

Romania: Reviving Russian Ties

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Bucharest aims to breathe new life into diplomatic and economic ties with once major trading partner.

"When Russia sneezes, Romania gets a cold", is an old saying which casts a good deal of light on the long, bitter history of disputes and differences between the former Soviet superpower and its ex-satellite.

But after the two states last week sealed the final draft of a treaty of friendship, a thawing of ties between the former communist allies is in the air.

Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov initialed the document with his Romanian counterpart Mircea Geoana on May 5. The treaty, under which both states recognise each other's national sovereignty and borders, is to be signed in July in Moscow.

Romanian officials hailed the moment as the turning-point in bilateral relations, after what they called a "complicated decade".

"2003 will be remembered as the year that Romania and Russia re-launched bilateral relations, closing an emotional chapter and embarking on a partnership based on politics, economics and culture," Romanian prime minister Adrian Nastase said.

Relations deteriorated with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989. Taking advantage of their new liberty to discuss recent history, many Romanians openly blamed Moscow for imposing the communist system on their country after the Second World War.

Adding to the tension was Moscow's decision to impose a security agreement on Romania in 1991, just before the Soviet Union collapsed.

The treaty was never ratified and it has taken almost 12 years to draw up a new one. Talks were dogged by Bucharest's demands that Russia, the successor state to the Soviet Union, condemn the 1940 pact between the USSR and Germany, which enabled Stalin to annex two Romanian provinces.

After the 1939-45 war, most of the former Romanian province of Bessarabia became the Soviet republic of Moldova, while Bukovina was incorporated into Soviet Ukraine.

In 1991, Moldova declared independence from the Soviet Union, while Bukovina became part of newly independent Ukraine. Although post-communist Romania never demanded the return of its former territories, it constantly urged Moscow to denounce the pact.

After initially refusing, Russia agreed on condition that Romania also condemn its decision to fight with the Germans against the Soviet Union during the Second World War, before switching sides shortly before the Allied victory.

Another dispute centered on Romanian gold shipped to Czarist Russia over 80 years ago during the First

World War. The gold, along with jewelry and art treasures, was sent to Russia to escape being seized by German occupation forces.

The treasures, which Bucharest says is worth 3 billion US dollars, were never returned. Both countries have now agreed to form a joint committee to search for the former and archives in Russia. "The issue is to be settled by experts and must be resolved through diplomacy, not by emotions," Russian foreign minister, Igor Ivanov said.

Ivanov also promised to support Romania's candidacy to a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

In spite of the optimistic reports of officials, some Romanian observers are sceptical about the value of the treaty. "The sealing of the document after years of chilly relations with Russia is nothing more than a diplomatic feat," political analyst Zoe Petre said.

"Romania is almost a member of an expanded western world now. It has no reason to fear an expansionist Moscow could ever regain the tremendous influence it once had."

Petre said the test of the treaty's significance would be economic benefits, as a country of Russia's size remains an important potential market. Bucharest is eager to increase economic ties with Moscow to revive what was once an important trading relationship before the fall of communism in 1989.

Economic exchanges in recent years have amounted to a mere 1 billion US dollars annually, mostly from energy imports to Romania, which heavily depends on Russian gas and oil.

Romania's prime minister recently announced plans to set up a group to promote economic cooperation with Moscow, to boost the present low level of trade. By the end of the year, a joint company will also be set up to transport gas directly from Russia, thus eliminating western intermediaries and reducing costs.

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