

**WHO IS AFRAID OF AFRICA?****Nicolae Melinescu, Dr., "Andrei Şaguna" University of Constanţa**

*Abstract: The Sub-Sahara Africa has experienced challenging developments after many of its forty-eight countries gained their independence from the former European colonial powers. Blessed with huge natural resources that might have granted a successful progress in economic and political terms, the states in the area had to bear the curse of their mineral riches. In some cases, like the Congo, the standard of living dropped after independence lower than its level during the Belgian rule. A number of presidents for life who took the reins of power from the former white masters promoted new local elite, greedier and more impatient to become the newly rich encouraged by a number of rapacious cronies. Communist Romania supported the new states and developed special relationships with many of them to get preferential prices for the raw materials it needed for its forced industrialization policy, to take some distance from Soviet Russia and to find a new market for its industrial products like oil drilling equipment, tractors, trucks, cement factories, and energy grid equipment, among others. After the events of late 1989, traditional African partners dropped out of sight for no specific reason and most of the Romanian governments in power funneled their efforts towards the Euro-Atlantic connection after the collapse of the European communism.*

**Keywords: The Dictators' Club, African partners, Romanian assets, trans-continental trade, land-partition.**

Africa has been marred by several features, which marked its relations among the populations living inside its vast surface and their connections to the outside world. Historically, its inhabitants were exposed to two major invasions: the Arab and Muslim invasion starting with the VIIIth century and the European invasion, which reached its peak in late XVIIIth and the early XIXth century. The latter brought along the English, the French and the Portuguese languages and Christianity. Together they laid the foundation that united a myriad of languages, dialects, traditions and customs specific of each and every tribe. For quite some time, maps of the continent drawn by Europeans covered areas simply termed *terra incognita*. Soon enough, that could no longer be accepted and the new masters had to know what and where they actually possessed. "When marking out the boundaries of their new territories, European negotiators frequently resorted to drawing straight lines on the map, taking little or no account of the countless traditional monarchies, chiefdoms and other African societies that existed on the ground. Nearly one-half of the new frontiers imposed on Africa were geometric lines, lines of latitude and longitude, other straight lines or arcs of circles. In some cases, African societies were rent apart: the Bakongo were partitioned between French Congo, Belgian Congo and Portuguese Angola... In other cases, Europe's new colonial territories enclosed hundreds of diverse and independent groups, with no common history, culture, language or religion, as was the case of Nigeria, containing more than 250 ethno-linguistic groups"<sup>1</sup>.

Global events changed what initially seemed a long-lasting system. The two world wars, the bipolar world emerging from them generated that "wind of change" that the British

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Meredith, *The Fate of Africa. A History of Fifty Years of Independence*, Public Affairs, New York, 2005, pp. 1-2.

Prime Minister Harold Macmillan introduced in his speech of 1960 in South Africa. The independence wave proved to be a very demanding development and for three or four decades, many African new countries fell under the rule of cruel dictators. During the 1990s, at least twenty-five countries started to change that and head towards governments that are more democratic. Politicians from the north and the south of the Sahara began to mention an African renaissance.

Romania contacted African countries as soon as the independence process started in the late 1950s (Sudan and Ghana<sup>2</sup>), supported by the anti-colonial ideology of the communist rulers and by economic interests: import of raw materials and export of industrial products and consumer goods. With the second generation of Romanian communist leaders in the early 1960s, the regime started to buy out its image of truthful partners of the African rulers by offering academic grants, stipendiums and scholarships for African students to study in the universities from Romania free of charge. After 1965, that solidarity among the poor started to pay back soon enough and the communist president enjoyed a glamorous welcome whenever he descended on the African soil for a crowd bath once the West and the Americans was turning their backs on him because of the suppression of human rights by his totalitarian regime.

Agreements with the 48 countries of “black Africa” became a major line of action for the Romanian foreign policy until 1989. They functioned because all of them were endorsed and supervised by the local diminutive dictator who spoke a common language and was on very good terms with his counterparts from Africa for the very good reason that regimes of similar policy never contradicted, let alone, challenged one another, as Spencer Weart noticed in his book. “Well-established oligarchic republics have scarcely ever opposed one another. Almost as completely as democracies, oligarchic republics have historically kept peace with their own kind<sup>3</sup>”.

Ideology hindered the economy. All trading agreements fell under the patriarchal influence of the head of state at both ends of such connections. Most confusing of all was the fact that little money actually changed hands because 90 per cent of all trading went along barter lines. Each side committed to return the value of the imported goods by the value of their own exported goods. Financial balance of the bilateral dealings was usually delayed by years and sometimes huge amounts of debts accumulated, especially on the African states’ side. Productivity of the Romanian industrial equipment was low, yet the skills and the professionalism of Romanian technicians and engineers working in joint ventures with the Africans was highly appreciated and added benefit to the whole business. For the Romanian employees of the state companies working abroad was a chance to gain better wages while they were deployed in Zambia, in Ghana, in Libya or anywhere else. Working conditions were rough, they were underpaid compared to their western counterparts, but money was better than what they would get back home for the same job.

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, Ghana’s first President, Kwame Nkrumah died in the Romanian capital city of Bucharest in 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Spencer R. Weart, *Never at War. Why Democracies Will Not Fight One Another*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998, p. 14.

For Romanians, Sub-Sahara Africa was successively a remote continent, a promised land, a realm of adventure populated by pigmies and roamed by wild lions, hyenas, cheetahs and leopards along the centuries. In the Medieval times, the continent was shrouded in the mysteries of the jungle and of the rain forest. Anonymous painters of the Romanian Christian churches from the Middle Ages were the first to attempt to picture such an isolated and forbidding world in scenes from the Apocalypse. Inspired by medieval religious manuscripts produced by western travelers who sailed to Africa, local artists imagined unicorns, elephants, crocodiles and other wild animals on the northern fresco of the “Last Judgment” of the Voronets monastery from north eastern Romania in the XVIth century. The Romanians’ first-hand experiences from their travels to Africa started with the pilgrimages to the Holy Land, the birthplace of Christianity. Northern Africa was also far enough from the Romanian medieval principalities to be a major destination for deposed local rulers and noblemen. Radu Paisie, prince of Walachia was cheated to come to the Serene Gate of Istanbul only to be banished by the Sultan to Egypt, where he ended his days<sup>4</sup>.

Another local prince, Mihnea Turcitul, followed his predecessor afterwards and landed in Tunis several years later<sup>5</sup>. In 1594 Mardarie, a monk from a Bucharest monastery left notes of his trip to the Lower Egypt, along the Nile<sup>6</sup>. At the end of the XVIIth century two unidentified Romanian monks sailed southwards on the Nile, convinced that its springs could lead to the Eden itself. They had to abandon their adventure when they reached the cataracts and could not progress any farther<sup>7</sup>.

Romanians’ experiences in the land of bazaars, pyramids, camel caravans, across the desert into the savannah and through the bush land expanded after the beginning of the XIXth century when they moved together the European cohorts.

The great romantic poet Vasile Alecsandri was the third European artist to travel to northern Africa in 1853, following the French painter Ferdinand-Eugène-Victor Delacroix (1832) and the French novelist Alexandre Dumas (1846). In 1856, another Romanian poet, Dimitrie Bolintineanu traveled to Tangier.

As the colonial administration penetrated deeper into Africa Romanians followed the leader. In 1860 two Romanian army officers embarked for Morocco<sup>8</sup>. In 1881 Dinu Grant joined the French Foreign Legion and spent one year in Algeria<sup>9</sup>. From Senegal, the Romanian astronomer Nicolae Coculescu reported about the sun eclipse of 1886 to the French Academy. In 1895 Dimitrie Ghica-Comănești and his son, Nicolae traveled to the Horn of Africa to gather information about possible lumber imports for Romania from the Somaliland<sup>10</sup>. In 1899, Sever Pleniceanu worked in the Congo, as a public officer employed by a Belgian company<sup>11</sup>. The Romanian lawyer and explorer Aurel Varlam traveled to Dakar, Freetown, and Monrovia. He ended up as a judge in the Congolese port city of Boma. In his

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<sup>4</sup> E. Turdeanu, “Un moine Roumaine aux Mont Athos, Lieux Saints et en Egypte”, in *Revue des etudes roumaines*, III-IV, 1957, p. 223.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>7</sup> Mircea Angheliescu, *Călători români în Africa*, Editura Sport-Turism, București, 1983, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> “Revista politică”, in *Naționalul*, III (1860), nr. 17, 28 februarie.

<sup>9</sup> Mircea Angheliescu, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

memories, he criticized the colonial practices and the white men's disregard of the local population<sup>12</sup>. The number of Romanian travelers to Africa grew rapidly after 1900, but fewer and fewer of them wrote about their exploits, which were no longer singular or thrilling. Yet one of them stands out for its performance and its success. In 1935, three pilots, Mihai Pantazi, Gheorghe Davidescu and Alexandru Cernescu flew one German Messerschmitt and two Romanian fighter aircrafts from Bucharest to Cape Town and back. They covered 24 thousand kilometers without any incidents, stopped 11 times to refuel from jerry cans provided by Shell Company which had business both in Romania and Africa, and were welcomed in Bulawayo by a Romanian businessman married to an English woman who owned a plantation on the banks of the Zambezi<sup>13</sup>.

The Second World War severed Europe from Africa where only the main stakeholders fought for territories and natural resources. The political turmoil inside Romania and the Soviet occupation of the country forced its communist government to fall into line with Moscow's attitude towards the black continent. The principles of the proletariat dictatorship encouraged the fight for independence in Africa and elsewhere in the hope that the new independent states would come under the Soviet umbrella. "The Romanian diplomatic argumentation [in foreign relations] relied on a chaotic and persistent usage of the workers political power over the other social categories"<sup>14</sup>. The late foreign minister Corneliu Mănescu served with the first communist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej and had the vision of productive connections with the future independent African states that were coming out of the colonial straightjacket. The minister placed the development of relationships with Sub-Saharan countries along the guidelines of the Romanian diplomacy carefully enough not to upset the Moscow masters, all too eager to expand their sphere of influence over Africa. "We had no links to the black Africa. There were some relations with the Mediterranean African countries – Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. That was it. But I thought it was the time to expand our connections further south, to know and promote other emerging countries"<sup>15</sup>.

The communist Romania established diplomatic relations and opened its embassies in Ghana (1957) and Nigeria (1960) within the same year of their independence. Such a movement paid good political and economic dividends because it won the confidence and trust of the other African regimes substituting the colonial rule with the tight grip of the local dictators, emphatically called "founding fathers" and "nation builders". Under the banner of the new economic order and the fight against neocolonialism, the communist rulers joined the club of the poor and saved some of the failing dictatorships and their stars, Idi Amin, Kenneth Kaunda, Augustino Neto, Sassou Nguesso, Siad Barre, Mobutu Sese Seko, Jean Bedel Bokasa Tolbert Junior, among others, with economic arrangements and political understandings that helped them to maintain a tight grip over their poor populations and the rich natural resources.

A long chain of state visits to Africa of the new communist dictator, who came to power in 1964, set the pace for the economic and political conquest of new "friends and

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Gen. (r) Alexandru Cernescu, *Avioane românești străbat Africa*, Editura Militară, București, 1975, p. 132.

<sup>14</sup> Florin Muller, *Opțiuni de politică externă ale Partidului Comunist Român*, Academia Română, Institutul de Istorie „Nicolae Iorga”, serie nouă, tom XIII, nr. 5-6, , 2002, București, p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> Lavinia Betea, *Convorbiri neterminate*, Polirom, Iași, 2001, p. 117.

partners”. Once the festivities were over, negotiators, foreign trade experts put in months of hard work to find reasonable solutions for the “directives” imposed by the top leaders. That was how some of the Romanian industrial products became household names in many African countries. The popularity of Romanians developed when African young people returned to their home countries after graduating the Romanian universities. Overall, Romania managed to get a very precious asset in its relations with the black continent, and that was the place it held in the public knowledge, in the hearts and minds of those who experienced a few years’ stay in Romania. The ARO all-terrain trucks, ROMAN lorries, “Universal” tractors, drinking water feed pipes, residential quarters built by ARCOM Company, were landmarks for the development of Romania’s presence.

In 1970, a scientific expedition from the University of Cluj-Napoca, the second largest in the country, crossed Africa from Senegal to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania in Romanian-built vans. For more than four months, the Romanian scientists and researchers studied the flora and the fauna of the areas they crossed. They had the chance as well to meet friends who had studied in Romania, dealers of Romanian cars and trucks, or businessmen selling Romanian commodities<sup>16</sup>.

Official statistics recorded a growing volume of bilateral commercial links between Romanian and most of the African countries.

<b>Year</b>		<b>1970</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1987</b>	<b>1989</b>
	<i>Export</i>	82.7	117.6	27.5	64.7
<b>ANGOLA</b>	<i>Import</i>	203.7	1.8	0	0
<b>Year</b>		<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1987</b>
	<i>Export</i>	0.9	23.8	7.2	68.7
<b>COTE d’IVOIRE</b>	<i>Import</i>	0	46.2	83.9	2.9
<b>Year</b>		<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1987</b>	<b>1989</b>
	<i>Export</i>	0.7	19.4	97.6	24.6
<b>ETHIOPIA</b>	<i>Import</i>	0	23.2	56.4	48.8
<b>Year</b>		<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1989</b>
	<i>Export</i>	3.1	2.4	84.7	29.5
<b>GHANA</b>	<i>Import</i>	3.7	31.2	151.6	26.0
<b>Year</b>		<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1989</b>
	<i>Export</i>	2.0	0	43.5	2.8
<b>GUINEA</b>	<i>Import</i>	3.0	0	112.6	7.5
<b>Year</b>		<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1989</b>
	<i>Export</i>	16.3	160.9	1384.5	729.6
<b>NIGERIA</b>	<i>Import</i>	0	1399.5	0	1.2
<b>Year</b>		<b>1960</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1989</b>

<sup>16</sup> Nicolae Coman *De la Atlantic la Oceanul Indian. Însemnările unui biolog din prima expediție românească trans-africană (1970-1971)*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1975.

	<i>Export</i>	9.5	24.7	1028.6	157.2
<b>SUDAN</b>	<i>Import</i>	4.81	13.6	391.1	9.6
<b>Year</b>		<b>1980</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1987</b>	<b>1989</b>
	<i>Export</i>	3.0	21.2	61.6	22.0
<b>ZAIRE</b>	<i>Import</i>	147.3	0	26.2	2.6

**Note:** The table was amalgamated by the author on the data provided by the Romanian Institute for Statistics. Export and import digits translated into million dollars, at the current value of the respective years.

1985 was the most productive year in bilateral exchanges, which consisted mainly of raw materials and oil Romanian imports and massive exports of machine tools, rolling stock and agricultural expertise. It is striking to notice the sudden steep jumps of export and import values within a decade or even within a five years period in the 1980s. The spectacular rise of Romanian imports (oil) from Nigeria worth more than a billion dollars at the value of the American currency at that time, for example, stemmed from the fall of the Iranian Shah in the previous year and the collapse of the agreements the Romanian dictator had concluded with him. When the internal conflicts in Nigeria compromised the Romanian oil imports, their value dive nosed to zero in 1985 only to pick up again once the political domestic fracas died out. In Guinea, a country that Romania initiated diplomatic relationships with three years after Guinea's independence bilateral exchanges, modest as they had been, collapsed completely after the military coup of 1980, to reach more than forty million dollars five years later. Most of such dramatic eschews occurred in the aftermath of the events in the African countries like state coups, civil wars or changes in the political orientation of the government towards the US or the Soviet sphere of influence. Sometimes, a growth in Romania's bilateral trade with the African countries resulted after top-level talks between the Romanian communist ruler and his African counterparts. What spiked exchanges at the end of such festive meetings either in Bucharest or in Africa was not the vision or the economic wisdom of presidential decisions, but the pressure country bosses placed on their ministers and negotiators to meet unrealistic tasks just for propagandistic ends meant to highlight the solidarity among the developing countries outside the umbrella of the two world super-powers.

What is noteworthy is the fact that agreements, arrangements and understandings between Romania and the African countries concluded on the African soil were the direct product of the Romanian communist president's visits. The purpose of such maneuvers was to prove that he, like no other Romanian official, had the capacity, the political will and the ability to promote and defend best the national interests and the international role of his country and people. No other member from his entourage, any minister or diplomat was allowed to sign strategic documents in Romanian's name. Paradoxically, all the African presidents visiting Bucharest had official talks with the prime minister and the members of his cabinet after meeting the president.

Romania's connections to Sub-Sahara countries developed along political and ideological lines until 1989. A change of regime in Romania, in the wake of the collapse of the European communism changed that environment on both sides. The new governments in Romania focused on the new economic and political pattern in Europe, on the rise of Eastern Europe and on the new strategic partnership with the U.S. NATO and E.U. memberships

became top priorities for either centre left or centre right governments that came to power in Romania. Although some significant changes happened in Africa as well at that time, relations with the countries from the region dive nosed and were partially revived only when Romania became a NATO and E.U. member. The European Union has been the most important political and economic partner for the African countries, and most of Romania's ties with them hinged on the larger framework of the Union's approach. One unprecedented event was the emergence of South Africa from international embargoes after the multiracial elections of 1994. Isolated until that time because of the apartheid policy, Mandela's rainbow new country was an attractive partner for Romania. Henceforth, political diplomatic and economic ties were established in 1998. Jacob Zuma came to Bucharest in 2005 as the vice-president of the country. Yet, according to the Romanian ambassador to Pretoria, not more than two thousand visas were issued every year for travels both ways. Nigeria's ambassador to Romania stated that he endorsed eighteen hundred visas for Romanian traveling to his country on business in one year, but not more than a couple of Nigerians traveled to Romania.

In a analytical conversation with the first prime minister of the Romanian government after the 1989 events, Petre Roman stated that in 1990 there still was a chance to follow up on the good assets of Romania's presence in countries like Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Zambia or Zimbabwe but the number of embassies had to be reduced from 28 to less than a dozen for financial reasons. The Government expected to pass the gains of bilateral connections to private companies, which could support and develop them. Such companies failed to show up and the moral and image credit Romanian had had, vanished never to be rebuilt again<sup>17</sup>.

In a post-doctoral research on the relations between Romania and Africa, we interviewed the former minister for foreign affairs, Teodor Meleşcanu. He connected the reduction of Romanian diplomatic offices in Africa to limited resources his ministry had and to the need to channel those still available towards the new areas of interest: Western Europe and North America. He pointed out that the closure of some Romanian embassies from Africa resulted from slack economic exchanges with the respective countries. Cuts were operated in those countries where the value of bilateral economic exchanges reached less than 10 million dollars pe year. Teodor Meleşcanu explained that such a severe drop was also the outcome of the fact that the Romanian ocean fishing fleet, built in the communist era had been sold out as scrap metal and most of the Romanian sailors were employed by major international shipping and fishing companies<sup>18</sup>.

The former foreign minister and Prime Minister Adrian Năstase pointed out that Romania also wanted to put some distance between the attitude the country had followed during communism and the new architecture that the post-communist governments tried to put up in its place. What the new Bucharest authorities wanted to accomplish was to cleanse the relationships with the African countries of any hypocritical ideology<sup>19</sup>.

In 1990 when Romania could steer its international posture along different guidelines that are more democratic it held several aces in its hands:

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<sup>17</sup> Structured interview with Petre Roman, 17 January, 2008, Bucharest.

<sup>18</sup> Structured interview with Teodor Meleşcanu, 8 February 2007, Bucharest.

<sup>19</sup> Structured interview with Adrian Năstase, 3 March 2008, Bucharest.

- it controlled part of the African market for industrial products that had been promoted and exported by the former state companies. Consequently, they were household names for the Africans;

- a number of Romanian experts, engineers, planners and highly skilled workers were familiar with the requirements and the working conditions on the African building sites;

- former graduates from the Romanian universities held key decision-making positions in the economy of their native countries, they still had good connections to their former professors and tutors and were willing to encourage the development of business relations with Romania;

- Romania had to recover large debts accumulated in its dealings with countries like Zambia and it could use them as a starting point for new, fair relations.

Yet post-1989 governments ignored such assets and soon they were completely wasted. Not even at the academic level, the study of Africa and its enormous historical and traditional treasure stirred any particular interest. When we suggested a round table on the development in Africa to the Romanian president's adviser on international matters, he looked as if he had been offered to invest public money in growing cucumbers on Mars. Such an attitude can be explained by several reasons.

First, many people, even from the university and academy circles do not have upgraded data about the profound changes happening on the continent. The image of the former "dictators' club" still prevails. Second, a reduced number of African embassies in Romania and fewer Romanian embassies in Africa cut off the means of exercising public diplomacy, which is so productive in passing information both ways about the realities and the developments in the two areas. Third, globalization pushed to the forefront the communicators from powerful countries, which leveled the messages coming from Africa. The international media controlled by western and American corporations filter those messages that do come through. The digital divide deepened the reluctance to approach the African reality in a constructive manner.

To answer the initial question from the title, those who do not share a vision on the future and do not muster the data of ancient and more recent history of the African continent still view it as a remote land of danger and backwardness. The past two or three decades showed remarkable signs of progress in Africa towards international communication and cooperation. Some landmarks are already obvious, like the New Economic Programme for Africa's Development – NEPAD, the challenge for a permanent member seat in the UN Security Council, the sharing of the military burden in peacekeeping operations. Others are slightly visible, but they are there already. It is up to perceptive people to see them and to put them to work for a new type of relationships between Romania and its former African partners.

For Romania, the development of more realistic and more balanced relationships with those countries from Sub-Sahara that may vouch for stable and significant links in economic and the commercial domains will open chances to:

- revive existing gains in terms of prestige, reliability and competence;

– act as a promoter of democratic and market economy principles outside the area of the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance, within and without the two organizations;

– regain access to the natural resources by employing Romanian engineering and expertise in the energy and extraction industries;

– confirm Romania's role and attitude of a responsible and accountable member of the international community fully aware and well connected to the major contemporary global issues.

The venue to follow requires political will and a long perspective vision.

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