



ROMANIA'S LONG ROAD AFTER NATO

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Romania was invited to start the Accession Talks with NATO, together with other six countries from Central and Eastern Europe - Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia at the Prague summit from 21 and 22 November 2002. This decision took by the Alliance, expected in Bucharest, was welcome in the country, but the large majority of the politicians and political analysts have been unanimous in saying that the future would be difficult. For the next period, the most important tasks for Romania will be to counter the widespread corruption and improving the overall economic situation of the country. Two days after the Prague announcement, US president George W. Bush announced the decision to almost one hundred thousand people, gathered in one of the largest squares from Bucharest, "Piata Revolutiei", the place of the last public discourse of the Romanian communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu. In a five hours visit in Bucharest, the US president, together with US state secretary Colin Powell and special advisor Condoleezza Rice, discussed with the Romanian authorities about the steps to be taken in the next period for fulfilling the NATO membership duties. In his discourse from the Piata Revolutiei, Bush talked about the role of Romania in the new NATO alliance as a "bridge" to the "New Russia" and about the military strike against Iraq, as a part of the anti-terror campaign to which Romania took successfully part by sending troops in Afghanistan.

Full membership in 2004

"This has been a hugely significant decision, for NATO, for these seven countries that we have just invited to start accession talks, and for the Euro-Atlantic Community", said NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson at Prague, when announcing the decision. "The accession of these new members will strengthen security for all in the Euro-Atlantic area, and help achieve our common goal of a Europe whole and free, united in peace and by common value", it's said in the Prague summit Declaration from 21 November 2002. The invited countries are expected to join NATO in 2004. According to the final declaration, the accession talks will begin shortly with the aim of signing Accession Protocols by the end of March 2003 and "completing the ratification process in time for these countries to join the Alliance at the latest at (...) the summit in May 2004". According to the Romanian Foreign Ministry, that process will be very short, intense and the accession protocols are expected to be signed over March-April 2003. Afterwards,

will start the process of ratifying the protocols by the 19 Parliaments of the Allied States.

The Romanian president Ion Iliescu and the prime-minister Adrian Nastase stressed, in a press conference held in Prague, that the day of 21 November is for the country's security and stability a day of historical significance and impact. President Ion Iliescu emphasized that the decision in Prague is in keeping with the constant yearnings of the Romanian people, it is the consequence of major efforts made during the last decade, in keeping with an objective the entire country shares, that of finding its place in the big family of the democratic states. The head of the Romanian executive said that Romania no longer was "Europe's unwanted child", forgotten in a suburb, and underlined the major impact of the decision in Prague for the young generations. Romania's Minister of National Defence, Ioan Mircea Pascu, said that Romania is ready to contribute to the NATO Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) with mountain troops, military police and special air transportation. Romania's potential contribution to RRF will rely on the Romanian Army's traditional fields such as the mountain troops but also the experience earned in the peace keeping missions during the last years. In a declaration quoted by NATO press office's news it was mention a statement by US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stressing "Romania's expertise in the mountain troops field".

"Beyond a Romantic view of the event"

"Beyond a Romantic view of the event, we have to be pragmatic and know what we have to do". In many towns from Romania took place street celebrations of the event and in Parliament, senators and deputies halted their debates to watch the Prague announcement. NATO invitation is not a "gift" stressed recently in Bucharest the former US secretary during Clinton administration Madeleine Albright. "We shall endeavor the strengthen democracy and the rule of law, enhance economic performance, make the army a professional body, and safeguard classified information", said Romanian president Ion Iliescu in a statement. "Romania is on its way to reform. We must be patient with Romania because Romania has come from a history of your state-dominated industry, which failed, and it failed to provide for the people", stated US president George W. Bush in a interview for the Romanian State Television before Prague. The most important areas of reform, with effects to the whole population are regarding the improvement of the economic situation together with fighting corruption, a phenomena considered by both EU and US official as "endemic" and "widespread". The Romania's NATO membership also involved costs and risks that aren't still evaluated.

EU's another serious challenge

The relations between Bucharest and Washington knew an ascendant direction during the last two years. The Romanian-US Strategic Partnership was launched in 1997 and its priority was the consolidation of relations between the two countries in the domains of strategic interest for both countries (military, economic, regional security) being an important stability and peacekeeping element in Southeastern Europe. It was launched during Clinton administration, after the rejection of Romania's NATO candidacy for the first wave of enlargement. The stabilization of Southeastern Europe was a major topic of political dialogue within the Partnership. Romania gave assistance to the international campaign led by US against Yugoslavia in 1999 by opening its air-space to the US airplanes and, after, by taking part to KFOR operations. After September 11 terrorist attacks, Romania showed its stance on the part of the anti-terrorist campaign sending troops in Afghanistan. US gave Romania support for obtaining the OSCE Chairmanship-in-office in 2001 and supported the setting up of the SECI Center for the fight of Cross border crime in Bucharest. Also, Romania was the first country to sign an agreement to US granting immunity against the International Criminal Court, a move hardly criticized by the European Union. After the NATO decisions, Romania is to make now preparations for the summit of the European Union in Copenhagen, asking a clear "road-map" and supplementary funds for the accession. The authorities from Bucharest want to be received in EU in 2007, together with Bulgaria.