

## Romanian Ambassador in Washington assures US investors that Gov't in Bucharest, functional, there is no legislative instability

**AGERPRES special correspondent Florentina Peia reports: Romania's Ambassador in Washington, Andrei Muraru, told AGERPRES in an interview that he gave assurances to US investors, whom he encourages to come to Romania, that the Executive in Bucharest is a functional one, and the change of its makeup should not affect the business environment.**

"I have given everyone the necessary assurances that this crisis is short-lived, that the Government is a functional one and that President Iohannis together with the Government will continue to manage public affairs in Romania and that this instability should not affect the business environment, because we do not have a legislative instability, we have a change in the makeup of the Government and, from this point of view, the Government, in any way, will move forward," the Romanian diplomat maintained.

He also said that the 25th anniversary of the inauguration of the Strategic Partnership between the United States and Romania could be honored next year either by a visit of US President Joe Biden to Bucharest or by a visit of President. Klaus Iohannis to Washington.

"This year marks the 25th anniversary of the inauguration of this Strategic Partnership between the United States and Romania. (...) We are not even considering not honoring this anniversary in a completely special way. And here we have two options: either a visit of the US president to Bucharest, or a visit of the Romanian president to Washington," said Muraru.

The Romanian Ambassador in Washington also talks in an interview about the Visa Waiver program, pointing out that the goal is for Romania to join it by 2024.

**AGERPRES: You recently received the letter of accreditation as Ambassador of Romania from the US President, Joe Biden. Romania and the United States have a strong Strategic Partnership, but there is a general desire to deepen it. Along which dimensions?**

**Andrei Muraru:** The dimensions along which we want the deepening of this Partnership are inscribed, on the one hand, in this Joint Declaration On Strategic Partnership For The 21st Century Between The United States Of America and Romania, which was signed in 2011 and from which there have been ten years, but also in the recent Joint Declaration of the US and Romanian Presidents from 2019, which adds other dimensions to this Strategic Partnership. First of all, the political, military and security dimension, which means, in addition to a very robust cooperation in this field, which was agreed last year, with the visit of the Romanian Minister of Defense to Washington and the conclusion of a new military cooperation agreement, but also the conclusion of a roadmap for 2020-2030, on a robust American presence in Romania. Today, we have over 1,100 soldiers on Romanian territory, and what we want is to increase this military presence. We have a missile shield at Deveselu, which was fully operationalized and passed under NATO command five years ago, but we also have a very important air base for the United States, but also for NATO - Mihail Kogalniceanu -, in which Romania is investing over three billion in the coming years. We also have a base in the Turzii Plain, which, through the European Deterrence Initiative, the US is investing 130 million dollars this year, the largest American investment this year in Europe, but also along other dimensions of this military cooperation.

Then we have a robust cooperation on the energy component. We have signed a memorandum that has since become a law, an intergovernmental agreement between the United States and Romania on the construction of two

new nuclear reactors at Cernavoda [Nuclear Power Plant] by 2030, the refurbishment of reactor 1 at Cernavoda. Just tomorrow [ed.n. - Thursday] the US Secretary of Energy, Jennifer Granholm, and the Romanian Minister of Energy, Virgil Popescu, are meeting in Vienna to discuss in detail how this investment in Cernavoda will be financed and how it will be carried out, as it will be led by the United States, but at the same time it will be operationalized through a transatlantic consortium.

We also have, at the same time, a component related to the encouragement and strengthening of the rule of law and the defense of human rights, in which Romania has taken concrete steps for which there is a continuous search in Romanian society to strengthen the resilience of the Romanian democratic system to the current challenges. We have another component here, which was and will be highlighted at the end of this year's Democracy Summit, in which Romania will take part, namely a dimension of the fight against corruption, which was strongly institutionalized in Romania, this fight, through a prosecutor's office that has become an example of good practice in our part of Europe and there are ways in which we would like to export this model of good practice to countries such as [the Republic of] Moldova, which has recently seen a resounding victory of pro-European forces through President Maia Sandu and a majority that won the parliamentary elections and aims to fight this scourge of corruption. Romania can offer this model in the region.

Other dimensions are related to innovation, education, economic cooperation, in which we will certainly take important steps in the next period.

**You talked about the Cernavoda reactor project, a project announced during the Trump administration. What happens to the other projects announced then, namely the construction of a motorway and a railway to connect Constanta to Gdansk? Will they be continued?**

The United States' commitment to the Three Seas Initiative is still extremely robust. At the last summit of this Initiative, which took place in Sofia, Bulgaria, a few months ago, and which was also attended by President Klaus Iohannis, the United States was present with a very important delegation. In addition to the fact that the American President, Joe Biden, the Secretary of State Antony Blinken sent recorded messages, in the field there was a delegation of the American Congress, a delegation of the Department of Energy, a delegation of the State Department. These projects remain standing. Romania wants their implementation in the next period, precisely because they have not only a strategic commercial, but also a military importance because they provide transport from Gdansk to Constanta, which is practically fundamental for the security of NATO's Eastern Flank.

**On the economic side, the USA is among the first investors in Romania, a country that is currently facing a government crisis. You have already had meetings with some US investors. How do they see the situation in Romania? Are they concerned?**

No one is certainly happy to witness a government crisis, but I have given everyone the necessary assurances that this crisis is short-lived, that the Government is a functioning one and that President Iohannis and the Government will continue to manage public affairs in Romania and that this instability should not affect the business environment, because we do not have a legislative instability, we have a change in the makeup of the Government and, from this point of view, the Government, in whatever way, will move forward. We assured them that, from our point of view, they have all the support to have a direct contact with Romanian officials, regardless of the structure and political color of the Government, and we are doing everything in our power to encourage US investors or Romanian investors to get over these less pleasant news about the politics in Bucharest.

**Are there chances for these American investments to grow in Romania?**

Not only is there a chance, but we have very direct signals that these investments in the coming period... This year, we exceed the psychological threshold of 4 billion dollars in commercial exchanges, for the first time in the history

of bilateral relations. And we have very clear signals that important US companies, that desire in the coming period to relocate some operations in other areas of the globe, from Asia, and are seeking in Romania opportunities to create other areas to build successful businesses. We are in contact with them, we had a meeting with the Romanian-American Business Council, we met officials from companies such as Tesla, Oracle, UiPath. The signal we want to give is that we are very open to receiving these investors, because they, through the business they make in Romania, are doing nothing but creating jobs in the US as well, because if you're an important company, such as Boeing, which received an order for planes from two Romanian companies, that means jobs created in the USA as well. The interest is not only to create such jobs in Romania, but to build this economic ecosystem that both sides benefit from.

**In the hearing in the parliamentary committees you stated that you are confident that, until 2024, Romania will be included in the Visa Waiver program. What are the chances, in the context in which a problem is posed by the high refusal rate of Romanians' requests for visas for the United States?**

It's true, we have quite a high refusal rate for visa requests for short stay visas of up to 90 days - 9.41 in 2019, 10.14 last year - and we are in a plateau for approximately five years. Our purpose is to get closer to a 3 pct rejection rate, which could offer us this perspective to build together with the American side a very predictable path for the moment we enter this program - Visa Waiver, at the gates of which we've been for approximately 15 years. We are working on two paths: on the executive path and the legislative path, because this inflexible legislation depends on Congress. We are in the process of elaborating a very coherent strategy to approach the US administration on these two paths. At the same time, with the visit of the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs in Washington, last year, a working group that is working specifically on this problem was created and has met already six times.

We are very confident that we will make concrete steps in this sense. We discussed with the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, the United States having this very recent experience with Poland and with Croatia that entered the Visa Waiver program. The closer we work, the faster we will enter this program. We will not see spectacular developments overnight, but I remain with the conviction that until the end of 2024 we can have this chance to enter this program, either by reaching this percentage under 3 pct rejection rate, either by obtaining this waiver from the US administration, if a biometric exit system from the United States is implemented by then. A very costly program that is now being implemented on the main US airports and which will be finalized in two years - this is the estimate of the American side - it gives the possibility to the State Department to ask the Department of Homeland Security for a country that does not fulfill the 3 pct criteria, but is under 10 pct rejection rate, enter the program based on the firm commitment to trans-Atlantic values, towards democracy, rule of law - principles that Romania respects in every dimension of this partnership.

**What could be done so that this rejection rate for applications be smaller?**

We could make Romanian citizens be aware that an incorrect application, an application with many inexact details certainly represents a vulnerability when requesting a short stay visa of up to 90 days. And this is what the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is doing: they're working on a public information campaign to make Romanians understand how to apply for these visas, what are the vulnerabilities of a weak or incomplete application and what are the risks to apply again, using the same inexact information for a new visa. Surely this rejection rate is not definitively tied to Romanian authorities, because the US authorities are those to process these applications for visas, namely Homeland Security, which manages this system, but our obligation is to make Romanian citizens understand what the risks and what the benefits are to making a successful application.

**President Klaus Iohannis invited his American counterpart, Joe Biden, to conduct a visit to Romania. Have demarches for such a visit started and when could it take place?**

As you know, we have not benefited from a visit of a US head of state since 2008, since the participation of President George Bush in the NATO summit in Bucharest. Efforts are made in this sense. I reiterated this invitation to the American side whenever I had the occasion, either at the State Department, either in the interactions with the National Security Council, nonetheless, this pandemic which does not want to pass obviously represents an obstacle for any travel of officials, either American or Romanian. Next year marks 25 years since the inauguration of this Strategic Partnership between the United States and Romania, when President Bill Clinton came to Bucharest and there was that letter exchange between Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State at the time, and the Romanian Foreign Minister at the time. We're not even considering this anniversary being marked otherwise than in a totally special way. And here we have two options: either a visit of the US President in Bucharest, either a visit of the Romanian President in Washington. Whichever finalizes quicker will represent, without a doubt, a great benefit for bilateral relations and for this Strategic Partnership which is at the highest level at this time.