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US-Romanian relations and American non-policy towards Eastern Europe


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

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On 25 December 1989 Romania's dictator Nicolae Ceausescu fell to what is now known as the "Romanian Revolution." Romania's violent transition certainly represented an exception within the bloc, as the rest of the regimes peacefully progressed towards democratic systems. The collapse of Ceausescu's rule, that ended with his and his wife's summary execution, was far from representing the only anomaly in Romania's Cold War past. Similarly, Ceausescu's close relationship with the United States figured high on the list of peculiarities that characterized Romania's communist path. This article seeks to identify some of the distinctive features of that relationship and propose how these may contribute to the development of a coherent narrative within the modern geopolitical context.

The differentiation policy

Generally speaking, "bipolarity" provided the descriptive paradigm for global politics during the Cold War; it also described US-Eastern Europe relations by and large. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the final objective in Eastern Europe was to trigger the regime change envisaged by George Kennan—from centralized communism to democratic capitalism. However, in the decades to come, US administrations adapted the means to this end according to context. They did so in order to maximize the efficacy of their political efforts throughout Eastern Europe.

In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson was arguably the first to conceive of a more granular approach to Eastern Europe when he launched his "building bridges" campaign: out of this a selective approach toward the countries of the region developed¹. In 1973, Richard Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger built upon this when he conceptualized the long-standing differentiation policy, a strategy that served as the US model approach toward Eastern European countries, until the collapse of the bipolar system. The US began targeting communist nations along the fringe, with policy initiatives especially tailored to each country, rather than treating communism as a monolith.

The differentiation policy prioritized security considerations, and its final objective was to loosen the Soviet hold on the region. It did so by strengthening US economic and political ties within the Eastern bloc. Accordingly, economic rewards were offered to those Eastern European countries which were either pursuing a more independent foreign policy from Moscow or implementing a more liberal domestic policy.

Together with economic assistance and governmental loans, the Most Favored Nation clause (MFN) was the main tool of the differentiation policy. A non-discriminatory trading status, the MFN was denied to non-market economies unless they met the criteria formulated by the Jackson-Vanik amendment. The Jackson-Vanik amendment, or the 1974 Trade Act, was adopted by the US Congress in response to the Soviet introduction of the diploma tax, a fee aiming at halting Soviet Jewry emigration. The congressional bill imposed that the extension of the MFN to communist countries would be granted if emigration rights were recognized.



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In walks “America’s favorite tyrant”

It may seem counter-intuitive that US-Romanian relations would serve any strategic interests; after all, the US was arguably the most stalwart proponent of capitalism, and Ceausescu was a neo-Stalinist. Despite his taste for Stalinism in domestic policies, Ceausescu was referred to as the enfant terrible of the Warsaw Pact, precisely for his nonconformist foreign policy decisions. So, throughout the Cold War, Romania was treated as an exception within the Eastern bloc by Western leaders.

Although somewhat exaggerated, Romania was described as a maverick satellite, due to Ceausescu’s political attitudes and the challenges he posed towards the Soviets. For example, Ceausescu decided to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel in 1967, condemned the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, acted as Richard Nixon’s back channel to communicate with Mao Zedong, criticized the Red Army’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and agreed on Romanian participation in the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. These positions were in contrast to the rest of the Warsaw Bloc, so Washington paid attention.

Under Ceausescu’s rule, Romania was the only Warsaw Pact country to agree to the MFN’s requirements up until 1978. For Romania, the MFN represented Ceausescu’s most coveted enticement, both for the economic and political implications. Far from being a mere trading status, the MFN sanctioned the friendship between Washington and Bucharest; ultimately, this represented solid proof of Ceausescu’s exceptionalism. Therefore, during the second half of the 1970s, Romania and non-aligned Yugoslavia served as the two major examples of communist states deserving Washington’s consideration, because of their deviation from Moscow’s policies². Romania’s association with Josip Broz Tito, the charismatic and independent leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, substantially fostered Ceausescu’s maverick status within the Warsaw Pact.

The extension of the MFN to Romania did not encounter any serious opposition during the 1970s. With the strong support of American Jewish interest groups, US-Romania political and economic ties developed, despite Jimmy Carter administration’s condemnation of states who did not acquiesce to human rights principles. In fact, Jimmy Carter was subjected to sharp criticism for not denouncing Romania (but also other countries, such as Iran, China and Cambodia) for its gross human rights violations. However, with Romania being a minor actor on the international stage, US ties to the small communist state remained off the radar for most Americans; after all, this country was tucked in the Balkans, away from public scrutiny. It was not only geographic distance that kept the American public in the dark, but also Ceausescu’s centralized control of who and what came in or out of Romania. Romanian communist leadership’s systematic refusal to allow any fact-checking mission of the most prominent NGOs (i.e. Helsinki Watch and Amnesty International) kept Western public opinion at bay. In turn, there was a lack of visibility and transparency, which preserved the relations and delayed interventions.

At the beginning of the 1980s, a congressional demand for more rigorous scrutiny of US economic and political support of Romania on the grounds of human rights violations emerged. Numerous members of the Congress started to question, for instance, Ceausescu’s foreign policy deviation from Moscow. Nonetheless, the State Department resisted the congressional pressure, replying to domestic critics by listing Ceausescu’s nonconformist foreign policy decisions dating back to one or two decades earlier. It was easier to follow this strategy than to publicly admit a twenty-year miscalculation of Ceausescu’s positioning on the bipolar scenario. Furthermore, even when in doubt about the authenticity of Ceausescu’s defiance, the price to pay to allure the Romanian leader was not too high: a marginal congressional opposition, few trade concessions and some loans in exchange for the assurance of an annoying pebble in the Soviets’ shoe. A readjustment of the orientation of the Executive branch finally occurred at the end of 1988, after having tested the relations with the new Soviet leadership. Once the security scenario changed, the US political vision of Eastern Europe and its human rights records finally became a prominent factor in the White House decision-making towards Romania.

To be sure, Ceausescu did not wait for the Congress or the President’s decision and tried to avoid the shame of having a foreign country inflicting discontinuation of an acquired status. At the end of February 1988, he announced that Romania unilaterally renounced the MFN clause, a denunciation of the US attempts to meddle in this country’s domestic affairs. Coinciding with the flourishing of a credible relationship between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, Ceausescu’s MFN withdrawal ultimately facilitated a re-formulation of the US policy towards Bucharest. Kissinger’s differentiation policy, favoring those Eastern European countries pursuing the most independent foreign policies to exasperate the Soviets, lost its purpose in a climate of cooperation



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between Moscow and Washington. Supporting those Warsaw Pact countries with a more liberal domestic policy (i.e. Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia) rapidly became the only justification of US policy in the region, a strategy that aimed to overcome any skepticism from the Soviet side. In the words of Brent Scowcroft, George Bush's National Security Advisor, Romania rapidly moved "from first place to last in US attention"³.

However, throughout much of the Cold War, Washington's endorsement of Ceausescu's rule represented the United States' most enduring display of support for a Warsaw Pact country, demonstrating that its strategy was built around a concept of anti-Sovietism rather than anti-communism. Immutability of the US strategy in Eastern Europe lay in the status quo of the region, subjected to the Soviet sway. Because of this influence, no bilateral relations between Washington and any of the Warsaw Pact countries could have dodged considerations on US-Soviet relations. And the flourishing of the US-Romanian relations should be perceived through the prism of US security and ideological interests in US-USSR relations.

Ceausescu's regime collapse in 1989 was a result of a convergence between popular uprising and nomenklatura coup. Ion Iliescu's illiberal presidency and the left-wing National Salvation Front government followed the communist rule. During the early years of this new context, interethnic and sociopolitical tensions took place. The seeming management of these crises was a significant rationale for the improvement of relations between Romania and the West.

Over a decade of patchy democratization followed, while Romania sought to join NATO and the European Community. In the post-2001 context generated by the emergence of the "War on Terror" and the rise of Vladimir Putin, George W. Bush administration reevaluated the importance of Eastern Europe. Bucharest gained its NATO membership in 2004 and was officially accepted in the European Union in 2007.

Despite the atypical character of US-Romania relations during the Cold War, the US Department of State has since attempted to reframe US ties to communist Romania and distance itself from the brutal dictator, claiming that "relations remained strained during the Cold War era while Romania was under communist leadership. After the 1989 revolution ended communist rule, however, Romania's foreign policy positioning became unequivocally pro-Western"⁴. By doing so, the statement glosses over the warm nature of Washington's relationship to Bucharest throughout almost three decades. The interest of the White House was to try to conceal the controversial friendship that it cultivated with one of the most brutal dictators of the twentieth century. However, throughout much of this time period Ceausescu was what former general of the Securitate, Ion Mihai Pacepa, described: "America's Most Favored Tyrant"⁵.

The State Department's interests and efforts to reshape the memory of US ties to Ceausescu stem from a more general pattern. American author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates raised a relevant question in a 2013 article for *The Atlantic*: "How to explain political partnerships that are in stark conflict with US state ideals?"⁶. In other words, how can the United States maintain their reputation as a champion for human rights while also promoting strategic interests through friendly relations with abusive regimes? This dilemma in policy-making was at the heart of the US-Romania relations in the Cold War period.

Human rights and geostrategic security concerns jostled for primacy throughout much of the United States' recent diplomatic history raising the question: how do we make sense of Donald Trump's presidency as it strayed from any systemic logic?

US-Romanian relations and US policy towards the "other Europe" in the age of Donald Trump

Prior to Donald Trump's term in office, US policy formulation towards the Eastern and Central Europe remained subordinated to security and ideology goals related to Russia's ambitions. Provocatively alluding to the title of historian Geir Lundestad's *The American Non-Policy Towards Eastern Europe 1943-1947*, I acknowledge that the American foreign policy towards Eastern Europe has been an inconsistent "non-policy"⁷. It was exemplified during the Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations, wherein the White House subordinated gross human rights violations in the region to anti-Russian security considerations. Various US administrations accepted and even supported Nicolae Ceausescu, a brutal dictator, as long as it entailed that this Warsaw Pact



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member-state would exhibit independence from the Bloc. Even so, the lack of a coherent policy, or non-policy, coming out of the compromised ideals of US Cold War diplomacy seems defensible in the face of Trump's approach to foreign relations.

Washington's subordination of Eastern European relations to that of US-Russian relations has resulted in internal contradictions and inconsistencies within the pattern of policies employed throughout the region over time—notably subordinating human rights interests to Russian security concerns. However, during his presidency, Trump navigated towards building a relationship with Vladimir Putin, raising security concerns in some liberal quarters. This while still managing to disregard the rule of law. These features have strained Trump's ties throughout Western Europe, yet they have contributed to improving relations with “the other Europe,” as Washington has seized on the opportunity to cultivate better relations with Central and Eastern European leadership. In turn, these improved relations have been reflected in regional leaders' response to the White House's political approach, in spite of Trump's seeming fascination for Putin.

Even with the continual turnover of the administrative officials, when it comes to its rivalry with Russia, the White House during the Trump administration seemed divided into two fronts: on one hand, senior policy officials worried about Russia's growing strength. On the other hand, Trump, supported by new officials such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, has perceived Vladimir Putin to be a resource. The first group of officials were professional diplomats, such as former Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Mitchell Wess. Even before taking office, Wess argued that overlooking the democratic underperformance of Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary was a desideratum of US relations towards Eastern and Central Europe. Such poor scrutiny of Central and Eastern Europeans' rule of law was recommended by the former Assistant Secretary of State in order to secure their security cooperation against Russia, a top American priority in the region. In fact, this was a tactic that deeply resembled US Cold War regional logic. Prominent officials, such as Pompeo, have expressed different priorities for the White House, such as reshaping a different West based on nationalist ideology, a West that would be home for Russia as well⁸.

The National Security Strategy (NSS) released in December 2017, chaotically sums up the considerations of these two groups coexisting in the administration. On the one hand, the document testifies to the priorities of the part of the administration that identifies Putin as a threat, acknowledging that Russia employs “subversive measures to weaken the credibility of America's commitment to Europe, undermine transatlantic unity, and weaken European institutions and governments”⁹. On the other hand, the NSS also testifies to the abdication of US traditional role of defender of the free world. The documents not only lack a strategy for the promotion of democracy and human rights, they also abandon any rhetoric to aspirations such as international stability and democratic peace¹⁰.

As a result of these two fronts, inconsistencies continue to bear out after the Donald Trump presidency, as US foreign relations within the region and Europe at large have been marred by controversy and conflicting interests. For example, Trump's pressure on NATO curried favor with Central and Eastern European leaders and resulted in increased spending. At the same time, Trump questioned NATO's core commitment pursuant to Article 5 of the alliance's founding treaty—that an attack on one ally constitutes an attack on all. This was one of the causes of the increased souring relations between the leaders of the EU and the US. Furthermore, Trump's deferential relationship with Putin and the challenges that the Ukraine crisis and Russia's rivalry posed added to the tensions.

In a context of growing resentment between Washington and its Western European partners, the US administration has been flirting with the idea of a relocation of US forces on NATO Eastern flank. Trump's declaration of an incumbent withdrawal of American troops from Germany has coupled with an increased US military presence in Central and Eastern Europe, a move that has seen Romania and Poland as key partners. While throughout his mandate Trump's proposal to dismantle NATO was daunting, it is hard to assess if he seriously intended to erode the alliance, or just employed a bluffing tactic to force his European allies into more military spending.

On NATO spending budget, Trump's appeal to increase defense contributions from his NATO allies was met with enthusiasm by state leaders in Romania, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. This won over the American president, as the leaders of the abovementioned countries all agreed to meet the target, allocating 2% of their GDP¹¹. It is not by chance that Central and Eastern European leaders promptly responded to Trump's call. Political leadership's claims of an existential threat of potential Russian



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invasion made the investment seem inherently reasonable. In the end, it can be argued that Trump and his associates essentially seized on this vulnerability.

Additionally, local leaders arguably crave international attention and enjoy Trump's lack of consideration for the rule of law. Some of them savor Trump's hostility towards EU institutions, as they too harbor growing resentment towards Brussels for rebuking their violations of democratic rules. Most notoriously, Hungarian premier Viktor Orban expressed enthusiasm for deepening ties with Washington, where there is less preoccupation with the domestic policies playing out in Central Europe.

Generally, Euroscepticism is less popular in Romania. At the same time, the United States enjoys a tremendously positive image among both political elites and the general population. EU and NATO memberships, together with strategic US alliance, have represented Romania's most cherished goals since the fall of communism and still constitute the core of its foreign and security policy¹².

Since joining NATO in 2004, Romanian governments of different colors have proved that Romania is a reliable and pro-active member, sending its troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, the one trait shared by Romanian politicians across the aisle is the so-called "Atlantism." This was evident in the Middle East crisis from the start of 2020. The killing of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani by the US military sparked no discomfort in Bucharest, at a time when Western European diplomats condemned the action. Reactions went from Romania's president Klaus Iohannis's silence, to the more colorful statements of EU Parliament deputy and former president Traian Basescu, who labelled French President Emmanuel Macron "a Marxist bastard" for his decision to discuss the crisis with Putin¹³.

Because of its geographical positioning in the Black Sea region, Romania's relevance to the North Atlantic partnership has increased rapidly after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Romania's partnership became even more valuable in the light of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan hegemonic ambitions. Putin's assertiveness in particular is regarded with much anxiety in Bucharest, not just because of memories of Soviet domination. Romanian leadership claimed fears that Russian renewed belligerence might translate into a military annexation of the Republic of Moldova. So, even before Trump's appeal to his NATO allies for increased military spending, the then-president Traian Basescu announced an expansion of Bucharest's defense budget.

Romania's strategic value was signaled by NATO's decision to position its ballistic missile interceptor shield in the Southern Romanian commune of Deveselu, inaugurated in 2016¹⁴. While its declared objective is to prevent an air attack from Iran, its proximity to the Russian territory has inflamed the leadership in Moscow, who, in February 2019, asked for the dismantling of the defense system. Additionally, Romania's renovation of the Mihail Kogalniceanu military base on the Black Sea¹⁵ together with its supervision of NATO cyber-defense program in Ukraine signaled Bucharest's desire to take over a leading role in security matters of the region.

The Romanian government released the National Defense Strategy in the summer of 2019 and planned for the next four years. This document represents an expression of the same transatlantic priorities. By identifying Russian expansion in the region as the main threat to national security, the Romanian government's programmatic agenda aims at responding to both the militarization of the Black Sea as well as Russia's disinformation campaign.

During the 2019 presidential campaign, Romanian political forces were particularly active in seeking American support. In November 2019, the then Romanian prime minister Viorica Dăncilă faced president Klaus Iohannis, the latter being eventually reelected. Dăncilă was running as the Social Democratic Party candidate while Iohannis was backed by the National Liberal Party. Throughout the year, both sides sought the strengthening of US relations, a seemingly key move for their eventual election.

It is no surprise that Romanian political parties played the American card to gather domestic political consensus. Americophilia has characterized Romanian popular culture and spread to political elites' aspirations since World War II. The expectation that the US would ultimately rescue the Romanian people from the yoke of the Soviets marked much of Romania's popular imaginary throughout the Cold War years. And fantasies of a US presence still resonate across generations as well as the political spectrum¹⁶.

At the beginning of 2019, a politically critical year, Romania took on the EU presidency. Few Eastern European leaders were more eager than prime minister Viorica Dăncilă to gain Trump's support. Facing a dual political crisis both domestically and within



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the EU bloc, Dăncilă and Liviu Dragnea, former leader of the Social Democratic Party (and currently in jail for corruption) were harshly criticized for their attempt to pass a law that would introduce pardons for politicians convicted of corruption¹⁷. The situation rapidly degenerated in March 2019, when current EU Chief Prosecutor Laura Codruta Kovesi was placed under police surveillance and banned from leaving the country. Kovesi, former head of the Romanian Anti-Corruption Directorate, was fired from the National Anticorruption Department in the summer of 2018 after having prosecuted prominent government officials, including Dragnea.

None of such murky initiatives of the previous Social Democratic Party governments shook Trump's advisors, quite the contrary. In August 2018, one of the most controversial characters of the Trump administration, president's attorney Rudolph Giuliani, prattled on about the excesses of Romania's judiciary, recommending amnesty for those who had fallen victim of Kovesi¹⁸. While extravagant, Giuliani's criticism aligned with the general trend inspiring the rest of the Executive agenda, which has taken little to no interest in the state of the rule of law in the region.

Right around Romania's political crisis, Dăncilă took her chances and travelled to Washington. While attending informal meetings, the prime minister tried to secure indirectly Trump's blessing of her political campaign. During an American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) gathering, she spectacularly announced that the Romanian embassy would move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in support of Trump's decision. Not only Dăncilă's announcement was in open contrast to Romania's European partners, her declaration had been issued without prior consultation with Iohannis, who according to the Romanian constitution formulates the country's foreign policy.

Her announcement did not bring her much luck. To these days, the Romanian embassy in Israel is still located in Tel Aviv and the Dăncilă government was ousted by the Parliament in October 2019. Consolidating the power of the National Liberal Party, Iohannis appointed Ludovic Orban as prime minister and his reelection as president of Romania few weeks later confirmed his consensus.

Unlike Dăncilă, Iohannis made the most of his American trip. Well aware of his electorate fascination with the United States, he cunningly secured Trump's support for his race when he traveled to Washington in the summer of 2019. Cameras displayed president Trump gifting his counterpart with a personalized "Make Romania Great Again" hat, that Iohannis happily wore, ratifying what looked like a well-established personal connection.

However, Iohannis did more than just wearing Trump's hallmark. He promised to work out business-related matters. So, he reassured Trump about Romania's security and energy priorities, both matching those of the US. First, Romania's president reasserted once more his commitment within the NATO spending framework; second, he promised to facilitate the activities of US oil group ExxonMobil off the Black Sea shore; third, and more importantly, he promised Trump that in the US-Chinese rivalry, he would stand by the US side.

The question of foreign exploitation of Romania's energy reservoirs constituted a political quarrel between the two major parties in Bucharest. US presence on Romania's extraction market has a long tradition, ExxonMobil's first investment in the country dating back to 1903. Back in 2000, the Romanian government granted to the partnership of ExxonMobile and Austrian OMV concessions to explore the gas reservoirs off Romanian shore, under the project called Neptun Deep. In the summer of 2018, the Dăncilă government passed a controversial Offshore law that has been reducing significantly foreign energy investors revenues. The law convinced both ExxonMobil and OMV to reconsider their commitment in the Black Sea. The US group announced its intention to sell its shares in the project, a dividend estimated around 250 million dollars.

The prospective exit of ExxonMobil from Neptun Deep is more than just a commercial transaction. As it often happens in the energy sector, the ExxonMobil investment in Romania also concerns security and military competition, as showed by the interest taken by the Russian company Lukoil in the project. Even if Lukoil has been present in the Romanian energy sector since the late 1990s, Putin's increased military aggressiveness has changed the approach of the Romanian leadership as to the presence of foreign stakeholders in key sectors. So, at the beginning of 2020, prime minister Ludovic Orban put forward a law proposal that would enable Bucharest to halt the involvement of suspicious foreign investors into projects that are considered matter of national security. Florin Cițu, Romania's current prime minister since December 2020, kept the proposed amendment on his cabinet agenda.



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More recently, the collapse of the oil market triggered by the pandemic, convinced both OMV and ExxonMobile to postpone any decision on the Neptun Deep project to 2021. Nonetheless, the Romanian government made the best of such unpredictable premises. At the end of last year, minister of energy Virgil Popescu secured a generous loan from US Exim Bank, a credit that would allow Romania's gas producer Romgaz to take over ExxonMobile's stake in the Black Sea project¹⁹. During her trip to Bucharest, Kimberly Reed, former Exim Bank president, expressed US government commitment in supporting a wide range of strategic investments in Romania for a 7 billion credit plan, including Neptun Deep. Accompanying Reed, former US ambassador to Bucharest Adrian Zuckerman stressed the importance of Romanian energy independence, conducive to a strong US-Romanian strategic partnership.

The other crucial question that Iohannis addressed during his trip to Washington regarded Romania's cooperation with Trump's number one rival, Chinese president Xi Jinping. China's investment plan in Romania followed the rationale of its acquisition and rehabilitation of the Greek harbor Piraeus: entering the Eastern and Central European market by funding major infrastructure projects. With a promised \$10 billion stake, China's investment plan in Romania was one of the most ambitious in the region. Among other projects, it included the construction of two reactors for the Cernavoda nuclear power plant along the Danube, the development of Romania's highway system, and the implementation and supervision of its 5G network.

Back in 2013, then prime minister and leader of the Romanian Socialist Democratic (PSD) Party Victor Ponta championed the rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, an agenda that to Ponta's political opposition looked too reminiscent of the communist times. Hoping to increase Chinese economic presence in Romania, Ponta signed a strategic partnership with his counterpart Li Keqiang in Beijing. A few years later, endorsing the line of the SDP, prime minister Dăncilă re-affirmed her commitment to this partnership.

The Chinese presence in the region has been regarded with much apprehension from the White House. However, during his trip to the White House last year, Iohannis made sure to spell out who he considered his priority partners and he tackled one of Trump's bogeyman: the expansion of Huawei 5G network. In Romania, the new infrastructure shall not be Chinese: that was the underlying promise made by Iohannis to the US president when signing a memorandum of understanding about the expansion of 5G technology in Romania. Iohannis was the first European leader to sign such an agreement. The other two EU member countries who did so are Poland and Estonia, a strong reminder of the importance that Atlanticism plays in Central and Eastern European policy making²⁰.

Few months after Iohannis' commitment, Ludovic Orban further hampered the implementation of the strategic partnership with China, by halting Chinese ventures in Romania's highway and nuclear industries²¹. Romania's leadership does not have to fear that by losing the Chinese cooperation there will be no investors, on the contrary its decision turned out to be a profitable trade off. Last October, the White House stepped up its game and decided it would directly invest into the renovation of the Cernavoda power plant, a \$8 billion project that will include the construction of new reactors.

Similarly, to what happened in other countries in the region, Chinese deferral of many of its investment projects was not greeted with enthusiasm. However, the trade war between Washington and Beijing made clear to China and everyone interested that if forced to pick sides, Central and Eastern European countries will always choose the United States. Security concerns related to the Russian-Chinese partnership, ancestral fears of a Russian invasion and a profound trust enjoyed by Washington in the region are all factors influencing this trend. After all, there was someone in the EU who continued to look to Trump's White House as the defender of the free world.

While the Trump administration's reformulation of US traditional values had a dramatic impact on its relations with Western Europe, Iohannis, as many Central and Eastern European leaders, preferred a pragmatic attitude, in tune with the Americanophile Romanian positioning after 1989. Sure, it meant overlooking Trump's fascination with Putin, which did not come without a sense of uneasiness. But his sympathy for Trump has been inspired by political pragmatism rather than ideological closeness.

Ironically, Trump's focus on self-promotion and his political narcissism suggest an easier comparison between him and Nicolae Ceausescu, than with any of the Cold War US presidents. And Central and Eastern European leaders, including Iohannis, have quite an experience in dealing with such personalities. To be sure, most of them have themselves an appetite for adulation. However, they



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also master what can be called “Cold War bon ton”: a skill shaped by their upbringing in politically repressive systems, a context that required pragmatism, flattery and a good dose of opportunism in order to survive. One can see how this skill-set, legacy of the Cold War, comes in handy when circumstances require an adaptation to narcissistic leadership styles, such as president Trump’s.

Conclusions

The strategic value of Romania and Eastern and Central Europe is nothing new. Throughout the Cold War, the US took great strides to cultivate relations in this region in order to achieve anti-Soviet objectives. Furthermore, similar to the current geopolitical landscape, during the Cold War, the US viewed relations with Eastern and Central Europe as subordinate to a grander scheme. At the time, those ties were subordinate to the US-USSR relations, and today the US-Russian relations represent the main focus.

Trump’s foreign policy was marked by contradictions, a “non-policy” tout court. Surprisingly, over the past four years EU members in Eastern and Central Europe have enjoyed more consistency from the White House than the rest of the world as showed by recent security and economic investments in Romania and Poland. It is hard to say if such result is the outcome of an actual strategic formulation or rather the unexpected product of regional and international circumstances.

US relations with countries in the region ranged from plain sympathy to ideological affinity. Various factors influenced US bilateral relations with regional states. Among these we can consider political frictions between regional leaders and the EU, local leaders’ eagerness to meet Trump’s NATO spending demands, a regional populist drift, along with a more general tendency towards conservative policies. In the end, within the maze of contradictions that was Trump’s foreign policy, few things seemed certain: a public “bromance” with Central and Eastern European leaders stood out.

The Romanian case shows how some aspects of the Cold War logic, such as a chaotic foreign policy formulation, are still valid today. However, the Trump administration looked rather oblivious when it comes to Cold War legacies, particularly in relation to the president’s fascination with Putin. Such legacies seem to play out more in the mind of local leaders of the region. The Soviet domination is still vivid in the popular memory, and in face of Russian assertiveness an increased military spending seemed obvious to Romanian leadership.

Finally, as president Biden moved in the White House at the beginning of this year, the new administration has started to mend US relations with its Western European allies.

Biden’s intention to restore US relations with its NATO partners will continue to favor Romania as a strategic partner of the alliance. Beyond the transatlantic question, Biden’s agenda will prioritize his policy towards Russia and China. Such engagements will likely leave little time and energy for developing of an ad hoc policy for Central and Eastern Europe. Not a novelty for the region. However, Biden’s manifesto indicates a much-awaited comeback of US liberal values²². So, there is hope that the White House will go back to the pre-Trumpian times, when a combination of strategic interests and commitments for social and political changes revealed an inconsistent policy but one inspired by democratic ideals. In the end, beyond Putin’s military assertiveness, the region still has to face and overcome serious issues related to the rule of law and widespread corruption.

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