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Geopolitical Journey

Part 3: Romania

In school, many of us learned the poem *Invictus*. It concludes with the line, “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.” This is a line that a Victorian gentleman might bequeath to an American businessman. It is not a line that resonates in Romania. Nothing in their history tells Romanians that they rule their fate or dominate their soul. Everything in their history is a lesson in how fate masters them or how their very soul is a captive of history. As a nation, Romanians have modest hopes and expectations tempered by their past.

This sensibility is not alien to me. My parents survived the Nazi death camps, returned to Hungary to try to rebuild their lives and then found themselves fleeing the communists. When they arrived in America, their wishes were extraordinarily modest, as I look back on it. They wanted to be safe, to get up in the morning, to go to work, to get paid — to live. They were never under the impression that they were the masters of their fate.

The problem that Romania has is that the world cares about it. More precisely, empires collide where Romania is. The last iteration was the Cold War. Today, at the moment, things seem easier, or at least less desperate, than before. Still, as I discussed in *Borderlands*, the great powers are sorting themselves out again and therefore Romania is becoming more important to others. It is not clear to me that the Romanians fully appreciate the shift in the geopolitical winds. They think they can hide in Europe, and perhaps they can. But I suspect that history is reaching for Romania again.

Geopolitics and Self-Mutilation

Begin with geography. The Carpathian Mountains define Romania, but in an odd way. Rather than serving as the border of the country, protecting it, the Carpathians are an arc that divides the country into three parts. To the south of the mountains is the Wallachian Plain, the heart of contemporary Romania, where its capital, Bucharest, and its old oil center, Ploesti, are located. In the east of the Carpathians is the Moldavian Plain. To the northwest of the Carpathians is Transylvania, more rugged, hilly country.

And this is the geopolitical tragedy of Romania. Romania is one nation divided by its geography. None of the three parts is easy to defend. Transylvania came under Hungarian rule in the 11th century, and Hungary came under Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian rule. Wallachia came under Ottoman rule, and Moldavia came under Ottoman and Russian rule. About the only time before the late 19th century that Romania was united was when it was completely conquered. And the only time it was completely conquered was when some empire wanted to secure the Carpathians to defend itself.

Some of us experience geopolitics as an opportunity. Most of humanity experiences it as a catastrophe. Romania has been a nation for a long time, but rarely has it been a united nation-state. After becoming a nation-state in the late 19th century, it had a precarious existence, balanced between Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Russia, with Germany a more distant but powerful reality. Romania spent the inter-war years trying to find its balance between monarchy, authoritarianism and fascism, and it never quite found it. It sought safety in an alliance with Hitler and found itself on the front lines in the German invasion of Russia. To understand Romania as an ally one must bear this in mind: When the Soviets began their great counterattack at Stalingrad, they launched it over Romanian (and Hungarian) troops. Romanians maneuvered themselves into the position of fighting and dying for the Germans, and then got their revenge on the Germans by being slaughtered by the Soviets.

All of this led to Romania's occupation by the Soviets, toward whom the Romanians developed a unique strategy. The Hungarians rose up against the Soviets and were crushed, and the Czechoslovaks tried to create a liberal communist regime that was still loyal to the Soviets and were crushed. The Romanians actually achieved a degree of autonomy from the Soviets in foreign affairs. The way the Romanians got the Soviets to tolerate this was by building a regime more rigid and oppressive than even that of the Soviet Union at the time. The Soviets knew NATO wasn't going to invade, let alone invade through Romania. So long as the Romanian regime kept the people in line, the Russians could tolerate their maneuvers. Romania retained its national identity and an independent foreign policy but at a stunning price in personal freedom and economic well-being.

Contemporary Romania cannot be understood without understanding Nicolae Ceausescu. He called himself the “Genius of the Carpathians.” He may well have been, but if so, the Carpathian definition of genius is idiosyncratic. The Romanian communist government was built around communists who had remained in Romania during World War II, in prison or in hiding. This was unique among the Soviet Union’s Eastern European satellites. Stalin didn’t trust communists who stayed home and resisted. He preferred communists who had fled to Moscow in the 1930s and had proved themselves loyal to Stalin by their betrayal of others. He sent Moscow communists to rule the rest of the newly occupied countries that buffered Russia from the West. Not so in Romania, where native communists ruled. After the death of the founder of communist Romania, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, another Romanian communist who stayed in Romania ultimately took over: Ceausescu. This was a peculiarity of Romanian communism that made it more like Josip Broz Tito’s Yugoslavia in foreign policy, and more like a bad dream in domestic policy.

Ceausescu decided to pay off the national debt. His reason seemed to flow from his foreign policy — he didn’t want Romania to be trapped by any country because of its debt — and he repaid it by selling to other countries nearly everything that was produced in Romania. This left Romania in staggering poverty; electricity and heat were occasional things, and even food was scarce in a country that had a lot of it. The Securitate, a domestic secret police whose efficiency and brutality were impressive, suppressed unrest. Nothing in Romania worked as well as the Securitate.

Herta Muller is a Romanian author who writes in German (she is part of Romania’s ethnic German community) and who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2009. One of her books, *The Appointment*, takes place in Romania under the communists. It gives an extraordinary sense of a place ruled by the Securitate. It is about a woman who is living her life, working at her job and dealing with an alcoholic husband while constantly preparing for and living in dread of appointments with the secret police. As in Kafka, what they are looking for and what she is hiding are unclear. But the danger is unrelenting and permeates her entire consciousness. When one reads this book, as I did in preparing for this trip, one understands the way in which the Securitate tore apart a citizen’s soul — and remembers that it was not a distant relic of the 1930s but was still in place and sustaining the Romanian regime in 1989.

It was as if the price that Romania had to pay for autonomy was to punch itself in the face continually. Even the fall of communism took a Romanian path. There was no Velvet Revolution here but a bloody one, where the Securitate resisted the anti-communist rising under circumstances and details that are still hotly debated and unclear. In the end, the Ceausescus (Nicolae’s wife Elena was also a piece of work, requiring a psychological genius to unravel) were executed and the Securitate blended into civil society as part of the organized-crime network that was mistaken for liberalization in the former Soviet empire by Western academics and reporters at the time.

Romania emerged from the previous 70 years of ongoing catastrophe by dreaming of simple things and having no illusions that these things were easy to come by or things

Romanians could control. As with much of Eastern Europe but perhaps with a greater intensity, Romanians believed their redemption lay with the West's multilateral organizations. If they were permitted to join NATO and especially the European Union, their national security needs would be taken care of along with their economic needs. Romanians yearned to become European simply because being Romanian was too dangerous.

The Redemption of Being European

In thinking of Romania, the phrase "institutionalized prisoner" comes to mind. In the United States it is said that if someone stays in prison long enough, he becomes "institutionalized," someone who can no longer imagine functioning outside a world where someone else always tells him what to do. For Romania, national sovereignty has always been experienced as the process of accommodating itself to more powerful nations and empires. So after 1991, Romania searched for the "someone else" to which it could subordinate itself. More to the point, Romania imbued these entities with extraordinary redemptive powers. Once in NATO and the European Union, all would be well.

And until recently, all has been well, or well in terms of the modest needs of a historical victim. The problem Romania has is that these sanctuaries are in many ways illusions. It looks to NATO for defense, but NATO is a hollowed-out entity. There is a new and ambitious NATO strategy, which sets a global agenda for the organization. Long discussed, it is an exercise in meaninglessness. Countries like Germany have no military with which to fulfill the strategy, assuming that any agreement to act could be reached. NATO is a consensual organization, and a single member can block any mission. The divergent interests of an expanded NATO guarantee that someone will block everything. NATO is an illusion that comforts the Romanians, but only if they don't look carefully. The Romanians seem to prefer the comforting illusion.

As for the European Union, there is a deep structural tension in the system. The main European economic power is Germany. It is also the world's second-largest exporter. Its economy is built around exporting. For a country like Romania, economic development requires that it take advantage of its wage advantage. Lower wages allow developing countries to develop their economy through exports. But Europe is dominated by an export superpower. Unlike the postwar world, where the United States absorbed the imports of Germany and Japan without needing to compete with them, Germany remains an exporting country exporting into Romania and leaving precious little room for Romania to develop its economy.

At this stage of its development, Romania should be running a trade surplus, particularly with Germany, but it is not. In 2007, it exported about \$40 billion worth of goods and imported about \$70 billion. In 2009, it exported the same \$40 billion but cut imports to

only \$54 billion (still a negative). Forty percent of its trade is with Germany, France and Italy, its major EU partners. But it is Germany where the major problem is. And this problem is compounded by the fact that a good part of Romania's exports to Germany are from German-owned firms operating in Romania.

During the period of relative prosperity in Europe from 1991 to 2008, the structural reality of the EU was hidden under a rising tide. In 2008 the tide went out, revealing the structural reality. It is not clear when the tide of prosperity will come rolling back in. In the meantime, while the German economy is growing again, Romania's is not. Because it exists in a system where the main engine is an exporter, and the exporter dominates the process of setting rules, it is difficult to see how Romania can take advantage of its greatest asset — a skilled workforce prepared to work for lower wages.

Add to this the regulatory question. Romania is a developing country. Europe's regulations are drawn with a focus on the highly developed countries. The laws on employment guarantees mean that Europeans don't hire workers, they adopt them. That means that entrepreneurship is difficult. Being an entrepreneur, as I well know, means making mistakes and recovering from them fast. Given the guarantees that every worker has in Europe, an entrepreneur cannot quickly recover from his mistakes. In Romania, the agility needed for risk-taking is not readily available under EU rules drawn up for a mature economy.

Romania should be a country of small entrepreneurs, and it is, but there is extensive evasion of Brussels' — and Bucharest's — regulations. It is a gray market that creates legal jeopardy and therefore corruption in the sector that Romania needs the most. Imagine if Germany had the regulations it champions today in 1955. Could it possibly have developed into what it is in 2010? There may be a time for these regulations (and that is debatable), but for Romania it is not now.

I met a Romanian entrepreneur who marketed industrial products. In talking to him, I raised the question of the various regulations governing his industry and how he handled them. There was no clear answer or, more precisely, I didn't realize the answer he had given me until later. There are regulations and there are relationships. The latter mitigate the former. In Germany this might be called corruption. In Romania it is survival. A Romanian entrepreneur rigorously following EU regulations would rapidly go out of business. It may be that Romania is corrupt, but the regulatory structure of the EU imposed on a developing economy makes evasion the only rational strategy. And yet the entrepreneur I talked to was a champion of the European Union. He too hoped for the time when he could be a normal European. As Rousseau said, "I have seen these contradictions and they have not rebuffed me."

It is difficult to for an outsider to see the specific benefits of NATO and EU membership for Romania. But for the Romanians, membership goes beyond the specifics.

Romania's Choice

August and September are bad months in Europe. It is when wars and crises strike. August and September 2008 were bad months. That August, Russia struck Georgia. In September, the financial crisis burst wide open. In the first, Russia delivered a message to the region: This is what American guarantees are worth. In the European handling of the financial crisis in Eastern Europe, the Germans delivered a message on the limits of German responsibility. Both NATO and the European Union went from being guarantors of Romanian interests to being enormous question marks.

In my conversations with Romanians, at all levels and almost universally, I have found the same answer. First, there is no doubt that NATO and the European Union did not work in Romania's favor at the moment. Second, there is no question of rethinking Romania's commitment to either. There are those Romanians, particularly on the far right, who dislike the European Union in particular, but Romania has no strategic alternative.

As for the vast majority, they cannot and will not conceive of a Romania outside the confines of NATO and the European Union. The mere fact that neither is working well for Romania does not mean that they do not do something important: NATO and the European Union keep the anti-democratic demons of the Romanian soul at bay. Being part of Europe is not simply a matter of strategic or economic benefits. It represents a transitional point in Romanian history. With membership in the European Union and NATO, Romania has affirmed its modernity and its democratic institutions. These twin amulets have redeemed Romania's soul. Given this, I suppose, an unfavorable trade balance and the absence of genuine security guarantees is a small price to pay. I am not Romanian, so I can't feel their ineffable belief in Brussels.

Romanians do acknowledge, again almost universally, the return of Russia to the historical stage, and it worries them. Of particular concern is Moldova, a region to the east that was historically Romanian, taken by the Soviets in a treaty with Hitler and the rest of which was seized after World War II. Moldova became an independent country in 1991 (a country I will be visiting next). For much of the post-Cold War period it had a communist government that fell a few years ago. An election will be held on Nov. 28, and it appears that the communists might return. The feeling is that if the communists return this time, the Russians will return with them and, in the coming years, Russian troops will be on Romania's borders.

Romanian officials are actively engaged in discussions with NATO officials about the Russians, but the Germans want a more active involvement of Russia in NATO and not tension between NATO and Russia. The Western Europeans are not about to be drawn into Eastern European paranoia fed by nostalgic American strategists wanting to relive the Cold War, as they think of it.

I raised two strategic alternatives with Romanian officials and the media. One was the Intermarium — an alliance, perhaps in NATO, perhaps not — of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. (To readers who asked why I did not go to Bulgaria on this trip, it was simply a matter of time. I will go there as soon as I can.) Very

interestingly, one official pointed out substantial levels of cooperation on military planning between Hungary and Romania and discussions between Romania and Poland. How serious this is and whether it will go beyond the NATO context is unclear to me. Perhaps I can get a better sense in Warsaw.

But military planning is one thing; the wherewithal to execute military plans is quite another. The Romanians are now caught in a crisis over buying fighter planes. There are three choices: the Swedish Gripen, the Eurofighter and used American F-16s. The problem is that the Romanians don't have the money for any of these aircraft, nor does it seem to me that these are the defense measures they really need. The Americans can provide air cover in a number of ways, and while 24 F-16s would have value, they would not solve Romania's most pressing military problem. From where I sit, creating an effective mobile force to secure their eastern frontier is what is needed. The alternative I've heard was buying naval vessels to block a very real Russian naval buildup in the Black Sea. But if Romania has trouble buying 24 fighters, naval vessels are out of the question.

The Romanians are approaching defense planning from a NATO perspective — one used for planning, not implementation, and one that always leads to sophisticated systems while leaving the basics uncovered. This may seem like an unnecessary level of detail for this essay, but the Romanians are deep in this discussion, and questions like this are the critical details of strategies growing out of geopolitics. It is the difference between planning papers drawn up by think tanks and the ability to defend a nation.

The Black Sea is a critical part of Romania's reality, and the rise of Turkey makes the system of relationships interesting. Turkey is Romania's fourth-largest export target, and one of the few major trading partners that imports more from Romania than it exports. I pointed out to Romanians that it is the great good fortune of Turkey that it was not admitted to the European Union. Turkey's economy grew by an annualized rate of 12 percent in the first quarter of 2010 and has been surging for years.

Turkey is becoming a regional economic engine and, unlike Germany, France and Italy, it offers compatibilities and synergies for Romania. In addition, Turkey is a serious military force and, while not seeking confrontation with Russia, it is not subservient to it. Turkey has adopted a "360 degree" strategy of engagement with all countries. And since Turkey is a NATO member, as are Hungary, Slovakia and Poland, there is no incompatibility with a dual strategy of the Intermarium and the Black Sea. For now, they fit. And the irony of Romania reaching out to the heir to the Ottomans is simply that and no more. This is the neighborhood that Romania inhabits. These are the options it has.

What doesn't fit for Romania is the NATO/EU system alone. Perhaps this is part of a rational mix, but it cannot be all of it. For Romania, the problem is to move beyond the psychological comfort of Europe to a strategic and economic understanding that accepts that the post-Cold War world is over. More important, it would be a move toward accepting that Romania is free, responsible for its future and capable of managing it.

It is this last step that is the hardest for Romania and many of the former Soviet satellites — which were also bound up with World War I and Hitler's disaster — to come to terms with. There is a connection between buying more expensive German cars than you can afford, and more of them than you need, and the novels of Herta Muller. The appointment can be permanently canceled, but the fear of the interrogation is always with you. In this region, the fear of the past dominates and oppresses while the confident, American-style military planning and economic restructuring I suggested is alien and frightening.

The Romanians emerged from a world of horror, some of it of their own making. They fear themselves perhaps more than they fear others. For them, becoming European is both a form of therapy and something that will restrain the demons within and without. When you live with bad memories, you live with the shadows of reality. For the Romanians, illusory solutions to haunting memories make a great deal of sense.

It makes sense until war comes, and in this part of the world, the coming of war has been the one certainty since before the Romans. It is only a question of when, with whom and what your own fate will be when it arrives. The Romanians believe with religious fervor that these things will be left behind if they become part of Europe. I am more skeptical. I had thought that Romania's problem was that it was part of Europe, a weak power surrounded by stronger ones. They seem to believe that their solution is to be part of Europe, a weak power surrounded by stronger ones.

I leave Romania confused. The Romanians hear things that I am deaf to. It is even at a pitch my Hungarian part can't hear. I leave now for another nation, Moldova, which has been even more exposed to history, one even stranger and more brutal than Romania's.