

# Romania's Relations with African countries: Input for a renewed Strategy

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2023 finds Romania and African countries in a complicated world undergoing multiple waves of transformation. Climate change, digitalization, hybrid security threats, and increasing violence affect Romania alongside its African, European Union (EU), and transatlantic partners.

In the past decades, Romania made insufficient efforts to establish and maintain diplomatic, economic, cultural, and development relations with African states. Despite solid historical ties, Romania's engagement with the continent has been sporadic and inconsistent, leaving the potential for collaboration and growth untapped. While the importance of African countries in global affairs is growing, in an increasingly volatile multilateral context, Romania can no longer afford not to prioritize African countries in its relations and policies.

This policy brief<sup>1</sup> aims to articulate a set of recommendations for a more powerful engagement between Romania and the African continent. To do so, the policy brief reviews the main characteristics of Romania's relations with African countries, including political, economic, development relations and analyzes civil society and academic actors' engagement<sup>2</sup> with African societies.



## Evolution of Romania's relations with African countries

Romania has a long history of engagement with Africa, consisting of sporadic interactions during the 1800s and a robust partnership during the communist-totalitarian times (1960s to 1989). At the height of the relationship, Romania's support for several countries on the African continent became substantive financially and complex in content, ranging from political, economic, and military to cultural-educational engagements.<sup>3</sup> Romania supported liberation movements in their struggles against colonialism and apartheid<sup>4</sup> and offered many scholarships for African students. In the 1970s and 1980s, Romania provided military and technical assistance to several African countries, including Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, Romania's attention to African states re-emerged, diversifying to include slightly more interest from a political, economic, development, educational, and security perspective. This increase in interest is perceived to be related to Romania's membership in the EU, NATO, and the United Nations (UN), the 2008 economic crisis, and the migration crisis of the mid-2010s.<sup>6</sup> While Africa is a key priority for the EU, newer Member States, such as Romania, have only recently shown a growing interest in EU-Africa relations.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The policy brief is developed by the Center on Global Affairs and Postdevelopment of the Făgăraș Research Institute in partnership with ARCADIA – the Romanian Association for International Cooperation and Development and FOND Romania.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis of Romanian non-governmental and academic actors' engagement with African societies relies on a questionnaire applied between Nov. 2022 – March 2023, that generated 20 responses.

<sup>3</sup> Mirela Oprea, "Development Discourse in Romania: From Socialism to EU Membership," Ph.D. thesis, University of Bologna. (2009).

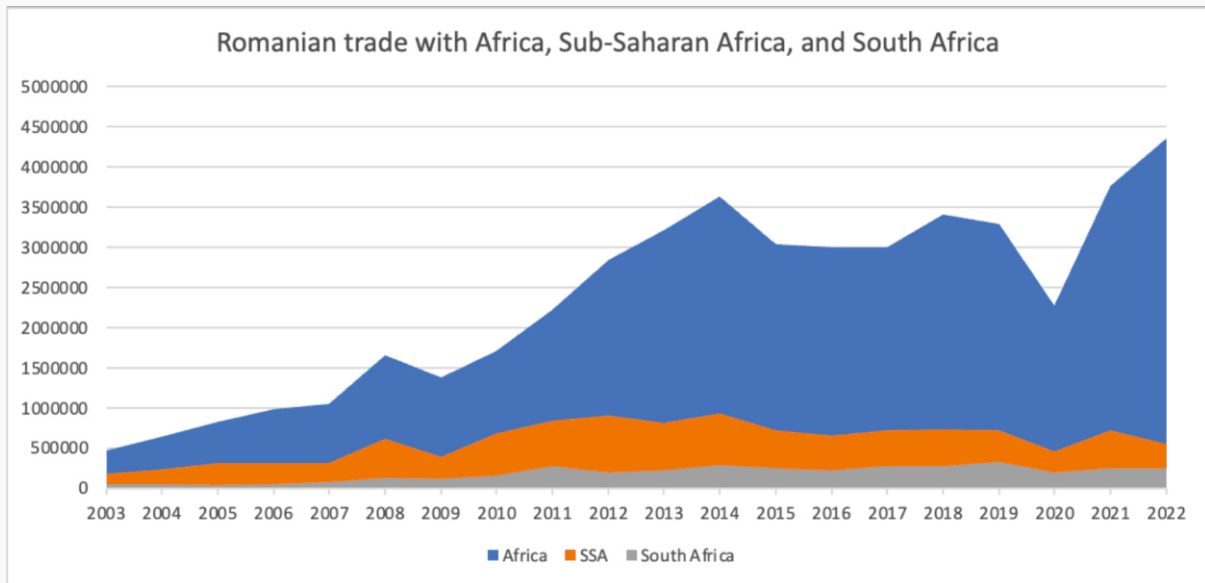
Radu Gabriel Mateescu, "Romania and Africa: Old Traditions, New Opportunities," *Africa Insight*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2002): 67. 10.4314/ai.v32i3.22280.

<sup>4</sup> Bogdan C. Iacob and Iolanda Vasile, "6. Agents of Decolonization? Romanian Activities in Mozambique's Oil and Healthcare Sectors, 1976-1984," In *Between East and South*, ed. Anna Calori, Anne-Kristin Hartmetz, Bence Kocsev, James Mark and Jan Zofka, (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 138.

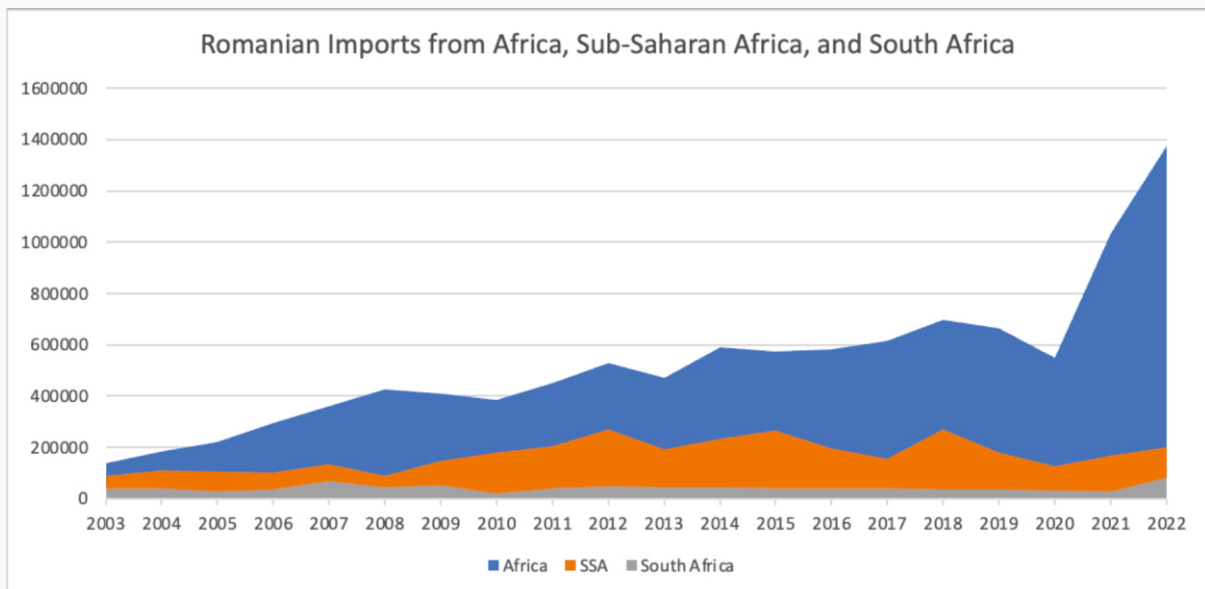
<sup>5</sup> Stefan Cibian, "Central and Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa: Prospects for Sustained Re-engagement," Chatham House Research Paper. (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Stefan Cibian, "Central and Eastern Europe and EU-Africa relations after 2020," Chatham House Research Paper. (2020).

Romania's primary interest is its economic cooperation with African states. The total volume of trade in goods between Romania and African countries fluctuates while presenting an overall increasing trend.<sup>8</sup> Trade with North African countries shows a far more significant development starting with 2008, while trade with Sub-Saharan Africa reached its height in 2014, then slowly decreased. Romania's trade with South Africa represents a substantive component of its trade with Sub-Saharan Africa (see graphs 1 to 3 below).<sup>9</sup>

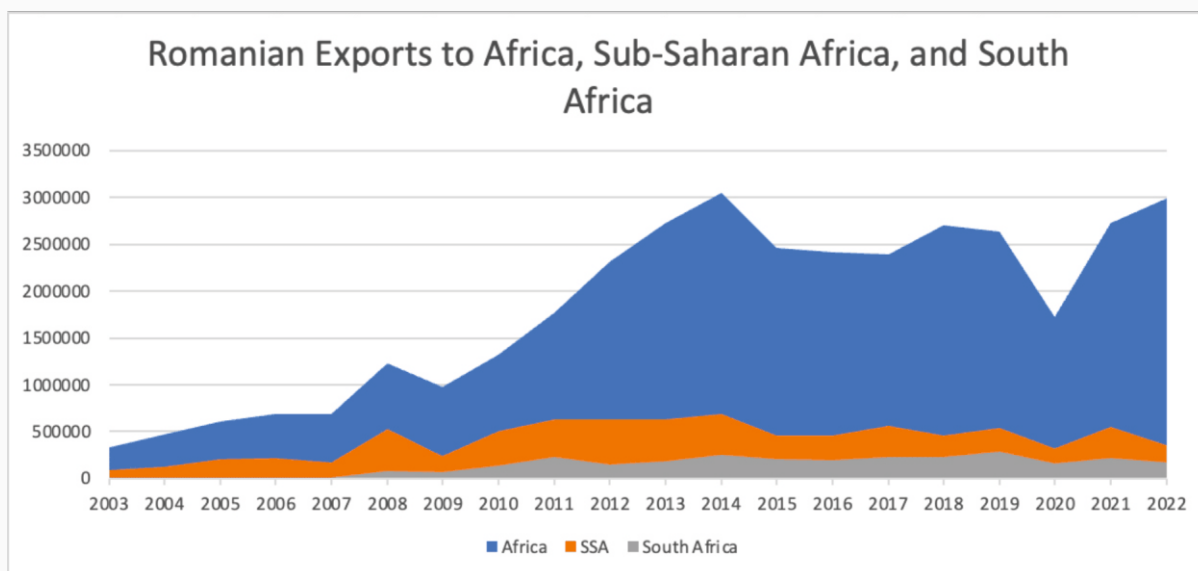


Graph 1: Romanian trade with Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Africa, total volume (thousands of USD).<sup>10</sup>



Graph 2: Romanian imports from Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Africa (thousands of USD).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Trade Statistics for International Business Development," Trade Map - Bilateral trade between Romania and Africa, accessed April 8, 2023. [https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral\\_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7C642%7C%7C%7C%7CTOTAL%7C%7C%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C2%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1](https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7C642%7C%7C%7C%7CTOTAL%7C%7C%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C2%7C2%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C1)  
<sup>9</sup> Own calculations based on data from Trade Map - Bilateral trade between Romania and Africa, accessed April 8, 2023. <https://www.trademap.org/>  
<sup>10</sup> Own calculations based on data from Trade Map - Bilateral trade between Romania and Africa, accessed April 8, 2023. <https://www.trademap.org/>  
<sup>11</sup> Own calculations based on data from Trade Map - Bilateral trade between Romania and Africa, accessed April 8, 2023. <https://www.trademap.org/>



Graph 3: Romanian exports to Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Africa (thousands of USD).<sup>12</sup>

Romania has supported African countries' efforts to achieve peace and stability, providing military and humanitarian assistance in several conflict zones, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Sudan.<sup>13</sup> Military relations remain an important area for bilateral ties with several African states.

However, despite these efforts, Romania's engagement with Africa has been limited compared to other countries in the region. Regional players such as Poland have had a more sustained effort in their engagement with Africa. The Poland-Africa Economic Forum is an example where Poland convenes business leaders and policymakers from both regions to explore opportunities for economic cooperation.<sup>14</sup> Slovenia organizes yearly an Africa Day conference bringing together significant inter-sector participation. Estonia strengthened its digital relations with African countries. Hungary increased the number of scholarships offered to African countries.

The Russian Federation is the most active among the former communist bloc in its efforts to enhance relations with African states. It organized the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum in 2019.<sup>15</sup> It is nurturing relations with Russian university alums and using state-aligned private military groups in countries such as the Central African Republic and Mali.<sup>16</sup> Russian engagement is increasingly relevant for the instability of several African regions today.

Several presidential visits from the region to African states took place in recent years, including from Estonia, Poland, Slovakia, and the Russian Federation. Unfortunately, no Romanian President visited African countries in the last decades, which is one of the most detrimental aspects of Romania's relations with the African continent.

<sup>12</sup> Own calculations based on data from Trade Map - Bilateral trade between Romania and Africa, accessed April 8, 2023. <https://www.trademap.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Romanian in Peacekeeping Operations," PERMANENT MISSION OF ROMANIA to the United Nations, accessed April 10, 2023. <https://mpnewyork.mae.ro/en/node/708>.

<sup>14</sup> "The Polish-African Economic Forum Brought Together over 400 Participants from All over the World," Poland, Expo2020.Dubai, April 20, 2022, accessed April 8, 2023. <https://expo.gov.pl/news/the-polish-african-economic-forum-brought-together-over-400-participants-from-all-over-the-world/>.

<sup>15</sup> Sidiropoulos Elizabeth and Chris Alden, "Russia in Africa - Post-Soviet Re-Engagement," Inside the Russia-Africa Matryoshka: Summitry, Geopolitics and Resources (October 2019): 12-13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25995.5>.

<sup>16</sup> Raphael Parens, "The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 18, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/the-wagner-groups-playbook-in-africa-mali/>.

# Academic and civil society engagement with African societies<sup>17</sup>

State,<sup>18</sup> academic, and non-profit actors engage with African actors in multiple ways. They provide several types of support, including development assistance, sharing lessons from the transition period, and offering scholarships to several African countries. Such partnerships are developed mainly in education and research, community development, health, and peacebuilding.<sup>19</sup>

The diagrams below present the network of partnerships and the countries in focus for the universities, civil society organizations, and individuals that filled in our questionnaire. The diagrams show that the following countries are of interest to the Romanian actors that filled in the survey: South Africa, Uganda, Senegal, Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Burundi, Mali, and Ivory Coast.

Regarding partnerships, more Romanian actors engage with the following countries: South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, Botswana, Senegal, and Tanzania. An aspect of interest is that partnerships are often multi-country, including also non-African countries. We see the UK, Germany, and Belgium organizations/initiations playing a role in how Romanian actors connect to African countries.

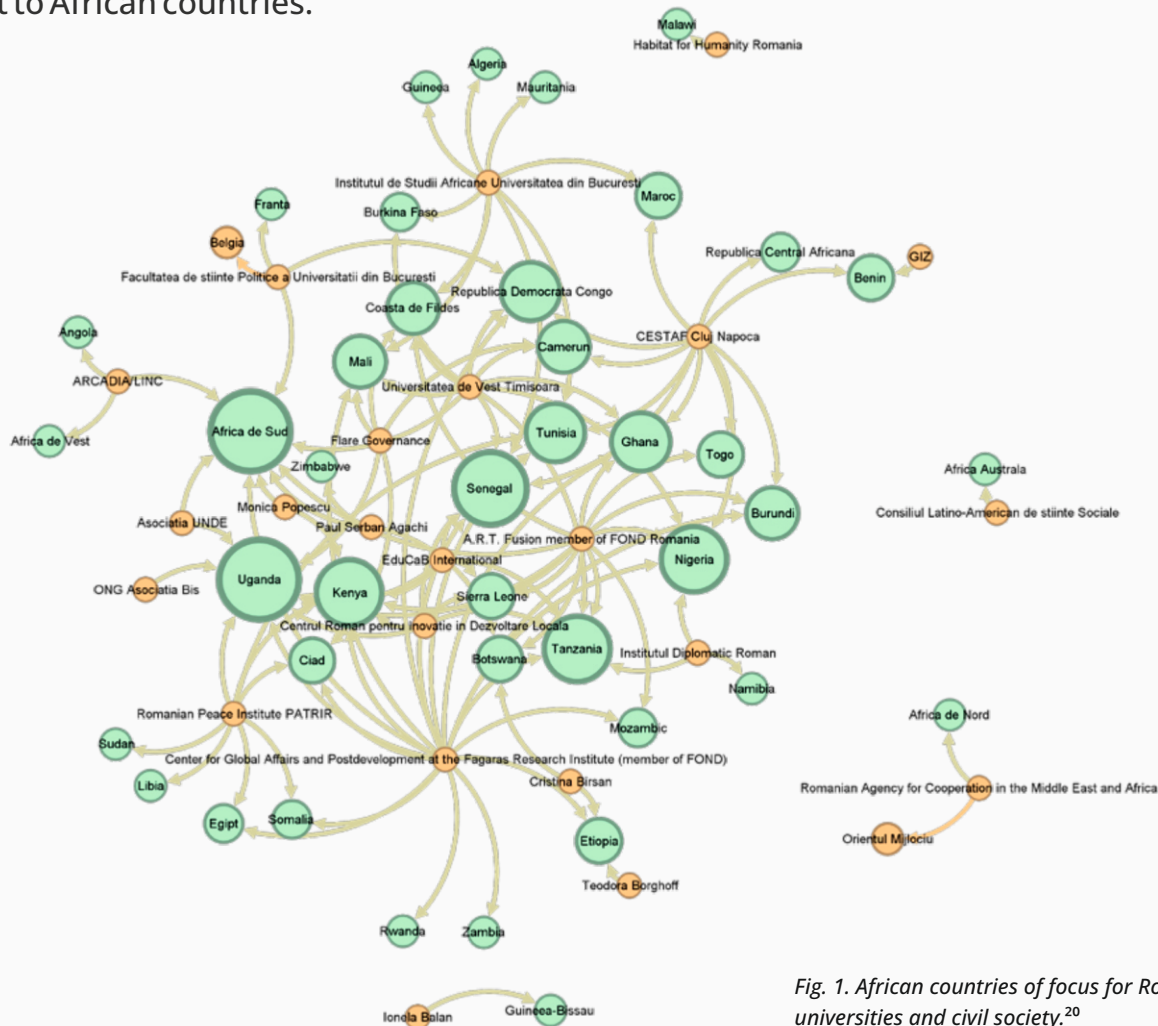


Fig. 1. African countries of focus for Romanian universities and civil society.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The data presented in this sections was collected through a questionnaire in 2022-2023.

<sup>18</sup> "Development Cooperation Policy and Humanitarian Aid," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, May 2020, accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.mae.ro/en/node/2062>.

<sup>19</sup> "Education Campaign in DR Congo on Hygiene Rules to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 Infection," RoAid - Romanian Agency for International Development Cooperation, October 29, 2020, accessed April 8, 2023. <https://roaid.ro/en/education-campaign-in-dr-congo-on-hygiene-rules-to-prevent-the-spread-of-covid-19-infection/>.

<sup>20</sup> Graph developed by Ianis Rușitoru, FRI Researcher, based on survey-generated data.

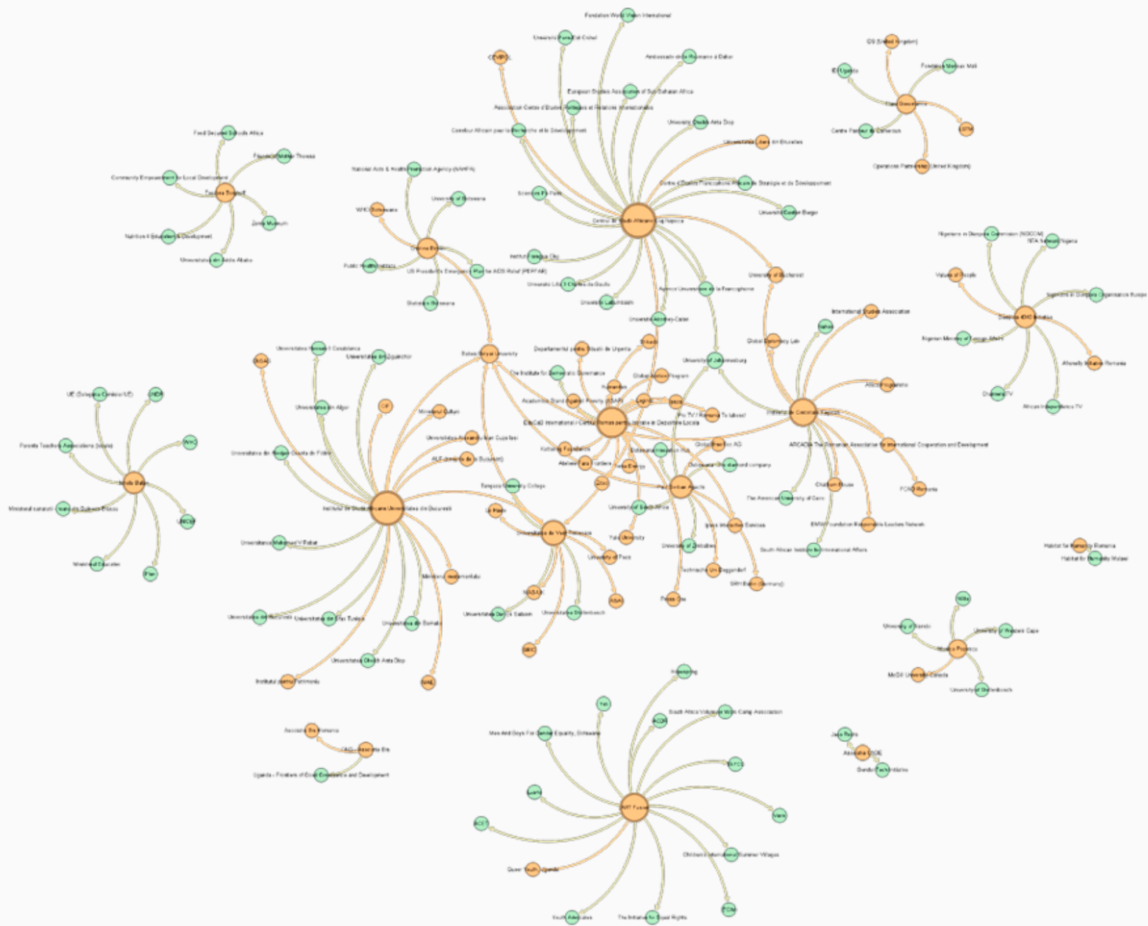


Fig. 2. Romanian universities and civil society partnerships focusing on Africa-related topics (organizations).<sup>21</sup>

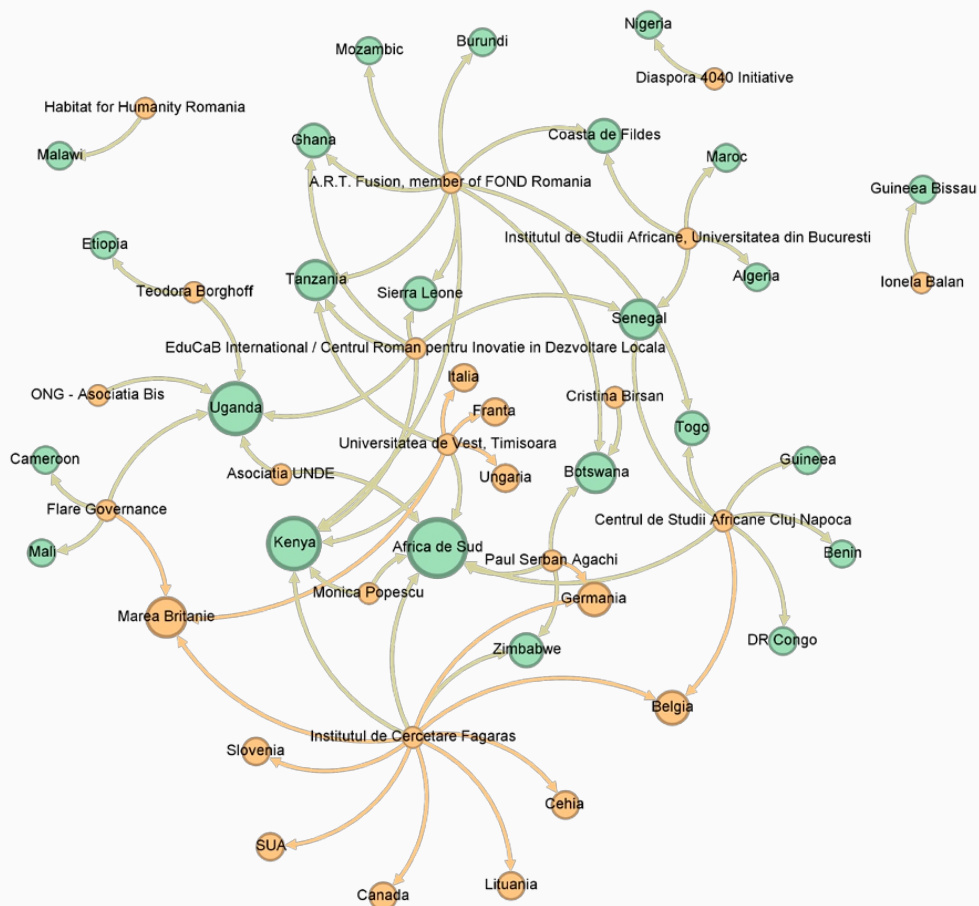


Fig. 3. Romanian universities and civil society partnerships on Africa-related topics (countries).<sup>22</sup>



Several major universities in Romania have significantly developed their relations with African countries. Babeş-Bolyai University established an African Studies Center, conducts relations with many African universities, admits many African students (including M.A. and Ph.D. students), and organizes exchanges for students and academic staff. The West University of Timișoara is also engaged through the Ubuntu African Studies Center and maintains continued relations with South Africa and other African countries. The Institute of African Studies at the University of Bucharest is involved in several CIVIS projects, collaborating with universities in Maghreb and West African Francophone countries, including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Mali. Such projects are aimed to research African heritage, the African diaspora in Europe, and the transatlantic slave trade. The Center on Global Affairs and Postdevelopment at the Făgăraș Research Instituted focuses on Central and Eastern Europe and EU relations with Sub-Saharan Africa and on topics such as innovation in governance, migration and development, and community diplomacy.

Increasingly Romanian NGOs are also expanding their relations with African societies through various joint projects and exchanges. Such organizations include the Romanian Peace Institute – PATRIR, EduCab International – Romanian Center for Innovation in Local Development, Habitat for Humanity Romania, UNDE Association, A.R.T. Fusion, Bis Association, LINC, FOND Romania, ARCADIA, Flare Governance, and Diaspora 4040 Initiative.

The Romanian Peace Institute - PATRIR engages in a wide range of programs and partnerships with African countries, including training programs, joint research, and policy engagement. As mentioned to us, PATRIR

*“provide[s] a wide range of programs and engagements with partners and partner countries in Africa, including training programs, joint research, policy engagement, upon-request support to UN Missions and Agencies. These apply to all the countries we are involved in: Nigeria, Sudan, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Kenya, Somalia, Chad, and Uganda. In Nigeria we have also worked extensively on early warning, prevention and Peacebuilding. In Libya, our principal focus has been on supporting sub-national peace processes and capacity building, and we organised the Libyan International Peace Forum. In Darfur, we provided direct training and support for local governments across Darfur together with public institutions and civil society organisations on peacebuilding and recovery. Most recently, in Chad and Uganda, we have civil society support programs to strengthen local and national peacebuilding capacities.”<sup>23</sup>*

A.R.T. Fusion implements Erasmus+ projects with youth organizations, focusing on specific methods such as “theatre of the oppressed, street campaigns, living libraries, on specific topics such as human rights, intercultural learning, climate change, and sustainable lifestyles.”<sup>24</sup> They conduct training courses internationally and have meetings for management and local activities. They have implemented projects in Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, and Botswana.

<sup>23</sup> Questionnaire response by PATRIR representative.

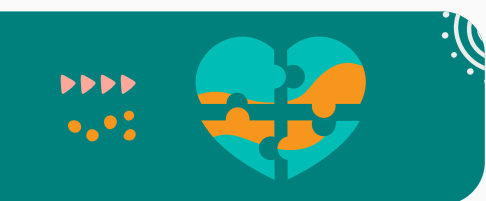
<sup>24</sup> Questionnaire response by A.R.T. Fusion representative.

EduCab International develops active community libraries in African countries, including Kenya, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, engaging a large network of local partners. Bis Association is an organization that operates in Uganda. They implemented educational projects and provided scholarships. Additionally, they constructed a water well in the Wakiso district of Uganda, in the Bibo village.

UNDE Association conducts research on collective trauma and provides organizational development programs in African countries. Currently, they are collaborating with partners in South Africa and Uganda. Habitat for Humanity Romania implemented projects in Malawi, where they work with local communities to build homes for families living in inadequate or unsafe housing. ARCADIA is a community of development professionals, several of whom have Africa-related expertise. LINC conducts knowledge transfer sessions in various regions of Africa. They are focusing on intercultural activities related to West Africa and Angola.

While academic and non-state actors make significant efforts to engage with African counterparts, they perceive that little to no support is provided by state institutions. They also highlight the lack of accessible funding for their work.

By re-thinking its relations with African states, Romania can unlock significant potential for trade and investment, cultural exchange, and political cooperation. It can also reposition itself as a relevant Member State in EU's relations with the African continent. Moreover, it can contribute to sustainable development in Africa and promote regional stability.



## **Articulating a strategy for the future of Romania's relations with African countries**

As emphasized above, Romania is slowly increasing its engagement with the African continent. However, without a strategy to guide its work, all the efforts fall short to generate an assumed and robust set of relationships with African countries and multilateral organizations.

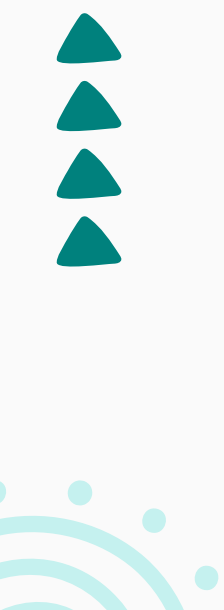
In 2023 Romania is at a different development moment compared with the early 1990s. As an established EU and NATO member, Romania is also responsible for ensuring its ties with African countries are evolving in the right direction and that the relations of the two alliances do as well.

The world is also at a different development moment compared to the early 1990s. Recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine, the war between Israel and Palestine, alongside broader transformative trends such as digitalization, climate change, and the transformation of security challenges, emphasize the importance of strategic thinking and foresight in both external and internal policies. To navigate an increasingly complicated world, each country, including Romania, must make additional efforts first to understand how the world is transforming and, second, to ensure that it contributes to building alliances for a peaceful and prosperous world. We are slowly arriving at a point where to have peace anywhere in the world; we must have peace everywhere.

Our research mapped several Romanian actors engaged in Romania's relations with African countries. The mapping exercise exposes a slow positive evolution of relations between Romanian and African actors. Equally, the map indicates that the web of relations encompasses several actors from third countries. Therefore, the relationships are multidimensional, highlighting the importance of partnerships and multi-country collaboration.

While the relations between Romanian and African actors is slowly advancing, collaboration between Romanian actors engaged in relations with African countries is somewhat limited. The causes of that fragmentation are likely related to the lack of resources for partnerships and to a focus on different types of activities and sectors.

The organizations and universities part of the survey highlight similar needs. First, there are limited or no resources for Romanian actors working on developing relations with African countries. Romanian actors manage to engage with African partners and maintain such relations by being part, mostly, of EU-funded projects, or by engaging directly with limited or no funding. Several Romanian organizations and institutions (universities) provide services to African actors.





# Recommendations for Romania's Strategy towards African countries

Given its resources, population dynamics, and vulnerabilities, Africa is a crucial region for current and future international efforts to counter emerging global challenges. As such, **our key recommendation is that the African continent should be seen as a main priority for Romania, alongside the EU and NATO.**

Given the above analysis, the following recommendations can be articulated:

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

***Transformation and unpredictability must be met with strategic thinking and foresight.*** To follow current trends and address their implications, Romania's Parliament, Presidency, CSAT, Government, and intelligence services must streamline strategic thinking and foresight at all levels of public management, within the business sector, and in local communities.

Given the EU's and NATO's global perspectives, it is no longer sufficient for Romania to state the EU and NATO as main priorities – as it is already a member of these organizations. ***Being a member of both organizations urges Romania to build a global vision and rebuild, strengthen, and invest significantly in its ability to understand today's world.***

***Given climate change, digitalization, emerging hybrid and conventional security threats, augmented resource competition, and energy dynamics, Romania needs to revisit its foreign policy priorities.*** As a full member of the European Union and NATO, Romania should prioritize making its most significant potential contribution to the well-being of its citizens and the citizens of the EU and NATO by engaging with the rest of the world in meaningful and substantive ways.

Such contribution implies at least two components:

- 1. Enable societal frameworks that nurture authentic, innovative, and robust international connections at all levels*** – public sector, private sector, civil society, media, academia, etc. ***Romania should assert an authentic and powerful voice globally and with African countries.*** For that, two processes are necessary – ***enabling Romanian actors to innovate in their international engagement while facing the societal traumas generated by the communist-totalitarian regime. Aligning democratic aspirations with acknowledging past traumas positions Romania as a valuable member of the EU and NATO and a meaningful partner for countries that face injustice and oppression.***
- 2. Investing in generating an evidence-based, open, and diverse space for policy dialogue in all policy areas,*** including foreign policy and Romania's relations with African countries.

***Given its resources, population dynamics, and vulnerabilities, Africa is a key region in the world's efforts to counter emerging global challenges; as such, it should be seen as a key priority for Romania.***

***The Romanian President should visit African countries regularly.*** Given Russia's war against Ukraine and the esteem African countries hold for former-communist countries, the Romanian President should share Romania's perspective on Russia's work against Ukraine.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

**Reposition Africa as a core priority of Romania's foreign policy. Develop a strategy that substantiates that priority and allocate the appropriate budget for its implementation.**

While Romania's relations with African countries have a historical dimension, reconnecting meaningfully today necessitates doing research and learning from the past and the present. Therefore, Romania should articulate a **core strategic aim of enhancing its ability to learn (in all sectors) from its own history and from African societies.**

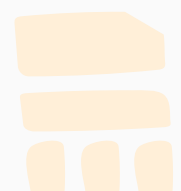
**Romania should value its vulnerabilities and complicated past in its strategic goals for enhancing relations with African countries. Its experience with totalitarianism and transition makes Romania an authentic and valuable partner, even more than current advancements in economy and technology.**

Learn and share learnings. **A partnership based on learning is one where both parties are recognized and appreciated.**

Value current relations and support their development. Mapping and nurturing meaningful relationships that rely on trust is the basis for successful foreign, development, security, trade, and investment policies. **Romania should start by consolidating its relations with the African countries represented in Romania and those where it has a representation, alongside the countries of interest for the business sector, civil society, universities, and media.**

**Romania should further enhance its presence on the African continent while re-thinking the current model of diplomatic mission, providing adequate staffing and budgets.**

**Romania should allow itself to innovate in strengthening diplomatic, economic, development, cultural, educational, and societal relations.** Its past experiences as it belongs to a volatile world region equips Romanian actors – public and private – with perspectives and lessons learned that are a good basis for innovation. The Romanian Government should provide mechanisms and allocate resources to nurture innovative practices and translate them at a systemic level.



## KEY STRATEGIC AREAS

that could be considered while developing Romania's strategy with African countries:

***Above all, such a strategy should be done in close partnership with African countries and Romanian actors engaged in relations with African actors.*** Furthermore, Romania should strengthen its capacity to make sense of past and present relations with African countries – at all levels, public, private, civil society, academic, media, etc. – through an enhanced dialogue with African partners, including African diaspora in Romania, former alums, and local actors engaged in relations with African societies.

***Develop tailored partnerships with each African country, appreciating the differences on the continent.*** Such an aim entails a ***whole-of-society approach to foreign policy, valuing existing relationships and building new ones.***

***Include joint foresight and strategic dialogues as a basis for reconnecting to African countries.*** Thinking together offers a powerful foundation for building trust, in a world where uncertainty becomes the norm. Such an approach would enable Romania to better understand evolving perspectives of African partner countries and communicate better.

***Prioritize people-to-people relations*** as they are long-lasting. That is a key lesson of the earlier relations with African countries (i.e., scholarships, exchanges, etc.). Stimulate the development of and fund models of people-to-people relations that make sense, are tested in practice, and prove functional.

***Assess and transform curricula within Romanian schools on international relations and foreign policy,*** including curricula regarding African countries, so that the Romanian population understands not just the geography and history of the continent but also its cultural diversity and current security and sustainability assets and challenges.

***Consolidate foreign trade and development policies and institutions so that the diplomatic missions can play a much more assumed role in trade and development relations.***

***Place people-to-people relations as the basis for external trade and development relations as that generates the most sustainable types of engagement based on trust and long-lasting partnerships.***

Generate and implement mechanisms for institutional support for civil society, universities and schools, and companies to enhance their relations with African actors. ***Adapt the visa regimes and consular relations to such policy objectives.***

***Strengthen Romania's voice in EU's relations with Africa by bringing an informed and authentic perspective, much needed for EU's capacity to transform its partnership with the African continent.***

**Organize and fund annual events enabling African and Romanian actors to learn about each other and build partnerships.**

**Strengthen the capacity of the Presidency, the Parliament, and the Government, including the MFA and other relevant ministries, civil society, universities, and businesses for connecting to African countries.**

**Develop a strategic and foresight Council on Romania's relations with African countries.** Bring in the composition of the Council representatives of civil society, including African diaspora organizations, media, the academic sector, the business sector, and the above institutions, as a constant institutional mechanism for assessing the development of Romania's relations with African countries and generate proposals for further engagement.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES**

Local communities are key to the future of diplomatic relations. The depth of partnerships that already exist among local communities from Romania and African countries substantiate traditional diplomatic relations while currently not being considered in articulating foreign policy.

In an era of global challenges affecting local communities, local actors are best positioned to address the challenges they face by connecting with communities they can learn from. Therefore, there is a need for mechanisms that connect local communities in Romania with those in various African countries, where such communities can learn from each other how to address the sustainability challenges they face.

