

## The Path of Good Intentions: Civil Society's Role in Romania's National African Strategy

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cucuta, R.-A. (2024). The Path of Good Intentions: Civil Society's Role in Romania's National African Strategy. *Perspective Politice*, 17, 217-225. <https://doi.org/10.25019/perspol/24.17.0.21>

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**How to cite this paper:**

Cucută, R.-A. (2024). The Path of Good Intentions. Civil Society's Role in Romania's National African Strategy. *Perspective Politice*. Pages [217-225].

<https://doi.org/10.25019/perspol/24.17.0.21>

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*Article*

# The Path of Good Intentions. Civil Society's Role in Romania's National African Strategy

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**Abstract:** *The paper discusses, from a social constructivist theoretical perspective, the manner in which Romania's African Strategy, Romania–Africa: A Partnership for Future through Peace, Development and Education, envisions civil society's role. The paper tries to identify the political, theoretical and ideological underpinnings of the document's view of civil society, by analyzing not only its content, but its position within the wider context of Romania's foreign policy.*

*The ambiguous or rather limited role that civil society is expected to play is explained as a result of the two rather conflicting views of international politics which the document tries, albeit unsuccessfully to reconcile: an understanding of international politics, focused on the distribution of power and centered on the privileged role states play in international politics, stemming from a historical sense of vulnerability exacerbated by the War in Ukraine, which cannot be reconciled with a view of international relations focused on the role of international institutions and Romania's historical support for decolonization. In addition to the interaction between these perspectives, both views, however, prescribe a subordinate role for civil society.*

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**Keywords:** *civil society, constructivism, Romanian-African relations*

## **1. Introduction. The Social Construction of Interests**

The theoretical framework of the paper adheres to some general tenets of social constructivism. Constructivists argue that reality itself is a form of social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 149-182). Moreover, factors seen otherwise as paramount in international relations, such as power, sovereignty and security are social facts (Barnett 2023: 198-199), relevant only in terms of their intersubjective meaning (Oslander 2008: 40-41; Tannenwald 2005: 14-16; Sørensen, Møller, Jackson 2022: 196-197). Consequently, the paper adopts an idealist

view and considers that foreign policy and strategic planning represent deliberate state actions instrumental to the pursuit of interests. The interests themselves however are socially constructed (Hurd 2008: 306-307) and are an expression of the self-perceived Romanian identity.

Fundamentally, the paper takes an agnostic perspective inasmuch as the debate between “conventional” and “critical constructivists” is concerned (McDonald 2018: 52-53; Sørensen, Møller, Jackson 2022: 199-201), positing however that the strategic document relevant for Romania’s interaction with Africa exhibits two distinct perspectives: On the one hand, a rather traditional approach to international politics, focused on security issues seen primarily in military terms, which emphasizes the primacy of state actors. This view is exacerbated by the threat seen in Russia’s war in Ukraine and it contrasts with a perspective which tries to take advantage of Romania’s past interactions with African countries, its position on national liberation, colonialism and the emphasis it placed on international institutions, on the other hand.

It is important to note, at the same time, that, while many ambiguities in relation to the role civil society should play are a result of the interaction between the two dimensions, both see the role civil society should play as a rather subordinate or auxiliary element. Analyzing *Romania - Africa: A Partnership for Future through Peace, Development and Education*, (hereinafter RAPFPDE), the article traces the interaction between the two perspectives as a significant source of the strategy’s reluctance to engage with this topic and to find a role for civil society in Romania’s African foreign policy. The two perspectives represent in essence not only self-perceptions of Romania’s identity and, consequently, interests, but are also an expression of Romania’s divide between past and present. While past interactions with African countries were important for the foreign policy of Communist Romania, NATO and EU membership are the bedrock of the country’s current strategic thinking.

## 2. A Traditional View of Security

The first perspective which is highlighted by the document is heavily reminiscent of a very traditional view of security (Buzan 1983: 75-83). There are several peculiar elements present in the document: membership to the EU and NATO as the overarching determinant of foreign policy and the instrumental security guarantee, the primacy of state actors, the pervasiveness of power relations in the international arena, security seen mostly in military or economic terms, foreign policy viewed as a series of competitive zero-sum games.

From the onset, the document argues that African developments can play a major role in “influencing the balance of the system of international relations and the global balance of power” (RAPFPDE 2023: 1), highlighting that power considerations are distinctly more important than other “subjects of global interest” such as economic growth, environmental and climate change dynamics, transition to green technologies, or combating terrorism. It is important to notice at the same time that while some non-traditional topics appear within this list of priorities, the outlook remains thoroughly traditional: for example, Africa is important for the green transition because it can provide access to rare minerals. Moreover, relations with Africa are set within a global competitive context: due to the continent’s increasing importance, the strategy envisions the existence of a “global competition” for a qualitatively and quantitatively different interaction with African countries (RAPFPDE 2023: 1). In addition, the Romanian strategy is related to the increased interest Romania’s foreign partners and the EU show the African continent (RAPFPDE 2023: 7). The document emphasizes that the rele-

vance of the African political communities and their development imperatives are somehow instrumental and not goals in themselves: they are instrumental to the maintenance of a favorable global distribution of power and they are also one of the instruments by means of which the EU (or the US), can reach its own strategic objectives. Furthermore, African leaders and societies themselves have to acknowledge Romania's status as a NATO and EU member (RAPFPDE 2023: 10).

The fact that the strategy adopts the perspective of the European Union is highlighted also by the document's discussion of migration. The impact climate change can have on migration is taken into account at the European level (Udrea 2023: 140-144). Furthermore, the 2015 EU debates about managing the consequences and impact of migration are also significant (Pătrașcu 2015: 251-256). The strategy acknowledges that while Romania is not a destination for the African migrants, managing migration in cooperation with the country's "European partners" remains an important objective (RAPFPDE 2023: 5).

The document firmly sees Romania as a member of "the Euro-Atlantic" community, deploring the "the historical reasons" and the "battle of narratives", fueling a citizen and political leader level mistrust in "Western" projects (RAPFPDE 2023: 1). The section is relevant for several reasons: firstly, the geopolitical discourse clearly places Romania within the geopolitical "Western" world, a construct equated by the document's content with the Euro-Atlantic community. Secondly, dismissing colonialism as a "historical reason" which can fit alongside the "narratives" of competitors is also relevant for the conventional worldview espoused by the document. In a sense, the strategy sees only a discursive dimension of colonialism which can be appropriated in order to advance power interests and seems to side-step the long term detrimental and traumatic impact of the process. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the most damaging impact of this mistrust is the lack of progress registered by "Western projects". It is just as important that, in a highly unusual manner for a strategic document, RAPFPDE contains a section titled "Africa beyond stereotypes", which, tellingly, is present only in the Romanian version of the document. (RAPFPDE 2023: 2, Romanian version). The strategy underscores that Romania sees itself as part of a "Western world" engaged in a power maximization global competition, and it is as part of taking up the "Western" label that Romanian engages with Africa.

Moreover, the Romanian strategy is aligned with the EU-Africa Strategic Partnership (RAPFPDE 2023: 1) and the document acknowledges that actions in the Sahel and in the Horn of Africa will observe the provisions of EU's regional strategies (RAPFPDE 2023: 2). The document continues to leave the same impression that African development objectives are legitimate and relevant not in and of themselves, but because they were endorsed by the European Union: "Pan-African economic integration is fully in line with the economic objectives of the EU in relation with Africa" (RAPFPDE 2023: 4). Romania's profile in relation to Africa is therefore seen within the institutional and normative confines of the European Union: the strategy references the role member states such as Romania will play in the disbursement of the 150 billion Euros package the EU will use for the implementation of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the African Union's *Agenda 2063* (RAPFPDE 2023: 7).

The same positioning is reflected by the document's discussion of the Strategy's objectives, which are derived from *Joint Vision 2030*, adopted at the 6th European Union-African Union Summit, Brussels, 17-18 February 2022, and from the African Union's *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* (RAPFPDE 2023: 9). The insistence on Romania's "Western" status is no-

ticeable also when debt owed to Romania is concerned: Romania's candidacy to the OECD is the most prominent variable in determining the country's future position on the matter (RAPFPDE 2023: 10).

Sometimes, the document seems to attempt to strike a middle ground between the commending and the stereotypical depiction: Africa, notwithstanding the diversity of the continent, becomes "a global actor" at the same time "dynamic" and "to be further mobilized" (RAPFPDE 2023: 4).

Even when the strategy cannot avoid mentioning colonialism, the discussion is incomplete or brief. Colonialism is directly responsible for the significant number of ethno-linguistic communities separated by internationally recognized borders (RAPFPDE 2023: 5). However, the document fails to acknowledge that while the problem was a source of contention for the leaders of the African countries, a decision to maintain the inherited frontiers and to settle on an informal rule of identifying ruling governments was adopted fast and it has succeeded in preventing inter-state conflict (Herbst 2000: 112-113, Thomson 2010: 46). The Western-centered perspective is still present. While the document acknowledges the trauma colonialism brought about, this represents in fact a vulnerability that can be exploited by state and non-state actors (RAPFPDE 2023: 5). The solution to this problem is not dealing with the consequences of colonialism, but increasing the resilience of these societies (RAPFPDE 2023: 5), a major point of emphasis in Romanian strategic documents (Cucută 2023: 25-34). The attempt to sidestep the impact of colonialism is relevant in the scarcity itself of its mentions – the document makes only three direct references to colonialism.

The confrontational nature of international politics is marked also by another factor – the increased sense of threat generated by Russia's attack in Ukraine. In this context, Romania promises to offer its expertise to combat the Russian discourse blaming the Western countries for the food crisis manifest in several African societies (RAPFPDE 2023: 7). It is telling, therefore, that the document manages to mention "Ukraine" nine times and makes only three direct references to colonialism, one of the being that Romania has no colonial past (RAPFPDE 2023: 5).

It is of little importance to what extent there is a normative dimension of NATO, or, more importantly, of the EU (Cucută 2015: 199-202). What is most significant is that, for particular historical reasons, Romanian history is interpreted or imbued by a specific sense of vulnerability. The conflict in Ukraine, which is referenced by several Romanian strategic documents (National Defense Ministry 2021, Romanian Presidency 2020) only exacerbates this historical sense of structural vulnerability. Joining NATO and the EU becomes therefore primarily a security concern – apart from the economic or material consequences of joining the two organizations, their role is that of ensuring Romanian security. It is debatable to what extent this might represent a form of balancing future or potential Russian aggression, in the case of a minor power or a form of bandwagoning (Miroiu 2005: 66-77). What is nonetheless clear from the study of the strategy is that it expresses a particular worldview, underpinned by a series of assumptions which shape Romania's first African Strategy: the sense of strategic vulnerability, especially in relation to Russia, the view that all foreign policy actions must ultimately contribute to the strengthening of Romania's security, a perspective which is significantly state-centered and, last, but not least, a rather ambiguous position in relation to civil society actors, given the difficulty of having them fit within this world view. States and their potentially violent interaction remain the main characteristics of an international system where cooperation, although needed and possible, aims to enhance power and security seen first and foremost as

commodities and not as relations (Williams, McDonald 2018: 6). At the same time, it is difficult to discard the normative impact of Romania's belonging to international organizations and to its own institutional and political heritage. To that extent, we can argue that, at least partially, we cannot discount the potential impact of a "logic of appropriateness" (March and Olsen 1996: 251-253).

Consequently, the "traditional" view of international politics features prominently in the strategy. Even when cooperation with Africa is concerned, the interaction remains a competitive one, within an environment marked by scarcity, hence the emphasis on the trade of limited natural resources. The motivation for the actions seems to be self-interest rather than the expression of an internalization of values, within a global system where the international distribution of power is paramount. References to Russia's war in Ukraine as a determining factor of Romanian actions is present in the document, which, conceptually, emphasizes the importance of states and political leaders and leaves little, if any room for the actions of civil society or non-state mediated interaction. Moreover, it is important to highlight that the range of objectives pursued by the strategy is extremely diverse, ranging from security, combating terrorism to environmental issues and higher education. Given this scope, it is difficult to argue whether the financial resources backing the strategy are adequate.

### 3. Romania's Traditional African Politics

The second perspective espoused by the RAPFPDE takes into account the historical interactions between Romania and the African countries. This perspective emphasizes Romania's policy during the communist period, without referencing its ideological underpinnings, opting to focus on its impact rather than its motivations. Furthermore, the perspective is given specificity by the emphasis it places on the institutional format of interacting with African states. International institutions do matter and represent the best avenue for success in complementing bilateral efforts.

The origins of Communist Romania's African policy are difficult to identify in ideological terms (Oprea 2009: 79-96). On the one hand, it is possible to see in Romania's interaction with African countries the expression of its limited or, on the contrary, "autonomous" or "independent" course in relation to the USSR (Miroiu, Nicolescu-Quintus, Ungureanu 2004: 132-141). On the other hand, it is possible to ascribe to the communist regime the same ideological or bureaucratic constraints manifest in the Soviet Union (Kalinovsky 2017: 72-94). Support for decolonization has also been suggested as a motivating factor for Romanian actions (Iacob, Vasile 2019: 133-163). Just as the ideological underpinnings are a matter of further research and debate, so is the level or the nature of Romania's economic assistance to African countries (Oprea 2009: 97-110). Regardless of these considerations, the self-perception implicit in the document is that the level of Romanian-African interactions was quantitatively and qualitatively superior to the present one. In fact, the strategy tries to capitalize on it, ascribing it the "traditional" label. Thus, the Strategy acknowledges the "traditionally positive perception of Romania", "traditional contribution to Africa's development", "traditional presence on the African continent" as well as the "special tradition of Romania-Africa cooperation" (RAPFPDE 2023: 2), "traditional relations" (RAPFPDE 2023: 9), and "traditional experience" (RAPFPDE 2023: 10). The document tries however at times to reconcile the two visions: Romania is seen as an EU "Member State with a traditional presence on the African continent" (RAPFPDE 2023: 2).

Nonetheless, the strategy acknowledges that the intensity of Romania's interaction with African politics has diminished – the document argues that NATO and EU accession, which represented the foremost political priorities after the 1989 Revolution, can help “reconnecting” with the African region (RAPFPDE 2023: 2). The text makes it clear that the reconnection entails, to a significant degree contacts between political leaders – either within a bilateral or an institutional framework: political leadership visits, contacts between MPs, consolidating diplomatic efforts or interaction within the AU or UN (RAPFPDE 2023: 11).

It is important to stress that the document places a significant emphasis on the importance of the institutional format of interacting with representatives of African countries: while belonging to NATO and the EU are seen as paramount, the strategy nonetheless insists on the importance of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) or the Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (CPLP) (RAPFPDE 2023: 12). It is relevant that these organizations and not NATO or the EU as potential venues for increased cooperation.

The specter of the conflict in Ukraine remains nonetheless present. The document emphasizes on several occasions the importance of a multilateral rule-based order and Romania's interest in upholding it (RAPFPDE 2023: 4, 8, 10,12). It is important to note, however, that the respect for the international rule-based multilateral order is directly connected with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, seen as a direct threat to the UN system (RAPFPDE 2023: 10).

#### **4. Civil Society – the Missing Actor**

Given the interplay between the two positions, the paucity of the references to civil society and the minor role it is supposed to play in the development of Romanian-African relations is no surprise. The document notices the existence of civil society cooperation independent of the state framework (RAPFPDE 2023: 2), while promising that public institutions, and the Foreign Ministry in particular will support civil society's projects in African countries. It is undoubtedly important that many references to civil society concern first and foremost Romanian actors.

Consequently, the objectives of Romanian aid do not include the support of African civil society. The prominent goals remain “focused on education, transfer of expertise and training of specialists” or grassroots projects concerning hospitals, schools and sport associations in South Africa, Senegal, Kenya, Angola, Nigeria and Ethiopia (RAPFPDE 2023: 9). In spite of the insistence that there needs to be a social dimension of Romania's engagement with African politics, to a large extent that consists of creating forms of interaction with African graduates of Romanian universities (RAPFPDE 2023: 8) or helping prospective African students to join graduate programs, a limited and in itself self-limiting approach (RAPFPDE 2023: 11). It is relevant that, as far as the strategy is concerned, “people to people” contacts are limited to the university framework, even though there is a significant activity at both the academic research and NGO level in Romania (Cibian, Vereștiuc, Stângaciu 2023: 9).

In fact, the insistence on interacting directly with African leaders, either via high-level visits or bilateral engagement (RAPFPDE 2023: 10) represents a clear preference of the strategy. Direct engagement with the leadership represents not necessarily a response to the institutional or financial constraints, but a consequence of both the tensions generated by the two logics the strategy tries to reconcile and of the shared state-centric view both perspectives espouse.

The document envisages that a significant part of the funding – up to 17% of the aid distributed via ROAID – will be used in order to fund “a sustainable and inclusive approach” pri-

oritizing youth and women as beneficiaries of grassroots projects (RAPFPDE 2023: 13). To the extent that civil society is actually mentioned directly, the document makes only a general claim to support an increased level of cooperation between African and Romanian NGOs (RAPFPDE 2023: 12).

All in all, the role of civil society is scarce. To the extent that the document tries to breach out of security or economic rationales for cooperation, education, remains the most prominent dimension. Nonetheless, the approach is also state-centered: it concerns the activity of research centers operating within major Romanian universities or the desire to reconnect with Romanian universities alumni or attracting African students remains a prominent dimension. While the development assistance managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs might represent a first step towards a more vigorous approach, it is important to note that the most recent data offered by ROAID (Romanian Agency for International Development Cooperation), the agency in charge of managing these funds on Romanian ODA is from 2014 and back then only 0.11% of the GNI was allotted to this end (ROAID 2024). Supporting civil society remains mostly an aspirational goal, a path of good intentions, which is allotted scant resources within a political environment which does not focus on foreign aid.

## **5. Conclusions**

The paper tried to look at the interaction between two perspectives on interaction with African countries and societies espoused by Romania's first strategy in the field: a traditional view on security, focused predominantly on power politics and economic considerations and a "traditional" view of past Romanian support and trade with African countries. While the communist perspective on engagement with the African continent could be ascribed not only economic, but also ideological reasons, this view of Romania's past relations with African countries present in the strategy seems to represent only an attempt to capitalize on a historical interaction. The document alludes to development, but is careful to emphasize Romania's EU and NATO member status, seeking rather to argue that the support for international institutions is compatible with Romania's hard won present international status. The strategy tries to build on the "traditional" relations with African countries, which undoubtedly had a stronger anti-colonial undertone in order to promote an agenda which tries to step around the consequences of colonialism.

The tension between the two views – on security and on past engagement with Africa – is prominent mostly in terms of the emphasis placed on international institutions and the status of colonialism, which makes the strategic objectives significantly diverse and in practice, probably underfunded when comparing resources to ambitions. Consequently, support for civil society initiatives is severely limited. The paper identifies also another factor for the limited role civil society is expected to play – both views espoused by the document see states as central, dominant actors in international relations.

## **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.



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