

ROMANIA AND THE CONCEPT OF MINILATERALISM. AN ANALYSIS OF THE COUNTRY’S REGIONAL COOPERATION STRATEGY (1990-2022)

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Abstract: The minilateral format is not an unknown concept in Romania’s geopolitical strategy. From regional initiatives based on the principle of interwar collective security to the Bucharest Nine format, Romania has participated but also initiated regional collaborations, especially regarding the security of the region. The present research aims to present the dynamics of Romania’s involvement in minilateral formats starting from the interwar periods and to analyze how these initiatives have contributed to the security and development of the Romanian state. The analytical approach will be correlated with the historical periods to which we refer, the analysis criteria being different depending on the regional geopolitical situation assessed such as Romania being part of the communist bloc compared to the current socio-economic and ideological configuration. The purpose of the research is to determine the usefulness and efficiency of the minilateral organizations in which Romania participated or which were initiated at the proposal of the Romanian side. It is also important to analyze how the minilateral endeavors influenced Romania’s membership in the European Union and NATO. Methodology-wise, the research uses document analysis to review both specialized sources belonging to the field of International Relations, but also historical ones. In the first part of the article, I will define the minilateral format, presenting the differences relative to a multilateral one. The second part is reserved for the analysis of the Little Entente, as an incipient minilateral commitment, with Romania as the initiator state, followed by the exemplification of the lack of minilateral commitments from the communist period. The third part contains the analysis of the post-Cold War period, and represents the main focus for the present research. The last part is the one dedicated to the conclusion of the analysed minilaterals from the perspective of Romania, containing added recommendations regarding the future of Romania’s external collaborations .

Keywords: Romania, minilateral format, multilateral, Bucharest Nine, geopolitics, NATO, Three Seas Initiative, Little Entente



Rezumat: Formatul de tip minilateral nu constituie un concept neexplorat în strategia geopolitică a României. De la inițiativele regionale bazate pe principiul securității colective interbelice și până la formatul București Nouă, România a participat, dar a și

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inițiat colaborări regionale, cu precădere privind securitatea regiunii. Cercetarea de față își propune să prezinte dinamica implicării României în formate minilaterale având ca punct de pornire alianțele din perioada interbelică și să analizeze modul în care aceste inițiative au contribuit la securitatea și la dezvoltarea statului român. Demersul analitic va fi corelat cu perioadele istorice la care ne raportăm, criteriile de analiză fiind diferite în funcție de situația geopolitică regională (ex.: România ca parte a blocului comunist comparativ cu actuala configurație socio-economică și ideologică). Scopul cercetării este de a determina utilitatea și eficiența abordărilor minilaterale la care România a participat sau care s-au inițiat la propunerea părții române. De asemenea, este important de analizat cum au influențat minilateralele apartenența României la Uniunea Europeană și NATO. În privința metodologiei folosite, cercetarea apelează la analiza de documente folosind atât surse academice aparținând relațiilor internaționale, dar și surse istorice. În prima parte a articolului, voi defini formatele minilaterale, prezentând și diferențele raportat la cadrul multilateral. Cea de-a doua parte este rezervată analizei Micii Antante, ca angajament unilateral incipient, având România ca stat inițiator, cât și exemplificării lipsei angajamentelor minilaterale din perioada comunistă. Partea a treia conține analiza perioadei post-Război Rece, fiind și cea mai semnificativă pentru cercetarea prezentă. Ultima parte este cea dedicată concluziilor privind minilateralele analizate din perspectiva României, oferind recomandări privind viitoarele colaborări externe ale României.

Cuvinte cheie: Romania, format unilateral, multilateral, București Nouă, geopolitică, NATO, Three Seas Initiative, Mica Antantă

I. Introduction

The changes in the international system over the last decade are dynamic, involving both economic and military considerations, while also impacting the way states design their external strategy. Large multilateral formats are becoming less relevant in the context of the American pivot to Asia, an area where minilaterals are evolving towards a significantly more strategic role than large formats. In the specific case of the south-eastern region of Europe, unilateral collaborations have generally been a secondary priority in the foreign policy strategies of the states in the area. However, the complicated geopolitical context in which they found themselves since the end of the First World War, often at the confluence of major power conflicts, has led to regional cooperation initiatives on specific issues, especially in terms of security. In this sense, the analysis of Romania as a case study is relevant in the context of its geopolitical importance in the region.

Unilateralism has seen strong development, especially in the last 30 years, but more recently, in Europe, it has been dominated by comprehensive formats aimed at maintaining peace. Romania initially neglected this type of

collaboration, with the main priority being accession to multilateral organizations such as the European Union (EU) and NATO, which offered strong political and security guarantees, necessary given the historical experience and the geopolitical situation in the area. The unilateral initiatives occurred mainly after the accession to the EU, through formats such as the Three Seas Initiative, Bucharest Nine (B9), or the Craiova Group. Through unilateralism, Romania has focused mainly on strengthening its security and to a lesser extent on cultural, economic, or political collaborations.

In the context of regional collaboration formats, examined both from theoretical perspectives as well as applied to the reality on the ground, the concept of unilateral initiative was pursued in the historical periods preceding the disappearance of the communist bloc. Relevant for our analysis are the security agreements from the years before the Second World War, such as the Little Entente or the Balkan Pact, formats that had a role in collective defense of the region. The above formats can be considered as the first attempts to bring together common interests under a unilateral initiative, and thus their analysis is relevant to our research approach. To determine the relevance and usefulness of the unilaterals in which Romania was or is involved, the present study analyses the contexts in which they were created, the purpose, as well as the implemented decisions resulted from these cooperative frameworks. It is also crucial to analyse how these small formats relate to the multilateral organizations of which Romania is part of, the EU and NATO, and what is their role in the geopolitical configuration of the Euro-Atlantic area.

II. The Concept of Unilateralism. Definition and General Characteristics

Unilateral initiatives are nothing new in the international system, although the world order determined by the United States and the Allies in 1945 was largely based on big, multilateral formats. However, the proliferation of such formats, which may include bilateral or trilateral formats has recently taken place, especially in areas such as security, climate change, or trade¹. However,

¹ Aarshi Tirkey, “Unilateralism: Weighing the Prospects for Cooperation and Governance”, *Observer Research Foundation*, Issue Brief no. 489, September 2021, 3, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ORF_IssueBrief_489_Unilaterals_NEW.pdf, accessed on May 10, 2022.

one can speak of an earlier stage of minilateral initiatives in the period between the two world wars, such as those involving collective defense systems initiated by small European countries to make up for the lack of coercive instruments against aggressor states specific to the League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations. The term “minilateralism” used to define small alliances as opposed to large multilateral organizations, appeared in 1992 at the initiative of Miles Kahler, from the author’s desire to convey his criticisms of multilateral alliances. In Kahler’s view, minilateralism could be a way to minimize the hegemonic power of the United States by creating a minilateral core consisting of major economic powers, but also a possible solution to make multilateral formats more efficient, considered since the 1980s to be ineffective in managing major global issues such as international trade or security². Afterwards, the term was popularized by Moises Naim, a *Foreign Policy* journalist, who saw in minilateralism a way for effective collaboration in solving problems such as climate change or poverty, against the background marked by the failure of large formats to reach the promised efficiency targets³. In recent times, the minilateral format is academically conceptualized as a way of organizing cooperation in the economic sphere⁴, hence the relevance of initiatives such as G7 or G20. As I will exemplify later in this study, the concept of smaller, flexible alliances with narrow and clear objectives was present long before their theorization under the term “minilateralism” framework.

A minilateral organization can be defined as an international collaboration format consisting of two states or of a small group. The upper limit for the number of states that can make up a minilateral is still a topic of discussion at the theoretical level since the formats verge from bilateral and trilateral initiatives to regional groups that bring together nine members, such as Bucharest Nine, or even more. For a more relevant conceptual comparison, multilateralism is defined as a “formal effort by three or more states to build trust and avoid conflict by identifying, institutionalizing and observing rules and norms for a common vision of regional or international order”⁵. Minilateralism,

² Miles Kahler, “Multilateralism with small and large numbers”, *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 681–708.

³ Moises Naim, “Minilateralism: The Magic Number to Get Real International Action”, *Foreign Policy*, July 21, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/06/21/minilateralism/>, accessed on November 19, 2022.

⁴ Chris Brummer, *Minilateralism: How Trade Alliances, Soft Law and Financial Engineering are Redefining Economic Statecraft* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁵ William T. Tow, “Minilateral security’s relevance to US strategy in the Indo-Pacific: challenges and prospects”, *The Pacific Review* 32, no. 2 (2019): 232-244.

meanwhile, differs in the “three or more states” area by containing a set of features that cover the specifics of the issues for which the initiative was created or the mode of operation, based on a substantially lower need for bureaucratic engagement.

The minilateral level of collaboration involves complementing international organizations on various specific activities, it might address certain shortcomings of the multilateral frame, or take on tasks that are far too difficult to manage in a large format⁶. There is also the possibility that a minilateral format may serve to assist each member in fulfilling the criteria for accession to a multilateral one⁷. A variable feature of the minilateralist frameworks regards the areas of interest for which it was formed, often being concerned with specific issues that through a smaller format, can be easier and more efficient to manage. We specified “variable” because there are also initiatives that cover several areas as part of the same framework and are managed at the same time or modulated, depending on the need of the member states at various moments.

In addition to the forms and purposes that a minilateral format can have, modularity is another feature, and a beneficent one at that when compared to a multilateral one. If at the global level or in a large multilateral format, there is a common will to address a specific problem such as climate change, the minilateral format makes it possible to disaggregate the problem. This is done by implementing more efficient methodologies that focus on the particularities of a given problem in the member states⁸. Minilateralism can “federalize” a specific situation by finding solutions that are effectively related to the characteristics of each state. Grouping them according to the distinct possibilities through which certain problems can be managed thus enables the modularity function. In other words, minilateralism is seen as a solution to address the inefficiencies of

⁶ Erica Moret, “Effective minilateralism for the EU: What, when and how”, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, Brief Issue 17 (2016): 2, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_17_Minilateralism.pdf, accessed on November 19, 2022.

⁷ An eloquent example is the Visegrád Group (V4) (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia), which was set up in 1991 and is still in force. In addition to collaborating in many fields such as culture, economics, or the military, which is unusual when it comes to a minilateral framework, the fundamental goal was to integrate all members into the European Union as soon as possible, a goal accomplished in 2004. The group represents the conservative pole within the EU and advocates for the reduction of the functions of the community bloc. It is an example of a minilateral format that affects the role and credibility of the European Union, the multilateral of which it is part of.

⁸ Patrick Stewart, “The New “New Multilateralism”: Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?”, *Global Summitry* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 125.

multilateralism, allowing states to find viable alternatives to common problems⁹. In addition, this “federalization” can also facilitate the coordination of policies towards areas of immediate and critical interest, which, otherwise, could be easily marginalized in a complex framework such as a multilateral alliance¹⁰.

The minilateral framework can be set up quickly, ad-hoc, by a simple high-level meeting or even at a ministerial level. This was the case of Bucharest Nine, which was established during a bilateral summit between the Presidents of Romania and Poland. At the proposal of the Romanian side, a minilateral framework was formed, which was quickly joined by other states in the region, sharing similar interests. The quick way in which minilaterals can be set up is also replicated in the way they operate since these formats aim to speed up the decision-making process, which is achieved not only by a bottom-up simplification of bureaucratic elements, but also by the greater predisposition of leaders to meet much more often in extraordinary summits¹¹. From Romania’s perspective, the advantage of a minilateral format helps it prioritize its interests, which frequently coincide with those of regional partners. This, in turn, is important and necessary for the acceleration of certain social and economic policies¹².

Certain theoretical views among researchers place the minilateral format in a position that can be considered “a step down the road of civilizing politics among states”¹³, acting as a mechanism to dilute the actions of international pacification. Specifically, a minilateral format is not comprehensive enough and, as a result, cannot act as an actor in the position of imposing economic or diplomatic sanctions on states that violate international law¹⁴. The multilateral

⁹ Aarshi Tirkey, “Addressing the inefficiency of multilateralism – Are regional minilaterals the answer?”, *Observer Research Foundation*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/addressing-inefficacy-multilateralism/>, accessed May 10, 2022.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ For example, Bucharest Nine, in the eight years since the first summit of heads of state took place, only in 2016 and 2017, meetings were not organized. Instead, there were meetings of foreign ministers, which in some years complemented the high-level meetings. This frequency of meetings at the highest level is also present in multilateral formats, but they do not always have such a significant impact due to the complexity of the implementation process, as opposed to the flexible nature of the minilateral.

¹² The priorities of the countries of Eastern EU often differ from those of the West, which have a different level of social and economic development. Thus, it is preferable to concentrate common interests in a minilateral with the role of boosting the decision-making system of a multilateral one for the purpose of accelerating policies in favor of these states.

¹³ Fulvio Attinà, “Multilateralism and the Emergence of “Minilateralism” in EU Peace Operations”, *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2008): 6.

¹⁴ Ibid.

body, on the other hand, is inclusive and tends to perpetuate its values in areas of external conflict or other security threats through peacekeeping interventions.

Although the characteristics differ in the management of other areas such as economic cooperation or climate change, the essence remains the same, namely that the inclusive nature of a multilateral format brings more stability compared to unilateral initiatives. Consequently, one of the debates at the academic level involving unilateralism concerned the extent to which it can lead to new conflicts, or the disintegration of the world order established after the Second World War. First of all, a multilateral format loses its ability to create consensus on important topics due to the possible decentralization of interests, which can be caused by the consolidation of some unilateral formats inside a multilateral one. In this case, we can compare the unilateral structure to a lobby group, which presents and supports its views and interests within the multilateral's decision-making process.

In this way, instability and a weakened reaction to external impulses and potential geopolitical challenges at the macro level on the part of a multilateral organization may appear. Second, the potential loss of a multilateral's ability to create consensus following the fragmentation of interests caused by unilateral formats also reduces the efficiency with which a comprehensive format adapts on the international stage, especially in the case of sensitive issues where it is very difficult to reach an agreement, such as addressing climate change or international trade policy. Moreover, in the long term, the classic international order, represented by the multilateral formats, once eroded, increases the risk of armed conflicts that have the potential to extend beyond the regional area in which most of them were identified after the implementation of the multilateral system of alliances at the end of World War II.

The development of unilateral initiatives is identified mainly in the Indo-Pacific area, through diversified formats, covering a wide range of areas of collaboration. In Europe, things are different, especially concerning the scale of the unilateral phenomenon. First of all, in Europe, the unilaterals have a strictly regional character, acting within two consolidated multilateral structures, the EU and NATO. In addition, some European powers, such as the United Kingdom and France, are involved in unilateral formats in the Indo-Pacific area, trying to influence the security architecture in the area¹⁵. Secondly, the non-

¹⁵ Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Eva Pejsova, “Unilateralism: an opportunity for the EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific”, *CSDS Policy Brief*, no. 22, November 26, 2021, 2, <https://brussels-school.be/publications/policy-briefs/policy-brief-unilateralism-opportunity-eu%E2%80%99s-engagement-indo-pacific>, accessed May 10, 2022.

security cooperation formats, especially the commercial ones, are constituted respecting the legal bases established by the EU for the minilaterals of which only the EU members are part. It should be added that the general minilateral dynamic is not intended to harm the EU and NATO¹⁶. In contrast, the US pivot to the Asian continent has created an acute need for regional alliances in the form of mini-partnerships between US partner states to counter Chinese influence.

In conclusion, there are many possibilities for applying minilateral collaboration formats. It can be extremely useful at the regional level in managing transnational issues that cannot be effectively managed at a macro, global level such as climate change or trade protectionism. The development of minilaterals also comes against the background of the lack of innovation and underwhelming responsiveness of institutions with global coverage or of those with an oversized bureaucratic apparatus. However, on the long term, the transition involving the dismantling of international arrangements and of their rearrangement under bloc dynamics consolidated into small initiatives with distinct interests from each other, can pose a danger to international stability and global peace.

III. Romania's Minilateral Collaboration Formats Between 1920-1989. Little Entente as a Forerunner of Contemporary Minilateral Formats

The geopolitical reconfiguration of Europe after the First World War led to a change in the way alliances were formed and shaped. First of all, a large number of new states had emerged as a result of a self-determination policy based on nationality, especially in the east and south-east. As a result, these states needed to build their own foreign policies. Second, the collective security system of the League of Nations had only a political role, not providing an effective defense of its members in the event an aggression took place. In addition, post-war Europe was extremely politically and militarily unstable, forcing newly created or integrated states from former multinational empires to form alliances in the name of collective defense. States such as Romania, Yugoslavia, or Czechoslovakia felt the need to initiate regional alliances, especially due to

¹⁶ With the notable exception of V4, initiatives such as E3, B9 or the Three Seas have not impacted negatively neither the EU, nor NATO, so far.

doubts regarding the guarantees offered by the peace treaties signed at the end of the war¹⁷. Therefore, these alliances could be considered unilateral security formats because they met certain theoretical particularities and were similar in terms of how they operated to the contemporary initiatives of this type.

Thus, Romania has been involved in such alliances since 1920 when it established the Little Entente. Consisting of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania, it was initially intended to counteract the irredentist tendencies of Hungary and Bulgaria. This meant that each state had the obligation to help an ally, if it was attacked by Hungary or Bulgaria, alone or with support from Germany or Italy¹⁸. After the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, the direct military support of France, which officially held the status of observer for the Little Entente, could no longer be directly secured¹⁹. In addition, Poland's refusal to participate in the alliance, a state considered by the Romanian side as indispensable for the regional security system, partly due to the good relations it had with Hungary²⁰, considerably diminished the defense and deterrence capabilities of the Little Entente.

Eventually, it ceased to exist with the annexation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany. In essence, the alliance was not a failure if we look at the objectives for which it was created, namely defense in the event of an unprovoked attack by Hungary and Bulgaria²¹, but it was not able to ensure the defense of its members' borders against a great aggressor power²². In addition to the Little Entente, the system of defensive alliances in South-Eastern Europe also included the Balkan Pact, and consisted of Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Romania. It had the same defensive role, though in this instance, the state considered to be a possible aggressor was Bulgaria. The alliance was dissolved due to the inability of its members to provide security to Romania as a result of the territorial partitions of 1940.

¹⁷ Sorin Arhire, „Politica Externă a României 1920-1940 I”, *Terra Sebus. Acta Musei Sabasiensis*, no. 3 (2011): 477-507.

¹⁸ Nicolae Titulescu, *Politica externă a României (1937)* (București: Editura Enciclopedică, 1994), 23.

¹⁹ Gerald G. Govorchin, “The Little Entente: A Post-Mortem”, *The Social Studies* 38, no. 4 (1947): 170.

²⁰ Daniela Elena Nica, *România și politica securității colective. Pactul Briand-Kellog* (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2012), 66.

²¹ Ungarisches Institut München, “Convention of Defensive Alliance Between Romania and the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovans, 1921”, <http://www.forost.ungarisches-institut.de/pdf/19210607-1.pdf>, accessed May 15, 2022.

²² Govorchin, “The Little Entente”, 171.

The Little Entente had a form of institutional organization. There were regular ministerial meetings between states at least once a year or whenever circumstances made it necessary²³. Member states could also delegate a single common representative, depending on the situation, in the common interest of the three²⁴. Moreover, the Little Entente presented a minimal form of institutionalization, through so-called The Little Entente System or Pact of Organization, which represented the permanent collaboration in a legal recognized formal form²⁵. Article 7 of the Treaty establishing the Permanent Council also stipulated the possible establishment of an “economic council” to “coordinate the economic interests of the three states”²⁶, and specified what it should be composed of. Also created under the auspices of this treaty and specified in Article 9 was that a permanent secretariat would be organized, having a mobile working point depending on the state hosting the Permanent Council²⁷. In other words, the Small Entente could be defined as a minilateral format for the following reasons:

- It was an alliance established at the regional level with a delimited area of implementation.
- It had a permanently institutionalized form, with clear objectives, which made decisions in the European geopolitical framework of that period. Moreover, since its establishment, the members proposed that the Little Entente should be represented by a common voice in negotiations with the Allied Powers. The leaders of the states thus became aware of “the need to present themselves as a block not only to the enemy powers but especially to the allied powers”²⁸.
- It maintained a low level of institutional bureaucracy, with decisions undergoing a filtering process at least three times a year during meetings convened by the member states’ foreign ministers.

²³ ***, “Supplementary Agreement to the Treaties of Friendship an Alliance between the states of the Little Entente, 27 June 1930”, in *The Major International Treaties of the Twentieth Century (Volume 1)*, ed. J.A.S. Grenville and Bernard Wasserstein (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 167-168.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Pact of Organization of the Little Entente. Signed at Geneva, February 16, 1933, accessed May 15, <http://www.forost.ungarisches-institut.de/pdf/19330216-1.pdf>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Eliza Campus, *Din politica externă a României. 1913-1947* (București: Editura Politică, 1980), 219.

- It aimed to manage common security issues for all member states but also at a regional level, mainly focused on the irredentist and aggressive foreign policies of Hungary and Bulgaria.
- It did not seek to suppress the authority of the League of Nations as it was constituted in accordance with the principles of collective security.
- The flexibility offered by a small number of members enabled the alliance to extend the areas of collaboration, in this case, in the sector of economic cooperation.

Additionally, as in the case of more modern cooperation formats, the Little Entente was set up in accordance with the provisions of the League of Nations, even having a permanent secretariat at its headquarters in Geneva. Although these alliances ultimately failed with the outbreak of World War II and the military inability of member states to meet their security commitments, they demonstrated a pragmatic regional policy on the part of Romania, focused on clear security objectives and collective defense, especially when Nicolae Titulescu was acting in his capacity of foreign minister. Given the geopolitical context and Romania's defense capabilities, these proto-minilaterals represented an opportunity for Romania to affirm itself, from being a signatory of the treaty establishing the Permanent Council to the pursuit of collective defense initiatives between among the members.

Following the Sovietization process that Central and Eastern Europe was subjected to after the Second World War, in Romania, the Soviet model was introduced in all areas of society: politics, economy, culture, intellectual-scientific life²⁹, as well as foreign policy. The Sovietization of Romania which took place between 1945-1948, led to the imposition of a pro-Moscow regime that reduced the country to a state of obedience³⁰. This process also entailed integration into the system of alliances created and arbitrarily controlled by the Soviet Union. The old bilateral or multilateral commitments in which interwar Romania participated were no longer valid, instead, the first decades of Romania's foreign policy were monopolized by the USSR. The system of alliances and cooperation formats found in the communist bloc allowed only for limited bilateral relations between Romania and Western states, while precluding the possibility of more complex forms of collaboration. For example, Romania was involved in the Western Bretton Woods system, but other smaller forms of

²⁹ Adrian Cioroianu, *Pe umerii lui Marx. O introducere în istoria comunismului românesc* (București: Editura Curtea Veche, 2005), 322.

³⁰ Dennis Deletant, *România sub regimul comunist (A treia ediție)* (București: Editura Fundației Academia Civică, 2010), 85.

cooperation with the states of the opposing bloc were not allowed. The organizations in which Romania was involved, such as the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) or the Warsaw Pact, had a systemic character and not just regional applicability since they included, with small exceptions, all communist states globally. Even within these communist multilaterals, Romania had not pursued cooperation at the sub-regional, trilateral, or multi-member levels, designed to address the economic, social, or security issues of these states. In Central and Eastern Europe, the conception of a system of communist organizations was built and controlled by the Soviet Union³¹, while initiatives to empower satellite states by forming minilaterals not directly controlled by Moscow were possible only by exiting Soviet control structures.

The regime change that took place at the end of 1989, the disbandment of Moscow's alliance system in the years to come, and the transitions to liberal democracies allowed foreign policy concepts to change and diversify regional, European, and global opportunities for cooperation. During the first decade of transition, Romania's external behavior will be dominated by initiatives aimed at European and North Atlantic integration, which became a fundamental national objective from 1995 onwards. For a while, the opening up of regional cooperation tracks had been delayed due to internal political and social unrest, which had alienated potential partners, as well as by external factors, ranging from the war in Yugoslavia to Romania's inconsistent behavior towards its neighbors and Western powers. Starting in 1995, Romania laid the foundations for minilateral cooperation, through a series of trilateral frameworks established at the regional level.

IV. A Brief Description of Romania's Foreign Policy Concept Regarding the Formats of Cooperation after the Fall of Communism

Romania's foreign policy strategy tends to pay more attention to multilateral formats. An easy-to-understand strategy, even if we would refer only to the security and economic needs, critical in the post-communist period. As such, the accession within the Euro-Atlantic institutional constructions, EU and NATO, was considered to be of paramount significance for the future socio-economic

³¹ Exceptions were Tito's Yugoslavia in 1948 and Albania after 1967.

development of Romania. The initial neglect of regional collaborations, due to a conceptually limited foreign policy and accompanying internal problems, slowed down Romania's reintegration into the contemporary European fold, leaving the country in a prolonged state of international isolation³².

The final change in Romania's direction of foreign policy, following the decisions taken during the 1995 Snagov Declaration, was marked by a rare cross-party political consensus and resulted in a set of new treaties and collaborative formats in order to prepare politically and administratively the Romanian state for the EU and NATO accession. In addition to the treaties on the normalization of relations with neighboring states and the recognition of borders, the development of the trilateral cooperation format continued, with six such formats being initiated in the following years. Trilateral cooperation, especially in the fields of economy and security, played a complementary role in European and Euro-Atlantic integration efforts³³. European integration became a national strategic objective, and Romania's foreign policy thus became a necessary tool in achieving national goals. Since 1995, trilateral cooperation was established, accompanied by treaties to normalize relations with neighboring states, which did not exist under communism, alongside forms of bilateral, strategic, and non-strategic cooperation.

The process of transition from the socialist international organizations associated with the former Soviet bloc to a new approach in foreign relations marked by the normalization of relations with democratic states developed slowly in the early years. Neither the social or political conflicts, marked by numerous anti-democratic slippages and initial reliance on an Eastern orientation, which was not in sync with Western values, peppered by the mining crises of 1990, did not stimulate the exit from isolation.

In 1995, Greece held a forum for multilevel cooperation, covering political, economic, and migration aspects, along with combating drug trafficking criminality and organized crime, followed by talks on mutual assistance in emergencies such as natural disasters³⁴. This format, together with the one established in 1997, the Romania-Bulgaria-Turkey trilateral, focused on securing

³² Romania wanted to join the Visegrád Group since its inception, but due to ethnic unrest in Târgu-Mureș, it had been turned down.

³³ Particular attention was paid to security, especially the control of transnational crime, of drug, human and arms trafficking. The security of these areas was a sensitive issue that could delay integration into the EU and NATO multilateral structures.

³⁴ Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, „Trilaterală România-Bulgaria-Grecia”, <https://www.mae.ro/node/1506>, accessed on May 9, 2022.

the borders from illicit activities, leading to the exchange of experience with Greece and Turkey, which were NATO member states. Thus, through minilateral means, Romania was building the capabilities needed to join the multilateral formats. A series of similar collaborations with the neighboring states followed, including with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, former Soviet countries. The key priority remained the inclusion in the multilateral formats and the strengthening of strategic or special status bilateral partnerships, such as with the United States or, as was the case, with Hungary, on the sensitive issue of minority protection³⁵.

The accession to NATO and the EU, which occurred in 2004 and 2007, respectively, represented the fundamental foreign policy strategic objectives that Romania pursued, along with other former communist Central and Eastern European states. Thus, the fulfillment of the strategic goals of Euro-Atlantic integration also led to a change in external behavior, which now, revolved around concentrating efforts on economic, social, and security cooperation with members of multilaterals and/or states with liberal democracies considered “like-minded” partners. The categorical pro-European direction, unquestionably supported both politically and at the level of public opinion, has reaffirmed the need for regional stability, involving both the achievement of objectives set at the NATO level, but also from the perspective of promoting values and liberal concepts³⁶. Specifically, the dynamics of Romanian foreign policy are evolving towards regional initiatives, by reconfirming older trilateral partnerships, but also stimulating new formats of smaller cooperation, focused on issues difficult to manage at the multilateral level.

Considering as a reference moment the 2008 NATO Summit from Bucharest, we can see that Romania initiated or joined miniateral collaboration formats at the regional level on various levels aimed at ensuring security on the eastern flank of NATO while also deepening economic and social ties between the member states. A common feature of all formats in which Romania is a member is premised on the idea that multilateral alliances should not be prejudiced in terms of their institutional influence and relevance. The minilaterals in which Romania participates aim to enhance the European

³⁵ Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, „Declarația de Parteneriat Strategic dintre Guvernul României și Guvernul Republicii Ungare pentru Europa secolului XXI”, March 2021, <https://www.mae.ro/node/5181>, accessed on May 9, 2022.

³⁶ European Commission, “Standard Eurobarometer 93”, Summer 2020, 13, <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/ebsm/api/public/deliverable/download?doc=true&deliverableId=73669>, accessed May 18, 2022.

integration process and to maintain regional stability in an area that is unstable par excellence. If in the first half of the decade immediately following the fall of communism, Romania was completely absent as a factor of influence at the regional level, progress in this regard is noticeable in recent years, given the constantly changing geopolitical situation in the Black Sea and all-over eastern Europe. Formats such as the Three Seas Initiative or Bucharest Nine are minilaterals that respect EU and NATO values and complement their resilience, cohesion, and security instruments in Eastern Europe.

Eastern European minilaterals go beyond the theoretical boundaries of ad hoc collaboration that address a limited number of areas and, instead, seek to optimize a semi-comprehensive approach by facilitating discussion forums on resilience, economic cooperation, and vital energy security in the current geopolitical conditions³⁷. These formats will boost existing goals at the EU level, by building methodologies that take into account the different features of the East-West dynamic, further facilitating the processes of implementing European strategic programs such as reducing dependence on energy imports from Russia or managing climate change. Specifically, Central and Eastern European NATO members have found, through minilateral collaborative formats, a “fill the gap” method between East and West concerning the significant differences in economic potential or the quality and maturity of the infrastructure³⁸.

Thus, Romania has integrated into the new system of regional cooperation formats developed over the last decade in Europe. However, apart from regional initiatives, at a global scale, Romania is reactive and dependent on strategic partners and/or on decisions taken at the level of multilateral alliances. Areas of cooperation are not diversified and focus largely on Black Sea security and active participation in NATO policy on the eastern flank. In this way, the Romanian foreign policy approaches irrelevance at the European level and is almost completely insignificant as part of the global geopolitical games – this, in turn, implicitly affects the efficiency of the minilateral formats of which it is part. With the exception of the Bucharest Nine format, there is a lack of strategic initiative, both in terms of bilateral relations³⁹ and innovation at the

³⁷ Three Seas, “Objectives”, 2022, <https://3seas.eu/about/objectives>, accessed May 19, 2022.

³⁸ Grzegorz Zbińkowski, “The Three Seas Initiative and its Economic and Geopolitical Effect on the European Union and Central and Eastern Europe”, *Comparative Economic Research. Central and Eastern Europe* 22, no. 2 (2019): 2.

³⁹ Romania has strategic partnerships with states such as the USA or France, but not with neighboring states or in the broader region. Relations with Hungary are still strained amid tensions raising from minority policies.

regional level. Moreover, this shy and washed-out attitude, shrouded in proactivity, defined by taking on the role of mere executor of American and European plans, but lacking in initiative, does not contribute to an improvement in asserting regional responsibility, especially in the current geopolitical context.

V. NATO's Eastern Front Alliance. The Bucharest Nine Initiative

In many ways, the Bucharest Nine Initiative (B9) is an unusual format. It is a collective security framework within a collective defense alliance, namely NATO, with a stated role in highlighting the risks and threats facing these states on the eastern flank of the aforementioned alliance. At the same time, the eastern flank represents NATO's main sensitive point, the area from which the most complex threats to the members of the alliance begin to spread. All NATO strategic concepts have been adapted to the geopolitical evolution of this part of the alliance, but even so, the former communist states that now form the eastern flank have felt the need for a minilateral cooperation format that would identify priority tasks in line with Russia's behavior. This being said, the B9 never set out to become a power vector, or to occupy a central role in NATO, but to add value to the alliance.

Poland and Romania were the states that proposed, in 2014, the formation of an instrument of dialogue and cooperation at the level of the entire eastern flank of NATO in the context of the annexation of Crimea, each state having its own security concerns. In the case of Romania, the main concern had to do with the future militarization of the Black Sea region triggered by Russia⁴⁰. Moreover, in addition to facilitating regional cooperation, another factor that drives such an initiative focuses on the engagement of global leaders, especially of the United States, in the security agenda of the region⁴¹.

B9 was founded in Bucharest in November 2015, by bringing together nine states: Romania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, and Hungary. These countries share a common communist

⁴⁰ In fact, the security of the Black Sea is an recurrent concern of the Romanian foreign policy, but in reality, it lacks content and results, except for the allied military aid obtained after the unofficial aggression of Russia in Ukraine in 2014.

⁴¹ Sergiy Gerasymchuk, "Bucharest Nine: Looking for Cooperation on NATO's Eastern Flank?", *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, July 2019, 4, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueeros/ukraine/15574.pdf>, accessed May 19, 2022.

past, geographical and geopolitical proximity to the Russian Federation, and have also been subjected to the aggressive policies practiced by the former USSR on the international stage. In November 2016, B9 foreign ministers, in the presence of the NATO Deputy Secretary-General Rose Gottemoeller, drafted a Joint Declaration outlining the alliance's key objectives: strengthening and supporting Member States' security in light of Russia's aggressive stance in Ukraine⁴². In practice, since its inception, the B9 goal has been to institutionalize all the security concerns of the NATO states on the Eastern Front related to Russia's aggressive intentions in the area and draw the attention of Western military powers, especially of the United States. During the Trump administration, when the American position was one of distancing itself from traditional transatlantic values and implicitly from the institutions that represented them, the role of B9 became rather decorative in a Europe that was beginning to question the relevance of NATO⁴³. In a series of high-level summits between 2017 and 2019, at which several joint statements were adopted, states expressed concern over Russia's actions in Ukraine's separatist areas, maintained their support for a European and pro-Atlantic path for Ukraine, and reasserted their commitment to the policy of defense and deterrence in response to any revisionist state in Eastern Europe. Without real American and Western support, B9 was until 2020 an inefficient format in terms of institutionalizing its main objective, except for the organization of joint military exercises in which Ukraine, a B9 partner state, also participated. However, with the notable exception of Hungary⁴⁴, the B9 cooperation has pushed all member states to revise their conceptions on national security by focusing more heavily on the issue concerning the potential and existing threats coming from Russia. Additionally, by involving military experts in the process of strengthening the capabilities of the Ukrainian army, B9 has also embarked on a mission of assistance and solidarity with Ukraine to counter Russian expansion, in what can be called B9+ initiative.

⁴² Sergiy Gerasymchuk, "NATO's Bucharest Nine: Nothing quiet on the eastern flank", *Ukrainian Prism Foreign Policy Council*, December 29, 2021, 4, http://prismua.org/en/nato_b9/, accessed May 19, 2022.

⁴³ The Economist, "Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead", November 7, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-becoming-brain-dead>, accessed May 19, 2022.

⁴⁴ Hungary has had a tolerant attitude towards the Russian Federation over the past decade, thanks to the good relations between the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the leader of a Eurosceptical party, and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Russia's preferential energy policy towards Hungary is also well known.

As of 2020, the role of B9 in NATO and in the region has started to grow in importance. The process of rebuilding the transatlantic relationship initiated by the Biden administration has led to a new discussion on the future of NATO and the strategic issues facing the alliance. In this way, the B9 initiative became attractive from the perspective of securing the eastern flank, representing a flexible format for collaboration, and a way to decentralize the process of monitoring the borders of the alliance. In May 2021, President Biden attended a virtual summit of B9 leaders, hosted by the presidents of Poland and Romania, assuring allies on the eastern front that the US would be actively involved in closer cooperation with the nine members from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg also attended the meeting, stressing the importance of the US commitment to combating the security threats facing NATO. This top-level representation reflects the potential of B9, the goal for which it was created being achieved step-by-step, as the US and NATO will continue to prioritize security in the region.

Another testament to the importance of the B9 format was the top-level conference between President Biden and the B9 members, represented by their heads of state. The summit came after talks between the US leader and Russian president amid tensions over Ukraine's eastern border. Afterwards, the US president wanted to immediately inform B9 leaders that the US was directly involved in pursuing dialogue and setting a course to discourage the Russian side from escalating⁴⁵. The relevance of B9 became crucial with the ongoing Russian military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which as of November 2022, was still ongoing. B9 provided military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, and they benefited, in turn, from a considerable increase in NATO troop deployments in the territory of the member states for defense and deterrence purposes.

For Romania, the B9 format means more efficient cooperation with NATO allies in the region. The cooperation in B9 also led to the supplementation of the allied military forces that are regularly deployed in the Black Sea, whose security is strategic for Romania. If in the early years, B9 seemed to be only a format without substance, incapable of bringing relevant benefits to Romania, the war in Ukraine and the reorientation of US policy towards the security of Eastern Europe have invigorated the format.

⁴⁵ Gerasymchuk, “Bucharest Nine”, 5.

VI. The Three Seas Initiative, a Comprehensive and Flexible Political Platform

The initiative of the Three Seas is a minilateral format, set up in the eastern part of the EU, comprising of 12 states, including Romania⁴⁶. Compared to B9, the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) goes beyond the exclusive sphere of security and expands the areas of collaboration, while maintaining a small number of general objectives – a particularity for minilaterals. Launched in 2015, a prolific year in terms of regional cooperation movements in Eastern Europe, it aims to modernize regional infrastructure, both digital and land transport, as well as strengthen energy independence, especially from Russia, by reducing reliance on gas and oil.

The TSI can also be identified as an instrument of cohesion, given that with the exception of Austria, the rest of the member states came out of communism with a less developed infrastructure compared to the capitalist West. Investments at the national level after decommunization have not been enough to significantly close the gap. The field of energy security is also important, in the context of Russia’s implementation of hybrid warfare strategies, and TSI states are at the forefront. A key fundamental goal of the TSI is to strengthen transatlantic relations, but also to maintain a balanced economic policy with China. The discussion framework of the first TSI summit hosted by Croatia in 2016 had as guest a representative of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, very interested in the development of the area⁴⁷. Notably, TSI, as an expression the Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea area, aims to operate “both within the European Union and across the broader transatlantic space, [...], without creating a parallel structure to the existing mechanisms of cooperation”⁴⁸, having a complementary character and working in parallel with the EU. When analysing TSI in terms of the theoretical principles of a minilateral format, the non-bureaucratic nature is highlighted, with annual meetings of members’ leaders

⁴⁶ The rest of the members are: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia.

⁴⁷ Visegrád Post, “The Three Seas Initiative: Central and Eastern Europe takes charge of its own destiny”, August 28, 2016, <https://visegradpost.com/en/2016/08/28/the-three-seas-initiative-central-and-eastern-europe-takes-charge-of-its-own-destiny/>, accessed on May 18, 2022.

⁴⁸ Three Seas, “The Joint Statement on The Three Seas Initiative (The Dubrovnik Statement)”, August 25, 2016, <http://three-seas.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DUBROVNIK.pdf>, accessed May 18, 2022.

that trace the lines of evolution and thus maintain the ability to provide perspectives and quick decisions, even ad-hoc. Also, along with the state initiatives, TSI organizes a business forum dedicated to innovation and development in the priority areas.

Unlike B9, TSI was not just a consultation mechanism in the early years, lacking in projects or decisions that would have a real impact on its members. TSI has proposed and implemented extensive road and rail infrastructure projects, which will help reduce deficiencies in this regard. In addition, the TSI relied on development areas and common security issues across all member states, which encouraged collaboration and active involvement, and facilitated the interstate connection of infrastructure projects or energy systems. Moreover, at the 2018 Bucharest summit, members set up a common investment fund for TSI, in which Romania also participates through EximBank, but so far, has not produced any relevant results.

Although it did not initiate this cooperation format, Romania was actively involved in the development of the initiative, seen in the fact that TSI is the only regional alliance that focuses on issues like poor infrastructure, energy security, or cyber security. There are seven major TSI projects in which Romania is involved, that focus on the development of land infrastructure, digitalization, and sustainable energy – all underperforming chapters that have evolved at a very slow pace since the country’s democratic transition. However, compared to other countries, Romania is not very prolific in terms of project initiatives, relative to its needs and size. For comparison, Hungary has around 15 priority projects, while Croatia has 16, though these states do not reach the combined population and territory of Romania⁴⁹.

A recurrent problem would be the lack of a permanent TSI coordination and monitoring structure to reduce the member states’ particular, if not systemic, shortcomings in project implementation, and to prevent delays that could hamper progress in reaching the infrastructure interconnection targets. Traditionally, Romania is a state where the pace of infrastructure development is slow, especially for road and rail, and thus, a structure designed to provide consultancy, assistance, and supranational monitoring of TSI projects could increase the pace of implementation and efficiency of TSI in general.

Among Romania’s seven priority projects, two are most significant: *Rail 2 Sea* and *Via Carpathia*. The former wants to link the Baltic Sea Port of Gdansk with

⁴⁹ Three Seas, “Priority Projects”, 2022, <https://3seas.eu/about/progressreport>, accessed May 18, 2022.

the Black Sea Port of Constanța. The project, proposed by Romania and supported by the United States, is of both military and civilian importance. Meanwhile, the latter is a road infrastructure project that stretches from Estonia to Bulgaria. This future transport corridor should be completed by 2030.

Ultimately, measuring the efficiency and relevance of the TSI for Romania depends very much on the ability to implement the proposed projects on time, without delay. According to the TSI platform, which provides annual information on the overall progress of projects, *Rail 2 Sea* and *Via Carpathia* are in the “substantial progress” stage⁵⁰, but this does not preclude the possibility, for various reasons, of delays, postponements, or cancellations. Whether TSI will prove efficient or not where Romania is concerned, we would argue that, in theory, TSI can enable the country to become integrated in the European transport system, given that its own system is fraught with various deficiencies at the moment, especially by connecting Romania with the member states of the format. In practice, a lot depends on Romania’s internal capabilities.

VII. A Substanceless Minilateral. The Craiova Group

Formed by Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, and Serbia in order to pursue economic, cultural, and energy cooperation, but also for the purpose of developing the transport infrastructure, the Craiova Group aspired to be a transposition adapted to the Balkan conditions of the Visegrád Group. Launched in 2015, with Greece joining in 2017 after the meeting in Varna, the group did not perform as the leaders of the member states would have intended, lacking in relevant projects and initiatives that would bring considerable benefits to either regional / economic cooperation or energy security. Furthermore, the alliance remained largely unknown to the general public, and the academic environment was not involved in its analysis, as proven by the absence of any specialized works addressing the subject.

Initially, when it was launched, the Craiova Group began to strengthen the telecommunications infrastructure and provide support to Serbia with a view to future integration into the EU. Additionally, road infrastructure was among the Group’s main priorities, with a highway between Belgrade-Timișoara-Bucharest-Ruse-Sofia being planned. The highway would have included a subsequent

⁵⁰ Three Seas, “Project Platform”, 2022, <https://projects.3seas.eu/>, accessed May 18, 2022.

extension to Thessaloniki, after the inclusion of Greece in the group⁵¹. Although there were extensive discussions during the high-level meetings on railway infrastructure modernization projects between the four states and the European Commission encouraged projects on energy issues, such as the Balkan Gas Hub in 2016⁵², the Craiova Group failed to implement its own initiatives. At the declarative level, the leaders of the member countries committed themselves to connect the port of Thessaloniki with important ports in Bulgaria and Romania, taking into account the connectivity improvements in the capitals of neighboring states.

The Craiova group is best known for single focus initiatives, namely competing for the 2028 European Football Championship or the 2030 World Cup. The proposal came from the head of the Greek government at the Thessaloniki summit in November 2018 and remains, in fact, the only decision that did not have a simple declarative value. The last summit of the Craiova Group took place in 2020, with a focus on managing the pandemic situation. Since then, the Craiova Group has not initiated meetings between state leaders or other joint initiatives within the format, and a revival is still pending.

VIII. Conclusions

Romania's participation in minilateral alliances has not always been a strategic priority. If in the interwar period there were collective defense alliances created mainly due to the absence at the European level of a NATO-like structure to offer security guarantees, in the post-Cold War period, the geopolitics of the European continent requires interconnection in many areas (economy, social development, security, or culture). Ultimately, Romania's attitude towards the possibilities offered by a flexible format did not detract from the national strategic objective which was the integration into the multilateral structures of the West, NATO and the European Union. Prior to the accession, any type of collaboration had among its objectives *the preparation for accession*, or in other words, European and North Atlantic integration.

⁵¹ Venelin Bochev, "Craiova Group - too late or better late than never?", *European Policy Center*, December 6, 2018, <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/craiova-group-too-late-or-better-late-than-never/>, accessed May 21, 2022.

⁵² European Commission, "Balkan Gas Hub Concept and its role in the EU's Internal Energy Market", Varna, 2016, accessed May 22, 2022, https://www.Europeangashub.com/wp-content/uploads/attach_686.pdf

The minilateral formats in which Romania is involved are, at least for the time being, devoid of conclusive results and impact, with the notable exception of the Three Seas, which offers a broader perspective on regional cooperation. Bucharest Nine has achieved its goal for which it was created after the American perception of Russia's aggression on NATO's eastern front changed. With the war in Ukraine, the B9 became relevant both in terms of common security strategies and in the management of the refugee crisis, since it already was a well-established platform for communication between the member states, directly affected by the current geopolitical situation. As for the cooperation at the sub-regional level, represented by the analysis of the Craiova Group, we saw that these types of formats require a greater involvement on the part of the member states, which should not limit themselves only to the declarative level, where their intentions are concerned. The Craiova Group is a format that has a lot of potential, especially in the areas of economic cooperation, digitization, and greening, and it needs to be revitalized in order to reach any of its stated goals.

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