

interview

Interview with H.E. Mr. Philippe Benoit, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Belgium to Romania



This year, we have celebrated 140 years since the first Romanian diplomatic mission was established in Brussels and we can account for more than 180 years since Belgium established its first consulate offices in Romania. How would you describe the evolution of the Belgian-Romanian relations and of the common interest areas in the last years?

The relations between Romania and the Kingdom of Belgium are not only excellent, but also historically very rich. Our country established its first consulate in Romania in 1838, in Galați. The nature of the relations between our two countries was therefore mainly economic. With the recognition of the independence of the Romanian Principalities by our Kingdom in 1880, the diplomatic relations between the two countries were established and a political dimension was added to the economic nature of relations. Romania opened in turn several honorary consulates (Brussels and Liège in 1881, Namur in 1921 and Louvain in 1932) and a Belgian-Romanian Chamber of Commerce was created in 1919 in Brussels.

After 140 years from the establishment of diplomatic relations, our countries are tightly linked by our partnership in the EU and NATO. This multilateral framework has brought our citizens and businesses closer and deepened our relations in different fields. ... p. 2

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On 16 September 2020, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, presented her first State of the Union speech¹, and she started by paying tribute to all those who worked on the front line of health care systems and contributed to the direct management of the pandemic effects. Saying that *“in these last six months, Europeans have shown how strong the human spirit really is”*, she spoke of empathy and solidarity for the victims of the pandemic and has spoken of the *“fragility all around us”*.

In this context, the EC president focused on the economic, social, digital, health and environmental recovery measures that should to be implemented in the coming period in order to *“protect the lives and livelihoods”* of the European citizens. Stressing that over the past six months, the European Union designed solutions to the problems and effects brought by the pandemic, the President of the European Commission noted that we need to *“build a stronger European Health Union”*.

The EU had no exclusive health competences, but nevertheless it created green corridors for the transport of goods and medical products when the Member States closed borders and brought home more than 600 000 European citizens stranded abroad. Accordingly, among the measures proposed for the development of the European health sector she mentioned: the creation of a European agency for advanced biomedical research and development, debate possible changes regarding... p. 3

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[continued from page 1] The increase in the number of Belgian investors in Romania and the constant growth in the volume of our trade are remarkable. It led to the transformation of the Belgian-Romanian Business Club in Bucharest into a fully-fledged Belgian-Romanian Chamber of Commerce. The mobility of citizens between both our countries has increased constantly. Today, an estimated 100 000 Romanians live in Belgium, half of them in Brussels. The intensification of our bilateral relations also has an impact on tourist flows. If the number of Belgian tourists visiting Romania is still relatively small, it is nevertheless steadily increasing. This is one of the reasons why we have recently opened an honorary consulate in Timișoara and we are planning to open one in Cluj as well.



[photo: Europalia - King Philippe, Queen Mathilde and President Iohannis at Brâncuși Exhibition]

In 2019, the 50th edition of the Belgian Cultural Festival Europalia was entirely dedicated to Romania. More than 250 cultural events were organized in more than 50 Belgian cities and artists from both our countries worked together intensively. The flagship exhibition of this festival, a unique exhibition dedicated to the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși, was jointly opened by King Philippe, Queen Mathilde and President Klaus Iohannis.

In the context of the common EU membership, can you please offer us some examples of joint initiatives or common agendas between Belgium and Romania in order to better understand the relationship dynamics between a founding member and a newer member of the EU?

First of all, it is important to underline that Belgium and Romania, despite the turbulence our continent is experiencing, remain deeply Europhile. We are both spared from the wave of anti-European populism that has unfortunately gained significant strength in some Member States of the European Union.

Regarding the collaboration between our two countries in the European field, it began before Romania's accession to the European Union with the development of a common action agreement (2004-2006) aimed at structuring the Belgian support to the European integration of Romania. Today, our two countries are close partners, with widely converging views and positions within the European Union.

A good example is the internal market. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has demonstrated that, over and above the reflexes of certain Member States (border controls or bans on the export of critical goods etc.), progress in the proper functioning of the internal market has remained very fragile.



As both our countries depend on exports, it is essential for us that free movement and free access to goods and services be guaranteed through a barrier-free internal market. For this reason, Belgium and Romania call for further deepening of the internal market as a driver for growth and employment.



In terms of Belgian economic diplomacy pursued in Romania, can you please offer us some insights into the state of investments and the main areas of cooperation?

According to the figures from the Romanian National Bank, Belgium is the 15th largest investor in Romania, which is far from negligible for a country of 11.4 million inhabitants. Since 1990, 4 178 Belgian companies have invested in Romania. The Bucharest-Ilfov Region attracts most Belgian investors (over 25%). Other preferred locations are the North-West Region and the Center Region. By value of subscribed capital, 33.66% of the Belgian companies are active in construction, 26.19% in mining and manufacturing, 17.04% in trade and 14.07% in transport.

As for the trade flows between our countries, they have also been growing steadily. In 2019, our trade totaled 3.4 billion euros with a positive trade balance of 976 million euros for Belgium. Between 2014 and 2019, Belgian exports to Romania increased by 59%, and Romanian exports to Belgium by 39%. Romania is currently Belgium's 28th customer and its 38th supplier.

Regarding the product categories, our country mainly exports transport equipment, chemicals and machine and equipment to your country, while

[Source: Belgian Foreign Trade Agency]

Romania mainly exports to Belgium machine and equipment, transport equipment and miscellaneous manufactured articles.

In order to promote Belgian exports to your country, the Regions (Flanders, Brussels-Capital and Wallonia), which are the competent bodies for these matters, regularly organise economic missions to Romania. These can be sectoral (agri-food sector, for example) or multi-sectoral. FIT (Flanders Investment and Trade) and AWEX (Wallonia Foreign Trade & Investment Agency) both have a representative office in Romania.

Considering the decentralized cooperation that has been developing between Belgium and Romania for quite some time now, can you please talk about the latest outcomes in this field and the future of this special cooperation?

Decentralized cooperation is an intensive form of cooperation between local and regional actors in our respective countries. It started 31 years ago. It was born out of a surge of solidarity following the policy of systematization of Romanian villages by the communist regime. 350 (!) Belgian municipalities (out of 596) symbolically adopted a Romanian village. In Belgium, the initiatives were largely grouped into the organizations “Aktie Dorpen Roemenië” (Action Villages from Romania) in Flanders and “Opérations Villages roumains” (Operation Romanian Villages) in Wallonia. The tight ties forged through this solidarity operation have persisted to this day, with more than 50 groups of volunteers still active in the partner Romanian villages in areas such as youth, civil society, health, social economy, education, retraining and rural economy.

Numerous initiatives exist, but I would like to highlight a recent one by ADR - Aktiedorpen Roemenië and TON - The Open Network for Community Development, undertaken with the support of our Embassy. ADR and TON set up a local information campaign on COVID-19 protection measures and 1 000 reusable non-medical masks were made available to the beneficiaries of the TON member organizations throughout the country. This pilot project focusses on correctly informing caregivers, teachers and local civil society organizations. They can thus serve as a model for their families and for other people in their communities.

In this pandemic, a global phenomenon by nature, we can see how longstanding decentralized cooperation is still an effective framework for people-to-people diplomacy and mutual support.

Interview by Eliza Vaş, Editor-in-chief EIR Newsletter

Biography

Philippe Benoit was born on 15-02-1965 in Malo-les-Bains, in the north of France. At the age of 7 he moved to the Flemish part of Belgium. After his secondary studies, he went to study in Brussels, where he successively obtained a license in journalism and communication (Université Libre de Bruxelles), a master's in marketing management (ICHEC) and a master's degree in international relations (Université Libre de Bruxelles). After 10 years in the private sector, where he worked notably in the public affairs sector, Philippe joins the Belgian diplomatic service. Ever since, he has held several positions: First Secretary in Moscow (2003-2007), Adviser in Rome (2007-2011), Diplomatic Adviser to the Minister for Development Cooperation and European Affairs (2011-2012), Adviser to the Secretary General (2012-2015), Ambassador in Zagreb (2015-2019) and Ambassador in Bucharest (2019-), also competent for the Republic of Moldova. Philippe Benoit has a son, Alexandre (15 years old). He enjoys photography, history, food, oenology and travel.

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health competences at the Conference on the Future of Europe, [\[continued from page 1\]](#) and organising a World Health Summit in 2021, in Italy.

In the field of social affairs, Ursula von der Leyen noted that the European executive will put forward a legislative proposal to help Member States define a framework for minimum wages. She also pointed out that in the EU the “*dignity of work must be sacred*” and presented the Commission’s measures to support Member States with the necessary funds to avoid mass unemployment.

At the economic level, she recalled the **NextGenerationEU** instrument and invited the MEPs to vote for it as soon as possible. In addition, she noted that structural reforms are necessary for the Member States’ economies and that there is a need to strike a balance “*between providing financial support and ensuring fiscal sustainability*”.

Closely connected to the single market and the profound changes caused by the pandemic, the President of the European Commission has called for a new strategy on the future of the Schengen area, so as to restore the four freedoms, reduce red tape and streamline the implementation of the regulations and rules.



[Source: European Commission - Audiovisual Service]

In order to have the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, the European Green Deal has been mentioned alongside with increasing the targets and the pace of change. In this respect, she pointed out that the target for 2030 in terms of reducing emissions should be increased to at least 55% from 40%. While the target seems to be a very ambitious one, the EC President pointed out that “with our Just Transition Fund we will support the regions that have a bigger and more costly change to make”. In addition, it was restated that 37% of the NextGenerationEU funds will be directed to meet the objectives of the European Green Deal.

The circular economy is seen as the engine to push forward sustainable changes related to the environment and economy. In this regard, the President of the Commission proposed investments in high-impact projects (e.g. the use of hydrogen instead of coal), the construction of one million electricity charging points, the renovation and modernisation of buildings, and the use of digital technologies to create more circular economic models.

This is also closely linked to European digital development or as Ursula von der Leyen described it - “Europe’s Digital Decade”. The priority areas for this objective are those related to harnessing industrial data, building a European cloud and increasing the use of artificial intelligence in different sectors, starting from agriculture and continuing with the health sector. In this context, she stressed the need to protect the data collected, and to develop a secure European electronic identity. Towards that end, NextGenerationEU will invest 20% of its funds on digital priorities.

At the same time, the State of the Union included proposals on coordinating the global response to the pandemic and identifying means for securing medical products, promoting multilateralism in international relations and swift action in the field of non-compliance with human rights and the principles of democracy (the EU’s support for the people of Belarus was mentioned here), building a new transatlantic agenda and strengthening the partnership with the US, structuring the relationship with the United Kingdom, presenting a new pact on migration, providing support to the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries, fighting against racism and supporting just globalisation.

Finally, the Head of the European Executive called for the construction of a Europe based on the efforts of each citizen and each Member State. She suggested replacing fragility with a new chance for vitality and stop talking down the EU: “The future will be what we make it. And Europe will be what we want it to be”

Eliza Vaş
European Studies Unit

¹ The full speech is available here: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1655.

Editorial release: The spectre of disinformation in the European Union and the COVID-19 infodemic



The European Institute of Romania (EIR) announces the publication of a new entry in its Policy Briefs series, a text focused on the COVID-19 infodemic, in the larger context of the disinformation campaigns taking place inside the European Union in recent years.

The author, Bogdan Mureşan, expert within the European Studies Unit (EIR), writes that the physical social distancing measures implemented by national authorities because of the novel coronavirus outbreak have driven many people to seek refuge on the web, where they were exposed to an infodemic, a particularly dangerous instance of disinformation that may yet cost lives.

These campaigns primarily aim to hack the emotions of regular internet users, while trying to avoid and actively discourage their reason and critical thinking. It is precisely for these reasons that educating the public in tracing malign information manipulation attempts, through media literacy, has become exponentially more difficult. This also helps explain while various conspiracy theories have become more successful in exploiting pre-existing socioeconomic divisions within the society.

What we know in an erroneous manner has the potential to hurt us more than what we do not know at all. And, even though conspiracy theories were not born together with the Internet, they fully benefit from the perks of social media and instant messaging apps. There are no truly harmless conspiracy theories for one simple reason. Beyond fuelling exaggerated scepticism and distrust in authorities, those deviant themes overcrowd and

distort the public debate, making it really hard for the public to distinguish between facts and speculation, between

data and opinion, thus fulfilling the *raison d'être* of the infodemic.

Which are the traits of the infodemic and what does the European Union currently do to mitigate its malign effects and contain it? What is the purpose of institutionalised fake news and who spreads it? These are some of the questions explored by the policy brief, in a non-exhaustive manner, all the while inviting new lines of research and inquiry over a complex and dynamic topic.

The full text, available only in Romanian, can be accessed [here](#).

Bogdan Mureşan
European Studies Unit

New training programmes organised by EIR this autumn

The Training Unit of the European Institute of Romania (EIR) will offer new training programmes for the last months of 2020 and will update some of its regular ones.

Aside from the established courses dedicated to waste material recovery, legislative techniques and normative systems, in this autumn two new topics will be available: *Whistleblowing in Public Institutions* and *Cybersecurity Challenges in the Domain of European Affairs*. Both training programmes will be delivered online, and the pilot programmes, of October and November, will be fully subsidised by EIR.

The first programme, *Whistleblowing in Public Institutions*, appeared as a result of the analysis of the training needs assessments of 2018-2019, developed by EIR, and by the feedback we received on the occasion of the training programme *Prevention and Combat of Corruption* organised last year. The programme will be 15 hours long and the online sessions will last for five days. As it is one of the few courses not addressed to the private sector, its main target audience consists of public sector employees.

The second training programme, *Cybersecurity Challenges in the Domain of European Affairs*, is a result of the increase of the activities of the public institutions linked to the online environment and implicitly to the need to safeguard personal and professional data. The programme will be 12 hours long, meaning four days online. Similar to other EIR programmes, we will use virtual communication platforms. The objectives are the analysis of the main cyber threats and their impact, data and cyber systems security protection of identity and personal data. For the moment, the programme is focussed on the employees working in public administration with sensitive and confidential data.

Depending on the feedback received from the participants after course completion, the topics have the potential to become standard in EIR's training programmes.

Monica Ingeaua
Training Unit

70 years since the adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights ECHR Anniversary Book

To mark the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights, the Council of Europe published a bilingual anniversary book on the European Court of Human Rights¹. It contains many previously unpublished photographs and, for the first time, it also reproduces a copy of the original text of the Convention; also included are pictures of all the judges of the Court since its creation. Moreover, the case-law of such importance for Europe is presented through 47 cases, one for each Member State, together with their background and especially their impact on the various States Parties to the Convention. Lastly, the book presents the Human Rights Building, an architectural icon, where the European law of human rights is being developed every day.

The European Court of Human Rights was set up 59 years ago, 10 years after the founding of its parent institution, the Council of Europe. At a time of increasing uncertainty and resistance to the fundamental values that these two bodies represent, it is important to recall the extraordinary contribution which the Court has made, and continues to make, to the protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law². These three elements are crucial to maintain tolerance, stability and, above all, peace. The strength of the European system of human rights protection and the radical breakthrough in terms of the traditional understanding of international law and state responsibility comes

¹ The book can be ordered online [here](#).

² The President of the European Court of Human Rights, Linos-Alexandre Sicilianos, in his [speech](#) marking 60 years of peace, democracy and tolerance, referred to the Court as a precious but fragile mechanism, of enormous significance and striking relevance in today's extremely complex and unpredictable international context.



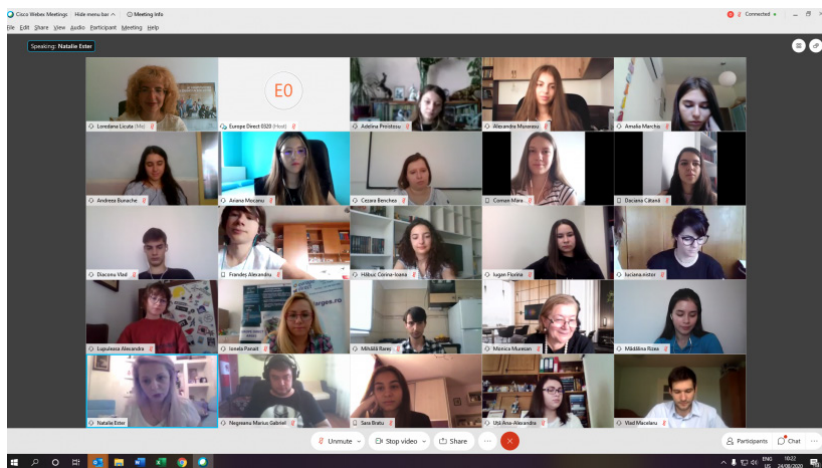
from the fact that, at the time, the European Convention on Human Rights provided for the establishment of a court to ensure compliance with the Contracting States' commitments. For the first time, individuals could lodge an application alleging a violation of the protected rights and freedoms against any of the Contracting States within whose jurisdiction the alleged violation occurred. For the first time, an international supervisory mechanism was established, capable of leading to a binding judicial decision, whose execution was subject to collective supervision by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. The States Parties to the Convention were thereby integrated into a system - one that is unparalleled anywhere in the world - of collective responsibility for the protection of human rights. This was the most effective way to achieve the objectives of peace and stability.

Since its establishment, the Court has decided on more than 750 000 applications. No other international court is even close to this impressive figure. The Court developed a body of case-law that refined and expanded human rights standards. As a result of its execution mechanism, the impact of its judgments is unmatched. Obviously, there is no court in the world that has done so much for the emancipation of the individual as a subject of international law. Nowadays, the challenge for the Court is to ensure that Europe remains a single legal space, founded on common values, in order to protect European citizens from instability and division, to serve the cause of peace and democracy. The European Court of Human Rights remains a unique and extremely important model of international justice.

Costin Leonard Fălcuță
Translation Coordination Unit

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Online Summer School: “Dialogues for the Future!”



Between 24 and 27 August 2020, the Europe Direct Information Centre (EDIC) Bucharest, hosted by the European Institute of Romania (EIR), in partnership with Europe Direct Centres in Argeş and, respectively, Bistrița, organised its traditional summer school, this time online given the current restrictions. The theme of the summer school focused on Artificial Intelligence and related ethical issues, with debate being the non-formal learning method used. This educational approach favours information, research, logical thinking and direct engagement in solving various societal problems. The participants in (and also beneficiaries of) the two training sessions were 18 pupils and students volunteering for the

three Europe Direct Centres involved. They were all eager to hone their debating skills and strengthen their knowledge in the field of Artificial Intelligence.

Throughout the four days of the summer school, the young attendees enjoyed the presence of two exceptional trainers, experts in their respective fields: Vlad Măcelaru and Natalie Ester. Vlad Măcelaru was one of the two Romanian UN Youth Delegates during the 2017-2018 mandate and he is currently the CEO of ClarK, a local company who produces AR smart glasses for industrial use. Natalie Ester is an actress at the State Jewish Theatre, with solid experience in the realm of audiovisual sector. She is also a spectacular trainer and scriptwriter. Moreover, Natalie is very engaged in the public life, being involved in many citizens' initiatives.

On the first day, the young participants had the opportunity to take part in a highly interactive training on Artificial Intelligence, held by Vlad Măcelaru. Not only did they learn a lot about the digital revolution and the main developments in AI, but they also had the opportunity to express their views on ethical issues relating to AI, cyber security, the jobs of the future in the context of automatization and digitisation of society etc.

During the following two days, Natalie Ester masterfully guided students through the art of debate, focusing on public speaking, critical thinking and logical reasoning. Participants managed to harness their emotions through games and

spontaneous dialogues, and, under the close supervision of Natalie, they eventually simulated a debate, getting ready for the final representation.

The last day of the summer school provided the young participants with the chance to display their communication skills by formulating clear, concise and coherent arguments during three debate competitions. The six teams of debaters had to argue the motion “Artificial Intelligence is trustworthy”, a theme inspired by the speech of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on shaping Europe’s digital future. Both the trainer and the representatives of the Europe Direct Centres were impressed by the innovative spirit, creativity and self-confidence with which the young debaters argued for the pros and cons. In the end, the trainer provided customised feedback for all participants, adding genuine value to their educational and professional future formation.

Loredana Licuța
Europe Direct Information Centre Bucharest

Comparative Report on free movement rights and EU mobile citizens’ inclusion. EUREKA Project - A Key Access to EU Rights

The EUREKA project seeks to facilitate the exercise of free movement rights and EU mobile citizens’ inclusion and participation in host Member States. The chosen path is a joint local, national and transnational circulation of capabilities and expertise and an advanced level of access to and use of digital information.

To that end, a survey was conducted in the first work package of the project. It combined benchmarking methods with user-centred design methodology, aiming to identify examples of good practice (especially online), focused on the ability to provide easy access to information services for EU mobile citizens and to implement a user-friendly communication, without discrimination. The survey was completed through published country reports, containing a summary of the legislative framework and the national social context, an analysis of the survey results, an evaluation of existing best practices and a description of them.

In August 2020, the Centre for Studies and Research (*Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS*) in Italy published the **Comparative Report on the Free Movement Rights and EU Mobile Citizens’ Inclusion**, based on country reports produced by partners. The report was edited by IDOS, the EUREKA project coordinator.

A comparative analysis of the different sections included in the national reports is accompanied, in the conclusions section, by a first set of recommendations for public authorities, at their different levels and for civil society organizations. The conclusions and recommendations are supported by the main challenges highlighted by the country’s partners. The recommendations aim to facilitate the improvement of online information services for EU mobile citizens. They will be discussed and deepened in national focus groups.

Ten national thematic focus groups will be organized in order to expand the results of the survey, to exchange experiences and considerations. These focus groups will outline a sort of preparatory “thematic collective narrative” for the transition from exploration and analysis to problem solving.

More information about the project is available on [EIR’s website](#). Also, the Comparative Report and the Country Report can be consulted in full, available in English.

Iulian Oneașcă
EIR project manager

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