

THE COGNITIVE DISSONANCE OF ROMANIAN ANTI-AMERICANISM: AMBIVALENCE AND/OR “SLOUGH OF RESENTFUL DESPOND”

Gabriel C. Gherasim*

Abstract

The Romanian attitudes and perceptions towards the role(s) that the United States of America have been playing in contemporary politics and history in their relationship with the Romanian state and nation could be roughly characterized as ambiguous and diffuse; accordingly, no well-founded cognitive approaches are possible in terms of rigorously descriptive and explanatory accounts. At best, the overall Romanian (mis)representations about the United States could be depicted as ambivalent, context-dependant and essentially emotional. The present working hypothesis on the facets of Romanian anti-Americanism aims at unveiling and analyzing the most plausible forms of its manifestations based on either positive and favorable Romanian responses to the American presence and commitment, or negative, critical and repulsive Romanian attitudes towards the United States regarding certain indicative analytical elements. It goes without saying that such an approach using other illustrative ingredients is also possible in the argumentative case of Romanian Americanism; as far as the scope of the present study is concerned, I will attempt to distinguish between four distinctive forms of Romanian anti-Americanism: cultural and ideological, economic, psychological and, finally, religious.

Keywords: Romanian anti-Americanism, cultural anti-Americanism, economic anti-Americanism, psychological anti-Americanism, religious anti-Americanism

* Gabriel C. Gherasim has taught in the American Studies programme of Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, Romania, since 2009. He is a member of the Romanian Association of American Studies and executive editor of the Romanian Journal of American Studies. Contact: ggherasim@euro.ubbcluj.ro.

Preliminary considerations

In the aftermath of the 9/11 events and the subsequent American response which generated the so-called "Iraqi narrative", the topic of anti-Americanism has considerably expanded and disseminated into a multitude of receptions, conceptions, perceptions, apprehensions and symbolizations susceptible of inflicting baffling knowledge, confusing sentiments and/or partisan emotions. The multi-faceted literature in the field of anti-Americanism studies has not contributed to a systematic approach of phenomena associated with anti-American attitudes yet, but has largely succeeded in representing its connotations. However, outstanding researchers of anti-Americanism have not reached a plain consensus regarding its definition, forms of manifestation, characteristics, and explanatory variables; instead, they have argued for contextual interpretations and specific instantiations of a general attitude admittedly directed at criticizing, denouncing and rejecting the United States' assertive role in the world.¹

If the European interest in exploring anti-Americanism has been pervasive in Great Britain, Germany and France, the absorption of the subject in Romania seems comparatively feeble, modest or, at best, circumstantial. To my knowledge, there is not one book or comprehensive study exclusively or thematically dedicated to anti-Americanism, either referring to the topic in general, or focusing on its particular understanding in Romania. Those who have incidentally approached Romanian anti-Americanism (be they foreign or native scholars and journalists) have been rather dismissive about the topic by minimizing its relevance when discussing various realities in contemporary Romania. The absence of reflective considerations on anti-Americanism in Romania or, at best, the momentary inflammations generated by exceptional situations and imminent contexts might be explanatory for what I would call "cognitive dissonance". In brief, the Romanian cognition of anti-Americanism might

¹ After 1990, and especially after the assertion of the American unilateralism in the 2000s, the literature dedicated to anti-Americanism in the world has expanded considerably; researchers such as James W. Ceaser, Giacomo Chiozza, Philipp Gassert, Robert O. Keohane, Ivan Krastev, Denis Lacorne, Tony Judt, Andrei S. Markovits, Brendon O'Connor, Martin Griffiths, Jean-François Revel and Philippe Roger, among many others, have contributed to the synthesis of the widespread phenomenon of anti-Americanism.

be perceived as dissonant because of an essentially ambivalent, Manichaeistic positioning of Romanians in this respect: comprehensive knowledge of American standing values and institutions intermingles with naivety, prejudice and ignorance, calm judgment is mixed with emotions, lucid analysis with passions, deference with fear, admiration with resentment. This basic indecisiveness of Romanians in confronting anti-Americanism makes it possible to transfer the problem from the field of cognition to the affective mechanisms of reception; but cognitive approaches are generally full of approximations, imprecision, intuitions, prejudices and fallacies.

The etiquette “slough of resentful despond” was used by British historian Tony Judt in the conclusive remarks of his article *Romania: Bottom of the Heap*, published in *The New York Review of Books*, on November 1, 2001.² Even if the author’s guiding intentions aimed at defending the Romanian cause of European integration, despite an overall somber analytic tone concerning the evolution of Romanian political history, the article brought about one of the most acute reactions of anti-Americanism in Romania after 1989 (sic!). Stating that the exclusion of Romania from both NATO and the European Union would lead to the Romanians’ hopelessness, distrust and resentment, Tony Judt melancholically argued for Romania’s “Europeanism” in his partially distorted historical narrative. However, some Romanian intellectuals and journalists harshly criticized Judt’s perspective on Romania: Mircea Iorgulescu and Andrei Brezianu rejected Judt’s lack of scientific rigor, shallowness, negligence and non-professionalism; both Brezianu and Ștefan Borbely denounced the contextual distortions, simplifications and stereotypical representations of Romania, while Victor Eskenasy accused Judt of anti-Romanian conspiracy. In a radical tone, Mircea Iorgulescu and the historian Florin Constantiniu dismissed the article published by the “American professor” as biased, hostile and methodologically Stalinist; Constantiniu went so far as to assert that the American globalist neo-hegemony is a substitute for the former

² Tony Judt’s study was published in Romanian in a volume collecting also some of the Romanian intellectuals’ replies and comments (v. Mircea Mihăieș (ed.), *Tony Judt. România: la fundul grămezii*, Iași: Polirom, 2002).

Soviet socialist internationalism, etc.³ This brief overview of the Romanian intellectuals' reactions towards what, in my view, stood as a stylistic narrative rather than a scrupulous piece of objective historical writing, is illustrative for the above-mentioned "cognitive dissonance" which is not a characteristic solely of Romanian ordinary citizens.

It goes without saying that Romanian anti-Americanism is not homogeneously prevalent in all Romanian mentalities; the most striking criterion of differentiating the existence of anti-American attitudes roughly divides middle-aged and elderly citizens from their young counterparts; accordingly, a more or less conscious anti-Americanism is much more widespread in the attitudes of Romanian citizens over 40 years of age. With few exceptions, young citizens, and especially those born after 1990, are regularly favorable, seduced and/or positive in their representations of the United States and what America generally stands for; in order to achieve a more scientific approach of anti-Americanism in Romania, extensive sociological types of investigation regarding some basic criteria for distinguishing levels of anti-Americanism by considering public internet forums, social networks and journalistic investigations are needed; but, as one important East-European researcher put it, sentiments of anti-Americanism are "visible only in the polls, not on the streets".⁴ Additionally, the results of comparative international questionnaires among European citizens are useful tools for deriving valid generalizations in the above-mentioned respect. These sociological surveys generally illustrate a slow increase of anti-American sentiments in Romania after 2000, among young and old alike.⁵

³ See Mircea Iorgulescu, "Un pic altfel" (pp. 80-96), Andrei Brezianu, "Cui prodest?" (pp. 97-111), Victor Eskenasy, "O analiză lucidă" (pp. 112-115), Ștefan Borbély, "Sindromul Tony Judt" (pp. 119-128), Florin Constantiniu, "Despre Tony Judt și despre stalinismul în veșmânt democratic" (pp. 129-138), in Mihăieș (ed.), *op. cit.*

⁴ Ivan Krastev, "The Anti-American Century?" in *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2004, p. 9.

⁵ *The Anti-Americanism in the Balkans Survey*, conducted by BBSS Gallup International in June 2003 and funded by The Open Society Foundation in Sofia, included Bulgaria, Macedonia, Kosovo, Romania and Serbia; *Transatlantic Trends*, conducted by The German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Compagnia di San Paolo, with additional support from the Fundação Luso-Americana, Fundación BBVA and the Tipping Point Foundation, in 2008.

These introductory considerations fit my own purpose of thwarting the Romanian cognitive dissonance on anti-Americanism by a systematic approach which, in my view, is consistent with four fundamental dimensions of anti-Americanism in Romania; methodologically, I will expose the analytical components of these dimensions which are explanatory for my working hypothesis. In other words, this paper is based upon an analytic model of explanation which might eventually enhance the possibilities of overcoming ambiguities and “cognitive dissonance”.

Facets of Romanian anti-Americanism

Even if the largest majority of Romanian citizens are much more favorable to the United States in comparison to the mass majority in other European countries, as exemplified in the *Transatlantic Trends* survey of 2008, the most common tenets of anti-Americanism in Romania derive from a set of four fundamental categories of assessment: the cultural and ideological representations and prejudices about the United States and its people, the (macro)economic views and mentalities of Romanian citizens concerning both the economic impact of the United States’ interests in worldwide affairs on Romanian economy and the misconceptions about liberal mentalities and practices, the Romanians’ psychological mindset through which they construct and receive an idiosyncratic image of America and, finally, the mainstream Orthodox religious tradition which instills a set of beliefs and behaviors at odds with the United States’ religious and secular traditions of thought

Cultural and Ideological Anti-Americanism in Romania comprises all possible analytic and explanatory elements postulating the essentially non-Western and non-American characteristics of Romanian culture in general. In recent history, the post-1945 integration of Romania in the Soviet bloc and the ideological conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States brought about a general misunderstanding about the meanings of modernization theories during the Cold War period and beyond. In the aftermath of the Cold War era, two inter-related political culture phenomena contributed to the perpetuation of anti-Americanism in Romania: on the one hand, unbiased critics noticed the “ambiguous

democratization”⁶ in Romania and the Romanian political elites’ opposition to the geopolitical meaning of democratization⁷ in the post-communist era. On the other hand, other commentators noticed the shortcomings of the liberal political culture in Romania after 1990.⁸ To the persistence of “patrimonialism and sultanism”⁹ in Romanian political culture and the reminiscence of communist mentalities, one should add some specificities and reminiscences of traditional Romanian culture; for instance, the “Semănătorist” cultural fundamentalism in Romania in the interwar period in the philosophical works of Lucian Blaga and D.D. Roșca had an insidious impact on the nostalgic, anti-utilitarian and anti-liberal Romanian mentalities.¹⁰ This “culture of nostalgia” has prevailed as a harmful sentiment according to which Romanian national identity would be suffocated by political and cultural globalization. The rejection of common-sense rationalism and the seduction of traditionalist mysticism and irrationalism have been perniciously consistent with the anti-pragmatic orientation of the Romanian intellectual tradition; this trademark of equivocal intellectual and philosophical anti-Americanism in Romania has been contrasted with the guiding principles of American intellectual life.¹¹

⁶ Henry F. Carey, “Ambiguous Democratization?” in Henry F. Carey (ed.), *Romania since 1989. Politics, Economics, and Society*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004, pp. 553-618.

⁷ Samuel H. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

⁸ Richard A. Hall, “Political Culture in Post-Ceaușescu Romania” in Carey (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 215.

⁹ Frank Sellin, “Democratization in the Shadow: Post-Communist Patrimonialism” in Carey (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹⁰ Marius Jucan, „La isvoarele studiilor americane în România” in Alina Branda (ed.), *Studii de Americanistică*, Cluj Napoca: EFES, 2001, p. XVI.

¹¹ With the probable exception of Vasile Conta’s philosophy, which was highly influenced by empiricism, positivism and materialism, one could hardly find notable examples of progressive, scientific and positive works in Romanian intellectual life during the second half of the nineteenth century, when prominent American intellectuals and philosophers started to think according to the pragmatic and progressive orientations of the time (see Max H. Fisch, „The Classic Period in American Philosophy” in Max H. Fisch (ed.), *Classic American Philosophers*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1996). Nor could one find descriptions of Romanians in the *Sămănătorist*, *Poporanist* and *Gîndirist* traditions of thought similar to the characterization of “the symbolic American(s)” by George Santayana in the first decades of the 20th century (see George Santayana, “Materialism and Idealism in

After 1990, former dissidents and critics of the communist regime in Romania denounced the negative role of ideological leftism, modern nihilism and Stalinist mentalities as difficult obstacles to reformism and democratization.¹² This general sketch of cultural and ideological Romanian anti-Americanism could be completed by other two rather indirect forms of manifestation: first, Romanian anti-Americanism was explained as a dormant form of antisemitism and anti-Zionism.¹³ According to this model of explanation, the problem of the Jewish conspiracy in the Romanian mentality has been understood as a form of "Americanization" in disguise, resulting from the postwar traditional alliance between the United States and Israel. Second, the meanings of American cultural studies in the Romanian academia (and not only) might be depicted as a discrete and paradoxical way of subverting American Exceptionalism and its values.¹⁴

Economic Anti-Americanism in Romania can be analyzed starting from two fundamental characteristics: the remanence of Cold War collectivist mentalities and the Romanian anxiety towards market fundamentalism and capitalism.¹⁵ Both generative causes of Romanian economic anti-Americanism can be analytically elaborated and logically connected by implication. The analysis of Romanian collectivist mentalities and the Romanians' preference for government intervention in economy would be effective when opposing them to the dominant American economic culture of methodological individualism and laissez-faire capitalism. The popularity of the Keynesian principles of government interventionism, paternalism, welfarism and market regulation in Romania are generally detrimental to the neo-liberal economic principles of the Austrian School of Economics in the United States and its criticism of the

American Life" in Norman Henfrey (ed.), *Selected Critical Writings of George Santayana*, vol. 2, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968, pp. 58-68).

¹² Vladimir Tismăneanu, „Understanding National Stalinism: Legacies of Ceaușescu's Socialism" in Carey (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 27-48; Ion Mihai Pacepa, „New NATO Country Promotes Anti-Americanism" in *Front Page Magazine*, March 23, 2009.

¹³ Andrei Markovits, „European Anti-Americanism (and Anti-Semitism): Ever Present Though Always Denied", Center for European Studies Working Paper Series, no. 108.

¹⁴ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1987, pp. 313-382.

¹⁵ George Soros, *The Crisis of Global Capitalism: Open Society Endangered*, New York: Public Affairs, 2008.

regulative mechanisms of control by the state. Additionally, the neo-economic oligarchies in Romania slowed down the processes of privatization in the economic sector and the transition to a market economy.¹⁶ Even the Romanian intelligentsia, who have been generally favorable to reformism and the liberalization of economy, have revealed certain suspicions regarding the inadequacies of the Romanian economic mentalities with American *laissez-faire* capitalism.¹⁷ Accordingly, the general Romanian anxieties and reservations towards the American model of capitalist economy and free market liberalism partially result from a set of mentalities and prejudices about the fundamentally insecure and crude capitalist system. Moreover, Romanians feared that American economic imperialism was guided by (their) market interests, economic lobbyism and unfair competition, paying no attention to Romanian economic goals whatsoever. Moreover, many Romanians were aware of the absence of economic competitiveness in post-communist Romania and the difficulties of efficient teamwork in private companies; for instance, harsh economic competition was experienced by middle-aged Romanians at the beginning of the 1990s as a state of alienation and lack of solidarity among individuals. More recently, certain instantiations of Romanian economic anti-Americanism might be found by considering two relevant case studies: the social protests against the *Roșia Montană* shale gas extraction by the North American Gabriel Gold Corporation and the reactions towards the ongoing *Microsoft* corruption scandal.

Psychological Anti-Americanism can be analytically elucidated by revealing those key attitudes, diffuse perceptions, apprehensions, fears, resentments and hidden hopes that compose the affective responses and the Romanians' diffuse amalgamation of sentiments in confronting their representations of the United States of America and its people. The psychological sources of Romanian anti-Americanism are various and multi-faceted. First of all, one could notice the increasing seduction of conspiracy theories among Romanians: there is a widespread sentiment that Americans are to blame both for causing military interventions and the

¹⁶ Anneli Ute Gabanyi, „The New Business Elite: From Nomenklatura to Oligarchy” in Carey (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 353-372.

¹⁷ Sorin Antohi, *Mai avem un viitor? România la început de mileniu*, Iași: Polirom, 2001, pp. 114-115.

existence of economic cleavages. Romanians are fundamentally ambivalent and confused about the benefits of militarism and democracy promotion in the world. An illustrative case in point would be the sociological analysis of the Romanian attitudes towards the American intervention in Yugoslavia. Not only the American militarist assertiveness, but also the model of *pax Americana* generate the deep sentiment of insecurity in Romania: the “risk society”¹⁸ and global competition constitute sufficient reasons for “fear and loathing”. More recent and circumstantial sources of psychological anti-Americanism in Romania could be added: one of them has been consistent with the Romanian retaliation against the legal immunity of American citizens in Romania. The case of Teo Peter, a very popular pop-rock singer who was killed in a car crash by an American soldier, has fuelled resentful and neurotic effusions of anti-Americanism. Moreover, the overall Romanian perception of American high-level hypocrisy and cynicism is visible if one considers the Romanian stupefaction towards the prolonged vacancy at the United States Embassy in Bucharest and the visa restrictions against Romanians. In general terms, when the outright psychological rejection of what the United States of America stands for is absent, one might notice a certain ambivalence on the part of Romanians: for instance, the reception of Victoria Nuland’s recommendations and surveillance of democratic processes in Romania split our citizens’ perceptions and attitudes. Additionally, the Romanian reaction towards the recent scandal involving the existence of CIA-operated black-op sites in Poland and Romania has raised serious perplexities and (mis)perceptions about the United States’ role as “policeman of the world”. The pervasive ambivalent and ambiguous perceptions about the United States’ actions and roles in present-day world affairs stem from of a certain state of anomy regarding the inconsistencies of civil society: anti-Americanism in Romania is diffuse and predominantly private rather than publicly outspoken and articulated at the civil society level; that is the reason why the study of psychological anti-Americanism in Romania would be more instructive as an approach of the Romanian social imaginary¹⁹ rather than an endeavour using the instruments of qualitative sociological research.

¹⁸ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage Publications, 1992.

¹⁹ Marius Jucan, „Anti-Americanism in Europe after 9/11. Remapping the U.S. in the European (Social) Imaginary” in *Americana Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2011.

Religious Anti-Americanism in Romania is consistent with a set of deeply internalized traditional beliefs and the dogmatic influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church on a large category of citizens. The analytic premises of religious anti-Americanism in Romania are deeply embedded in some dogmatic teachings of religious Orthodoxy, which are distinct from the values of Protestantism understood in terms of elimination of “dogmatism, symbolism and rituals”²⁰ from religion. In traditional Orthodoxy, the mystical and mythical elements stemming from “the Byzantine and neo-Platonic sources of Romanian religious culture”²¹ stand in contrast with the secular values derived from the religious culture of American Protestantism.²² According to the defenders of dogmatic Orthodoxy, the mystical values of Orthodoxy are ethically superior to the soft values of secular religion in America.²³ Beyond the widespread conception of the Romanian Orthodox believers about the crass secularization of Christian religious dogmas, there is also the strong Romanian conception regarding the profound connections between the Orthodox religion and national identity and the threatening potential of postmodern Americanization to dilute both.²⁴ The more recent proselytism of Aleksandr Dugin’s cultural and religious traditionalism (i.e., “Neo-Eurasianism”) as an outright anti-American geopolitical alternative has been seductive and influential among large categories of Romanian citizens, young and old alike.²⁵ Finally, one type of reaction in Romania in the aftermath of the terrorist carnage at the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, on

²⁰ Vlad Mureșan, „Dialectica protestantismului” in *Verso*, no. 104, 2012, p. 19.

²¹ Virgil Nemoianu, *România și liberalismele ei*, București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2000, p. 243.

²² See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons, London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2005, pp. 102-125.

²³ Some exemplifications might be considered relevant from a religious standpoint: the American understanding of the “pursuit of happiness” trivializes the spiritual meaning of the “eternal bliss” in mysticism, while the meanings of “tolerance” in the American language of rights represent a political secularization of the Christian traditional value of “mercy”.

²⁴ Lavinia Stan, Lucian Turcescu, *Religion and Politics in Post-Communist Romania*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 42-43; see also Lucian N. Leuștean, *Orthodoxy and the Cold War. Religion and Political Power in Romania, 1947-65*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

²⁵ See, for instance, Alexander Dugin, *Eurasian Mission: An Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism*, Arktos Media Ltd., 2014.

January 7, 2015, in Paris, raised serious doubts about the unlimited nature of freedom of expression and traced back its causes to the American ideology of war on fundamentalist terrorism, suggesting an implicit criticism of American liberal and democratic values that stirred the fanatic potential of religious fundamentalism in the Muslim world.

Conclusive remarks

Two different kinds of rational and methodological justifications stood as necessary preconditions both for the formal structure and the descriptive content of the present study. First, the present paper is nothing more than a working hypothesis, a provisional interrogation about the conditions of possibility for anti-Americanism in Romania. As such, it has the narrative form of a sketch designed to highlight the most relevant analytical elements rendering Romanian anti-Americanism valid and plausible. If there are cognitive bases for its assertiveness, the pillars of Romanian anti-Americanism should make room for a set of theoretical and methodological presuppositions to be tested by confronting multi-level approaches of the phenomenon; accordingly, the comprehensive analysis of Romanian cultural, political, social, economic, psychological and religious traditions should be complemented by considering also illustrative empirical facts and events, including various journalistic sources, sociological interviews and surveys, contextual occurrences, etc.

Second, I have provisionally assessed the nature of Romanian anti-Americanism as fundamentally ambivalent and affective. Considering the above-proposed forms of anti-Americanism in Romania, ambivalence might be explained as follows: culturally and politically, Romanians are caught between a rather intuitive admiration for the American enthusiasm for success and their commitment to self-fulfillment and a certain kind of contempt regarding their naivety and shallowness. Romanians, especially the younger ones, are still fascinated by the arresting force of the "American dream" ideology, but are reluctant and suspicious about its effectiveness in the real world. On the one hand, most Romanians are reverent towards the military capabilities of the United States today, but a large majority considers it as a harmful source of global insecurity and evils. Nevertheless, the Romanian need for security evacuates criticism and resentments about the destructive potential of American militarism.

Economically, Romanians admire what in their view looks like “the land of opportunities”, but feel simultaneously insecure and anxious about competition, risk and the success of their private initiatives; the economic mentality of a large number of Romanians is still considerably contaminated by disbelief in the driving force of entrepreneurial initiative, free competition and market liberalism. Psychologically, many Romanians share a certain consideration for the Americans’ inclinations of valuing self-reliance, determination, optimism and a strong sense of world happiness, but, from a religious standpoint, the Romanian people educated in the spirit of Byzantine values denounce the erosion of spiritual life by the assault of American-type consumerist values. A more rigorous analytical approach of the four dimensions of anti-Americanism in Romania might be explanatory for many other subtle forms of ambivalent attitudes and representations of Romanians concerning their plural reception of the United States.

Ultimately, the very reason I have opted for the descriptive force of Tony Judt’s expression “slough of resentful despond” might be connected with present state of affairs in geopolitics. The words simply point at the weakening of Romanians’ hope as a result of arbitrary normativism and mimicry of assistance in the field of international relations²⁶ (i.e., the strategic partnership between the United States of America and Romania). Explicitly, in the case of Romania’s membership in NATO, Tony Judt’s words acquire explanatory force by considering at least two factors: on the one hand, during the period of negotiations between Romania and NATO, the 1997 recommendations of the US that Romania should continue its efforts of integration was interpreted by the Romanian public opinion as “another Yalta”²⁷; on the other hand, the Romanians’ commitment to NATO is largely influenced both by their fear of Russia and the weak capabilities of the Romanian armed forces in confronting present-day challenges.²⁸ The future degree of anti-Americanism in Romania will

²⁶ Alexandru Zub, *Oglinzi retrovizoare. Istorie, memorie și morală în România*, Iași: Polirom, 2002, pp. 87-88.

²⁷ Steven D. Roper, *Romania: the Unfinished Revolution*, Singapore: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2005, p. 124.

²⁸ Douglas A. Phillips, *Global Connections. America’s Role in a Changing World*, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2010, p. 57.

certainly be assessed proportionally with the Romanian level of confidence or hope regarding the partnership with the United States of America.

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