

## THE PLACE OF ROMANIA AND RUSSIA IN THE CONTEXT OF EAST-WEST RELATIONS: POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS

TATIANA G. BITKOVA\*

**Abstract.** *The paper highlights the similarities and the differences between Russia and Romania regarding the assimilation of Western civilization. It also reveals the causes of the current foreign policy options of the two countries, taking into account their position in the current global context and, of course, the size of their territories. Also, it specifies the unsolved “dossiers” of the Russian-Romanian relations.*

**Keywords:** *East, West, Europeanization, Slavophilism, Westernism, Atlanticism, Eurasianism.*

The search for ways and means of modernization, both in Romania and in Russia, has always meant the assimilation experience of Western European civilization. With many similarities in this respect, our countries still occupy different positions in the force field of European attraction, not only because of the different sizes of our countries, but also because of the specificity of the internal development and geopolitical location on the map of Eurasia. In this regard, several historical subjects will be touched in the present paper.

Russia is often considered in Romania as “the East” that has repeatedly slowed down its European ambitions in the Romanian history. But it should be emphasized in this connection that Russia itself, over the past several centuries, has directed its development towards the west. For Russia, however, there is only the “West” and there is no external “East” that could be charged with its difficulties. However, the “East” appears to be within us. Note that “the East” lives also inside the Romanian culture. In Romania, this phenomenon is sometimes called the remnants of the mentality of the Balkan areal, which had been too long under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. As for Russia’s internal “East”, philosophers and culture sometimes explain it by the too large territory of Russia, which does not allow

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\* Senior Researcher, PhD, The Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences, Russian Academy of Sciences; tgbitkova@mail.ru.

its residents to achieve the concentration, mental focus and clarity of purpose, the rationality that lies at the bottom of Western development<sup>1</sup>.

It is known that the gravitational attraction of Romania to Western Europe was exposed most clearly in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The young Romanian state adopted almost all of the European institutional, legislative and state system. However, modernization was largely formal and superficial and, according to T. Maiorescu, the most outstanding cultural and political personality of the time, was “a form without content.” This is also evident in the lifestyle and even the fashion of the upper strata of the Romanian society. J. Le Claire, a member of the French military mission in Bucharest, wrote: “While Paris fashion is slavishly copied, there is more wealth and ostentation than taste in the choice of fabrics and hairstyles”<sup>2</sup>.

The influence of the Western culture on the formation of the Romanian national culture was, however, not superficial; not only the form but also the content was present. Prominent members of the Romanian national culture were brought up not only in the framework of European models, but also directly in Europe. The great Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu was a student at the universities of Vienna and Berlin, where he studied works of Western philosophers. His deeply national poetry bears the features of late European Romanticism. Lucian Blaga, one of the major masters of Romanian traditionalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, studied in Vienna. His nationally-oriented philosophical system bears the imprint of Schopenhauer’s ideas, while his poetry has expressionistic features. One of the most important musicians of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, George Enescu also studied in Vienna and Paris. His work incorporated the influence of Viennese School neo-classicism and neo-baroque. At all stages, however, it was always important and distinctive to appeal to the Romanian folklore. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, trends of Western culture (impressionism, symbolism, expressionism etc.) have been reflected in the Romanian artistic consciousness.

The whole Russian aristocratic culture was not simply nourished by European scientists. Historian Alexander Zimin even considered that it “did not have roots in the Russian reality,” and that it “was non-national.” He mentioned, as an example, the Decembrists, who believed “that it is enough to get the power ... to bring happiness to all those who live in snowy Russia. Even though they expressed it in French.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the whole life of the upper strata of the Russian society of the 18-19 centuries rested on European standards. In the houses of the nobility there were French, German and sometimes English tutors. Russian emperors married German princesses. However, the Russian culture did not only assimilate and adopt standards and mindsets of the West, but also made a unique contribution to the world

<sup>1</sup> Russian poet and statesman Peter Vyazemsky (1792-1878) wrote: “A distance from an idea to another one is five thousand miles”.

<sup>2</sup> Cit.: S. A. Madiievski, *Ruminskoe obshchestvo ot burzhuznih preobazvanii 60-h gg. XIX v. do 1918 g.* (Romanian Society from bourgeois reforms of 60s. XIX c. up to 1918) – Chişinău, Zolotii straniti, 1996, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandr Zimin, “Dve tivilizatii v istorii Rossii”, *Vestnic visshoi shkoly* (“Two civilizations in the history of Russia”, *Bulletin of High School*), Moscow, no. 3, 2002, p. 43-47.

culture. In this respect the giants of Russian literature, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, should be mentioned. The Russian composer Peter Tchaikovsky is called a European romantic. Being fascinated by the works of Wagner, he unwittingly borrowed many of his musical motifs. But his music, bearing national and folk motifs, is unique.

*Europeanization of Romania and Russia  
in the Late Period of the Modern Time*

Trying to understand the specifics of the Europeanization of the Romanian society, one finds features that are very similar to those of Russia. Like in Romania, there were big problems with the process of modernization in Russia. Since Peter I, attempts were made to modernize Russia following European models. The whole 18<sup>th</sup> century passed under the sign of Europeanization. Catherine II even thought about the need to limit serfdom, but soon it turned out that it was still impossible to lift this burden. Liberal reforms by her grandson, Alexander I, resulted in the Decembrist uprising of the enlightened nobility in 1825. The Decembrist movement caused fear of the authorities and a long political reaction by Nicholas I (the brother of Alexander I). The abolition of serfdom in 1861 was followed by an attempt on the emperor's life and other terrorist acts, resulting in the reaction of authorities – infringement of liberties and increased censorship.

The inconsistencies of Russian life during the 30's of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are vividly described in the famous travel essays by the Count de Custine<sup>4</sup>. He was horrified to find, behind European facades of rich houses in Moscow, dirt, strange and weird manners. No way could he grasp why it was there need to build, on a bleak plain, Greek Empire-style mansions with porticos. In his opinion, in Russia, for that matter, there was a lack of hills and mountains. Isn't this a form without content?

A new form could not overcome feudal mechanisms of social organization, customs and habits of the illiterate masses and half-educated bureaucrats. Let us re-read Gogol, recalling the characters of "Dead Souls." Not Europe! And what is interesting: Gogol's "The Inspector General", which I saw in the 90's on the stage of the Bucharest "Teatrul mic", looked very lively and authentic to the Romanian reality, and was perceived by the audience as something familiar in spirit and content.

The Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin, being in exile after the October Revolution in 1917, wrote that communism in Russia was an unfortunate and embarrassing use of Western sociological exercises on unsuitable soil.

In Romania, it was also difficult to adapt Western standards to the slumbering society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were discrepancies at every step. As S. Anton wrote, the Western modernization of Romania caused a crisis of identity among local elites. "Since at least Dinicu Golesku<sup>5</sup>, Romanians in the Danubian principalities

<sup>4</sup> Astolphe de Custine, *Rossia v 1839 godu (Russia in 1839)*, Moskva, Iz-vo im. Sabashnikovih, 1996, vol. 1, 528 p., vol. 2, 479 p.

<sup>5</sup> Dinicu Golesku (1777-1830) – scientist and educator, author of the first published diary of travel impressions (1827), where the distressing gap is fixed between Western civilization and the social and economic situation in Wallachia.

had more or less traumatic contacts with contemporary civilizations, the constant comparisons destroying them in their own eyes.” Note that the experience of Transylvanians who had travelled to the West was different, because they had a different history under the Habsburgs<sup>6</sup>. “However, is this Europeanization really needed?” – ask those members of the intellectual world in both countries that are concerned about the possible loss of national identity.

Taking hold of the minds of the educated layers of the Romanian society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Westernization became a subject of anxiety for those representatives of the elite who saw in it a loss of local identity. The alienation of the Romanian intellectual elite from the past was manifested, “it continuously starts to search for its place under the sun, including the symbolical topography of the native land.”<sup>7</sup> Thus the Romanian traditionalism was formed.

In Russia, in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, traditionalism (Slavophilism) arises as a counterbalance to Westernism. These ideas are to a certain extent reflected in the creativity of the greatest masters of the Russian literature: Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy. Deep cultural and public processes stand behind these, probably distinct examples.

The main obstacle to economic and cultural modernization, associated with the process of Europeanization in both Romania and Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was a feudal structure of the society, its predominantly rural character. In Romania, in contrast to Russia, the bourgeois class was formed mainly of foreigners, the urban environment was very cosmopolitan, so that the city seemed to have a particularly alien atmosphere<sup>8</sup>. That is why the contradiction between Europeanism and traditionalism in Romania is much more serious than in Russia.

The difference between rural and urban areas meant for the traditionalist trends, such as poporanizm and semenetorizm, a contradiction between the ethnic and cultural purity of peasants, “native” boyars, and cosmopolitan bourgeoisie. The idealization of rural and patriarchal past is a favorite theme of the Romanian literature of the interwar period.

The struggle between traditionalism and Europeanism, or Westernism, continues, both in politics and culture, in both countries throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, we cannot deal with these issues in detail, because it is necessary to appeal to the present days. It should be only emphasized that the issue of Europeanization is too old to be solved quickly and easily.

### *Coordinates of Modern Westernization of Romania and Russia*

After the fall of the Ceausescu regime in 1989 a dispute between Westerners and traditionalists in Romania arose, due to the freedom of speech and vivid journalistic forms. Traditionalism highlights the risks of European influences, and asserts the inviolability of national identity, sometimes starting from pre-Roman times.

<sup>6</sup> Sorin Antohi, *Exercițiul distanței: discursuri, societăți, metode*, ediția a II-a neschimbată, Bucharest, Nemira, 1998, p. 299.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> S. A. Madievski, *op. cit.*, p. 56-58.

“Today we are witnessing the spread of favorite topics of the national communism” – wrote L. Boia. In particular, “the Dacians are flooding the market of printed materials, advancing, through a variety of ways, an idea of primacy and superiority of Romanians.”<sup>9</sup> In the 90’s “Rumynizm” had become the ideology of the political parties of the nationalist wing. New advocates of national identity, as well as representatives of nationally-oriented movements of the interwar period, insist on the essential difference between Romanian identity and that of Balkan, Slavic and Western Europe.

According to some extreme traditionalist views, Romania is generally outside of time and space. Time is the glorious past of Romanian ethnicity. Extreme nativists deny the North, South, East and West. Their ideal toponymy is a vertical with zero length, which brings together ... the depth of the land and the height of the sky.<sup>10</sup>

In the early 90’s the Romanian society, as the Russian one, was still embraced as a whole by the euphoria of Westernism. Westerners wanted to see their country as a part of symbolic Europe, to include it in the Western European areal. From the extreme point of view, the Orthodox and Byzantine traditions have alienated Romania from the West. Europe appears as a savior, which hosted many of the best representatives of the national culture during hard times.

However, the difficulties of the transition period – the economic downturn, corruption, impoverishment of the already poor people – have contributed to the strengthening of nationally oriented trends in politics and culture. A striking example is the activity of the “Great Romania” party and its leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor.

The official foreign policy of the Romanian leadership, despite changes of presidential commands, has a clear pro-Western orientation. The way of Romania to the EU and NATO was not easy. The press repeatedly criticized the country’s leadership: Romania still cannot find an individual face in a new system of international relations. The period of Ceaușescu, when Romania held a special place between the East and the West and when her opinion was heard, has passed together with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

Since the mid of the 90’s, there have been calls in the Romanian press for a more sober and critical assessment of Western partners. Recollections of the outcome of the Second World War, “when we were left by the West”, were quite relevant when at the Madrid meeting of NATO in 1997 it was decided to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to the organization as full members, while Romania was given only assurances that its intend to be a NATO member will be considered at the further expansion of NATO.

A litmus test on the support by Romania of the Western policy has become its position concerning the Balkan crisis. It is known that, prior to the recognition of Kosovo’s independence by Western states, Romania demonstrated loyalty to

<sup>9</sup> Lucian Boia, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1997, p. 288.

<sup>10</sup> Sorin Antohi, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

any NATO actions in the Balkans, regardless of Romanian economic interests. Serious concerns have arisen in Bucharest when comparing events in Kosovo with Romanian intra-ethnic problems. That is why Romania was among the countries that, despite its membership in NATO and the EU, did not recognize Kosovo's independence (2008).

As it was acknowledged by some Romanian analysts, the U.S. and EU promote in the Balkans their own interests. "We are witnessing a clash of interests of the U.S., EU and Russia in the Balkans – wrote M. Suhl. – There are two stakes in the game: an economic and a political one. The economic one implies the sales market and the use of the Balkans as a traditional way to transport raw materials from Asia. The political stake involves the establishment of political stability, which should benefit all the major political players."<sup>11</sup> The great powers, of course, always and everywhere have their own geopolitical interests.

What is the place of Romania in this context? Romania offers Western partners the use of its intermediate geographical position between the East and the West, so as to find its own niche in the East-West dialogue. According to Romania, the provision of its territory to transport of energy resources from the East to the West could bring economic benefits.

Russia, like Romania, survived the period of romantic fascination with the West in the early 90's. Coming to power, democratic forces hoped to quickly build in Russia a legal society and a market economy, and the West seemed to represent the major political ally. The first generation of new Russian political liberals even thought that Russia should certainly focus on NATO and other transatlantic structures. This direction of foreign policy was called "Atlanticism". Among the politicians, leaders of "Atlanticists", there was the foreign minister at that time Andrei Kozyrev.

However, the West's trust in Russia gradually began to fall, because we could not get out of the crisis. Contrary to hopes of "Atlanticists", the West did not take Russia to the "select club". Moreover, using a weakening of Russia, the West often did not consider Russia in addressing major issues of international security and even sought to limit Russian influence in its near abroad.

Dissatisfaction with relations with the West and growing patriotic and nationalist sentiments in the country forced Yeltsin to change, the tone of Russian diplomacy by the end of 1993.

In the beginning of 1999 the US-British air force bombed Iraq. Since this military action was not coordinated with the UN Security Council, Moscow described it as a manifestation of the hegemonic tendencies in the politics of Washington. No sooner the crisis in Russian-American relations had softened in late March 1999, NATO began bombing Yugoslavia. The Kremlin condemned the bombing as a gross violation of the UN Charter and the principles of international law, as an attempt to dictate NATO's will to sovereign states. The sharp reaction of Russia to the bombing of Iraq and Yugoslavia, however, had no

<sup>11</sup> Marian Zulean, "Interesele americane în Eurasia", *Sfera politică*, no. 63, oct. 1998, p. 17-18.

effect on the policy of the U.S. and its allies. The balance of power in the world has changed strongly not in favor of Moscow. The bombing of Yugoslavia clearly demonstrated that Washington did not pay attention to the opinion of Moscow.

Until the end of the 90's it had become quite clear that Russia is not so comfortable to Western partners and not so similar to their world as it was earlier considered in Moscow and in Western capitals. In these circumstances, the Russian government began to implement its own line of confidence in international affairs, thanks to the activity of Yevgeny Primakov, who as foreign minister had managed to find a common ground not only with foreign colleagues, but also with the Russian opposition. Primkov's activity as a foreign minister fits the concept of *Realpolitik*.

The so-called "Primakov doctrine" of multipolar alternativity, although not described in a special document, formed the basis of a new foreign policy in the 2000s. Russia refused the role of "junior partner" in relations with the U.S. and with the West as a whole, this step being supported by the strengthening of its economy.

The Russian foreign policy after 2000 was based on the desire to adequately assess the resource base of its policy and its place in the world. Continuing Primakov's direction, Putin's administration has supported the achievement of a multipolar world and the protection of national interests. Emphasis was laid on the need for a closer cooperation with the West.

### *Romania and Russia Today*

What can be said about the Russian-Romanian relations in this context? It is known that a painful point of the Russian-Romanian relations concerns Bessarabian lands. Our state has always considered this region as a zone of geopolitical interest and wished to confirm its presence there. Romania, however, believes that this policy prevented the unification of the Romanians into a single state and hope for the support of its position by Western powers, who show quite discreet interest in the region, given the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria.

Today in the Romanian press one can meet the claim that Kremlin cannot turn away from its "imperialist pretensions." Romanian authors write that modern Russia implicitly prevents the political unification of Romania and Moldova, playing a mixed role in the Transnistrian conflict. Events in Moldova, even if they were not provoked by Moscow, belong to the sphere of Russian strategy of creating tension in the region, which should be resolved by Russia itself, making participants in these conflicts depend on its will. This is the view from Bucharest. Moscow has refrained from comments.

Political contacts between Romania and Russia in the 90s were hampered not only because of the "Atlanticism" of Russia's policy but also because of its lack of interest in Eastern Europe. Romania concentrated all its foreign policy resources in the western direction. The relations between Romania and Russia were also burdened by the search for compromise in the negotiations for the preparation of the basic political treaty, the signing of which was held in 2003.

The Romanian press called the talks with Russia as a long string of concessions made by the Romanian government. Here were included both the assessment of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the problem of the Romanian gold reserves..

The signing of the treaty facilitated mutual contacts at both political and economic levels. However, in contrast to more flexible predecessors, President Traian Basescu has repeatedly spoken out strongly enough against Russia. Moscow was concerned that the Romanian government was increasing its influence in Moldova and that the Western powers are not indifferent to the problems of Moldova. Moscow was also not happy with the Agreement on the deployment of the U.S. missile defense system in Romania. Russian analysts have repeatedly pointed out that the program is essentially aimed at Russia.

Russia, whatever it may be accused of in Romania, is now a very profitable and promising economic partner. The strengthening of economic ties and political contacts offer benefits to both countries. At the end of 2011, the total volume of the Romanian-Russian trade reached 4.343 billion U.S. dollars (14.1% more than in 2010).

The relations between our countries cannot ignore Western interests. This is inevitable as the West is not only a political power, but also an attractive cultural civilization. At the same time, Romania and Russia are worlds somewhat different from the West, not only because of the lack of material development, but also because they are areals of different spiritual foundations. In both countries, the liberal Western-direction opposes traditionalism and nationalism, both in culture and politics.

What is the specific of today's Russian traditionalism? "The authors of this trend, of course, are innovative Slavophiles, as they coincide with their predecessors, living in the 19 century, in the respect of the confrontation to Western civilization and opposition to it of the Russian (sometimes Eurasian) identity, which, in contrast to the West, is closely connected with ancient religious and mystical traditions"<sup>12</sup>.

A noticeable but at the same time odious figure on the horizon of Russian traditionalism is the writer and philosopher Alexander Dugin. Using the idea of the opposition of the two types of states, marine and inland<sup>13</sup>, Dugin promotes the idea of a special path of development of our country, which is expressed in the concept of "Eurasianism". He opposes the Westernization of Russia. Though Dugin does not formally belong to any political trend, his ideas are close to those of some circles of Russian politicians.

Traditionalism in Russia is wider than the Slavophilism. Some of its representatives apply to the esoteric teachings of Eastern origin. In terms of its ideological roots, traditionalism is sometimes accused of fascism. "Many of these authors would not give up the title of the Nazis, stipulating that they mean an original, ideological and mystical fascism, not the distortions that were turned into a political practice by the German, Italian and other Nazis"<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Constantin Frumkin, "Traditionalisty: portret na fone textov", *Druzhiba norodov* ("Traditionalists: a portrait on the background of texts", *Friendship of Peoples*), Moscow, no. 6, 2002, p. 12 .

<sup>13</sup> This notion was first introduced in the works by the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) and became popular in the geopolitics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>14</sup> Constantin Frumkin, *op. cit.*



Heydar Jemal, one of the most prominent figure among theorists of traditionalism, is developing the most complicated, abstract and mysterious theories. Jemal considers one of the goals of his political activity the transformation of Russia into an islamophilic and anti-Western country.

The confrontation between westerners and traditionalists is important for both Romania and Russia. The scope of this conflict is in both politics and culture; its meaning is identical for the two countries: we both are under the influence of Western values, we strive for them, but at the same time we fear for our identity, and there is only one way out – to find a middle ground. And that is our problem, and at the same time the spring of our development today.

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