

Does Romania see in Britain a key partner in the EU? Is so how does this benefit Romania?

First of all, as certainly you know, Romania and the United Kingdom are strategic partners in the EU and in NATO. We have a strategic partnership that has been agreed in 2003 and it received a new boost just a couple of months ago, when the President of Romania, His Excellency, Mr Traian Basescu, paid an official visit to London, as a guest of Her Majesty's Government. So yes, Britain is a key partner of Romania and I do believe that Romania is also a key partner of the United Kingdom in both the EU and NATO. We share a common vision on Europe, both countries being proud to promote economic growth, to compete in a single market in areas such as the energy. Both countries are supportive to the enlargement of the EU with countries from the Western Balkans, Turkey and the Republic of Moldova, for instance. Both countries want to reduce the overall burden of EU regulation in business, which certainly will be beneficial for companies in the UK and in Romania. We are grateful to the UK government for its decisive action in Brussels for simplifying the EU regulations, in order to get an easier access to EU funds. As Romania has an important sum of EU money allocated, we still need a better absorption capacity. This is why (hence) simplifying the EU spending procedures will give a boost to the absorption capacity and it would be a key instrument in getting the Romanian economy back on track and consolidating the economic growth. You asked me how this partnership is beneficial for Romania- well, I am proud to say that Britain is on the 6th position on Romania's list of trade partners in Europe and on the 11th position in the world and it is no. 1 amongst the EU partners in terms of trade surplus. Even in a time of crisis we still have with the UK an export which is higher than the import, with an amount of around 85 millions euro. It is not much but it is positive. In a time when Europe is in trouble due to the crisis in the Euro zone, having a positive trade balance with a country like the United Kingdom is an incentive for continuing on this way. I will come back later on our bilateral trade because it is really something which takes an important time of our Embassy's efforts here, also seen as a concrete way of putting into practice the strategic partnerships.

According to the recently appointed BRCC chairman, Ray Breden, the most important issues which the British investors in Romania come across are: the lack of long term strategies of local authorities, the underdeveloped infrastructure, bureaucracy, sudden changes in legislation and corruption. How do you see these comments from London?

I would not like to comment on what Mr. Ray Breden has said because I am neither a political commentator nor a journalist. I think it is good to see the overall picture of the business environment in Romania and, as you probably know, there are currently over 4400 British companies operating in Romania and it seems they are doing good business because their number is continuously increasing. I will give you some figures. If at the end of 2010 there were around 650 million euros in British capital subscribed in Romania and around 4100 British companies after the first seven months of 2011 we can count over 4400 companies, so we see an increase with almost 300 new companies and the value of the subscribed capital rose by 28%. If we think in terms of trade values, I mean the total trade between the UK and Romania, even in a time of crisis in 2010 we

had more than 2.4 billion worth of bilateral exchanges, which compared with 2009 show an increase of 30%. As the figures for the first seven months of 2011 indicate, the total trade for these months is of 1.6 billion euros which means that if the trend continues we will have more than 2.5 billion by the end of the year. I will not comment on what Ray said, I am just giving you figures and facts. I had and I continue to have frequent meetings with members of the British business community in London and in the UK, during every visit I pay in different parts of Britain, and I have visited almost every important part of Britain in the last three and a half years since I am an Ambassador here. I have attended working lunches and dinners organized by the BRCC, and I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the BRCC for being so involved, committed and determined in promoting business relations with Romania. I have, and I am saying this in total openness and fairness, a great respect for Anne Marie Martin for what she does as the CEO of the BRCC. I do not remember in any of the visits and meetings I had in the last year, any mention to corruption. I would not say that corruption does not exist in Romania. Corruption, I am sorry to say it, unfortunately exists everywhere in the world. What is important is to keep the level of corruption under certain limits which do not affect the functionality of the society and, when corruption is discovered, the law must be applied. The new civil code, as the Minister of Justice, Catalin Predoiu, underlined in his September visit in London in the meeting he had with the Business Community, is an incentive for the foreign investors to come and put their money in Romania. Recently the British Business Secretary, Mr. Vince Cable paid a fruitful visit to Romania in order to promote British business and to take advantage of the Romanian business opportunities. I doubt that so many British companies and high level British officials would pay attention to Romania if there would not be a lot of positive aspects. Romania is not perfect, as perfection only exists in theory, but I think that looking at the business opportunities Romania has to offer, certainly the glass is more full than empty.. I recently read about what the Wales International Business Council is doing in relation to Romania and I noted a declaration made by its chairman Byron Davies, who said in an interview that

“ Bucharest is home to one of the worlds finest hotels...Take Romania for example. We are unaware of the country’s dash to encourage growth and international trade.” Mr. Davies said Romania has a progressive government committed to act and implement rapid economic reforms, there are British lawyers in Bucharest who can register a company in Romania in only two weeks, one can rent offices in Bucharest at good prices and with advise from a good accountant a company can find out all about the legislation.

Which are the biggest assets Romania has to offer to British investors and similarly which are the biggest assets the UK can offer Romanian companies?

First, Romania is an important market. It is the second largest market in Central and Eastern Europe. We are more than a market able to absorb British goods and services. We have a very attractive labour force, well qualified, we have fiscal incentives like the flat corporate tax system, we have an excellent geographical location because we are acting like a gate, a bridge towards the Caucasus region, the Middle East and the

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Western Balkans, and we also have a huge agricultural potential. Let me recall that Romania has more than 4 million arable hectares. Only France has more in the EU. Our agricultural potential is able to feed 80 million people (we are only 20 million in Romania), so agriculture is a fantastic opportunity. Tourism is another. I take this opportunity to mention that recently our embassy hosted the preview screening of the Wild Carpathia film, in fact I was the patron of the event. It is a fantastic film about fantastic opportunities Romania offers in tourism. It is certainly one of the most beautiful countries in Europe, and it is not me, the Romanian Ambassador saying this, it is a British film producer and his Royal Highness Prince Charles, who gave an interview for this film. The Romanian Carpathians are more than a legend, they are the place where half of the bear population in Europe are, where 45% of wild species in Europe are, the place where one can find the only remaining virgin forests in Europe. And the Carpathians are just a part of Romania, a backbone of the country. Tourism is, therefore, a big asset for my country.

Also there are opportunities in the energy mix. Romania still has important reserves in oil, gas and coal, we produce nuclear energy and have good experience in the field, but we have also the second largest potential for wind farms in Europe (1st being Scotland). We have a resilient banking sector and an important human potential. For those who are not aware of that, I would like to underline that 80% of Romanian students graduating in our universities speak English and 40% speak French. Our language is a Latin one, so it is quite easy to be learnt by people who have a Latin education. Our culture, our traditions are very closed to those of countries from western Europe- this is also an advantage for foreign investors, as you do not need to spend years in order to understand the culture and peoples' way of thinking. You can just come to Romania and you feel at home even if you come from London, even if the continent is isolated by fog, as the BBC used to say a few years ago. These are some of the assets Romania has to offer to British investors.

To respond to your second part of the question, the biggest asset that the UK can offer to Romanian companies is mainly the fact that London is the global financial centre so it is an incentive for Romanians to put their money here. It is also the British expertise in doing business, the way of thinking in a pragmatic approach. There are some quite important Romanian investments in Britain. As an example, I take Pilon, which is a building company started by a Romanian a few years ago from scratch. The company now has a turnover of 17 million pounds with good perspectives to reach a turnover of 100 millions in a few years. I am proud of this example.

Last, but not least, the UK was last year the 1st recruiter of Romanian labour force. This is happening in the current context when Romanians still have to fight with restrictions on the British labour market. It seems, forgive me for the lack of modesty, that we are probably the best foreigners in Britain. It is not myself who said it, I am just quoting a report recently released by the British government, commissioned in 2009 by the previous government.. Romanians have the highest proportion of migrants with high education (40%), the lowest percentage of people with low education levels (26%), the highest rate of employment (85%) and the lowest rate of unemployment (4.4%), so it seems that we are the best migrants in the UK.

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What is the strategy the Embassy of Romania in London has for attracting more British investment in Romania but also to bring more Romanian goods and services into the UK?

As I already mentioned, we encourage a lot contacts at the local level. Of course, it is always very important to have ministerial visits and other high level visits, such as the visit paid by the President of Romania, as these give the political direction and the political coverage for businesses to continue to have the assurance that at the highest level the bilateral relations between the two countries are excellent. On the ground, ministers can meet quite often at Brussels as well. The best opportunity is to encourage contacts at the local level between businesses, between chambers of commerce, to participate at conferences, seminars and fairs and to be at the right place whenever it is important to show your presence. We have in our Embassy a commercial office from the Ministry of economy, which follows every important business opportunity and tries to support the business people from Romania which want to get involved and do business in Britain. We are also supporting British business people who would like to be present on the Romanian market. Our aim is to promote Romanian exports but it is also an important mission the embassy has to attract foreign investment in Romania- and again events organized under the umbrella of the BRCC are one of the best tools for doing that.

The Romanian presidential visit to London was the peak of the 2011 official bilateral visits which make 2011 be an important year for the relationship between Romania and the UK. Could we expect following these visits to see an increase in British expertise in key sectors in Romania, such as the kick starting infrastructure projects with EU funding?

I think I already answered your question. When the president came to London he met not only the Prime Minister, David Cameron, but also an important group of representatives of British companies at Guildhall and then he delivered a speech at the LSE in which the economy was an important topic. Maybe it is too early to draw conclusions after the visit from an economic perspective, but just remember what I said earlier, that compared with 2010 in 2011 we have a growth of 28% in the number of British companies operating in Romania and some of them moved to Romania after the visit, when it was clear to the Business community that the British government is also encouraging British companies to go and do business in Romania. Recently, at the end of September, we organized a successful seminar “ Introducing Economic lessons learnt by Romania- a newcomer in the EU”.

As the Romanian Ambassador in London could you name 5 things which you would like to see changed in Britain?

That is a good question but also a difficult one because, as a diplomat, I have to be very careful when eventually suggesting things to be improved in the country where you are accredited. Still, I shall try and make some suggestions, with all due respect for those in charge of eventually putting them into practice.

1. The first thing I would like to see changed is to lift the remaining restrictions on the UK labour market for the Romanians living in the UK. For Romanians living here the main advantage would be not to feel anymore discriminated compared to their Eastern European friends from Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia to name a few. It will also be an advantage for the British Economy, or for the British Treasury at least, as the Romanians who are here and are working hard as self-employed (they are legally entitled to be in Britain, as they are EU citizens) will pay the treasury more taxes when they will be employed. It is a mutual advantage and again every statistics and research suggest that there is no danger of a wave of Romanians coming to the UK, on the contrary the trend has diminished since 2009- I recall the same report which states that Romanians have come here to fill a gap on the British labour market and many of them are in highly skilled jobs. We have more than 1700 Romanian doctors and over 2000 nurses. I have to say it publicly, I am not happy that these professionals have left Romania but I am pleased to see that they are so much appreciated here. Recently I talked to a British journalist from an important newspaper who said that his wife was in a hospital and two Romanian nurses took care of her and he was pleased to see her so well looked after. This is therefore the first thing I would like to see changed here- the lifting of restriction on the labour market for Romanians.
2. Secondly, I would like to see more Romanian companies listed on the London Stock Exchange.
3. Thirdly, I would like to see the British media more friendly, as it still uses stereotypes about Romanians living in Britain.
4. Changing a bit to jokes, I would be happy to see the traffic easier on the highway from London to Brighton, on sunny Sundays, as it took me, a few weeks ago, two hours only to exit London and, after giving up to go to Brighton, another two hours to come back.
5. Finally, it wouldn't be bad to make Harrods cheaper.

And the 5 things which you mostly love about Britain

Let me start by telling you that I needed one year, as Ambassador here, to understand Britain, or at least to believe that I understand Britain. Then I needed another year to admire Britain and at the end of my third year here I realized that I love Britain. Why?

1. I love the British fair play.
2. I love British self-control. We have a saying "To behave like a British Lord, or like a gentleman." It means to respect your word, to be always polite.
3. I love the British pragmatism in business and the British generosity in social life.
4. I love the combination of conservatism (in terms of preserving a traditional style of life, at least in the countryside), tolerance and openness to the world.
5. I love the British sense of humour.