

**STEPPING ‘OUTSIDE OF THE COMFORT ZONE’?  
Romania and Bulgaria’s regional roles in the Lower Danube -  
Opportunities and challenges to strengthening their political-diplomatic cooperation <sup>1</sup>**

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*Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Lower Danube region has transformed into a critical resilience corridor, demanding intensified political-diplomatic cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria to manage heightened security threats and infrastructure risks. While bolstering regional connections and moving toward a strategic partnership, in 2026 the two nations must transition from symbolic coordination to proactive leadership by adopting »out of the comfort zone« strategies in regional security, border connectivity, and on the cognitive frontlines, particularly leveraging Bulgaria's 2026 EUSDR Presidency and Romania's SEECF Presidency.*

## **Introduction**

The Lower Danube is a major geopolitical, ecological, and economic corridor in Europe, and its importance has grown sharply after 2022. Romania sits at the centre of this space because it controls a key stretch of the Danube, hosts the Danube Delta and the port of Constanța, borders Ukraine and Moldova, and maintains close ties with Serbia and Bulgaria. Its EU and NATO membership also give it unusual institutional weight in a region where several neighbours are still EU candidates.

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Danube has become not only a cohesion corridor but also a resilience corridor. Romania’s role in enabling Ukrainian grain exports through Constanța and the Danube route has shown that its infrastructure and foreign policy matter regionally, not just nationally. At this time of considerable geopolitical flux, Romania became the crucial EU connective tissue between its enlargement areas – with Serbia to the west and Moldova and Ukraine to the east. However, its views on regional strategy in the neighbourhood are neither as widely recognized nor communicated as they ought to be and this was underlined both in the Balkans (Butnaru Troncotă et al 2024) and in its timid public messaging towards its support for the Republic of Moldova (Grămadă 2026).

In 2026, the main challenge is the security pressure created by the war in Ukraine, Russian drone incidents, and hybrid threats around the Black Sea, especially against ports and transport nodes. This raises the importance of coordinated leadership from Romania and Bulgaria, whose ties have deepened since 2022 through EU-funded cross-border cooperation and the 2023 Strategic Partnership.

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The core argument is that Romania should move from symbolic coordination to a more active, implementation-focused foreign policy in the Lower Danube region. Romania and Bulgaria should step out of their comfort zone and shift from being regional security consumers to regional security providers, working more closely with Serbia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Bulgaria's 2026 Danube Strategy presidency and Romania's upcoming SEECP presidency create a timely opening for this kind of partnership.

The study's final aim is to assess Romania-Bulgaria diplomatic relations from the 2007 EU accession process to the 2022–2026 war-driven period, to identify the main opportunities and challenges, and draw recommendations for stronger political-diplomatic cooperation in the years ahead.

Applying the psychological concept of *the comfort zone* to international relations as a central metaphor reveals that a nation's »comfort zone« is defined by *status quo bias* that implies diplomatic inertia, predictable multilateralism, and a preference for low-risk, low-reward regional strategies. This also includes relying on traditional alliances, adhering to predictable diplomatic rhetoric, or relying on a single superpower for security. This is in fact a very accurate description of Romania and Bulgaria bilateral moves between 2007 after their EU accession and the watershed year 2022. My main argument is that in 2026 Romania and Bulgaria's relations need to deepen in a more courageous way, moving from *the learning zone* into *the growth zone* of regional leadership. The final policy recommendations will serve this overarching purpose.

## **1. In the Comfort Zone: Romania–Bulgaria relations between 2007 and 2022**

Romania and Bulgaria have maintained a long and steady pattern of political and diplomatic cooperation shaped by shared geography and security interests. Both countries sit on NATO's south-eastern flank and face the same Black Sea, Danube, airspace monitoring, mine-countermeasure, and infrastructure-protection challenges. They also participate in several regional formats, including the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), The South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), the Black Sea Naval Co-operation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR) & MCM Black Sea. Two sub-regional sub-groups should be added to this extensive list - the Craiova Group (Quadrilateral / Trilateral) formed by Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia (and later joined by Greece), and the Bucharest Nine (B9) that includes nine countries on NATO's Eastern Flank (from the Baltics to the Black Sea).

For most of the 2007–2022 period, bilateral relations remained in a diplomatic comfort zone. Cooperation was generally orderly, reactive, and tied to shared EU and NATO frameworks rather than driven by bold bilateral initiatives. In practice, the two states often moved in parallel, especially on issues such as Schengen accession and post-accession monitoring. Bilateral relations were characterized by »bureaucratic synchronization« – coupling their

efforts to enter the Schengen zone, waiting for EU/NATO directives, and issuing *polite* joint declarations.

EU accession created the foundation for this partnership, but also exposed both countries to unusual post-accession conditionality. This placed Romania and Bulgaria in a shared institutional category and reinforced the perception as the EU's »latecomers« from the eastern enlargement wave. Romania and Bulgaria remained marked by »unfinished business« of Europeanization: both stayed outside Schengen for a long period, both remained under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, and both continued to face problems of corruption, state capture and weak accountability (Bechev 2020).

Several milestones deepened coordination. The High-Level Cooperation Council, created in 2011, institutionalized regular joint government meetings. The 2013 opening of the Calafat–Vidin bridge improved physical connectivity and trade. After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, cooperation became more security-oriented, with greater attention to NATO's eastern flank, Black Sea security, and formats such as the Bucharest Nine and the Craiova Group. Romania's 2018–2019 EUSDR presidency further showed its capacity to shape regional agendas.

Even so, the relationship remained one of alignment more than leadership. The main limitations were slow infrastructure development, weak Danube navigability, limited energy interconnection, and the broader gap between shared political declarations and concrete implementation. Overall, the 2007–2022 period can be characterized as one of bilateral stability, but also strategic passivity: close cooperation, yet below the region's full potential.

Overall, an important asset of the bilateral relations was that the two countries did not face any structural friction at the political and diplomatic level over the last decades. What was more visible were the common elements of their agenda: both share Danube and Black Sea interests, and both face similar problems of infrastructure gaps, demographic decline, administrative capacity and external security pressure.

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Established</b>	<b>Core Membership</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)</b>	2011	14 countries along the Danube river basin (9 EU states and 5 non-EU states)	A macro-regional framework established by the European Commission to address shared connectivity, environmental protection, and water security challenges.
<b>Bucharest Nine (B9)</b>	2015	9 countries on NATO's Eastern Flank: Romania, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia,	Serves as a unified platform for coordinating collective defence policy, military readiness, and

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Established</b>	<b>Core Membership</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
		Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia	strategic positioning within NATO.
<b>Craiova Group (C4)</b>	2015	Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia	A sub-regional minilateral format designed to advance transport connectivity, regional energy hubs, and Western Balkan European integration.
<b>Three Seas Initiative (3SI)</b>	2016	13 Eastern and Central EU member states spanning the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas (joined by Greece as a full member)	Accelerates cross-border energy, digital, and transport infrastructure along a strategic North-South axis to boost European resilience.

**Table 1** The main regional initiatives or organisations established between 2007 and 2022 where Romania and Bulgaria are part of, edited by the author

## **2. In the Learning Zone: Romania–Bulgaria relations between 2022 and 2026**

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 pushed Romania and Bulgaria out of strategic passivity and into a more active phase of cooperation. Shared security risks in the Black Sea and Lower Danube region, including drone incidents, hybrid threats, and pressure on transport corridors, made it clear that the two countries were facing one connected regional challenge.

Romania and Bulgaria increasingly treated ports, border crossings, and logistics networks as regional resilience assets, not just national infrastructure. Their cooperation broadened around Black Sea security, support for Ukraine, Moldovan energy security, transport, energy, and border capacity, while remaining more effective in practice than in public messaging.

A major turning point came on 4 April 2023, when Presidents Klaus Iohannis and Rumen Radev signed the Joint Political Declaration for a Strategic Partnership in Bucharest. The new framework institutionalized regular consultations on defence, internal affairs, and EU policy, and helped coordinate support for Ukrainian grain exports through the Danube corridor and Constanța port.

The partnership also deepened through cross-border projects, Schengen coordination, and EU-funded connectivity initiatives. Romania and Bulgaria’s full Schengen accession in 2025 removed long-standing border bottlenecks, while the EU’s Black Sea strategy and Bulgaria’s 2026 EUSDR presidency further reinforced their role as complementary actors in a shared strategic space.

Another relevant milestone occurred in March 2026, when the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) the »East Gate« was established in Bucharest. The group is an EU legal instrument through which public institutions from different countries create a joint structure with its own legal personality. This legal entity of public interest, headquartered in Romania, will operate in accordance with the rules of the European regulation on EGTCs. Its purpose is not only to coordinate, but also to prepare, manage, and effectively implement joint cross-border projects and initiatives between Romania and Bulgaria. This EGTC can strengthen the bilateral cooperation because it may submit applications or participate in Interreg, NDICI/ENI, IPA, Horizon Europe, LIFE, Erasmus+, Creative Europe, Digital Europe, and the Connecting Europe Facility project preparation, partnerships, and technical assistance, as well as common training courses, exchange of experience, and representation before European institutions. Svetoslav Kyosev, founding partner from the Bulgarian side and vice president of the Romanian-Bulgarian Bilateral Chamber of Commerce defined this as a »shift toward a more pragmatic and results-oriented partnership, focused on leveraging European funding instruments and aligning national development strategies.« (The Bridge of Friendship 2026).

This reflects a broader trend identified in recent analyses, where Romania and Bulgaria increasingly use bilateral cooperation as a mechanism to address structural regional disparities and to improve their integration into European value chains. This form of bilateralism should not be interpreted as an alternative to multilateralism, but as a way for two medium-sized states to increase their influence within it (Drăgulin 2024).

Soft power also played an important role in strengthening diplomatic relations in the analysed period. After the upgrading of their rank to a strategic partnership, the two countries visibly tightened their cooperation also in the field of culture. The two ministers of culture held a meeting in Sofia in March 2025 and discussed expanding cooperation in the field of cultural heritage, creating a joint expert committee to review the current state of the legal framework, promoting Bulgarian culture in Romania and Romanian culture in Bulgaria, the partnership in the restoration of the emblematic Han Solacolu in Bucharest, the opportunity to cooperate in the restoration of the Murfatlar Monastery near Constanta, cooperation initiatives within various UNESCO and European Union programs, and others (Ministerul Culturii 2025). Moreover, the absolute highlight of bilateral cultural diplomacy this year is Bulgaria's status as the Guest of Honor at the 19th International Book Fair Bookfest in Bucharest (June 3–7, 2026). EU funding streams like the Interreg VI-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme have been used also in the cultural field, and an example is the project »Moving Balkans« (with key residential workshops happening in Sofia in June 2026) that are linking Romanian and Bulgarian contemporary dance producers, cultural managers, and curators to create shared touring networks across the Danube.

In the critical period between 2022 and 2026, most countries, including Romania and Bulgaria as EU and NATO members were forced to step into the *Learning zone* as they were faced with the first military invasion in Europe after the wars in Yugoslavia from the 90s. By 2026, the relationship had clearly moved beyond polite bilateral coordination. The main remaining

weakness was not a lack of cooperation, but limited strategic communication and inconsistent ability to translate political alignment into visible regional leadership.

### **3. Current status of Romania-Bulgaria political relations and regional outlook**

Mines, drones, cyberattacks, port disruptions, energy infrastructure risks coupled with domestic crisis, disinformation campaign during elections, FIMI and hybrid threats - all affected Romania and Bulgaria over the past two years. Following the partial withdrawal of US forces from the Black Sea theatre in late 2025 and an escalation in hybrid warfare, the southern arc of NATO's Eastern Flank has become its most vulnerable sector. For Romania, maintaining its traditional foreign policy posture in this context is no longer viable. As such, Romania needs to actively transform from a passive observer into a proactive regional security anchor and strengthening bilateral relations with Bulgaria is a chance towards this objective.

Romania and Bulgaria already have a practical base to build strengthened cooperation, as their existing close relations includes NATO battlegroups, EU-funded cross-border programs, a Black Sea mine countermeasures group, and increased military mobility. So, what is missing?

Domestic political volatility shapes regional foreign policy and ongoing processes that are currently unfolding in both Romania and Bulgaria complicate the context even more. Romania is currently embroiled in a severe political crisis following the collapse of Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan's government on May 5, 2026, which fell to a parliamentary no-confidence vote just ten months after taking office<sup>2</sup>. These events increase the risk that domestic instability in Romania will slow fiscal decisions, complicate coalition-making, and create openings for Russian influence and regional uncertainty in the second part of 2026, which could all reverberate in its foreign policy. Moreover, there is also a high risk that in the next months Romanian policymakers will be more inward-facing, consumed by protracted coalition negotiations and the rising polling numbers of nationalist movements like AUR, and this may limit focus on foreign policy.

In parallel, in the April 2026 snap parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, after five years, eight elections, and what at times began to resemble a national routine of voting without governing, former President Rumen Radev's newly formed, populist Progressive Bulgaria (PB) party achieved a historic landslide victory, securing 44.6% of the vote and an absolute majority of 131 seats to decisively end the nation's five-year cycle of political instability. Regionally, while this decisive result provides much-needed domestic governability, Radev's Eurosceptic undertones and past opposition to Ukraine defence agreements introduce fresh strategic ambiguity, positioning Sofia to adopt a more cautious, transaction-based foreign policy that shifts the regional balance on NATO's Southern Flank (Simeonova & Tcherneva 2026).

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<sup>2</sup> The crisis began in April when the center-left Social Democratic Party (PSD) withdrew from the pro-Western ruling coalition over fiscal disagreements, subsequently joining forces with the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) to pass the motion and leave the National Liberal Party (PNL) heading a shaky caretaker administration.

These recent domestic politics developments in both countries are a major obstacle against the ongoing need for Bucharest to develop a more pragmatic neighbourhood policy, particularly in strengthening economic, transport, and energy corridors with Bulgaria. Cooperation with Bulgaria should be assessed as fundamentally stable at the macro-institutional level, but tactically constrained at the political level.

In Romania's case, the problem is not the absence of regional opportunities. The problem is the uneven capacity to absorb, coordinate and complete them. Currently, further integration and more targeted cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria, combining the strengths of each country, are key to European security and this requires a more pro-active diplomatic engagement for both countries.

For the next years, Romania has the structural potential to act as a regional actor and bridge builder in the Lower Danube region, but its past performance remains uneven. Sofia should remain Bucharest's most critical strategic ally in balancing regional integration. In relation to Bulgaria, Romania has the most mature regional cooperation potential because both states are EU and NATO members and share Danube and Black Sea interests. Yet, this potential is weakened by infrastructure bottlenecks, internal political divisions and a tendency to treat cooperation more as diplomatic language rather than as a delivery mechanism with visible outcomes. Overall, the geopolitical bond between Romania and Bulgaria has become one of deep strategic interdependence profoundly marked by strategic bilateralism, driven by both external pressures and internal objectives. However, there is still a need for the two countries' foreign policies to step out of their comfort zone.

#### 4. In the Growth Zone: policy recommendations for future Romania–Bulgaria relations

In 2027, Romania and Bulgaria will mark 35 years since the 1992 Treaty of Friendship, Collaboration and Good Neighbourliness and 20 years since they both gained EU membership. This is a useful moment to shift the relationship from passive bilateralism to a more practical partnership along the Danube–Black Sea axis.

**The core problem is that political rhetoric has often outpaced implementation.** Romania and Bulgaria should act less as separate regional actors and more as coordinated connectors between the Lower Danube, the Black Sea, and the Eastern Neighbourhood.

Policy Problems	Policy Solutions
1. The need to move out of <i>passive bilateralism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More coordinated actions, less rhetoric</li> <li>- More congruence, less competition</li> </ul> <p style="color: red; font-weight: bold; margin-top: 10px;">Romania should initiate a structured cooperation mechanism with Bulgaria to coordinate on the main topics before any European Council meeting</p>

<p>2. The gap between strategic declarations and infrastructure reality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Synchronization of regional security</li> <li>- More operational capacity</li> </ul> <p><b>Romania should co-host a regional connectivity summit with Bulgaria by the end of 2026.</b></p>
<p>3. The erosion of the Eastern Flank: Russian electoral interference and social sabotage in Bucharest and Sofia</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Synchronization of the Counter-FIMI (Hybrid) defence and integration of a joint cognitive defence shield between Romania and Bulgaria</li> <li>- More outspoken strategic communication on bilateral cooperation</li> </ul> <p><b>Romania should elaborate a communication strategy targeting mainly the results of the joint initiatives funded under the Interreg VI-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme for wider audiences</b></p>

**Table 2.** Edited by the author

**A first priority is stronger coordination and less symbolism.** The two states should define a small number of shared priorities, especially connectivity and cross-border resilience, and use them to support Ukraine, Moldova, and Serbia more effectively. Regional leadership should be selective and realistic, not spread across too many formats. This approach of *selective regional leadership* would allow Romania to concentrate administrative and diplomatic resources. Such an approach would match Romania's capabilities with regional needs. Using the model of other countries – like Sweden, Finland, Poland and the Baltics - another recommendation would be to establish a structured cooperation mechanism between Romania and Bulgaria to coordinate on the main topics before any European Council meeting.

**A second priority is the gap between strategic ambitions and infrastructure delivery.** Bridges, rail links, river navigation, and energy interconnectors still lag behind political declarations, leaving the border region underconnected and economically underused. Romania and Bulgaria should therefore establish a standing coordination mechanism, with technical teams and a clear project pipeline, to accelerate cross-border infrastructure and funding. Romania and Bulgaria have historically moved further when acting as a unified diplomatic bloc rather than pursuing individual tracks. Instead of competing for regional influence, Romania and Bulgaria should pursue a model of complementary partnership, aimed at strengthening their joint position within the European and transatlantic systems. Leveraging both Bulgaria's 2026 EUSDR Presidency and Romania's SEECF Presidency, Romania should co-host a regional connectivity summit with Bulgaria by the end of 2026. An encouraging and hopeful step forward in this direction is the recent news that Romania and Bulgaria have finalized the joint concept for the European Union Black Sea Maritime Security Center, which will be located in Constanta and Varna, with the aim of increasing the two countries' capacity for joint

threat analysis, improving situational awareness, and facilitating information sharing in a complementary way (Radio Romania Actualități 2026).

**A third priority is hybrid resilience.** Both countries are exposed to Russian disinformation, electoral interference, and social sabotage, so they need closer cooperation on counter-FIMI, cyber defence, and intelligence sharing. Building on the fact that Romania recently joined a Cyber Alliance with Ukraine and Moldova and following the model of the High-Level Cyber Resilience Regional Forum organised in Bucharest on 23 April 2026 under the auspices of the Digital for Development Hub (D4D Hub) by the National Cybersecurity Coordination Centre (NCC-RO), my recommendation is that a similar structure should also be created for Romania and Bulgaria. Romania and Bulgaria should project an image of a unified Eastern Flank; therefore, the tools of public strategic communication need to be more focused with this purpose in mind. Quiet coordination is useful, but public alignment has deterrence value. Romania has been very discrete on its strategic positioning and this is a risk particularly for combating FIMI attacks. Public strategic communication should also become more coherent, so that bilateral cooperation is visible to domestic audiences and to partners in Ukraine, Serbia, and Moldova. In this sense, Bulgaria's 2026 presidency of the EUSDR is a pivotal opportunity for both nations to use digital diplomacy instruments to be more outspoken about their cooperation. Both countries should elaborate a communication strategy targeting mainly the joint initiatives funded under the Interreg VI-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme of the past years and their concrete results for citizens.

The overall recommendation is straightforward: **Romania and Bulgaria should move from polite coordination to institutionalized, results-oriented cooperation.** Less competition, more planning, and more visible joint action would strengthen both countries and reinforce NATO's south-eastern flank.

## Conclusions

In order for Romania and Bulgaria to leave their diplomatic »comfort zone« and act together they need to move away from the cautious and routine bilateral mode that dominated until 2022. Applied to the relations between Romania and Bulgaria, that means using a deliberately more ambitious diplomacy style composed of faster coordination, more joint planning, and more public and outspoken alignment in order to confront the regional risks of the years to come. This strategy means that the two actors should move beyond what I would call the *polite strategic coordination* that prevailed between 2022 and 2026 and move into *renewed shared strategic habits* that would include common threat assessment, more visible defence cooperation, and joint messaging targeting not only their own citizens but also citizens from Ukraine, Moldova and Serbia.

Few states in the region can connect so many strategic spaces at once as Romania and Bulgaria - the Lower Danube, the Black Sea, the Eastern neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. As shown in this analysis, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 acted as a massive

catalyst, forcing both nations to rapidly align their security architectures. More actions are needed from Romania and Bulgaria in order to turn a vulnerable frontier into a shared resilience zone facing unprecedented FIMI attacks alongside espionage, sabotage, and major disinformation campaigns from Russia.

Already existing institutional alignment (like being joint EU, NATO/Schengen members) does not equate to active regional defence. The biggest challenge to this bold move is that regional leadership in the Lower Danube Area implies predictability, a focus on critical infrastructure and investments, diplomatic initiative and the ability to transform EU policy instruments into visible results for border communities and with direct, visible impact on citizens. The main limits of this ambition: weak administrative capacity, infrastructure delays, fragmented political coordination and the risk of overpromising without delivery. The way forward is to turn shared security interests into a disciplined delivery agenda, with fewer declarations and more joint projects that produce measurable security, connectivity, and economic gains by 2027 and beyond.

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