

Romania-ASEAN Relations:

Ending 2020, Looking for a Momentous 2021

The much welcomed and most recent remarks of the **Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bogdan Aurescu, represent a very important moment in Romania's position with regard to the Association of Southeast Asia Nations/ ASEAN.** During his comments at the **23rd EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting**, on December 1, 2020, the Romanian Foreign Minister **welcomed the process of elevating the relations between EU and ASEAN at Strategic Partnership level**, in the light of the common interests, values and principles. The Head of the Romanian Diplomacy further **encouraged the actions to intensify the cooperation between EU and ASEAN** to manage the common global political, security, economic and environmental challenges, also taking into consideration the interest displayed by the ASEAN partners towards the EU goals in this direction. In the same key, the Romanian Foreign Minister **stressed on the importance of cooperation between EU and ASEAN** in order to successfully tackle the vicissitudes raised by the Covid-19 pandemic.

As far as the **bilateral cooperation framework is concerned**, the Head of the Romanian diplomacy expressed **his support to complete the legal bilateral cooperation framework** and pointed out the **economic cooperation and trade opportunities between EU and ASEAN**, including the **EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy**. In his note, Minister Aurescu welcomed the **EU-ASEAN Joint Ministerial Statement on Connectivity**, based on democracy and the rule of law, respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, social and environmental protection and sustainable development.

Starting from 2007, as Romania joined the European Union, **a great and constant importance has been attached by Romania to the relations with ASEAN in a multilateral and bi-regional format**, so that Romania could fully and actively support the **European Strategy for developing bi-regional relations with ASEAN**. In fact, **Romania is an active participant at all levels, structures and organisms of Europe's relation with ASEAN**, including the **Asia-Europe Meeting/ ASEM**, in which Romania is part of since 2008 (*ASEM 7 Summit in Beijing*). At EU level, since 2007, Romanian Ministers of Foreign Affairs as well other high Romanian representatives have constantly generated positive outcomes following their active participation at the **EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meetings**.

In parallel with **merging its own bilateral relations with ASEAN into the greater scope of the EU-ASEAN relationship**, Romania was securing as well its own bilateral approach in **developing the relations with the member states of ASEAN**.

In fact, the fruitful contribution, involvement and the strong voice of Romania towards consolidating the EU-ASEAN partnership **are without any doubts a vivid evidence of assuming**

the existence of the political decision in Bucharest to further strengthening, as well, its own bilateral relations with ASEAN.

Romania, based on its reach and fruitful exercise of regional cooperation, which it always represented a constant pillar of her Diplomacy, **could initiate**, if not happened already, the diplomatic demarches to enter into **a format of constant and direct relationship with ASEAN as organization**. Many non – member states, including from European Union, put it into practice to the mutual benefit of each side. Romania itself took such a decision in 2016 **establishing a partnership with the Pacific Alliance**. Certainly, the concurrent accreditation of the Romanian Ambassador from Jakarta to ASEAN is an important first step. Practically, the direct diplomatic avenues were opened as previously the bilateral contacts with ASEAN were sporadic; as the situation stands nowadays much more has to be done.

In this meaning, **Romania could start with a bilateral agreement** on the cooperation between **Romanian and ASEAN small and medium enterprises** in the framework of the ASEAN SME Agencies Working Group (SMEWG), which comprises representatives from all SME Agencies of the member states. At the same time, **a bilateral agreement on Education and Culture could similarly foster the people-to-people exchanges**, a capital step in empowering people and creating bridges across continents and cultures.

Romania has a historical asset in establishing a direct dialogue and cooperation with ASEAN as organization. **Romania has been the only country in our region to recognize ASEAN as a true economic regional Association**, unlike other countries which assumed the regional organization was a substitute for the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization/ SEATO, a regional alliance based on collective defense.

From another perspective, the position of the Romanian Foreign Minister at the 23rd EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting **has developed the hope to witness very soon a boom in the bilateral relations with the countries in Southeast Asia Area**, which could lead to an enlarged permanent diplomatic presence in Southeast Asia (**Romania has diplomatic missions in 6 out of 10 capitals of ASEAN**), a strengthening of the force of diplomatic missions by enlarging their staff, particularly the economic representation (**this absolutely necessary representation has been drastically reduced during the last 20 years to Singapore and Vietnam**). Last but not least, the bilateral juridical framework needs a serious consideration to cover the aspects that could not find their solution from the EU-ASEAN partnership.

For sure, all these ingredients and instruments **will allow to reaching a really strong bilateral trade. The total volume of Romania's trade with all 10 countries for the past several years is around half a billion US dollars (Vietnam is leading) !**

On November 20, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania, issued a statement, on the occasion of accomplishing one year of his mandate, making an analysis of **“the main landmarks of Romania's diplomatic action”**. **With regard to Asia** it is mentioned that **“Romania maintained the political dialogue with South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, India, Australia and Pakistan”** in spite of

the pandemic year. **From the 6 individualized countries only Vietnam is a member of ASEAN.** In fact, it is a welcomed change as **Vietnam, Australia and Pakistan are new comers in “the main landmarks of Romania’s diplomatic action”.** Usually such statements were referring to **China (which was not mentioned in the document quoted above), Japan, India and South Korea, which points out that these countries are the priority or the bridge to whole Asia in the foreign policy of Romania for that part of the world.** Some time ago, “establishing bridges” in different regions was presented as strategy of the foreign policy of Romania for different regions, including Southeast Asia.

Such a desirous and predictable future requires a political decision meant to elevate the whole Southeast Asia to level of priority in the Romanian diplomacy to benefit of the enormous opportunities of the rapid development of the Southeast Asia economies in the “Asia Century”. All 10 nations are now in a process to **consolidate the ASEAN COMMUNITY**, based on three pillars – political and security, economic and social and cultural.

A strong economic dimension in the foreign policy of Romania on Southeast Asia, and not only, it is and will be required by the needs of the economy and progress of Romania to face the challenges of the world economy, **in general, and Southest Asia, in particular.** The entire business in East Asia and a part of Pacific is based on **a solid chain of free trade agreements, having as driving forece ASEAN.** Less than a month ago, ASEAN was a very important actor to conclude the negotians for signing **the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.**

It goes without sayng that 2021 is the time for Romania to vigorously act in promoting and defending her interests in Southeast Asia. Under the circumstances of an undisered situation to act into a far later stage in this direction, **even the traditional asset**, gained by Romania during many years, when a very strong economic cooperation and large trade were developed as an outcome of their complementary economies, **will not help in securing a solid and advantagious business between Romania and the members of ASEAN.**

Naturally, as **the most active promoter of ASEAN in Romania as a Second Track Diplomacy venue, IRSEA continues to support the positive developments between Romania - ASEAN and Romania - Southeast Asia countries** by analises on the region, cooperating with similar strong entities in the Southeast Asia and, maintainig permamnet contacts with the Ambassadors of the ASEAN countries being represent in Romania and with ASEAN Bucharest Committee. Similarly, in 2008, IRSEA initiated a **fruitful working relationship with the ASEAN Secretariat as well as with Asia Europe Foundation – ASEF).** Based on this partnership, the **40th, 45th and 50th Anniversaries of ASEAN were organized**, events which benefited the attention of a wide number of Romanian professionals, academics and students. IRSEA was selected by ASEF to join a study called „Asia in the Eyes of Eorope” conducted in 8 European countries, Romania being one of them from the entire Eastern Europe. The auther founded the Chamber of Commerce and Industry with Malaysia, being the single at that time private and independent business institutioan with a member of ASEAN.

In 2020, IRSEA has prepared a high-level **visit to Bucharest on behalf of two high-level ASEAN officials.** Despite the visit having been postponed due to the pandemic, there are high

expectations for the event to be organized in 2021.

IRSEA remains committed to contribute to a more robust interaction between Europe and Asia and strongly believes that the relations between Romania-ASEAN and Romania – Southeast Asia countries will have a prosperous future.

After a relative positive 2020, despite the severe limitations imposed by the pandemic, IRSEA firmly believes that **a momentous 2021 lays ahead.**

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This paper represents an opinion.

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