

Romania: Courting NATO Harms EU Hopes

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While the Bucharest authorities' controversial pro-US stance may help Romania to join NATO, it will also hurt its chances for a place within the EU.

Romania's prospects for gaining NATO membership have improved dramatically after it bowed to the United States' demands on two heated political issues, but this may come at the cost of its hope to join the European Union.

The Romanian authorities signed an agreement this month pledging not to turn over American soldiers to the new International Criminal Court, ICC, which the US opposes. Bucharest has also paved the way for the lifting of a ban on international adoption of Romanian children.

The prime minister and the ruling Socialist party defended the decisions as necessary to securing membership in the NATO alliance. However, opponents said the concessions amounted to "servile behaviour" that could undermine Romania's chances of joining the European Union.

EU representatives, who oppose Washington's attempts to undermine the authority of the International Criminal Court, criticised Romania for taking the decision without consulting Brussels.

"It is a bad political signal. We would have expected Romania to have at least coordinated with us on such an important issue," Jean-Christophe Filori, the European Commission enlargement spokesman, said.

EU officials said Romania and other potential associates should have waited for a Union-wide decision on the issue. The 13 states applying for membership were recently warned to resist appeals from the US to grant exemptions to the ICC's authority.

Romanian prime minister Adrian Nastase said his government had contacted and consulted with EU "bureaucrats and experts" on more than 30 occasions and said that these contacts might have been "short-circuited", as he put it, due to the summer holiday break in Brussels.

Foreign minister Mircea Geoana admitted that they may have made a mistake in not consulting with EU officials at the "highest political level" and said that steps are under way to correct that error.

However, he defended the agreement, saying that until Romania became a member of the European Union, it must be allowed freedom to make decisions based on its own self-interest.

Apart from Romania, only two other countries - Israel and Columbia - have so far agreed to exempt American military personnel from possible prosecution by the ICC.

The Bush administration has launched a global lobbying campaign to try to persuade states that signed up to the ICC to grant immunity to US soldiers, on the pretext that it fears "politically motivated trials". It has threatened to cut off military assistance to countries that refuse the request.

Bucharest was the first to sign up to the immunity pledge, which is allowed under Article 98 of the ICC's statute, preventing the court from asking a country to hand over suspects if it would clash with another international agreement.

A day after the August 1 signing, the US ambassador to Romania, Micheal Guest, called for the resumption of international adoptions of Romanian children as soon as the country adopts necessary legislation.

Romania had banned around 3500 adoptions by foreigners last year to stem a tide of corruption among adoption agencies, but the US had made the country's entry into NATO dependent on the ban being lifted.

Soon after the American ambassador's statement, government officials said the cabinet had started preparing a draft law designed to reform adoption procedures.

Both moves came in the run-up to a landmark NATO summit set for November, when member states are expected to discuss an expansion of the alliance.

Plagued by economic and political shortcomings resulting from decades of communist misrule, Romania has tried to improve its status in the NATO sweepstakes by restructuring its defence industry and sending troops to multi-national peacekeeping missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Only a year ago, Romania's chances for early membership looked bleak. But the government's bid to court US support show how far it is willing to go to win a place in the alliance.

"The Bucharest government has now to walk a tightrope between US and EU due mainly to the divergences over ICC issue," political analyst Horatiu Pepine told IWPR.

"In the short term, Romania will gain stronger support from the US, which is expected to have a decisive say in who will be accepted in NATO following the Prague summit. But it could also endanger the country's hopes for EU membership".

Most public commentary has focused on Romania's balancing act between the US and the EU, with no serious debate about the international legal issues at stake.

"Politicians speak only about the national interest, while the reactions of the people in the street show that many Romanians do not share the pro-US agenda repeatedly proclaimed by the government," said journalist Mircea Zamfir.

Recent polls show public support for NATO membership standing at around 80 per cent. However, to the average Romanian, the alliance and the US in particular remain a technologically and economically powerful force, interested only in "pursuing its selfish interest".

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