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Romania-U.S. Relations at the Beginning of Trump's Presidency

Jakub Pieńkowski

On 9 June, President of Romania Klaus Iohannis, the first leader from a NATO Eastern Flank state, paid a visit to U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington. Trump acknowledged Romania's contribution to common security, describing it as in model form, and ensured that the U.S. would respect NATO Article 5 guarantees. The U.S. president's confirmation of existing commitments does not mean any privileged status for Romania, which, because of Trump's transactional treatment of international relations so far, was expected by some Romanian political elites.

Romania has been among the most devoted U.S. allies in Europe since President Bill Clinton visited Bucharest in 1997, opening the door to the country's membership of NATO. Accession to the European Union and traditionally good relations with Germany and France have not affected Romania's transatlantic ties. In 2011, Romania joined a small group of states with whom the United States signed the Joint Declaration on the Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century. At the same time, Romania also welcomed the U.S. missile defence system on its territory. There is consensus on the Romanian political scene that a close alliance with the United States forms the cornerstone of its foreign and security policy, together with EU and NATO membership.

Romanian Expectations. President Iohannis, who is Romania's most important foreign policy architect, commented on Trump's election by declaring his intent to make relations with the U.S. even closer. At the same time, he said was sceptical about Trump's rhetoric diminishing U.S. obligations to NATO and other allies. Leaders of Romania's Social Democratic Party (PSD), the main political force in the government since early 2017, were enthusiastic about Trump's victory. In his treatment of international issues, they saw an opportunity for Romania to be favoured in the political and economic spheres in exchange for loyalty. To establish close contact with the new administration, the leader of PSD and Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Liviu Dragnea and Prime Minister Sorin Grindeanu went on a private visit to ticketed Trump inauguration ceremonies. They also participated in a dinner for donors ($0.5–1 million per plate), although the government denied it had paid for the participation of the Romanian politicians.

However, so far, the Romanian government has not received the expected privileges from the new U.S. administration. What is more, open criticism from American officials about imperfections in the fight against corruption, respect of democratic values, and independence of the judiciary in Romania has continued. In early 2017, during mass protests against a proposed anti-corruption law, U.S. Ambassador Hans Klemm publicly criticised the government for the changes. During the meeting with Iohannis, Trump cited the effective fight against corruption as the basis for the development of strategic partnerships, especially in the economic sphere.

The Romanian-American partnership so far has not translated into strong economic ties. In 2016, Romania exported to the United States $1.96 billion worth of goods and imported $710 million. For comparison,

U.S.-Hungary trade was similar, at $5.34 billion and $1.84 billion, respectively, and larger and more balanced with Poland, at $5.97 billion and $3.66 billion, respectively. By 2015, the United States was only 10th in terms of foreign investment in Romania, at about €980 million, and seventh in terms of investing companies, totalling 6,985. This has been caused by a lack of political decisions by Romanian authorities. For example, in 2016, no large contracts strategically important to Romanian military security (modernisation of frigates, construction of corvettes, purchases of helicopters or wheeled infantry fighting vehicles) or energy (construction of two more reactors at the Cearnavodă nuclear power plant) had been signed with any American company.

Romania is also one of the five EU Member States whose citizens still need entry visas to the US. However, it is a "roadmap" country for the visa-waiver programme and has met technical criteria for safety and the fight against crime. However, the share of rejected Romanian citizens' visa applications is still far above the 3% threshold—in 2016, it was 11.43%. For comparison, for Polish citizens it was 5.37%, and for Bulgarians, 16.86%. What is more, the implementation of Trump's immigration policy could make traveling to the U.S. harder for Romanian citizens. Already issued regulations shorten the time to apply for a visa extension from 48 to 12 months and significantly reduce the possibility of obtaining a work visa.

Security of the Eastern Flank. In the context of transatlantic relations, Romania's most serious concern has been the possibility of a U.S.-Russia agreement. Romanian political elite would view it as coming at the expense of Ukraine and Moldova while also undermining the security of Eastern European NATO members. Russia's aggressive policy in the Black Sea region is the most serious threat to Romania's security, since its coast is only about 300 km away from Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014. Therefore, it has been crucial to Romania to obtain confirmation of the U.S. guarantees and to strengthen the presence of NATO forces on the Eastern Flank of the Alliance, especially in its southern part and the Black Sea.

In May, during the NATO summit in Brussels, President Iohannis met President Trump for the first time. Iohannis said then that Romania is fully committed to its duties as an ally, especially to the United States. In 2003-2009, Romanian soldiers participated in the stabilisation mission in Iraq. Since 2001, they have participated in NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan, where 23 of them have been killed. Currently, the Romanian contingent there consists of 587 troops, making it the fifth-largest in the country (fourth among NATO members). Romania provided the Mihail Kogălniceanu air base near Constanta to American military forces. Despite Russian threats, including of an advance nuclear strike, Romania also provided the Devesel base to the United States, where elements of the Aegis Ashore anti-ballistic system have been installed. In response to American expectations, Iohannis agreed in Brussels to join the anti-ISIS coalition. Although Romania has not declared it will send troops, Romanian support can be very valuable because of its considerable intelligence capabilities in the Middle East.

Romania also raised the planned 2017 armed forces budget to 2% of GDP. In 2016, it was just 1.5% of GDP. This has been a significant Romanian argument on the point of view of President Trump. During Iohannis's visit to the White House, Trump used that fact to present Romania as a model to the rest of the Allies concerning defence spending obligations and then confirmed the American security guarantees under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

Conclusions. In the first months of Trump's presidency, his administration's treatment of Romania given its loyalty to the United States has been limited to reaffirming existing security guarantees—not meeting the higher expectations of some among the country's elites. At the same time, Trump's pronouncements seemingly tying U.S. defence commitments to European partners' defence budget goals, remains a major challenge for Romania. In 2017, military spending in the state budget is planned at 2% of GDP. It is not certain if it will be implemented because of the risk of exceeding the EU's limit of a 3% of budget deficit. On the other hand, implementing this plan would mean that over the next five years, Romania would spend about $10 billion on arms purchases. This would be an opportunity to significantly increase U.S. investment in the Romanian economy. However, American companies struggling for arms contracts would face serious competition from companies from Germany and France, which already have a strong position in Romania.

The visit of Iohannis to Washington and the confirmation of Allied commitments by Trump proves that the new U.S. administration understands the expectations of NATO members on the Eastern Flank—mostly American participation in alleviating security concerns stemming from Russia's aggressive policies. Due to its close contacts with the United States at the start of Trump's presidency, Poland and Romania should stand as globally engaged U.S. partners and remind it of the importance of NATO's Eastern Flank for the region and U.S. interests in Europe.