

THE EVOLUTION OF BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN ROMANIA AND VIETNAM IN THE PERIOD AFTER THE ROMANIAN REVOLUTION OF DECEMBER 1989

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Abstract

In the context of the longstanding friendship between Romania and Vietnam, a relationship with a rich history spanning almost 75 years, the purpose of this study is to highlight the evolution and development of bilateral relations in various fields, including politics, diplomacy, economics, security and defence, culture and education. Considering the fact that the year 1989 marked a historical moment in the evolution of Europe and the whole world, one of the objectives of the present study is to describe the impact of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989 on the relations between Romania and Vietnam, focusing on the first years characterized by a certain stagnation, in order to then highlight the progress made in the stages that followed. Thus, they highlighted the development of collaboration in the fields of science, technology and education, as well as the Romanian-Vietnamese cooperation within international organizations. In the end, taking into account the current context of an ever-changing world, it strengthened the conviction that only through deepening as well as enhancing the traditional relationship between the two nations it is possible to reach new level - based on mutual understanding and trust, for the interest of both sides.

Key words: Romanian Revolution of December 1989; Romania-Vietnam bilateral relations; Romania's foreign policy; International agreements.

1. The impact of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989 on the relations between Romania and Vietnam

After the bloody revolution of late 1989, Romania changed its regime, abolishing the leadership of the Communist Party and the personal dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu. In this situation, the Romanian State significantly modified its foreign policy, shifting its attention to partners from Western Europe. This was necessary in the context of those historical times, but it also had an important impact on his relationship with Vietnam. Before clarifying the effects produced in these reports, we will first dwell on the events of 1989 and on the regional changes in Romania's foreign policy, following the way in which it built and evaluated relations with the USA and European countries.

Thus, at the end of the 1980s, Romania was influenced by the historical context in Eastern Europe, by the crisis that would finally lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the bankruptcy of the communist system and the economic collapse and total political reorientation of the Eastern European states. Under these conditions, the Old Order established after the Second World War collapsed. For some, the United States won the Cold War, for others it was a victory for the West and the „end of history”¹.

Undeniably, this historical moment marked the beginning of a new stage in the evolution of Europe and the whole world². In a word, Romania, like other states in Eastern Europe, was put, after 1989, in front of immense internal and external challenges, and its foreign policy contained, inherently, under the conditions of the dramatic change in the ideological substance, both elements of continuity as well as profound change. In this sense, Romanian diplomacy continued to promote the traditional principles and values specific to a responsible international actor – respect for independence, national territorial integrity and national sovereignty, cooperation based on trust and mutual respect, respect for the principles and norms of international law – both in the approach of constantly consolidating and developing relations with neighboring states, as well as a member of some international organizations and institutions. At the same time, Romania's foreign policy was gradually reshaped based on new principles – loyalty to the values of democracy and freedom, the modernization of Romania in the interest of its citizens, the

¹ Marc Bonnemains, *Romania's Post-Cold War International Relations*, Académie de Paris, Centre d'Etudes Diplomatiques et Stratégiques, 2010, p. 4 – <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/>, accessed on 12.08.2024.

² Đào Tuấn Thành, *Một số vấn đề trong lịch sử hiện đại Rumani*, Đại học Sư phạm. 2005, p. 335.

promotion of democratic stability standards in the region – and, therefore, reoriented in order to achieve new objectives strategic³.

At the same time, as a direct result of the changes produced after 1989, the decision-making system responsible for Romania's foreign policy was substantially modified, in a register specific to modern democracies. Thus, along with the head of state, various ministries and government agencies, as well as the Standing Committees of the Parliament, received a much more complex decision-making role. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was reorganized and given a much wider mandate, not only to represent and manage Romania's foreign affairs, but also to plan and implement strategies regarding action in the international environment. A decision-making unit dedicated to national security (the Supreme National Defense Council) appeared, as well as a series of European integration departments within the executive structures, clear evidence of a new, professional and democratic approach to Romanian foreign policy after 1989⁴.

If in the Old Order Romania had occupied an important place in the system of socialist countries where it had created and consolidated strong diplomatic and economic ties, in the new post-December phase, its diplomacy became more diversified, focusing more on the countries of Western Europe, the United States and capitalism. Partnerships with Asian countries were maintained, but were no longer considered as important. Therefore, factors appeared that, in many areas, could undermine Romania's diplomatic activities with Vietnam. However, as a traditional partner, Vietnam was among the first countries to recognize the new Romanian government after 1989, and relations and representative offices were maintained by both sides. In this regard, the official message of the Vietnamese government was that "after Romania changed the form of its political regime, the two countries continued their traditional friendly relations based on the principle of respect for independence and sovereignty, which does not interfere in internal affairs, in equality and mutual benefit"⁵. Regarding the relationship during this period, Vietnam's ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary in Romania, Nguyen Quang Chien, stated: „The changes that took place in the world and the region did not disrupt bilateral relations, whether it was the Cold War or the period of after the Cold War, by ideological or security conflict, armaments, social

³ Romania's foreign policy after 1989 - <https://mae.ro>, accesed on 12.08.2024.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Ban Quan hệ Quốc tế - VCCI, Hồ sơ thị trường Rumani* - Liên Đoàn Thương Mại Và Công Nghiệp Việt Nam, <https://vcci.com.vn/thi-truong-quoc-te/rumani>, accesed on 14.08.2024.

and political changes in Eastern Europe, the overthrow of the world order, globalization or the economic-financial crisis”⁶.

However, the facts show us that, immediately after 1989, the activities implemented did not reach the previous level. The period around that year is thus considered one of decline in the history of the development of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

2. The revival of bilateral relations between Romania and Vietnam

The situation at the beginning of the 1990s was extremely difficult for both countries, the conditions for the promotion and development of their relations facing many obstacles. However, good signs of recovery began to appear over time as their political and economic situations began to enter a period of recovery and stabilization. This fact was also possible because in Vietnam, since the 6th Congress of the National Congress of the Communist Party held in 1986, the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms were initiated a model of socialist state management based on a market-oriented economy⁷.

Thus, despite the fact that it had a different political orientation, Vietnam was prompt in recognizing the new Romanian political institutions because Romania, in addition to being a traditional partner, was also a country with an important role in this new cause of foreign Vietnamese economy. In addition, due to its geographical location, Romania was a good gateway to Europe. This in the context in which, in 1994, Vietnam and the United States reached a certain consensus in the normalization of their relations, the US announcing the abolition of economic sanctions for Vietnam, thus creating opportunities for accelerating the process of economic development and international integration under the leadership of the Communist Party. This removal of the economic sanctions made Vietnam achieve in one year a continuous economic growth of 7%, thus being one of the few countries that maintained stable development in the context of the financial crisis. In the same way, after efforts in economy, politics, diplomacy, Romania's socio-political situation began to gradually become stable, a necessary condition for the expansion of multilateral relations.

Under these conditions, high-level visits were resumed, as the first basis for strengthening bilateral relations, which opened up many directions of development for a strong recovery. The period of the recovery of ties could

⁶ Nguyen Quang Chien, „60 years of diplomatic relations between Romania and Vietnam (1950-2010)” - <https://www.mae.ro>, accessed on 14.08.2024.

⁷ Adam Fforde, From ‘Constructing Socialism’ to a ‘Socialist-oriented Market Economy’, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Volume 71, Issue 4, 2019, p. 14.

be delimited between 1994 and 2009, the premises being created from the visit to Romania, in April 1991, of the President of the National Assembly of Vietnam, Le Quang Dao⁸. This was the first diplomatic activity since Romania had changed its regime and since Vietnam had recognized the legitimacy of its new government. The visit of Le Quang Dao and the delegation that accompanied him was a landmark that marked the beginning of the recovery of foreign relations, after the historical and economic events that took place in the two countries. At the same time, it was the clearest proof of an uninterrupted relationship between the two countries, showing Vietnam's appreciation and interest in maintaining positive ties with its Romanian partner.

Among other visits to Romania by Vietnamese officials, can be mentioned: Vice State President Tran Duc Luong (August 1994), National Assembly Vice Chairman Phung Van Tuu (September 1995), Culture and Information Minister Tran Hoan (October 1996), Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam (December 1998), Minister of Science, Technology and Environment Chu Tuan Nha (September 1999), and Chairman of the National Assembly's Committee of External Relations Do Van Tai (July 2001). Also, in the following years, numerous high-level Vietnamese delegations made working visits to Romania, which marked a strong recovery of bilateral relations: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Manh Cam (December 1998, on the occasion of hosting in Bucharest the inter-ministerial conference of Francophone countries); President Tran Duc Luong (October 16-17, 2003), on this occasion, the two sides signed the Bilateral Agreement on Plant Protection and Quarantine, the Agreement on Veterinary Directorate, two Cooperation Programmes in Science-Technology and Education-Training in the 2003-2005 period, and the Cooperation Agreement between the two Commerce and Industry Chambers. In July 2004, the Chairman of the Party Central Committee's Commission for External Relations Nguyen Van Son visited Romania. In September 2006, Vice President Truong My Hoa attended the Francophone Summit XI held in Bucharest and had a meeting with President Băsescu on the sideline of the summit. Romania also sent representatives of its association of lawyers and a group of diplomats in charge of Francophone and Sports Committee to Vietnam in August 2004, 10-14 April 2006, and 24-29 September 2006 respectively⁹.

Among the high-level Romanian delegations that visited Vietnam over the years were can be mentioned: Foreign Ministers (November 1993,

⁸ Lê Hải Triều Phạm Thế Phương, *Hồ sơ thị trường Rumani* - <https://thuvien.hlu.edu.vn/>, accessed on 2.09.2024.

⁹ *The milestone in Bilateral relations Vietnam-Romania* - <https://vnembassy-bucharest.mofa.gov.vn/>, accessed on 2.09.2024.

May 1999, and October 2001), Trade Minister (February 1994), Prime Minister N. Vacaroiu (July 1995), President Emil Constantinescu and three Vice-Presidents and also Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Trade, Industry and Commerce respectively (Francophone Summit VII – November 1997), Minister of Environment – Water – Forestry (August 2000), and Chairman of the Senate's Committee of External Relations (October 2002). Also, Romanian President Ion Iliescu paid an official visit to Vietnam from 16-18 February 2002¹⁰.

Retrospectively analyzing the evolution of Romanian-Vietnamese bilateral relations in the first decade after the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, it should be highlighted that in just two years after the major political changes in Romania, the two countries demonstrated a rapid recovery of diplomatic relations which, although not they took place on a very large scale, yet they maintained a constant dynamic. An evaluation of bilateral relations took place in 1999, on the occasion of the visit to Romania of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Gia Khiem, the conclusion being that “the developments were positive, despite the impact of various internal situations, and that the joint promotion of good values continued built together”. In this context, it was agreed that the following objectives of strengthening bilateral cooperation should be concentrated in the fields of diplomatic policy, economy, trade, education, etc.¹¹.

If we are to strictly refer to the recovery and consolidation of economic relations, the first evidence in this regard was that the two countries concluded a series of agreements for the creation of the necessary legal framework. The first was the *Agreement on trade and payments between the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Government of the Republic of Romania* (signed on 4 December 1991 in Hanoi)¹², and the second one was the *Investment promotion and protection agreement between Vietnam and Romania* (signed on 1 September 1994 in Bucharest)¹³.

Besides these, many other agreements followed in the period 1994-2010, their main objective being to create the necessary legal basis for promoting the significant development of economic relations between the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ „Phó Thủ tướng và Bộ trưởng Ngoại giao Phạm Gia Khiêm đã thăm chính thức Rumani” - <http://www.mofahcm.gov.vn/>, accessed on 3.09.2024.

¹² *Hiệp định về thương mại và thanh toán giữa Chính phủ Cộng hòa Xã hội Chủ nghĩa Việt Nam và Chính phủ Cộng hòa Rumani, Tham tán Phòng Thương mại, Đại sứ quán Việt Nam tại Rumani* - <https://trungtamwto.vn/>, accessed on 3.09.2024.

¹³ *Hiệp định Khuyến khích và Bảo hộ Đầu tư Giữa Chính Phủ Cộng Hoà Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam Và Chính Phủ Cộng Hoà Rumani* - <https://trungtamwto.vn/>, accessed on 3.09.2024.

two countries. Thus, it can be said that considering the changes in economic and political ties, this was the period that reshaped the relationship between Romania and Vietnam into a new stage, fully recovering it and creating an impetus for the next stage of development.

3. Expanding and diversifying bilateral cooperation between Romania and Vietnam

In the context of major regional and global changes that took place in the first decade after 1990, the Romanian-Vietnamese friendship was continuously strengthened. A crucial moment in this regard was the visit of President Ion Iliescu (February 2002). This was important because, although there had been visits by Romanian officials to Vietnam since 1991, President Iliescu's visit was the first high-level official visit by the Romanian side¹⁴. Equally important was the visit of Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong, who officially visited Romania on 16-17 October 2003¹⁵.

Politically and diplomatically, the relations between the two countries were also strengthened by the cooperation at the parliamentary level, through the establishment in March 2010 of the Romania-Vietnam Friendship parliamentary group. This event marked a new step and opened a new content in bilateral relations¹⁶. Economically, since 1990, Vietnam and Romania have inked a number of documents creating a legal framework for further cooperation in the new era. The bilateral trade volume increased over 10 million US dollars from 1995 to 1999, approximately 20 million from 2000 to 2002, up to 40 million in 2003 (owing to Vietnam's purchase of Romanian oil device), 26, 25.6 and 27 million in 2004, 2005 and 2006 respectively (in 2006, of 26 million, 19 million is export and the rest 6 million is import). Moreover, Vietnam finished paying its debt to Romania on 11 March 2002. The two countries have much potential in enhancing the bilateral multifaceted cooperation, the two markets may complement each other (Romania's strengths lie in oil and gas, petrol chemistry, architecture, construction, healthcare and agricultural production. Romania is in need of tropical products and consumer goods from Vietnam.

¹⁴ In 1997, the president Emil Constantinescu came to Vietnam but only to participate in a conference of Francophone Countries - VIIe Conférence des chefs d'État et de gouvernement des pays ayant le français en partage Hanoi (Vietnam), 14-16 novembre 1997 - <https://www.francophonie.org/>, accessed on 20.09.2024.

¹⁵ *Chủ tịch Trần Đức Lương trả lời phỏng vấn báo chí Việt Nam sau chuyến thăm chính thức Ba Lan và Rumani, ngày 17 tháng 10 năm 2003* - <https://vnembassy-bucharest.mofa.gov.vn/>, accessed on 20.09.2024.

¹⁶ Nguyen Quang Chien, „60 years of diplomatic relations between Romania and Vietnam (1950-2010)” - <https://www.mae.ro>, accessed on 21.09.2024.

The 13th session of the Vietnam-Romania Joint Committee on Economic and Trade cooperation was held in Hanoi (2-5 December 2002)¹⁷.

The bilateral relations between the two countries were also developed and expanded by *Agreement between the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Government of Romania on Cooperation in the field of culture, science, education and sports* (signed in Hanoi on 8 July 1995). According to this agreement, the two parties established that they will favor collaboration in the fields of science and technology by: establishing and carrying out programs, studies and other joint activities in different branches of science and technology; exchanges of specialists, university teaching staff, researchers, technicians and experts; exchanges of publications and documentation, including scientific films and videotapes, as well as research results in this field. At the same time, the two parties have established that they will support collaboration and the exchange of experience in the field of education by: promoting direct collaboration between different educational institutions at all levels; awarding, according to the possibilities of each party, places and scholarships for university studies, postgraduate specialization and doctorate, in areas established by mutual agreement; exchange of teachers and other specialists, to teach courses or carry out research in their specialized field; encouraging and supporting the study of the partner's language and literature in national educational institutions by establishing, within them, some specialized chairs/lectures, sending lecturers, books and specialized publications and mutual participation in summer courses organized by each party ; exchange of students and pupils; joint actions, including by offering specific documentary materials and establishing a joint commission, for the correct reflection of the historical, geographical and socioeconomic development of each country in the school textbooks and in the university courses of the other country¹⁸.

Regarding the development of collaboration in the fields of science and technology, in 1999 an agreement on scientific, technological and environmental cooperation was signed¹⁹, a document that established and unified several provisions on environmental technology, energy technology

¹⁷ *The milestone in Bilateral relations Vietnam-Romania* – <https://vnembassy-bucharest.mofa.gov.vn/>, accessed on 22.09.2024.

¹⁸ DECISION no. 144 of 7 March 1996 for the approval of the Agreement between the Government of Romania and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam regarding collaboration in the fields of culture, science, education and sports, signed in Hanoi on 8 July 1995 – Published in the „Official Gazette of Romania”, Part I, no. 60 of 26 March 1996.

¹⁹ „Triển vọng hợp tác khoa học, công nghệ và đổi mới sáng tạo Việt Nam - Rumani” – <https://www.most.gov.vn/>, accessed on 22.09.2024.

and agriculture, depending on the strengths of each party. The determination of science and technology as points of mutual interest was a manifestation of the diversification of ties, and this legal document was extremely important for the relaunch of bilateral cooperation. Regarding the importance given by the two sides to this field, in 2005, on the occasion of the 55th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Romanian ambassador in Hanoi, Marin Buhoară, stated that bilateral relations have always focused on science, technology and carrying out exchanges of technical experts. As a result, according to His Excellency, a solid basis was established in Romanian universities for the perspectives of technological and technical cooperation in order to strengthen collaborations in the development of human resources²⁰.

Regarding the development of collaboration in the field of education, on 15 January 2008, authorized by the Minister of Education and Training, Vietnamese Ambassador to Romania Le Manh Hung signed the Vietnam-Romania educational cooperation program for the period 2008-2010 in Bucharest, the cooperation program being valid until 16 January 2011. In July 2016, on the occasion of the visit to Vietnam by the Prime Minister of Romania Dacian Cioloș, the leaders of the two ministries signed the "Education cooperation program between the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam and the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research of Romania for the period 2016-2020". Also, on 19 April 2023, the Government of Vietnam and the Government of Romania signed the "Cooperation program in education and training between the Government of Vietnam and the Government of Romania for the period 2022-2026"²¹.

In the context of the Vietnamese Prime Minister's visit to Bucharest (January 2024), the following were signed: The program of cooperation in the field of culture, the Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the field of labor and social security and the Memorandum of Understanding for the promotion of cooperation in the field of business. Also, 12 cooperation memoranda between universities were signed²².

Summarizing the process of expansion and diversification of Romanian-Vietnamese relations, it is obvious that remarkable progress has been registered, a fact that opened new perspectives for bilateral relations in the future.

²⁰ „Đại sứ Marin Buhoară: Việt Nam là đối tác truyền thống của Rumani” – <http://www.mofahcm.gov.vn/>, accessed on 23.09.2024.

²¹ Vietnam-Romania: beef up educational cooperation – <https://vietnamtimes.org.vn/>, accessed on 23.09.2024.

²² Socialist Republic of Vietnam – <https://www.mae.ro/bilateral-relations/>, accessed on 23.09.2024.

4. Romanian-Vietnamese cooperation within international organizations

Romania and Vietnam have developed close collaborative relationships also within international organizations. Thus, Romania supports Vietnam's entry to ECOSOC in 1998-2000 term, to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Commission in November 2006, to the WTO and the UN Security Council Non-permanent membership for 2008-2009 term. In turn, Vietnam supports Romania's access to the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) for 1998-2000 term, UN Commission on Human Rights (9 May 2006), and ECOSOC in 2007-2008 term.

In addition to all this, we must remind Romania's support for strengthening EU-Vietnam relations. By virtue of the Romanian-Vietnamese long friendship and as an active member of the European Union, Romania supported the strengthening of the EU-Vietnam partnership. In this respect, the Romanian representatives in EU institutions supported the cause of Vietnam in the negotiation process for EU-Vietnam Framework Cooperation Agreement (FCA) and also EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The Romanian support for Vietnam was reiterated on the occasion of Prime Minister Dacian Cioloș's official visit to Hanoi in July 2016. In this context, Prime Minister Dacian Cioloș has shown that Romania fully supports Vietnam in ratifying process of the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement, considering that rapid implementation of the document will contribute significantly to boosting trade and investment flows between Romania and Vietnam and will pave the way for the future recognition of Vietnam's status as market economy. The importance of strengthening bilateral cooperation was also highlighted in July 2018, when Romania's Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă met Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Pham Binh Minh. On this occasion, the Romanian Prime Minister expressed appreciation for the traditional collaboration between the two countries and showed that the presence in Romania of the high-ranking Vietnamese official reflects the common interest in strengthening the Romanian-Vietnamese relations. More than that, it was mentioned that Romania will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2019, when the intensification of the EU-Vietnam dialogue will be pursued, contributing to the development of economic, trade and investment relations between the two countries. Present at this meeting, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Teodor Melescanu conveyed to his Vietnamese counterpart Romania's firm interest in strengthening traditional relations with Vietnam,

with emphasis on economic cooperation driven by the strong dynamics and the complementarity of the two economies, as well as by the favorable context created by the clear prospects of EU-Vietnam FTA ratification²³.

5. Conclusions

Relations between Romania and Vietnam have a history of over seven decades, during which the two states have always attached great importance to political dialogue, constantly aiming to deepen mutual understanding and trust, as well as to strengthen the bilateral ties formed during this time.

Whilst during the communist period Romania expressed a fairly constant and independent stance regarding economic aid to Vietnam, the Romanian Revolution of December 1989 had a visible impact on bilateral relations, although these did not become discontinuous, they diminished and experienced a certain stagnation. However, some political and diplomatic relations remained active, and thus the long-lasting ties, sincere during difficult historical periods for both countries, were maintained and developed. As a result, currently Vietnam is one of the main Asian economic partners of Romania, occupying, at the same time, one of the first places among the commercial partners in ASEAN.

Thus, in the context of the Romania – Vietnam traditional friendship and cooperation with a rich history spanning almost 75 years, bilateral relations have developed in all fields, including politics, diplomacy, economics, security and defence, culture, education and training. Even so, taking into account the current context of an ever-changing world, I express my hope that the two countries could further strengthen their ties. Only together and making every effort to contribute to promoting, deepening as well as enhancing the traditional relationship between the two nations it is possible to reach a new level – based on mutual understanding and trust, for the interest of both sides.

As Ambassador Gheorghe Săvuică also said, the Vietnamese idiom “Fire proves gold” rings true for the relationship between Vietnam and Romania, since the relations between both nations have weathered many challenges and are still growing well. With what history has proven, I am confident that this relationship will continue to flourish, serving as a solid foundation for deepening multifaceted bilateral cooperation in the future, to the benefit of the two nations.

²³ Dan Vătăman, Nguyen The Ha, Nguyen Thi Thuy Dung, *The establishment and development of diplomatic relations and partnership between European Union and Vietnam (1990-2018)*, in „Romanian Review of Eurasian Studies”, Year XIV, No. 1-2/2018, pp. 290-291.

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