



Subscribe to *The Atlantic* today at an enlightening rate

Click here to SUBSCRIBE—No Risk!

Click Here

THE Atlantic online

The Atlantic Monthly | Digital Edition

Home
Current Issue
Archive
Forum
Site Guide
Feedback
Subscribe
Search

Browse >>
Books & Critics
Fiction
Food
Foreign Affairs
Language
Poetry Pages
Politics & Society
Science & Technology
Travel & Pursuits

Send this page to a friend

[Return to the Table of Contents.](#)

SEPTEMBER 1998

FOREIGN POLICY

The Fulcrum of Europe

Romania longs for the West, and the West needs Romania more than it knows

by [Robert D. Kaplan](#)

ONE of the largest and most passionate crowds President Bill Clinton has ever drawn was in Bucharest, where he stopped for an eight-hour [visit on July 11](#) of last year. Though crowds of comparable size had greeted him in Ireland and Africa, the Romanian crowd was unique, because American officials did not expect it. In fact, they worried that the people who would come to greet Clinton on that frying-hot afternoon on dusty, treeless avenues in the Romanian capital would be too few, and even hostile. Only three days before, at a [summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Madrid](#), the American-led alliance had decided not to admit Romania in the first wave of its post-Cold War expansion but to admit Romania's historical adversary, Hungary.

Yet hundreds of thousands of people packed the wide boulevards from Piata Universitatii, where Clinton spoke, to Piata Romana, a mile away, shouting "NATO, NATO" in ecstasy -- more people than at Clinton's stop the day before in Poland, a country that along with Hungary and the Czech Republic had just been accepted into NATO. In an interview last spring at the Cotroceni Palace, in Bucharest, the Romanian President, [Emil Constantinescu](#), said about the strength of the showing for Clinton, "In World War Two, American planes bombed Romania [an ally of Nazi Germany through 1944]. Some American pilots were shot down. What did the villagers do? They hid the pilots." Constantinescu exclaimed, waving his hands, "It was absurd. The villagers protected at their own, grave risk the very men who had bombed them. This can't have happened very often in the history of aerial bombardment. Whatever America does, Romanians love you, because America represents the West, to which we know we belong. In the late 1940s, naive as it may sound to you, Romanians literally watched the skies, waiting for

American planes to rescue them from Russian communism. When the Americans didn't come, we were brutally separated from the West for decades."

Discuss this article in the [Global Views conference of Post & Riposte](#).

From the archives:

- [Flashback: "Cold War, Part II?"](#), (February, 1997)

NATO is set to expand into Eastern Europe. Atlantic articles discuss the history and possible future of NATO.

- ["Black Lamb and Grey Falcon,"](#) (January, 1941)

In 1937 the novelist Rebecca West traveled to the Balkans in search of a better understanding of that region's historical conflicts. Her classic account of that journey, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, appeared first in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1941.

Related links:

- [Brief Ancient, Medieval and World War II History of România](#)

Posted by the Romanian Cultural Club of Melbourne, Australia.

- [Brief history of the Romanian revolution of 1989](#)

Posted by the

For Romanians, Constantinescu and others told me, Clinton's visit symbolized nothing less than the closing of that dark historical chapter, which continued beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall. Gorbachev-style Communists carried out the December 25, 1989, execution of the Stalinist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his equally sadistic wife, Elena, who had reduced the caloric intake of many Romanians to less than what it had been during the First World War enemy occupation. Those Communists held power until 1996, when Constantinescu, a geology professor, was elected President. He rammed through historic reconciliation treaties with neighboring Hungary and Ukraine, began to liberalize the economy, and filled the senior staff positions of the Romanian military with young, English-speaking officers. He was Romania's first moral head of state since the corrupt and politically disastrous King Carol II ascended the throne in 1930. Clinton's appearance on the podium with Constantinescu -- and his vow before throngs of Romanians that "the door to NATO is open ... and we will help you walk through it" -- has, in a part of the world where words and dates are remembered pathologically, assumed the aura of a sacred trust.

It is the purpose of many presidential trips abroad to raise vague hopes and obscure intractable local realities, so it should come as no surprise if Clinton has made a vow that he cannot fulfill. But this is no routine promise. Clinton's pledge to the people of Romania -- the largest and most populous country in the Balkans, with one foot in Central Europe and the other on the Black Sea -- is linked to issues at the very core of international relations: the growing but as yet unremarked economic and social split in Europe between the Catholic and Protestant West and the Orthodox East; Russia's new aggression, as expressed through organized crime and energy monopolies; the American need for reliable bases near the Middle East and the adjacent oil-rich regions of the Black and Caspian Seas; the disparate legacies of communism in various ex-Soviet bloc countries; the question of "national character" and its uses in foreign policy; and, most important, America's appetite for hegemony. It is hegemony, and hegemony alone, that has always accomplished the immoderate ambition of establishing one's political system throughout much of the world -- something that both liberals and conservatives claim they intend to do.

Romanian Cultural Club of Melbourne, Australia.

- **The Balkans in the Age of Nationalism: Twenty-five Lectures on Modern Balkan History**

Posted by Steven W. Sowards, who originally delivered the lectures as an undergraduate course on Balkan history at Swarthmore College in 1995.

- **Parliament of Romania**

The official Web site of the Romanian parliament, with information about the parliament's history and how it functions.

- **Bucharest Online**

Information about Bucharest history, arts, and culture.

WHEN I entered Romania by train from predominantly Catholic Hungary last spring, the shock of crossing the border was greater than it had been during the Cold War. Because of Hungary's deeper roots in Central Europe and its market-oriented reforms of the 1960s through the 1980s, Communist Hungary had been far more prosperous than Communist Romania. But since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Hungary's economic acceleration has been so much faster than Romania's that the difference simply cannot be bridged in the foreseeable future. Since 1989 the total foreign investment in Hungary has been \$18 billion; in Romania it has been \$3 billion. Thus with more than double Hungary's population, Romania garnered only a sixth as much foreign investment money. Even as Debrecen, in eastern Hungary, is becoming a forest of chrome-alloy shingles, advertising foreign banks, cash machines, and computer-program providers, the Romanian side of the border is characterized by unpaved roads, few cars, mounds of garbage, rusting and deserted factories, and shacks with missing roofs. When my train stopped a few miles inside the Romanian border, an official slipped into the car's restroom and put the paper towels and toilet paper into his briefcase. When I changed \$80, I received an inch-thick stack of cheapened local currency. As the train moved deeper into Romania, I observed a primitive and heartrending Europe that had changed little since my previous visit, eight years before: hordes of Gypsies washing their clothes along riverbanks, and peasants with pitchforks riding in horse-drawn wooden carts. Everywhere were the heirlooms of Ceausescu's Stalinism -- hideous industrial complexes marked by rust, pebbly concrete, and polluting chemicals, set beside the grinding reality of subsistence agriculture.

In Cluj, the city where I got off the train in the region of Transylvania, I saw a sprinkling of cellular phones, satellite dishes, flashy boutiques, and private security guards. But more meaningful as a sign of modernization were individual people. Communism, by denying individuality, fortified national stereotypes, turning Romanian streets into a sea of suffering expressions like those of icons. Now the Romanian population was less archetypal. I noticed would-be hippies, café types, nouveaux riches, sports enthusiasts, and so on, who by choosing their own self-images -- however derivative they may seem to us -- were launching a humanistic assault on the determinism of national character. The women, with their fashion consciousness, seemed far ahead of the men.

These changes, however, are taking place in Romania at a much slower pace than in former Communist republics of Central Europe such as Hungary and Slovenia, and must be

understood against an imponderable degree of ethnic national consciousness, a near absence of significant foreign investment outside Bucharest and Timisoara, and a monstrously wasteful and environmentally destructive Communist-era infrastructure. Each of these factors is a drag on development.

Cluj, for instance, is a city predominantly of Orthodox Romanians and Catholic and Protestant Hungarians, who in the course of this century's wars have each occupied the other's territory. The twice-elected mayor, Gheorghe Funar, is a Romanian nationalist who during an interview with me wore the pin of the ultra-nationalist organization Vatra Romaneasca ("Romanian Hearth"). Funar denied the very existence of the 1.5 million Hungarians in Transylvania, telling me that such people were merely Hungarian-speaking Romanians confused about their loyalty. The mayor's antics, which have included removing Hungarian street signs and painting park benches in the loud colors of the Romanian flag, have made Cluj a hard sell to the international business community.

From the archives:

- **"Transylvania Today,"** by Jeffrey Tayler (June, 1997)

This part of the world isn't just for Dracula buffs.

From *Atlantic Unbound*:

- **Atlantic Abroad: "Night Train to Istanbul,"** by Robert D. Kaplan (July, 1998)

"The decrepitude of the Soviet inheritance was such that after nearly two months in the Balkans, Istanbul's train station for me signified the West."

- **Atlantic Abroad: "Tricks of the Trade,"** by Jeffrey Tayler (April, 1998)

"Exchange booths in

Westerners who are upbeat about Romania do not often venture beyond Bucharest. Indeed, the city has changed dramatically in the eight years since I last saw it. In place of a forbidding Stalinist city whose populace, in baggy, mud-colored clothes, looked like a terrified peasantry, I found a lively metropolis of people wearing modish Italianate fashions (including lots of black leotards and tight leather jackets), noisy young couples kissing passionately in the street, pulsing casinos, private money changers, and countless shops and sidewalk stands selling compact discs and books -- everything from Israeli pop music to *Mein Kampf*. In place of dowdy restaurants offering the Communist-era fare of greasy pork cutlets and plum brandy there were intimate establishments run by young people offering nouvelle cuisine. Topless clubs were common, and sexy Brazilian soap operas dominated local television. Particularly pervasive were cell phones -- the perfect product for hustler economies -- whose beeping filled the cafés. In the 1980s under Ceausescu it was forbidden to bring so much as a typewriter into Romania.

"There are no limits with the Romanian nouveaux riches," Ioana Ieronim, a poet and former diplomat who is a close friend, told me. "We were just like this in the interwar period; we Romanians are resourceful, adaptable, but too often given to exaggeration. Romanians think of themselves as completely Western, and most of them have no sense of what separates Romania and the West. This is the consequence of our many years of isolation. Without an awareness of our own values, we may appear as some pseudo-cosmopolitan émigrés in a new global world --

Romania often ran out of money, and somewhere nearby there were usually black-market dealers."

Latin-Byzantine clones of the West. One often meets a crassness and directness, which is an outburst of 'freedom' after decades of repression." Ioana told me that she had seen a young, beautiful, rather revealingly dressed young woman trying to "buy" a young professional man. "Indifferent to the other people in the office, quite openly she hoped to persuade him to consent to a sexual relationship with her by explicitly promising to put at his disposal her connections in the world of power -- political and professional -- even to the point of specifically naming these connections."

Though Romanian is a Latin language, the vast majority of Romania's 22 million people are Eastern Orthodox Christians. Except among the Hungarians and the Romanian elite in Transylvania, there was never an Enlightenment here. "When we buy computers, CDs, and clothes now," Horea-Roman Patapievici, a leading Romanian philosopher and historian, told me, "we borrow the material consequences of the West without grasping the fundamental values that created such technologies in the first place." But isn't this, I thought, how all cultural infusions begin -- superficially? For example, in a country that has exhibited some of the most bestial tendencies of anti-Semitism, Jews are now somewhat favored as a cultural symbol, because they represent a cosmopolitanism to which the younger generation aspires. Ladislau Gyemant, a vice-dean at Babes-Bolyai University, in Cluj, told me that when Hebrew was offered recently as a foreign language, hundreds of students, only a handful of whom were Jewish, signed up.

STILL, my overwhelming impression after weeks of travel last spring through this variegated and mountainous country was of a place drifting from the Communist Second World to the Third World. Romania is a less extreme version of Egypt, with a mass of peasantry and a precocious consumer class that is limited mainly to a few districts of the capital. As my train entered Bucharest from the north, I saw miles of corrugated-metal squatter settlements as bad as many in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

A case in point is the politics. In the period after Constantinescu's election and continuing through Clinton's visit it was a mantra of international observers that Romania was a democratic success story. Then the government missed deadline after deadline, set by the International Monetary Fund, for privatization and the other reforms it had promised. Elements of the President's own National Peasants' Party -- not to mention Funar and others outside the party -- balked at Constantinescu's

reconciliation package with Hungary. Prime Minister Victor Ciorbea's penchant for cabinet meetings lasting as long as eighteen hours in which nothing was decided did not alleviate investors' fears. Inflation soared, and a budget was delayed. Last April, Ciorbea resigned; the new Prime Minister, Radu Vasile, has been stymied by divisions within the National Peasants' Party and also by malignities across the political spectrum, within and between parties. Many of my Romanian friends worried openly about "*Bulgarizarea*"-- ungovernability of the kind Bulgaria briefly experienced during the first months of last year.

Interviews I conducted with Romanian analysts, foreign diplomats, and Western businessmen elicited near-unanimous agreement that the problem is one not of this or that policy or minister but of "national character" -- resulting less from geography and history than from the sociological legacy of Ceausescu's communism. Silviu Brucan, long a leading figure in the Romanian Communist Party, and Dorel Sandor, a Bucharest policy wonk, explained how Ceausescu, by not allowing a reform wing of the Communist Party or any dissent whatsoever, utterly destroyed the Romanian political elite and even the mechanism for another to emerge. The consequence, Sandor said, is "a nation of weak, fuzzy institutions and coffeehouse politics, where, despite the names of the political parties, there are no ideas, only personal vanity and intrigue." For instance, he said, Romanian liberals are "not the center-right economic reformers that define liberal groups elsewhere in Europe"; they are "pocketbook liberals, concerned with short-term profit, who don't want foreign competition to threaten their new wealth."

Whereas in Hungary 70 percent of the banks have already been sold to foreigners (because, the Hungarian economist Laszlo Csaba told me, "it forces local institutions to run forever on international standards"), privatization in Romania is a record of delays, often followed by demands that only minority shares be offered to non-Romanians. "Our politics is all intrigue," Patapievici told me, explaining that part of the reason is the Orthodox habit of communicating traditions orally rather than through written texts, which makes everything forever negotiable. A Western financial expert said emphatically, "This is still a peasant society with a peasant suspicion about selling off what is conceived of as the national patrimony." Information is not disseminated but jealously guarded. A journalist told me that whereas his office in Hungary's capital, Budapest, requires a new roll of fax paper every other day, because of all the information sent to him by Hungarian ministries, in Romania a roll of fax paper lasts him a month.

What underlies all this, everyone I interviewed told me in one way or another, is that beyond the President and a few ministers there is nothing but wood: almost no one in the government's bureaucracy, they said, is even remotely competent or potentially employable by a Western firm. Though this is a problem in most of the formerly Communist societies of Central Europe, the degree of ineptitude is worse in Romania, where the annual per capita income of \$1,545 is not even half that in Poland.

THE widening gulf between predominantly Catholic societies like Poland and Hungary and Orthodox ones like Romania and Bulgaria is a complex matter of history, culture, and geographic position. Although it is true that Communist regimes in the Balkans were often more destructive than those in Central Europe, the nature of those regimes was partly determined by local history and culture in the first place. Whereas Budapest was a center of the Hapsburg Empire, which saw the birth of modernism in the persons of Sigmund Freud, Gustav Klimt, and others, Bucharest lay within the less enlightened, and poorer, Byzantine and Ottoman realms. In fact, if in 1989 I had based a ten-year prediction of these countries' economic performance solely on their relative economic positions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I would have been clairvoyant. Romania shows that no country begins with a clean slate.

Take religion: "Orthodoxy never offered a moral alternative to the Romanian state, as the Catholic Church did in Poland," Patapievici told me. "Orthodoxy is not an active principle, like Catholicism or Protestantism. Rather, it is passive and contemplative, separated from and therefore tolerant of the physical world and its political order -- whatever that order may be." Stelian Tanase, a political scientist and a magazine editor, told me, "In Orthodoxy only God takes risks. We don't." Father Iustin Marchis, a reform-minded cleric of the Stavropoleos Church, in Bucharest, said, "Eastern Orthodoxy puts one's relationship with God ahead of that with the community. We can't join a global system until we regain our identity as a nation, which is partly Eastern. Communism deformed it."

Americans may not feel comfortable with such cultural interpretations, but the fact that the three countries that have just been accepted into NATO all belong to the Catholic and Protestant West reflects how undeniable cultural interpretations are except in the abstract. Indeed, by consummating this expansion, NATO has re-created a variation on the Holy Roman Empire, and also the borders

dividing the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires -- true civilizational divides.

Romanians know on which side they want to fall. Their territory was violated by Russia three times in the nineteenth century alone, and they know how vulnerable they will be if the West accepts this emerging division of Europe -- while, of course, officially denying that it exists. There is no ambivalence here, as there is in the Czech Republic, for instance, about joining NATO. Constantinescu told me, "We see NATO as representing a set of values and standards peculiar to the West which we want: high economic performance, a civil society, and a well-functioning democracy." The President continued, "The hardest thing about the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of a competitive environment was the discovery that we are not all equal. Some are more intelligent than others, some harder-working, some in better positions to acquire wealth. Economic development in Europe and America was carried out with the utmost toughness, with debtors' prisons and the excesses of the Wild West. To say that we're equal is an insult to our individuality. It is important only that opportunities for advancement be equal. Communism was a reaction against this hard truth. It seduced us into a belief not only in equality but also in rule by the least sophisticated among us -- the proletariat. Similarly, we did not start from the same baseline as Hungary and Poland. Our problems as a people are far more complex. It is going to take us a lot more time. At least we are fully democratic -- just look at our cabinet crisis. It is precisely because our situation is more fragile that we need the understanding of NATO and the IMF."

In fact, the real debate about NATO is about the Balkans. Even without NATO membership, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia are secure within the Western community, because their reforms almost guarantee acceptance into the European Union at some point. But despite public statements to the contrary, no one seriously expects that Romania and other Orthodox countries will be admitted to the EU anytime soon. NATO is all these countries have if the West is not to lose them again. Romanians intuit that the Eurocrats in Brussels have little backbone, and that if anyone is likely to take a chance on them, it will be the Americans. That is why hundreds of thousands of them greeted Clinton in a seizure of joy. In poor and isolated Balkan countries like Romania and Bulgaria, which, unlike the former Yugoslavia, have resisted the descent into tribalism, NATO is seen as the ultimate totemic symbol of Western civilization. Membership would have a pivotal impact on local politics

and the fight against organized crime, with its Russian imperialist undercurrents.

A student at Babes-Bolyai University poignantly expressed the fear of what will happen should Romania continue to lag behind Central Europe and once again be denied NATO membership. Her professors and classmates nodded in agreement as she spoke. I will paraphrase:

"Romanians know that Russia will never really be democratic. We know that our enterprises are worth little and that our society, as in the 1930s, is without ethics. Our new aristocracy is the nomenbratura -- the spoiled children of the former Communist elite, which stole state assets after 1989. You Westerners will tire of us. You tell us we must privatize, but it is the mafia and the Russians who buy our companies. A major Romanian oil company was put on sale, but nobody in the West wanted it. It was sold to Lukoil, a Russian company. This is how the Russians will eventually own our country again. You'll see -- the Russians will operate through third parties in Europe, so your experts will be able to deny our fears."

Her remarks were very Romanian in their cynicism and their exaggeration, and also in their acute insight -- insight of a kind rare in Americans, who generally prefer not to look too deeply into the harsh reality of many societies.

The Russian company [Lukoil](#) has in fact sold a small interest in itself to the American company ARCO and in the future may sell more -- an example of how the global economy dilutes the economic imperialism that the student was worried about. Moreover, hard evidence for Russian involvement in the Romanian economy and local crime networks is, so far, meager. Nonetheless, as one Western executive in Bucharest told me, "Doing business here by Western standards is difficult. Everything depends on politics. Without Constantinescu behind you nothing happens. No one here likes decisions. No one really knows who owns the casinos, the Athenee Palace Hotel. Too much is obscure, and that does not make for a good impression. When Romanians do sell an enterprise, they sell merely to the highest bidder who meets the rate of extortion. They don't investigate the buyer's background. That adds another layer of uncertainty concerning who owns what. And it's not like in the thirties, when the Jewish, German, and Greek business communities set some reasonable standards -- they're all gone."

What has been called Romania's "Franco-Ottoman system" may thus limit the amount of Western investment -- and it is Western investment, more than aid or philanthropy, that

will transform the culture. International corporate values often reflect Western values. One European executive here told me, "We indoctrinate our staff with the company ideology -- integrity, respect, teamwork, and professionalism. We tell them that our policy is to pay our taxes and do no special favors for friends. Romanians like titles. I tell my Romanian staff not to call me Mister anything, and to confront me with any problem they have. Western managers are not aloof. This is how you change Romania: success depends on Western ownership." Others told me that they worry that the business climate offers a better opportunity for shady groups of the kind linked to Russia's new oligarchs -- groups that have already made headway in Bulgaria.

The poverty and crime that obtain in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union are so real to Romanians that their attitude toward their ethnic compatriots in the largely Romanian-speaking former Soviet republic of Moldova, on Romania's eastern border, has undergone a sea change. When I visited Romania in 1990, reunification with Moldova was popular politically. Now it is much less so, and not just because of the Russian-speaking minority in Moldova that would complicate any reunification scenario. The chaos in the former Soviet Union simply scares Romanians. A Romanian friend whose mother lives in Poland drives to see her twice a year on a route that passes through Hungary and Slovakia, rather than taking the shorter way, through Ukraine. He told me that Ukraine, and Moldova, too, are netherworlds of awful roads, where if you leave your car unattended for a moment, it is likely to be stolen. The dramatic drop in the level of development apparent when I crossed from Hungary to Romania is duplicated when crossing from Romania to Ukraine or Moldova. Random crime is much rarer in Romania than in the former Soviet Union; Romanians' distrust of their big eastern neighbor is not just ethnic and historical but anchored in daily experience.

It would seem that Romania needs us much more than we need Romania. But that is not entirely the case.

IN Bucharest I spent a full week talking with members of the secular institution Romanians respect most -- the military. "The Romanians are ahead of other armies in the region in terms of efficiency," an American Army officer and Balkan expert stationed in Germany told me. "Their top guys always assume the blame and don't punish officers below them. It's partly a factor of Latin honor. The civilians say we need the military to run things, but the Romanian armed forces say *no way*. Their desire to stay clear of politics is purer than it is in Greece, or certainly

than it is in Turkey. Romanian officers are forbidden to belong to political parties. In reality, democracy exists in Romania because of the restraint of the military."

The Pentagon also likes the Romanians because they are doing what it tells them to: transforming their military from a large, badly educated force more suited to manual labor than to fighting into a smaller, better-trained force organized along flexible, Western command lines. The Nazis considered the Romanian military among the fiercest of Axis troops, and when Romania switched sides, in August of 1944, Allied commanders were equally satisfied with the aggressiveness of Romanian soldiers. The Romanian military's attitude toward America is no less enthusiastic than it was toward the two sides it fought for during the Second World War. During the Iraq crisis last March the chief of the Romanian general staff, Division General Constantin Degeratu, told me, "We have given the United States overfly rights and the use of several air bases. We stand by the U.S. We are ready to take part in any operation. I gave [chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Henry H.] Shelton full assurances. We understand exactly your problem with Iraq."

The decades-long experience of living under communism (Ceausescu's Stalinism in particular), along with the insecurity of being on the fringe of the Western world, has made Romanians, who offer the visitor Oriental coffee and decorate their walls with Byzantine icons, passionately pro-American. Even intellectuals speak of Ronald Reagan with reverence. This is in marked contrast to the climate of Western Europe, where public opinion about the United States is usually skeptical. In crisis situations the public in France, Italy, and elsewhere looks for the slightest inconsistency in U.S. policy in order to deny its validity. Given that the Middle East is a region of major oil reserves, aging dictators, high unemployment among young males, high absolute rises in population, and increasing urbanization with dwindling water supplies, the recent Iraqi crisis may be but prologue for military emergencies there in the twenty-first century. Romania, closer to the Middle East than most other European countries, is a natural "forward" base for us -- especially because the level of sympathy for the United States may surpass even that in Western Europe immediately after the Second World War. In democracies, remember, security policy is ultimately tied to public opinion.

At a time when oil power in the Middle East is moving north, from the Arabian peninsula to the Caspian Sea, the strategic importance of friendly Balkan countries like Romania and Bulgaria -- so close to the Black and Caspian

Seas (and to Turkey, whose vast water supplies give it increasing leverage over water-poor Arab states) -- cannot be overemphasized. Iulian Fota, an assistant secretary in the Romanian Ministry of Defense, was blunt: "Russia's strategy," he told me, "is to fully re-create a sphere of influence through the former Soviet Union and Bulgaria and then work with France, Iran, and Greece to limit U.S. power in the Middle East. Opposing that will be Turkey and Israel. We can help them. Once Caspian Sea oil starts flowing to Europe across the Black Sea, Romania's international-security profile will grow. Romania is no longer on the periphery of Europe. It is in the middle of a volatile new region between Europe and the Caspian." General Degeratu put it like this: "Romania is the only country in Europe between the two great regions of instability and uncertainty -- the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. For the sake of ourselves and Europe we need to remain politically stable. We need NATO more than any other country in Europe."

My week of interviews included a dinner with ample plum brandy and wine, at which several members of the military gave me two messages between the lines. The first confirmed what the American officer in Germany had told me: the army hates politics, perhaps because of the Brownian motion it observes at cabinet meetings. It sees NATO as a source of good careers and decent wages, improved training and equipment, and access to international networks -- seminars, trips to the West, and so on. NATO is thus an escape valve for the military should Romania stagnate politically and economically. The second was that Romanian officers are terrified of a Europe in which NATO expansion ends at the Hungarian-Romanian border and the ethnically divided region of Transylvania becomes a cultural and political battleground. This second message constitutes a warning: Romania is on the edge; nationalists like Mayor Funar, in Cluj, and Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the head of the Greater Romania Party, are prepared with tirades of hate against minorities, particularly Hungarians, should the West disappoint Romania again.

The West ignores this warning at its peril. As the analyst Stelian Tanase told me, "We Romanians are adaptable: to fascism, to communism, to global capitalism, to whatever the prevailing model seems to be in Europe." The possible influences are various. From the Russian East come systematized, hierarchical criminal groupings. And from the European West the likelihood of borderless prosperity is less certain than it seems. For example, should Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front continue its march to legitimacy in France, Romanians and others in the troubled

formerly Communist countries of Europe could suddenly have another model. Le Pen visited Romania in November of 1997 as the guest of Vadim Tudor.

The late 1990s, in other words, offer a rare and perhaps fleeting moment for bold statesmanship in the Balkans. At the beginning of the Second World War, Bucharest was richer and more cosmopolitan than Athens. And today, with all its problems, Romania is still more salvageable than was Greece at the war's end. Riven by civil conflict and lacking a modern bourgeoisie, Greece seemed hopeless. But Washington acted boldly and yanked it into NATO. Whatever problems Greece has caused the alliance are minor compared with what they would have been had the Truman Administration been less aggressive.

Romania is now crucial to Europe's new map, much as Greece was in the late 1940s. If NATO accepts Romania's large Orthodox Christian population, the dangerous civilizational divide resulting from economic trends and the first stage of NATO enlargement could be bridged.

Of course, I may be naive. In the late 1940s, with men like George Marshall, Dean Acheson, and Loy Henderson running our foreign policy, America was both Eurocentric and hegemonic. Today it is neither. Yet listening to the Romanians and the Bulgarians, as I did for weeks, reveals that American Eurocentrism and hegemony are precisely what people in the Balkans yearn for -- even if they don't like to admit it.

Watching Romania is often agonizing. Progress is everywhere, even as the divide with Central Europe widens. I saw villages where, through democratic processes and despite the lack of records after fifty years, parcels of land have been returned to their rightful owners, yet rural poverty of a kind unknown in Hungary still obtains. I saw quiet, patient street demonstrations by medical workers in Cluj who are paid \$50 a month. I saw a new wave of young entrepreneurs encroaching on rapacious ex-Communist business barons. The yearning for the West is deep. At the opera in Bucharest I sat in a drafty hall with scratchy acoustics among an enthusiastic audience listening to Puccini and Verdi arias performed by soloists in worn shoes and tuxedos.

Democracy will take Romania only so far. Its proximity to Russia, and the way in which communism deformed its society and made a wreck of institutions, necessitate a reliable Western security umbrella. Without that security, Bill Clinton's legacy may include the redivision of Europe. At the moment, Romania's people have his pledge that he

won't let that happen.

Robert D. Kaplan is a contributing editor of *The Atlantic*. He is the author of six books, including *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (1993) and *An Empire Wilderness: Travels Into America's Future* (1998).


Copyright © 1998 by The Atlantic Monthly Company. All rights reserved.
The Atlantic Monthly; September 1998; The Fulcrum of Europe; Volume 282, No. 3; pages 28 - 36.

[Home](#) [Atlantic Unbound](#) [The Atlantic Monthly](#) [Post & Riposte](#) [Atlantic Store](#) [Search](#)

Subscribe to THE Atlantic
Guaranteed savings, no risk. Click here.

Discover the world's largest marketplace for books.

abebooks.com. Because you read.

Go there now 

Advertisement:

[Travel Guides](#)

[Guide to Hotels](#)

[Discount Hotels](#)