maritime Agenda also offers the role of regional actors and facilitators of European integration for the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. These countries have received the status of candidates for accession. The regional dialogue is focused on economic development through the sustainable use of the resources of the Black Sea, with the European Union having a complex agenda dedicated to the maritime domain.

A regional project with high economic and geostrategic relevance is the North-South corridor to be realised within the Trilateral Romania-Bulgaria-Greece. The three countries “will allocate in their 2024 budget guarantees totalling 6 billion euros for the implementation of the transport connectivity project and for pipelines from the Greek city of Thessaloniki on the Mediterranean Sea through Kavala, Alexandroupolis, then through the Bulgarian cities of Burgas and Varna, all the way to the Romanian city of Constanța” ([Curs de Guvernare 2023](#)).¹

The transport corridor will have dual uses for the transport of marketed goods and of military equipment. The connection with the continent’s south is advantageous for Romania as it adds to the European economy’s integration in the Mediterranean area, including the Greek logistics and port facilities from the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. On the other hand, Bulgaria is given access to Central Europe’s developed markets. The Bulgarian Minister of Finance pointed out the importance of this project for the initiating countries in key geostrategic terms (the conflict in Ukraine leading to the avoidance of northern transport corridors), but primarily economic and commercial: “The North-South connection plays a key role for sustainable infrastructure and connectivity in Europe (...) through the construction of a highway that will connect Greece and Romania through Bulgaria.

¹ See also Tsonkov N. and Petrov, K. 2023. “Possibilities for the construction of a parallel route of the European transport corridor No 9 through Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece”, *IOP Conference Series: Materials, Science and Engineering*, 1297/012018. <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1757-899X/1297/1/012018> (accessed 29.02.2024).

Through this highway, the connectivity map that offers an exit from Bulgaria's ports to the Mediterranean Sea will be completed" ([Curs de Guvernare 2023](#)).

The 2023 Summit of the Three Seas Initiative, hosted by Bucharest, provided the opportunity for Romania and Bulgaria, together with partner countries, to debate topics of regional importance - the negative consequences of conflicts, the long-term effects of the pandemic, the crises generated by the growth prices and disruptions in supply chains, as well as to identify innovative ways of responding to the new economic and geopolitical realities ([Three Seas Summit 2023](#)).

Security cooperation

With the increasing destabilisation of the international climate, the sphere of security dominated the agendas of multilateral summits – the European Council, the Davos Economic Forum, the G20 and the Munich Security Conference. In 2023, the Munich Security Conference drew attention to the need to strengthen European defence against vulnerabilities existing since the end of the Cold War ([Koenig et al. 2023](#)). The 2024 conclusions of the meeting in Munich highlighted “the need for a more secure, resilient and cooperative global order as an impetus to address the challenges of the 21st century” ([Bunde et al. 2024](#)).

The main common points of Romania and Bulgaria in the security sphere are the following: contribution to Euro-Atlantic projects according to interests and responsibilities of each country; political-diplomatic actions to strengthen the presence of NATO forces on the East-European flank, and a strategic and structured NATO approach to security in the Black Sea; combating the proliferation of extremism and radicalism, terrorism, hybrid threats, illicit trafficking and cybercrimes; support for vulnerable democratic partners in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, in the process of joining NATO and the EU. Special attention is given to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, countries vulnerable to hybrid threats and whose populations are mostly in favour of Euro-Atlantic integration.

The previously mentioned bilateral consultations in Sofia also included the *security situation in the Black Sea* in the context of the Russian military aggression in Ukraine. On this occasion, “the common interest in strengthening and developing defence and security cooperation was highlighted, both bilaterally and within NATO” ([Romanian MFA 2024c](#)). For his part, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, Mariya Gabriel, gave as an example the establishment of the Joint Mine Countermeasure Coalition in the Black Sea (MCM Black Sea), with Turkey being the initiator, together with Romania and Bulgaria ([MFA Bulgaria 2024](#)). The Turkish Foreign Ministry placed this project under the auspices of the 1936 Montreux Convention and insisted that this trilateral format be limited to the countries bordering the Black Sea. Therefore, minesweepers prepared to support the mission by the British Government were not given Ankara's permission to participate ([Buyuk 2024](#)). In the same margin of interpretation, Bulgaria's Ministry of National Defence assured



that “the group’s activities will not be directed against any other country and the Black Sea demining operation is expected to contribute to improving interaction and good neighbourly relations between the participants” ([Kotseva 2024](#)).

The Romanian Minister of Defence welcomed the approach, but added that “he confidently expects the involvement, in the future, of the NATO partners on the Black Sea coast, the Permanent Maritime Groups of NATO and other allied states, thus strengthening cooperation and increasing interoperability, ensuring at the same time the security of the Black Sea and of the Euro-Atlantic region” ([Romanian MND 2024](#)). On this occasion, the Romanian minister mentioned that security at the Black Sea remains a priority in Romania’s foreign policy and defence strategy.

So, the MCM Coalition is an exclusively regional mission. Turkey holds the initiative by force of international law, but Romania and Bulgaria treat the mission as support for their efforts to strengthen cooperation in the Black Sea. They have the possibility of political and military positioning in an unstable and conflict-dominated regional context. The MCM also complements another NATO initiative, namely the Air Police missions in the western part of the Black Sea region.

International cooperation

Following the successful model of cooperation for Euro-Atlantic integration, Romania and Bulgaria are working together for accession to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This objective is essential in the long term for both countries to achieve high macroeconomic indicators and, implicitly, high standards of integration into the global economy.

At an international economic forum held in February 2024, Romania’s ambassador to Bulgaria, Brândușa Predescu, confirmed that “Bulgaria’s and Romania’s OECD accession goals and stages are very similar” and that they “constitute a continuous process of training and learning” in which Romania and Bulgaria perform well ([Radio Bulgaria 2024](#)). Brândușa Predescu emphasised the importance of the OECD accession process for the two countries, insisting on “strengthening the institutional and administrative capacity to deal with the current complex processes, another benefit being the strengthening of governance systems, which generally implies better policies for a better life” ([Radio Bulgaria 2024](#)).

Accession to the OECD, a major foreign policy objective regarding entry into the group of the world’s most developed countries, is a complex and long-term undertaking. It requires structural reforms, the strengthening of the free trade regime, the increase of economic and social inclusion, the efficiency of governance, the digitalisation of public services and, implicitly, investments in infrastructure ([Romanian MFA 2024d](#)).



Results and policy proposals

The first year after the signing of the Joint Declaration demonstrated the clear intention of Romania and Bulgaria to cooperate strategically to deepen their regional roles and act together to reduce the gaps with Western countries. The intentional component of the partnership and the orientation towards the future are thus evident. Romania and Bulgaria have proposed to add, to the ongoing bilateral cooperation projects, a joint synergic and visible contribution to European affairs.

While the Romanian authorities insist on developing the security dimension of the partnership, the Bulgarian counterpart emphasises economic cooperation. However, the two foreign ministers confirmed that the Strategic Partnership is, in the end, about three key terms: cooperation, connectivity, and security ([MFA Bulgaria 2024](#)). The three major cooperation areas require a shared long-term vision and strategy, as well as financial resources commensurate with the objectives.

An impediment to deepening the strategic partnership is that Romania and Bulgaria appear on the European geopolitical map more like two “islands,” with specific differences in their foreign policy orientations in crisis situations. However, this study highlights many common points, too.

The most relevant factors shaping the partnership are joint cross-border projects, European integration, intentions to become more relevant regional actors mainly due to the common interest in the Black Sea, and very close economic relations.

The strategic partnership can facilitate communication between government authorities at all levels and the adoption of common positions on European and security issues. Debate mechanisms can be used to complement the existing High-Level Cooperation Councils, such as periodic bilateral consultations for preparing European Councils and summits.

Permanent communication at the ministerial level is necessary for the constructive approach to the common priority objective – full accession to the Schengen Area. Along with the dialogue at the presidential level (the presidential institutions of the two states being the initiators of the strategic partnership), the parliamentary and governmental cooperation completes the institutional scheme and facilitates common solutions for common problems. The exchange of ministerial experts in the fields of cooperation is also a way of strengthening relations and giving significance to the strategic partnership.

In the field of security, there is a need for strategic and anticipatory thinking and coordination of political and military decision-makers, to implement proposals such as the joint purchase of weapons and equipment, or increased cooperation in the field of training through several joint military exercises. At the same time, and especially in the current context, Romania and Bulgaria are obliged to jointly obtain the continuation of support from NATO partners through the more extensive and permanent deployment of their forces and logistics on our territories. All these initiatives should aim to increase the presence of NATO forces on the eastern flank - Enhanced Forward Presence, which would mean an irreversible strengthening of the transatlantic partnership.



Regarding the development perspectives, Romania and Bulgaria have the opportunity, within the Strategic Partnership, to invest in the role of strategic actors. However, this objective should not be approached in disagreement with the Euro-Atlantic agenda; the collaboration between the European Union and NATO can be a solution for ensuring the regional balance of power. The history of the last decades clearly shows us that, for Romania and Bulgaria, opening to the outside can be done through more effective diplomatic actions (negotiation, persuasion) within the EU and NATO than they were before joining the two organisations. The current context, marked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the tense situation in the Black Sea, the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, calls for more active roles and more effective Romanian-Bulgarian cooperation within the EU and NATO to achieve foreign policy objectives.

The increasingly pressing international context drives the development of this partnership, a fact highlighted by the Bulgarian ambassador in Bucharest, H.E. Radko Vlaykov. During an event organized by the Romanian Diplomatic Institute on March 14, 2024, celebrating the first year since the signing of the Joint Declaration, he emphasized “the speed” with which the strategic partnership agreement was concluded and eventually signed by the two presidents on March 15, 2023. Russia's war against Ukraine determined this speed, Bulgaria and Romania having understood very fast the need to go more firmly on a common path. The first year could be described as encouraging. There have been achievements, especially in the field of security, the shared responsibility in the Black Sea, the joint bilateral initiatives, as well as within NATO. We have also made tremendous progress in connectivity and now we must find ways to implement common projects efficiently, “with the speed fitting strategic partners in the European Union.”

Finally, we can say that bilateralism is a suitable form of cooperation for achieving similar objectives at the European and global levels, such as accession to the Schengen Area and the OECD. At the same time, bilateralism is a strategic option for protracted crisis situations, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, which requires diplomatic and economic commitments so that Romania and Bulgaria can overcome the turbulence in our region and prosper in the future.

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