

# ROMANIA'S PARTICIPATION TO THE AEGIS BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENSE SYSTEM AS REFLECTED BY ROMANIAN NEWSPAPERS' EVALUATIVE DISCOURSE

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*This study aims to investigate Romanian media discourse on the current standing of the relations between Romania and the United States of America in the military field. The main topic investigated is connected to Romania's decision to host the land-based component of the Ballistic Missile Defense System on its ground, an event which attracted significant media coverage during the year 2011. The corpus analyzed consisted of 37 news and opinion items and reports published on the site of three Romanian newspapers. The main research questions were to assess whether the evaluations of this event were positive or negative, who were the actors issuing these statements and what objects were discussed in association to this event. The results showed that positive evaluations were more common than negative evaluations and that the official stances on this topic formed a very coherent perspective, endorsing the project.*

**Key words:** *stance, evaluation, newspaper discourse, Romania, U.S.A.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In September 2011, the conclusion of the agreement regarding the hosting of a land-based component of the U.S. Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) System in Romania marked a significant moment in the field of the military and diplomatic relations between the two states. This cooperation has proved to be a constant in the Romanian foreign politics after the fall of the communist regime and it has been enhanced since Romania became a N.A.T.O. and European Union member.

An important component in the imaginary of the European societies, the image of America is characterized by the combination of opposite values: it can be represented both as the land of freedom and as the realm of decadence, superficiality and consumerism [1]. This ambivalence is particularly visible in the case of those European states which have had a totalitarian regime in the 20th century. The negative image of the U.S.A. was promoted by the discourse of the communist authorities, which stigmatized it as a corrupt and imperialist state. At the same time, common people dreamed

about an intervention decided by U.S. officials that would miraculously put an end to the domination of the Soviet Union, a desire which permeated the national mythologies and imaginaries for a long time during the Cold War. Communist propaganda has constantly depicted the Western countries as a main enemy of the worldwide peace and of the communist citizens' prosperity, but the borders between "us" and "the others" have been completely changed at present when international – not only national – security is facing the threat of terrorism.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The investigation of the media discourse in a given community offers an insight into its systems of values and beliefs. It is widely accepted that news fulfill more than the functions of disseminating information or providing entertainment for the public and that their significance can only be understood in connection to the social and cultural context in which they are encoded and decoded. News discourse functions jointly with other institutions and discourses which exist in the society at a given moment [2]. Berkowitz identifies three possible meanings of the cultural dimension of the news. First, news articles reflect the culture of their production and the values of the society in which they are produced; second, news is

shaped by the global context. A third meaning results from the property of each culture to develop relations of power; media convey these cultural specific representations of power which reinforce the current social structure [3].

Media discourse combines intended objectivity and unavoidable subjectivity, as the intention to depict the real facts collides with the action of the social and cultural values at stake [4]. This category of discourse corresponds to two of the three types of stancetaking (physical action, personal attitude, social morality) identified by [5]. We believe that identifying expressions of stance in media texts might give an insight into the beliefs and images of a community at a given moment. Following the terminology proposed by [6], this study is particularly focused on the actors whose opinions are expressed in the texts and on the objects or topics discussed, while other aspects, as the discursive strategies involved might represent a topic for further research.

## **3. DATA & METHODOLOGY**

The corpus consists of a total of 37 articles (26 news articles, 9 opinion articles, 2 reports) which have been published online during the year 2011 on the sites of three Romanian journals. One of them, *Gândul*, appears only online while the other two, *Adevărul* and *România liberă*, also have a print version. The databases available on each site have

been searched using the keywords Romania, SUA, scut antirachetă, sistemul Aegis. The articles which have been selected had to refer to the development of the military relations between Romania and the USA during 2011, especially to the negotiations and the treaty regarding the Ballistic Missile Defense System. This media event had the following main phases. At the beginning of May 2011, Romanian authorities announced that the land-based component of the BMD System will be installed in the Romanian village Deveselu. In September 2011, the Romanian president made an official visit to Washington for the conclusion of the negotiations. On this occasion, the agreement was signed by the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the Romanian Minister for Foreign Affairs Teodor Baconschi in Washington. The subject was also debated at the NATO Parliamentary meeting which took place in Bucharest in October. Because of their “news value”, all these phases were reflected by the Romanian media, which also highlighted the social dimension of this event as it concerned the future development of the Romanian community in Deveselu.

The main research questions were: (1) how are these events evaluated in the media and who are the actors issuing these statements; (2) which are the main topics discussed in the texts about this event. A further topic of investigation which emerged in

this phase concerned the specific lexical items, stylistic devices and the discursive strategies used in the framing of the “strategic partnership” between Romania and the USA. The main method used was content analysis.

#### **4. A MUTUALLY PROFITABLE PARTNERSHIP**

All texts have been read and lexical items (nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs) functioning as evaluative markers have been identified. Only evaluative judgments referring to the conclusion of the treaty, to the Aegis BMD System and to the general depiction of the bilateral relations have been taken into account. The results show that, on average, these topics have received more positive than negative evaluations in the newspaper texts but also that speakers with different social status tended to evaluate the event differently or to focus on different aspects of the event.

**Table 1** presents the status of evaluations in the articles analyzed as they ranged from positive to negative, mixed and neutral. The labeling of the evaluations made by some articles as “neutral” is to be understood as no evaluation being made explicit neither by the journalist, nor by the persons quoted.

**Table 1.** Positive and negative evaluations in the articles analyzed

	Positive evaluations only	Negative evaluations only	Mixed evaluations	Neutral tone
Total number of articles	13	4	11	9

Most quotations in the news articles come from public authorities, representing what can be labeled the “official” stance, as the quoted persons do not voice their individual opinions but the perspective of the institutions represented. Such actors in the public sphere are the Romanian government officials, namely the President, Traian Băsescu, and the Secretary of State, Bogdan Aurescu or the representatives of the local administration, for example the mayor of Deveselu. U.S. officials (e.g. the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control, Ellen Tauscher) are also frequently quoted. In the case of the Romanian authorities, their public act of stancetaking is combined with the necessity to inform the people and the media about the development of the negotiations, the conclusion of the treaty and its consequences. These actors voice a coherent perspective, highlighting the advantages of the project, and even representatives of opposition parties have endorsed the

decision regarding the installment of the system component in Romania (source 8).

The official stance-taking include evaluations at a macro and a micro level. Evaluation at the macro level is focused on the project as a whole and on its benefits for Romania as a nation. The idea of partnership between Romania and the USA is highlighted in the discourse of the officials representing both states. The Romanian secretary of state for foreign affairs alleged that “*această participare a României va contribui la consolidarea relațiilor bilaterale*” [“*this participation of Romania will concur to the strengthening of the bilateral relations*”] (source 12) while the Minister of Foreign Affairs said, during his visit to Washington, “*stăm alături de voi, cum am stat întotdeauna*” [“*we are standing by your side, as we have always done*”] (source 32). According to Hillary Clinton, Romania has thus gained a major role in the NATO missile defense architecture, an assertion which was afterwards quoted in the headlines and in the news texts.

Another idea which attracted positive evaluations was connected to the economic benefits of this decision for Romania. The idea was formulated by Romanian officials and it has been widely reiterated by the media both in headlines like *Cum ar putea aduce scutul antirachetă bani pentru România* [How could the antimissile shield bring money for Romania]; *Ce câștigă România din scutul american antirachetă*

[What does Romania gain from the American antimissile shield] and in articles: “*târg reciproc avantajos cu americanii*” [“*a mutually profitable deal with the Americans*”] (source 29); “*Însă de la scutul antirachetă american mulți români se așteaptă și la beneficii concrete*” [“*But from the American antimissile shield many Romanians are also expecting tangible benefits*”] (source 17).

At the micro level, the evaluations address the situation of the village Deveselu. The media depicted it as a rather “poor” community, whose inhabitants were affected by unemployment. The hosting of the Aegis component has been perceived as a means to create working places for Romanians and to attract funding for future investments: „*«Dar știți de când îi aștept?!»* răspunde însuflețit primarul Gheorghe Beciu. *«[...] aeroportul s-a dizolvat. Și uite că, după atâția ani, vin americanii tocmai la Deveselu. Ei știu despre ce e vorba, iar lucrurile s-au negociat profesionist, între ofițeri, nu între politicieni.»*” [“*But do you know how long I’ve been waiting for them?!*” The mayor Gheorghe Beciu answers eagerly. *‘[...] the airport has been closed. And look, after so many years, the Americans are coming precisely to Deveselu. They know what it’s all about and the matter has been negotiated in a competent manner, between officers, not between politicians.’*] (source 33).

There were a few cases when actors who played a role in the public sphere issued negative statements at

the macro level, hence contradicting the main “elite” perspective. Two news items mentioned that foreign officials expressed their skepticism regarding the efficiency of the project at the NATO Parliamentary Meeting in Bucharest, in September 2011. The status of the speaker, in this case, was considered to justify the character of the news: “*Chiar vicepreședintele Adunării Parlamentare a NATO, francezul Jean M. Boucheron, a explicat că sistemul este ineficient și că scutul ar atrage mai mult agresioni.*” [“*Even the vicepresident of the NATO Parliamentary Meeting, the French Jean M. Boucheron, explained that the system is inefficient and that the shield would attract more aggressions.*”] (source 1). Seven articles reported the negative stance taken by Russian officials and media on this topic.

## 5. NEW MASTERS AND OLD COMMUNITIES

An interesting situation occurs when voices which do not play a role in the public sphere are heard. While the discourse of the public authorities is reported mostly in news items, private actors are quoted in opinion texts and in reports. According to [7] “*it is important to the newspapers to include references to people – because of the factor of ‘personalization’ mentioned above – but their status as sources is accidental rather than privileged*”. Though the “private actors” are fewer than the “public” ones, the insertion



of their opinions and judgments in the newspaper articles is meant to give the impression of authentic depiction of the Romanian reality. It is also important that, according to recent research, editorials or opinion pages are more trusted by the public “for understanding and interpreting the meaning of international affairs” [8]. The persons quoted in the reports were mostly inhabitants of the village Deveselu. They were interviewed because of their belonging to this specific community. The reporter asked them to evaluate the efficiency of the project and/ or to express their judgments and feelings about what was described as the “arrival of the Americans” in their village, an allusion to the historical period between 1945 and 1965. After the Romanian communist party had taken the power, the citizens hoped that they would be saved by an American action at the political and the military level.

The “personal” stances expressed in the corpus included mostly negative evaluations of the topic. Besides providing a counter-perspective on the event, their statements manage to shift the discussed topic from the complexity of the bilateral relations to the stereotypical „us”/ „them” binary scheme. Instead of the idea of partnership, the lexical choices and the stylistic devices employed suggest that the relationship between the two states is depicted as profoundly asymmetrical: “Deveselu: se schimbă doar stăpânul” [“Deveselu: only the

master is changing”]; “Cu ce să ne ajute pe noi americanii?” [“How can the Americans help us?”] (source 29). The voices of the common people mingle, contrast and collide with the public discourse and their status may be more important for the message conveyed as it may appear; such voices are able to express a specific attitude without threatening the newspaper’s position. The simple echoing in the newspaper texts functions sometimes as a tacit agreement. In other cases, the journalists openly assert their knowledge of the attitudes and opinions of the public: “Mulțumiți?! Zic, conștient că deveselenii [...] sunt perfect sătisiți de interesul pogorât peste capetele lor [...]” [“Satisfied?! I say, aware that the people of Deveselu are absolutely tired of the interest suddenly concerning them”] (source 33).

## 6. TERRORISM & SECURITY ISSUES IN THE NEWS AND OPINION TEXTS

In all the analyzed texts, the broad objects were considered to be the BMD System and Romania’s hosting of one of its components. Four specific issues have been associated to the objects considered, namely terrorism, technical features of the system, details of the treaty, and economic consequences, as presented in **Table 2**.

**Table 2.** Specific issues discussed in the analyzed corpus.

T o p i c discussed	News items	O p i n i o n articles	Reports
Terrorism	4	3	2
T e c h n i c a l features of the system	8	-	1
Details of the treaty	17	-	-
E c o n o m i c consequences	5	1	1

The most extensive coverage was obtained by the two topics strictly connected to the event: the conclusion of the agreement and the technical features of the AEGIS system. Although the system has been designed to counteract terrorist threats, this main function has received limited coverage in the Romanian media. One possible explanation for the little information on the topic of terrorism is that it may have been regarded as a remote danger without any direct consequences for Romanian people till present. The idea was also reinforced by the official speeches, which asserted that raising Romania's warning level for terrorism was unnecessary. The allegation that the cooperation with the U.S.A. included both risks and benefits was mentioned in a few articles but not further developed. At most, it led to the construction of headlines in the style of the tabloids, being used as a device to attract the

readers' attention: *Bogdan Aureescu: România poate fi țintă! Vezi ce conține acordul privind scutul de la Deveselu!* [Bogdan Aureescu: Romania may be a target! See what the agreement regarding the Deveselu shield consists of!].

Some authors of opinion articles mentioning the terrorism topic express a clear dissent with the possibility that Iran may construct and launch ballistic missiles. The headline of an opinion text is based on a rhetorical device, formulating a question and immediately denying it: *De ce ne temem de Iran? O întrebare pe care nu o punem* [Why are we afraid of Iran? A question that we do not ask]. The author of this text clearly states his agreement with the general positive evaluations of the Aegis System while also insisting on the importance of avoiding a stereotypical representation of Iran and of its citizens as a dangerous "other" which must be fought against. At the geopolitical level, another journalist draws attention to a closer (and therefore possibly more dangerous) "other" represented by Russia and thus reminds the readers of the narratives of the Cold War. In his opinion, the fight against terrorism in the Arab world is less significant than the incapacity of the U.S.A. to control the Black Sea area (to introduce democracy in the Republic of Moldavia, as the author puts it). The deictic used by the writer, the Romanian pronoun "noi" ("us") forces an agreement with the readers and thus asserting

his belonging to a greater and more significant community: "Pentru noi, cei din 'Noua Europă', care nu am crede povestea cu scutul american anti-Iran nici dacă ar fi adevărată, miza este crucială" ["For us, those from the New Europe, who wouldn't believe the story of the American shield against Iran not even if it were true, the stake is crucial"] (source 20).

The official discourse mentions the raise of Romania's security level as a positive consequence of the participation in the Aegis system. On the other side, the journalists manifest doubts about this advantage in terms of security, because it is considered of less importance in comparison to other topics and to the internal state of affairs. This proves to be a constant feature of the newspaper discourse on the Aegis topic, as the internal politics and problems of Romania are brought into discussion and opposed to its evolution in the sphere of foreign affairs (e.g. source 11). The author of another opinion text denies the depiction of the event (the conclusion of the bilateral agreement in Washington) as "historical" and treats it from an ironical perspective: *Deveselu, Rovine, Călugăreni*. This headline resorts to the readers' background knowledge in order to be correctly interpreted. *Rovine* and *Călugăreni* represent the name of two places in the actual Romania, where two famous battles took place during the Middle Ages, both concluded with the victory of the army of Wallachia against the Turks.

Placing the village *Deveselu* in this series indicates a logic incongruence regarding the importance and a shift from traditional or "canonical" history to what can be termed as "contemporary" history.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion of the agreement between Romania and the U.S.A. was likely to attract news coverage, not only because of the general interest of the media in dealing with "important" nations [9], but also because it had been anticipated by the strong cooperation in the fight against terrorism in the last decade. Romania's decision to host the land-based component of the system has generally received positive evaluations from public actors and from a part of the journalists. Negative evaluations issued by public actors were directed against the efficiency of the project while negative evaluations coming from private persons showed doubtfulness regarding the possibility that Romania might benefit from the military cooperation with the U.S.A. The journalists' perspectives on the topic were mixed, generally endorsing the military cooperation but also expressing dissatisfaction at the lack of more visible benefits for Romania. The content analysis showed that positive and negative evaluations on this topic can be ultimately reduced to the representation of power, solidarity and status in the relations between the two countries.





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