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# country report

Country Office Romania



## Romania: Political and Social Impact One Year After the Start of Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine

### From crisis reaction to long-distance running

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The Romanian population was - and still is - appalled by the recent Russian attack on Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, which is strongly condemned in its entirety by all Romanian representatives and the vast majority of MPs as well as the population. There are historically rooted strong anti-Russian resentments in Romania, which are currently reflected in the explicit support for Ukraine. The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) also strongly and unequivocally condemned the Russian attack from the beginning. But what are the political and social effects of the Ukrainian war on Romania one year after the war began?

Romania shares over 600 km of border with Ukraine. Since the end of February 2022, around 3.5 million Ukrainians have fled to Romania via the various border crossings. There, people reacted with open arms in an exemplary manner: All arriving refugees were taken in and, for the most part, privately accommodated. Drop-in centers were set up at border crossings, train stations and airports - many of them run by associations and NGOs. Refugees were provided with food, drinks, hygiene articles, clothes and toys. But also with comfort and encouragement. Childcare was organised to relieve the burden on mothers, most of whom were travelling alone. Clothing stores, emergency medical aid and language courses were also provided. The Romanian IGSU - comparable to a central office for disaster control - sent extensive aid transports to Odessa, Czernowitz or Mykolajiw in the Ukraine. The BOR was also very active in refugee aid in the region around Siret, Rădăuți and Suceava, for example. Romanian companies, private individuals, the church and state agencies worked hand in hand.

In mid-January 2023, the Romanian government presented a [report](#) on the aid provided to Ukrainians who had fled. According to the report, more than 500 million euros were provided from the state budget and international partners, six

ministries were involved in the "National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Measures", more than 20 laws were amended or passed for the support of displaced persons from Ukraine, and more than 1,500 local authorities and 300 non-governmental organisations helped with direct support for refugees. One almost wants to say: Romania was more efficient for others in crisis mode than it was for itself in peacetime. Some commentators also note a new sense of community that has begun to develop in Romania as a result of refugee assistance.

### From Crisis Mode to Integration: Came to Stay?

Of the 3.5 million Ukrainians who fled to Romania, many travelled on to other EU countries. Some also returned to Ukraine. To date, 109,000 refugees have remained in Romania. Ukrainians who have fled still receive housing and food allowances of around EUR 14 per day and per person. This is a large sum for the Romanian state budget. Only about 5,700 refugee Ukrainians (approx. 5.2%) have taken up permanent employment in Romania in the meantime, and only very few Ukrainian children have been enrolled in Romanian schools. The Prime Minister's advisor on humanitarian issues and refugee assistance, Mădălina Turza, explains why: "They still firmly

believe that they are only temporarily in Romania and can soon go back home. But we have to switch from crisis mode to the second phase - integration." Both Kiev and the Ukrainian embassy in Bucharest, however, support the refugees' view that they are only in the neighbouring country for a short and temporary stay, and accordingly do not need to integrate. Another hurdle in the integration of refugees into the Romanian education market is that a school-leaving certificate or degree in Romania is often not recognised in Ukraine. Conversely, it is not always easy to have Ukrainian degrees recognised in Romania. This also hinders some refugees from taking up employment.

In a next phase, the Romanian government now wants to link the disbursement of the support payments to conditions, such as mandatory enrolment of the children in school, language course attendance and registration in the unemployment lists of the county-level job centres (Romanian AJOFM). About 300 social workers are currently mandated by the government to create a mapping of the approximately 15,500 registered Ukrainian children and their needs in Romania. In addition to protection and inclusion measures, the Romanian government is also working to address the risks of trafficking and other forms of violence and abuse. In December 2022, an action plan for the prevention of sexual abuse and trafficking was adopted for Ukrainian refugees. An important partner here is the neighbouring Republic of Moldova.

Mădălina Turza, the government's commissioner for refugee assistance, also emphasises that the upcoming measures should avoid a "push and pull" policy within the EU. If, for example, an EU country were to decide to pay child benefits to refugees, many refugees would move there, which, however, would destroy the integration work in the original host country. She sees this as disadvantageous for all parties involved. For this reason, the Romanian government convened a first meeting in Bucharest in September 2022 to discuss with EU partners at ministerial and state secretary level how a coordinated medium- to long-term approach to refugee Ukrainians could look. A second meeting to continue the

discussions is to take place soon in another EU country.

### **Military support? Don't poke the bear!**

Romania can be relied upon not only to take in and support Ukrainian refugees: without the Romanian corridors for arms shipments and Romania's support for these shipments, Ukraine would probably not have been able to successfully defend itself against Russian attacks for so long. However, Romania not only channels military goods through its territory to Ukraine, it also supports Ukraine with its own deliveries. However, the nature and extent of this military support to Ukraine remains largely unknown. From the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, to the government and the presidential administration, to the county administrations of the direct border regions with Ukraine, no one consistently comments on goods transports and arms deliveries to Ukraine. Confidential sources say that Romania does not want to "brag about it to the big bear in the East".

On the level of political communication towards Russia, Romania is clearly, unambiguously and extremely resolutely in line with the EU and NATO, but avoids the loud and sometimes shrill tones of the Baltic states or Poland. But: does a NATO member need a "don't -poke-the-bear" strategy? Perhaps one reason for Romania's quiet action is that Romania is historically, culturally and politically closely linked to the Republic of Moldova. It is said that about one third of Moldovans also hold Romanian citizenship. After Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova is the most vulnerable country in the region in terms of further Russian aggression. And the Republic of Moldova is not under the NATO umbrella. How would Romania behave in the event of a Russian attack on the Republic of Moldova? For strategic reasons, Romania's leadership is also leaving the answer to this question in a well-calculated fog.

It is interesting that the Romanian media landscape also fully and comprehensively supports the "smokescreen" strategy with regard to military deliveries and other support for Ukraine. Special broadcasts, investigative

research, probing journalists' questions: none of this exists in Romania on the topic of arms deliveries. Even if the Romanian media landscape is less independent than we know it from Germany: Such a collective silence or such superficial reporting cannot be imposed in Romania either. There seems to be a broad consensus that as little information as possible should be disseminated about arms deliveries.

### War reporting, public opinion and disinformation

Beyond the topic of arms deliveries and further details on military support for Ukraine, however, the broad Romanian public is well informed about the course, background and developments of the war in the neighbouring country. In addition to the general course of the war, the Romanian public is following the danger posed by the Ukrainian nuclear power plants very closely. Due to the geographical proximity, news about fighting at the Zaporizhia power plant and also Russian threats to use nuclear weapons triggered great concern in Romania. The procurement and distribution of iodine tablets was a major issue in the country for weeks.

However, the war in Ukraine was also instrumentalised in Romania by extreme right-wing groups and, for example, the AUR party (Alliance for the Unification of Romanians) to voice grievances about territorial losses of past centuries and the treatment of Romanian minorities in Ukraine. These were described by opinion leaders of the AUR party as "open wounds". In particular, the annexation of territories of Moldova and Northern Bukovina to Romania are motifs of nationalist rhetoric. Due to the historically rooted strong anti-Russian resentment, however, there are few explicitly pro-Russian statements even on the part of Romanian right-wing extremists.

However, some popular narratives in Romania play into the hands of Russian interests: It is widely accepted in Romania, for example, that Russia is an impossible opponent to defeat and that it is better to avoid confrontation with it. Peace between the warring parties should be achieved quickly, otherwise the war would directly threaten Romanian interests, as the think

tank "Globalfocus" summarised in a [study](#). But even if such narratives are present in the traditional and social media, they do not currently change the basic attitude: Russia is the aggressor, Ukraine must be defended and supported.

### High energy prices drive inflation

Despite all the consternation and support for Ukraine, recent surveys show that the war in the neighbouring country is no longer at the top of the agenda in Romania either: a considerable part of Romanian society sees the fight against price increases as the most urgent problem.

Although Romania, with a low dependence on Russian gas, full natural gas storage facilities, its own gas reserves and a generally very balanced energy mix in production, is a model pupil in terms of energy policy compared to the EU, Romania would usually buy energy from Ukraine in winter. This is now not possible after the Russian attacks on the Ukrainian power grid. The destruction of Ukrainian energy production by Russia reduced the amount of energy available on the market for the entire region of Eastern Europe or Southern Eastern Europe. Romania is also currently providing additional support to the neighbouring Republic of Moldova, which was previously completely dependent on Russia for energy. After Russia used electricity and gas supplies as political leverage against the pro-European and democratic reform government and finally stopped them completely, more than 90% of the Republic of Moldova's electricity needs are currently covered by Romania. Romania has actively contributed to the connection of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union's electricity sources through the continental electricity grid ENTSO-E (Association of European Transmission System Operators).

With the shortage of energy supply due to the loss of Ukraine as a supplier and the increased demand - also due to the co-supply of the Republic of Moldova - energy prices in Romania rose or did not fall again somewhat in recent months as in other parts of Europe. Energy prices that are 35-40% higher than in the previous year (comparison Dec. 2022-2023) are driving inflation

in Romania. This has stabilised at around 15% - painfully noticeable for all Romanians directly in their own wallets.

## Schengen debacle leads to EU disappointment

When Austria used the vote on the Schengen accession of Romania and Bulgaria in December to emphasise its own interests in the field of EU migration policy, the small Alpine republic caused devastating political damage in Romania. In the Romanian population, which had always been pro-European, anti-EU resentment was suddenly aroused according to the motto: "If they don't want us, we don't want them any more either! Even though the vast majority of EU countries were in favour of Romania's Schengen accession, the view continues to prevail there: When in doubt, it is not the EU but the USA and NATO that can be relied on. At the same time, Romania's

constructive participation in a reorganisation of the EU's security structures would be a decisive factor in stabilising the south of Eastern Europe and also South-Eastern Europe. Romania can influence its neighbouring countries Serbia, Bulgaria and Hungary, which are flirting with Russian influence. Romania is also the strongest EU country among the Black Sea countries and thus plays a key role in mediating this region to the EU partners.

The German chancellor, who put Schengen accession back on the political agenda in the first place with a speech in Prague in the summer of 2022, is now particularly in demand when it comes to its implementation. Psychologically, Schengen accession has now become a central stone for Romania's new role in the emerging new European security architecture after the debacle of December 2022. What is open at the moment is whether it will be a cornerstone or a stumbling block.

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