

AN UNWILLING COMMITMENT: TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract: *Since his surprising election as president of the United States, in November 2016, Donald Trump's foreign policy sent shockwaves around the world, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) where America's traditional allies felt uneasy about the "America First" strategy. Nevertheless, in spite of a nationalist president who has questioned America's leadership role in global affairs and his country's commitment to the protection of allies, the security cooperation between the United States and the CEE countries increased in the first three years of the Trump administration. The paper explains this continuity on the base of the American alternative foreign policy mindsets in the decision-making process. It is arguing that despite the president's opinions, those administration members who share a common, traditional understanding of American primacy in the world provided the continuity in American foreign policy in the CEE region by advocating for power competition against Russia. Therefore, the article shows that an individual-level analysis is more appropriate for understanding American foreign policy today than a state- and a system-level analyses.*

Keywords: *Donald Trump, American foreign policy, Central and Eastern Europe, individual-level analysis, nationalism, traditionalism, organizational balancing.*

Rezumat: *Un angajament forțat: strategia de politică externă a lui Trump în Europa Centrală și de Est. De la alegerea surprinzătoare a lui Donald Trump în funcția de președinte al Statelor Unite, în noiembrie 2016, politica externă a acestuia a trimis unde de șoc în întreaga lume, în special în Europa Centrală și de Est (CEE), neliniștindu-i pe aliații tradiționali ai Americii în legătură cu strategia "America First" („Întâi, America”). Cu toate acestea, în ciuda unui președinte naționalist care a pus sub semnul întrebării rolul de lider al Americii în afacerile globale și angajamentul țării sale cu privire la protecția aliaților, cooperarea Statelor Unite cu țările CEE în materie de securitate s-a intensificat în primii trei ani ai administrației Trump. Articolul explică această continuitate pe baza modului alternativ de a gândi politica externă americană în procesul de luare a deciziilor. Se susține că, în pofida opiniilor președintelui, acei membri ai administrației care împărtășesc o*

Înțelegere comună și tradițională a primatului american în lume au asigurat continuitate politicii externe americane în regiunea CEE, pledând pentru contrabalansarea puterii Rusiei. Prin urmare, articolul arată că o analiză la nivel individual este astăzi mai potrivită pentru înțelegerea politicii externe americane decât analizele la nivel de stat și de sistem.

INTRODUCTION

Since his surprising election as the forty-fifth American president in November 2016, Donald Trump has sent shockwaves around the world with his untraditional foreign policy choices. Examples abound in this regard. His decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the Golan Heights as Israeli territory, the justification of the Israeli right to keep settlements in the occupied territories, and the administration's pro-Israeli peace plan from January 2020¹ fundamentally changed the traditional American policy on the Palestinian question. Meanwhile, the president's "madman" strategy of challenging nuclear-aspiring powers with military threats² raised nerves in the international arena as the president's "rocket-man" speech to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un or his order to assassinate Iranian military leader Qasem Suleimani increased the rumours of a nuclear exchange between the United States and these countries. Last but not least, Trump's negligence of the traditional alliance relations of the United States³ and his positive approach to authoritarian leaders, most especially Vladimir Putin, led other countries to question American commitments and leadership in the international system.

¹ For the peace plan, see *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, in <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf> (Accessed on 02.03.2020).

² Nikki Haley, the former U.S. ambassador in the United Nations, reported that Trump asked her to make Chinese negotiators think that he is crazy and he can take any measures, including military ones if the Chinese government does not help the United States to solve the North Korean problem. Nikki R. Haley, *With All Due Respect: Defending America with Grit and Grace*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2019, e-book edition.

³ In a Pentagon meeting that aimed to draw the president to the traditional preferences of the foreign policy establishment, Trump defined the U.S.-led alliance system as "one big monster created over several years" and believed that the economic costs to keep the alliance relations was unfair to the American people. Guy M. Snodgrass, *Holding the Line: Inside Trump's Pentagon with Secretary Mattis*, New York, Sentinel, 2019, e-book edition.

One of the consequences of Donald Trump's untraditional grand strategy was the loss of confidence in American leadership. A Pew Research Center report released in January 2020 shows that several considerable policies of the Trump administration (including U.S. withdrawal of climate change agreements, immigration policies, mercantilist policies that increase tariffs and fees on imported goods, etc.) were quite unpopular around the world. As a result, the confidence in American leadership during the Trump administration significantly dropped in some countries, including major U.S. allies such as Germany, France, and Canada. On the question as to which leader could be trusted to do the right thing in world affairs, Trump also remained behind Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, and even Vladimir Putin and barely passed the Chinese leader Xi Jinping.⁴ These findings are in parallel to the views of those who speak of the Trump administration's abdication of global leadership in world affairs.⁵ Nevertheless, the report also shows that although the confidence towards the United States is low among some key allies, Washington still receives positive reviews in several Central and Eastern European (CEE) nations as 79% of Poles, 70% of Lithuanians, 66 % of Hungarians and 73% of Ukrainians have a favourable opinion of the United States. Besides, in Poland (51/39) and Ukraine (44/37), those who have confidence in Donald Trump are more than those who have not.⁶

Why do CEE nations continue to have confidence in the American global leadership despite an untraditional president who openly questions the value of alliances and has promised to change the way the traditional elements in the U.S. decision-making system conduct foreign policy? Without neglecting the value of systemic realist explanations (if the Russian political and military influence represents the main threat, and the European Union does not offer strong security guarantees, then the alliance with the United States remains the sole option for the CEE governments), I argue that, in the last three years, the individual-level variables in the United States played an important role in the close relations between the two sides. Indeed, the nationalist feature of the president's "America First" strategy could have a terrifying outcome on the security of the CEE

⁴ Richard Wike et al., *Trump Ratings Remain Low Around Globe, While Views of U.S. Stay Mostly Favorable*, in <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/01/08/trump-ratings-remain-low-around-globe-while-views-of-u-s-stay-mostly-favorable/> (Accessed on 02.03.2020), p. 6-14.

⁵ For example, see Ivo H. Daalder, James M. Lindsay, *The Empty Throne: America's Abdication of Global Leadership*, New York, Public Affairs, 2018, e-book edition.

⁶ Richard Wike et al., *Trump Ratings Remain Low Around Globe*, pp. 11, 14.

countries. Yet, I argue, over time traditional elements in the American foreign policy decision-making system balanced the “America First” strategy and policy choices took the shape of “business as usual” in the CEE region.⁷ With the lack of strong opposition within the Trump administration against this policy continuity in the CEE, we observe increasing levels of cooperation between the United States and regional governments. As the American president was unwilling to criticize the countries on the grounds of democracy and human rights, and security cooperation was not interrupted, the CEE governments did not have much reason to be terrified of an untraditional American president. In fact, Trump may be the ideal president that they would prefer to see in the White House.

The article will continue as follows: First, I will explain the main characteristics of Trump’s “America First” strategy and how it presented risks for the security of the CEE countries at the beginning. Then I will outline the actual developments on the ground to point out the continuity of cooperation between the United States and the CEE countries during the Trump administration. To explain the inconsistency between Trump’s rhetoric and actual relations, I will analyse the views of some traditionalist members within the administration. The final section will conclude the findings and present a picture for the future of American policies in the area.

“AMERICA FIRST”: LIBERAL LEADERSHIP OUT, AMERICAN NATIONALISM IN

When Donald Trump announced his bid for the presidential race, most people believed that it was mainly a PR campaign that the business tycoon and television personality did to increase his fame rather than entering the Oval Office.⁸ Trump’s candidacy did not hit the headlines at the beginning not only because he was quite inexperienced in politics but also his lifestyle and former political behaviours challenged the conservative values of the Republican Party

⁷ G. Murphy Donovan, *National Security in the Trump Era: Business as Usual?*, in <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/national-security-in-the-trump-era-business-as-usual> (Accessed on 02.03.2020).

⁸ Michael Wolff points out that in the pre-election campaign Trump himself was talking about being “the most famous man in the world,” but not being the president. Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2018, e-book edition.

and its voters.⁹ Yet, Donald Trump surprisingly won first the Republican Party primary and then the presidential race as he followed a unique strategy by refusing to follow the rules of traditional forces in American politics and giving a voice to the regular people. Steve Bannon, Trump's main adviser for the elections, told him that Hillary Clinton was "the tribune of a corrupt and incompetent status quo of elites" and if Trump wanted to defeat her against all odds he would have to be "the tribune of the forgotten man who wants to make America great again."¹⁰

Trump's election motto, "Make America Great Again," found its foreign policy equivalent in another term "America First." For a long time, the American public has not been content with the grand strategy of liberal hegemony that the traditional political elite followed ambitiously since the beginning of the Cold War. As Walt argues, although Americans generally rejected isolationism, they did not favor "costly, ambitious and burdensome foreign policy" which relies on a global leadership role for the United States. The majority of Americans believed that the United States should not play the role of "world policeman" while arguing that their country was doing "too much" in global affairs. Indeed, many Americans want their leadership to focus on domestic problems instead of foreign policy. Traditional foreign policy elites told them that liberal hegemony was "necessary, feasible, and affordable,"¹¹ but Trump organized his election campaign and then presidency with an opposing message.

In fact, Trump has opposed liberal leadership and its traditional alliance ties since his first public foreign policy message published in three major U.S. newspapers in 1987. In this message, Trump urged the political leadership to stop

⁹ For example, Trump's multiple marriages, little knowledge about the Bible and pro-choice position were hard to accept for the white conservative evangelicals, one of the main voting blocs of the Republican Party. Until Trump won the Republican ticket, the Christian Right supported other presidential candidates, especially Ted Cruz. Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2017, p. 627. Similarly, Trump's former donations to the Democratic Party until he considered the presidential race led many Republicans to question his political allegiances. In an interview in 1990, Trump said that he would "do better as a Democrat than as a Republican." Danielle Kurtzleben, *Most of Donald Trump's Political Money Went to Democrats – Until 5 Years Ago*, in <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/07/28/426888268/donald-trumps-flipping-political-donations> (Accessed on 04.03.2020).

¹⁰ Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2018, p. 15.

¹¹ Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018, p. 133-136.

providing money to countries that can protect themselves. His main criticism was against Japan, whom he blamed for taking advantage of the United States and costing the nation in terms of deficit and taxes. As an example, Trump gave the Gulf region where Washington was spending its military and economic resources to protect the oil interests of Japan and other nations while the area was “of only marginal significance to the United States for its oil supplies.” “The world is laughing at America’s politicians,” Trump said, “as we protect ships we don’t own, carrying oil we don’t need, destined for allies who won’t help.”¹²

Three decades later, President Trump’s mentality was quite the same. His “America First” campaign promised to restructure the alliance relationships by starting from zero with all countries, friends and foes alike. During his presidency, Trump repeatedly called for Japan to renegotiate the post-Second World War defence treaty that, he believed, was unfair to the United States and argued that Japan could protect itself from regional threats by not relying on American security guarantees but instead by buying American military equipment worth billions of dollars.¹³ In addition, Trump asked for more money from Japan and South Korea for the U.S. troops stationed in these countries to balance China and North Korea threats.¹⁴ Trump also criticized the European countries on the same grounds by calling for them to increase their defence spending for their own military protection. “If you look at how much we spend on [NATO] and how much countries in Europe pay, who really gets more of the benefit from that,” Trump asked, implying that European countries have simply been free-riding by relying on the United States to carry the burden of the military alliance.¹⁵ Although criticism against European free-riding policies is not new, Trump strengthened the rhetoric by suggesting that American military aid should be dependent on the allies’ ability to keep their promises to increase their defence spending.¹⁶ The

¹² John Shanahan, *Trump: U.S. Should Stop Paying to Defend Countries that Can Protect Selves*, in <https://apnews.com/05133dbe63ace98766527ec7d16ede08> (Accessed on 05.03.2020).

¹³ Mark Landler, Julie Hirschfeld Davis, *Trump Tells Japan It Can Protect Itself by Buying U.S. Arms*, in <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/06/world/asia/trump-japan-shinzo-abe.html> (Accessed on 05.03.2020).

¹⁴ Lara Seligman, Robbie Gramer, *Trump Asks Tokyo to Quadruple Payments for U.S. Troops in Japan*, in <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/15/trump-asks-tokyo-quadruple-payments-us-troops-japan/> (Accessed on 05.03.2020).

¹⁵ *Trump: What Does the US Contribute to NATO in Europe?*, in <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-44717074> (Accessed on 05.03.2020).

¹⁶ *Transcript: Donald Trump on NATO, Turkey’s Coup Attempt and the World*, in

president also questioned the worth of defending small European countries with the risk of starting a war with Russia.¹⁷ What is more important is that the threat to leave the allies to their own devices in the face of threats was not just rhetoric. In December 2018, Trump announced a military withdrawal from Syria by arguing that the only objective to be in the Middle East, the ISIS threat, was eliminated. Not only did this decision shock France and the United Kingdom who had troops in Syria, but also pushed the Syrian Kurdish groups – the principal partner of the Pentagon on the ground – into the arms of the Syrian regime as they felt betrayed.¹⁸

Trump's determination to change America's traditional liberal leadership policies as well as his nationalist rhetoric and actions were especially troublesome for the CEE countries. Russia's annexation of Crimea and pro-Russian military forces in Eastern Ukraine had already made most of the regional countries feel unsafe, and the possibility of American abdication of global leadership rang the alarm bells more loudly. Furthermore, Trump's lukewarm messages to Russian president Vladimir Putin and his desire to reset relations with Russia¹⁹ was the most worrisome development for the CEE region. Shortly after Trump became president, the former European leaders, mostly from Eastern Europe, wrote a joint letter to the president-elect and urged him not to make a mistake by ending the sanctions against Russia and accepting the division and subjugation of Ukraine. "Have no doubt: Vladimir Putin is not America's ally," the letter warned, "Putin does not seek American greatness. As your allies, we do." The letter also pointed out that the Russian leader "views concessions as a sign of weakness" and if given, concessions would destabilize Eastern Europe economically and feed "ex-

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-interview.html> (Accessed on 05.03.2020).

¹⁷ Daalder, Lindsay, *The Empty Throne*, e-book edition.

¹⁸ Julian Borger, Martin Chulov, *Trump Shocks Allies and Advisers with Plan to Pull US Troops Out of Syria*, in <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/dec/19/us-troops-syria-withdrawal-trump> (Accessed on 05.03.2020); Ben Hubbard, *Syria's Kurds, Feeling Betrayed by the U.S., Ask Assad Government for Protection*, in <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/world/middleeast/syria-kurds-turkey-manbij.html> (Accessed on 05.03.2020).

¹⁹ Jenna Johnson, Karen DeYoung, Elise Wiebeck, *Trump and Putin Speak by Phone, Say They'll Work Together to Improve Relations*, in https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-and-putin-speak-by-phone-say-theyll-work-together-to-improve-relations/2016/11/14/242f44c2-aa90-11e6-977a-1030f822fc35_story.html (Accessed on 09.03.2020).

tremist, oligarchic and anti-Western elements there.”²⁰ The fear was also felt at the public level as in December 2016 and January 2017 the people in the Baltic countries started making contingency plans, in case they would have to leave the country at short notice after a possible Russian invasion. Some Lithuanians and Estonians even started training themselves for guerrilla warfare in the forests.²¹ When Trump questioned Article 5 of NATO, which recognizes that an attack against a NATO member is an attack against all, and blamed the Montenegrin people for being so aggressive that they may cause the World War III²², or when he was reluctant to criticize Russia after the latter showed aggression against Ukrainian ships on the Kerch Strait,²³ CEE governments and publics understandably felt uneasy about American security guarantees.

CONTINUITY IN SECURITY COOPERATION BETWEEN THE U.S. AND CEE COUNTRIES

Despite President Trump’s self-interested nationalist tendencies and the initial fear about the lack of leadership against the Russian threat, the security cooperation between the United States and the CEE countries did not diminish, and even grew in the first three years of the Trump administration. In 2017, the United States signed defence cooperation agreements with each of the Baltic states, and the Trump administration authorized a security assistance program to improve these countries capacities to deter and resist aggression. In 2018 and 2019, the United States and Baltic countries also signed roadmaps that organized bilateral security cooperation over the next five years. These agreements aimed at strengthening the partnership on multiple military issues, including multilateral operations, maritime security in the Baltic Sea, intelligence-sharing,

²⁰ *Letter to President-elect Donald J. Trump from America’s Allies*, in https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2017/01/10/Editorial-Opinion/Graphics/Letter_to_Trump.pdf?tid=a_inl (Accessed on 09.03.2020).

²¹ Aliide Naylor, *The Shadow in the East: Vladimir Putin and the New Baltic Front*, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2020, p. 34.

²² *Very Aggressive’: Trump Suggests Montenegro Could Cause World War Three*, in <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/19/very-aggressive-trump-suggests-montenegro-could-cause-world-war-three> (Accessed on 09.03.2020).

²³ Nicole Gaouette, *Trump Refuses to Condemn Russian Aggression Against Ukraine*, in <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/26/politics/russia-ukraine-trump-silence/index.html> (Accessed on 09.03.2020).

cybersecurity capabilities and early warning systems. During this period, Congress also mandated the Secretaries of State and Defence to jointly work on the security requirements of the Baltic countries to deter and resist Russian aggression.²⁴ After the meeting with the leaders of Baltic countries in April 2018, Trump stated that Baltic countries' fulfilling their defence spending obligations should be an example to other NATO members and these countries "can trust the United States will remain a strong, proud, and loyal friend and ally."²⁵ Although Baltic leaders were concerned about Trump's criticism of NATO and his moderate tone towards Vladimir Putin, they appreciated the administration's effort, even if it is in the form of "unpredictable leadership," to reform military cooperation against Russia.²⁶

The "business as usual" approach also continued in the American policies towards the Balkans. Although the president repeatedly demonstrated his unwillingness to fight against Russia for the safety of small Balkan countries, the administration supported Montenegro's accession to NATO despite Russian opposition. In his visit to Montenegro in August 2017, Vice President Mike Pence assured the Balkan states that the United States is committed to their defence against Russian attacks and called on them to look westward for peace and stability. During the visit, Pence also accused "Moscow-backed agents" of attempting to attack the Montenegro parliament and even to assassinate the prime minister Milo Djukanovic, to dissuade the country from NATO membership. Yet he stated that NATO's doors are open to all European countries who "share our values, contribute to the common defence, and strive to achieve security, prosperity, and freedom for their people."²⁷ Despite the fears that the United States will not be interested in regional developments, officials in the Trump administration also played an active role in mediating some political crises in the

²⁴ Derek E. Mix, *Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: Background and U.S.-Baltic Relations*, in "Congressional Research Service", Report No. 46139, 2020, p. 9-10.

²⁵ *Remarks by President Trump and Heads of the Baltic States in Joint Press Conference*, in <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-heads-baltic-states-joint-press-conference/> (Accessed on 10.03.2020).

²⁶ David Jackson, Gregory Korte, *Donald Trump to Baltics: I've Been Tough on Russia, But Want Better Relations*, in <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/04/03/donald-trump-meets-baltic-leaders-worried-russia/480957002/> (Accessed on 10.03.2020).

²⁷ *Mike Pence in Montenegro Urges Balkans to Turn Away from Russia*, in <https://www.dw.com/en/mike-pence-in-montenegro-urges-balkans-to-turn-away-from-russia/a-39943571> (Accessed on 10.03.2020).

Balkans such as the government formation in Macedonia, the controversial elections in Albania, and political disagreements in Kosovo over the establishment of a military and border agreement with Montenegro. The United States also offered its support for the debated friendship agreement between Bulgaria and Macedonia²⁸ and for the territorial exchange between Kosovo and Serbia to resolve the long-term dispute between these countries.²⁹

In Central Europe, the fears about American isolationism also proved false. During the July 2017 visit of the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, Trump stated that the United States is “committed to maintaining peace and security in Central and Eastern Europe” while emphasizing that “NATO remains critical to deterring conflict and ensuring that war between great powers never again ravages Europe.”³⁰ Throughout the Trump administration, defence cooperation with Poland remained close and extensive, and Warsaw became the focus of the administration’s Central European strategy. The administration decided to strengthen its military presence in Poland by continuing the construction of an Aegis-Ashore missile defence site although problems with contractors and construction delayed the project until 2022. Being part of the European Phased Adaptive Approach with other military sites in Spain, Turkey and Romania,³¹ it was announced that Aegis-Ashore would target Iran, North Korea, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, not Russia.³² Still, the missile system raised the nerves in Moscow as Russian officials called it “a direct threat to global and regional security” while warning that the host countries might turn to “smoking ruins” in a possible nuclear confrontation in Europe.³³

²⁸ Matthew Rhodes, *The Trump Administration and the Balkans*, in “Security Insights”, 2017, No. 22, p. 2-3.

²⁹ Petrit Selimi, *This is How Donald Trump Can Win in the Balkans*, in <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-donald-trump-can-win-balkans-31227> (Accessed on 10.03.2020).

³⁰ Snodgrass, *Holding the Line*, e-book edition.

³¹ Jen Judson, *Poland’s Aegis Ashore Delayed to 2022 with New Way Forward Coming Soon*, in <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/federal-budget/2020/02/18/polands-aegis-ashore-delayed-to-2022-with-new-way-forward-coming-soon/> (Accessed on 12.03.2020).

³² John Grady, *Ambassador: Aegis Ashore Program Focused on the Rogue States, not Russia*, in <https://news.usni.org/2018/04/18/ambassador-aegis-ashore-program-focused-rogue-states-not-russia> (Accessed on 12.03.2020).

³³ Andrew E. Kramer, *Russia Calls New U.S. Missile Defense System a Direct Threat*, in <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/world/europe/russia-nato-us-romania->

The Trump administration also agreed to send 1000 additional troops to Poland and strengthen the “enhanced forward presence” in the country to deter military aggression from Russia. In the meeting between Trump and Duda in June 2019, both sides agreed to increase American logistical, administrative and training facilities, strengthen special operations forces, and establish a unit of aerial reconnaissance drones in Poland.³⁴ In these growing alliances, Polish leadership learned what Trump prioritizes in bilateral relations. As Trump approaches foreign policy as a businessman, he likes to sell American products to foreign countries while criticizing hegemonic leadership policies of guaranteeing the security of other countries in return for no tangible benefits. When the Polish leadership was eager to increase military purchases from the United States in order to intensify its military modernization, they gained President Trump’s favour and strengthened the bilateral ties. In the last three years, Poland bought air-to-air missiles, F-16 support and sustainment services, and air and missile defence system batteries worth more than five billion dollars combined. In February 2019, Poland announced plans to buy twenty High Mobility Artillery Rocket System launchers and requested to purchase thirty-two F-35 fighter jets in May 2019.³⁵ Most importantly, the Polish government sought to establish a permanent U.S. military base in Poland with an offer Trump would not turn down: paying “billions” for the facility. Duda’s suggestion to name the facility as “Fort Trump” may have been a joke, but it is possible to interpret it as a strategic move on the Polish part to feed the American president’s ego, which is critical for increasing bilateral relations during the Trump administration.³⁶

Finally, Ukraine was another CEE country that benefited from close security cooperation with the United States during the Trump administration. Although Ukraine was at the top of the list of countries under threat from Russia and was concerned about Trump’s non-traditional foreign policy strategy, according to some analysts, the Trump administration was more devoted to the protection of Ukraine in terms of military assistance than the former Obama administration. For example, in April 2018 the administration agreed to deliver Javelin anti-tank

missile-defense.html (Accessed on 12.03.2020).

³⁴ Derek E. Mix, *Poland: Background and U.S. Relations*, “Congressional Research Service”, Report No. 45784, 2019, p. 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁶ Melissa Hooper, *Duda’s Ego Trip*, in <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/10/dudas-ego-trip/> (Accessed on 12.03.2020).

missiles to the Ukrainian army to resist Russian aggression. The Obama administration rejected to provide these weapons to Ukraine for a long time with the concern that Russia may have acquired intelligence about the weapon's sensitive technology.³⁷ The administration sent lethal defensive weapons and non-lethal defensive aids worth millions of dollars to Ukraine, while the American soldiers participated in several military activities with the Ukrainian army, including the Rapid Trident air exercise in September 2017 and the Clear Sky exercise in October 2018.³⁸

Although the president was criticized when he did not adopt any punitive action against Moscow, choosing to remain silent after the Russian navy seized three Ukrainian ships and arrested twenty-four sailors in November 2018,³⁹ the administration supported the territorial integrity of the country and frequently pointed out Russia's human right violations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. In the Crimea Declaration announced in July 2018, the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blamed Russia for "act[ing] in a manner unworthy of a great nation" by occupying Crimea and choosing to isolate themselves from the international community by violation the main principle in international law: using force against the territorial integrity of a state. Similar to the Welles Declaration of 1940 which provided the U.S. refusal to recognize the Soviet Union's annexation of the Baltic States, the Crimea Declaration and following statements by the administration pointed out that the United States "does not and will not ever recognize Russia's claims of sovereignty over the peninsula."⁴⁰ Likewise, on the Eastern Ukraine issue, the administration regularly updated the public about the conflict status, settlement programs and humanitarian issues while criticizing Russia for its "continued failure" to meet international commitments. As with other CEE countries, the

³⁷ Ken Dilanian, *Former CIA Director: We Worried Arming Ukraine Would Hand Technology to Russian Spies*, in <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/former-cia-director-we-worried-arming-ukraine-would-hand-technology-n1089926> (Accessed on 13.03.2020).

³⁸ Robert D. Blackwill, *Trump's Foreign Policies are Better than They Seem*, in "Council on Foreign Relations", Report No. 84, 2019, p. 37-38.

³⁹ Nathan Hodge, *Donald Trump's Silence on Ukraine Could Make a Bad Situation Worse*, in <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/26/europe/russia-trump-analysis-hodge-intl/index.html> (Accessed on 13.03.2020).

⁴⁰ Michael R. Pompeo, *Crimea Declaration*, in <https://www.state.gov/crimea-declaration/> (Accessed on 13.03.2020); Michael R. Pompeo, *Crimea is Ukraine*, in <https://www.state.gov/crimea-is-ukraine-3/> (Accessed on 13.03.2020).

Trump administration kept supporting Ukraine against Russia's aggressive intentions in the region.⁴¹

ORGANIZATIONAL BALANCING: TRADITIONALIST ELEMENTS IN THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

As it is clear, Donald Trump's "American First" strategy and his discomfort with liberal leadership and traditional alliance relations significantly contradict with his administration's actual policy choices in the CEE region since he became the president. This inconsistency between rhetoric and practice can be explained with the balancing forces in the administration. As mentioned, Trump's victory in the presidential election was not expected⁴² and even Trump himself was not willing to think about whom he would hire in the administration once he was elected.⁴³ Although a list of possible candidates for the administration positions was prepared by Chris Christie during the campaign, Trump and his advisers ignored his work after the victory and they started to form the administration from square one.⁴⁴ As a result, Trump did not surround himself with like-minded people who would share his American First strategy and, except for Steve Bannon, he did not have a support force that would help him to change traditional liberal leadership policies. Although the Republican Party did not really embrace Trump during the election,⁴⁵ soon traditional elements of the party who favoured American global leadership

⁴¹ Cory Welt, *Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy*, "Congressional Research Service", Report No. 45008, 2020, p. 26-27.

⁴² A few days before the election, the New York Times only gave a 15 percent chance for Trump to win the election. Josh Katz, *Who Will Be President?*, in <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/presidential-polls-forecast.html> (Accessed on 15.03.2020).

⁴³ Trump was against the transition preparation because he believed that Mitt Romney lost the 2012 presidential election against Obama since he focused on transition meetings instead of the election campaign. Woodward, *Fear*, p. 42.

⁴⁴ Daalder and Lindsay, *The Empty Throne*, e-book edition.

⁴⁵ Once Trump became the presidential nominee of the Republican Party, several party members, as well as conservative policy experts and intellectuals, formed a phenomenal movement called Never Trump as they promised not to work in the administration if Trump would be elected. For recent works on the movement, see Robert P. Saldin, Steven M. Teles, *Never Trump: The Revolt of the Conservative Elites*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020.

filled important posts in the administration. Like a Trojan Horse, these officials strongly resisted the nationalist tendencies of the president, whether they personally liked Trump or not.

Both Secretaries of State during the Trump administration, Rex Tillerson and Mike Pompeo belong to this group whom I will call traditionalists. Although Tillerson's business ties with Moscow during his job as the CEO of ExxonMobil created some questions about his nomination at the beginning,⁴⁶ as the secretary of state Tillerson remained committed to America's traditional alliance ties and its leadership role in the world. As in other parts of the world, Tillerson was more interested with continuity in the CEE region than with change. Soon after assuming the administration position, Tillerson urged the NATO countries to improve the security situation in eastern Ukraine and "push Russia to end its aggression against its neighbours."⁴⁷ Unlike the president who wanted to follow a balanced approach between Russia and the CEE countries, Tillerson argued that NATO members in Eastern Europe were right to be alarmed by Moscow's aggressive moves⁴⁸ and he believed that Russian aggression is the biggest threat to European security. In November 2017, Tillerson blamed Russia for using "malicious tactics" against the United States and European countries and stated that relations with Russia will not be normal until the Ukraine issue is resolved. In this speech, he also gave the guarantee that if a NATO ally is attacked, the United States will be the first to respond.⁴⁹ During his tenure as the secretary of state, Tillerson generally gave harsher messages to Russia than the president he served

⁴⁶ "I don't know what Mr. Tillerson's relationship with Vladimir Putin was, but I'll tell you it is a matter of concern to me," late Senator John McCain, who was quite influential as the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, publicly said. Rebecca Morin, *McCain: Tillerson Relationship with Putin a 'Matter of Concern'*, in <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/john-mccain-rex-tillerson-putin-secretary-state-232467> (Accessed 15.03.2020).

⁴⁷ *On Secretary Tillerson's Upcoming Travel to Brussels, Belgium for the NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting*, in <https://www.state.gov/on-secretary-tillersons-upcoming-travel-to-brussels-belgium-for-the-nato-foreign-ministers-meeting/> (Accessed on 15.03.2020).

⁴⁸ Theodor Tudoroiu, *Brexit, President Trump, and the Changing Geopolitics of Eastern Europe*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 155.

⁴⁹ Carol Morello, *Tillerson Has Harsh Words for Russia's 'Malicious Tactics'*, in https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tillerson-has-harsh-words-for-russias-malicious-tactics/2017/11/28/f3136426-d465-11e7-a986-d0a9770d9a3e_story.html (Accessed on 15.03.2020).

and most often tried to soften the president's messages that could have been regarded as a lack of commitment for European security.

Tillerson had significant foreign policy disagreements with the president, and in March-April 2018, he was replaced by Mike Pompeo. Although Mike Pompeo was more in line with the president than his predecessor and friendlier to the America First strategy, he can also be counted as a traditionalist as he prioritizes balancing global and regional competitors such as China, Iran and Russia. As the head of Central Intelligence Agency in the first year of the administration, Pompeo contradicted the president about Russian meddling in the American elections and warned Trump that Putin is a dangerous leader.⁵⁰ After coming to State, Pompeo continued his negative assessments of Russian foreign policy. During his visit to the CEE region in February 2019, Pompeo warned that post-communist countries are vulnerable to Russian and Chinese political and economic influence and blamed Moscow for using economic initiatives, especially the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, to make aggressive inroads in the regional countries. Pompeo defended American alliance ties in the region by claiming that American "disengagement" in Central and Eastern Europe created a vacuum that Russia and China exploited.⁵¹ According to Pompeo, it was "crazy talk" to claim that the administration was not tough on Russia as, he argued, American military spending was raising the costs for Russian foreign policy in its neighbourhood.⁵² In terms of economic balancing, Pompeo recently announced the Three Sea Initiative that committed \$1 billion in CEE countries to develop cross border energy, transport and energy infrastructure between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas.⁵³

Another person who saw Russia as a threat and believed in the importance of alliance relationships in the administration was James Mattis, the Secretary of Defence between January 2017 and January 2019. As a former four-star military

⁵⁰ *Mike Pompeo: Trump's Loyalist Diplomat and Ex-spy-master*, in <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38029336> (Accessed on 16.03.2020).

⁵¹ Matthew Lee, *Pompeo Warns Eastern Europe on Chinese and Russian Meddling*, in <https://apnews.com/d6639cadbde74b6d8bf2acc0e86c4550> (Accessed on 16.03.2020).

⁵² Everett Rosenfeld, *It's 'Crazy Talk' to Say the US Isn't Tough on Russia: Mike Pompeo*, in <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/12/mike-pompeo-crazy-talk-to-say-the-us-isnt-tough-on-russia.html> (Accessed on 16.03.2020).

⁵³ *US Commits \$1 Billion Dollars to Develop Central European Infrastructure*, in <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/press-releases/us-commits-1-billion-dollars-to-develop-central-european-infrastructure/> (Accessed on 16.03.2020).

general, Mattis looked at world affairs through a realpolitik perspective. When he was the CentCom Commander in 2010-2013, Mattis contradicted President Obama about the Iranian issue as he regarded the Islamic regime as “the greatest threat” to American interests in the Middle East and did not agree with the president’s moderate approach toward Iran.⁵⁴ This realpolitik mindset also showed itself against Russia when Mattis assumed the post of Defence Secretary in the Trump administration. Mattis personally mistrusted Putin and believed that the trust will not be recovered while Putin was in power. Yet, more than Russia’s actions, his main concern was that Trump’s policies caused a rift between the United States and European allies and pushed Europe to take a pro-Russia position. “The European Union has embraced Putin,” Mattis complained by emphasizing that the German Chancellor Angela Merkel “talks to Putin two times a week, for one to two hours at a time.”⁵⁵ Unlike the president who gets along with Putin well while alienating allies, Mattis sought to follow the traditional balance of power policy by cooperating with allies in Europe. As a former military officer, Mattis especially remained interested in the military dimension of the problem, especially on the fast movement of NATO troops in the CEE region. With his request, NATO developed a “European Readiness Initiative” – “Four Thirties” in its popular name – which asked member countries to be able to deploy 30 battalions, 30 battleships, and 30 squadrons within 30 days or less.⁵⁶ Like other traditionalists in the administration, Mattis was in favour of American-led rules-based world order and believed that the diminished authority of the United States would create a vacuum that other countries such as China, Russia and Iran would eagerly fill.

Nikki Haley, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, also played a significant role in shaping the administration policies toward Russia. Like Pompeo, Haley was also sympathetic to the president’s foreign policy agenda (more than Tillerson or Mattis), yet her vigorous disagreement with Trump took place over issues concerning Russia. Haley criticized the Russian activities in the United Nations severely as she claimed that Moscow was using its veto power to protect authoritarian regimes while opposing human rights resolutions for political interests. “The Russians aren’t our friends. They will never be our friends,” Haley told Trump when the president wanted to reset relations with Russia and

⁵⁴ Woodward, *Fear*, p. 52-54.

⁵⁵ Snodgrass, *Holding the Line*, e-book edition.

⁵⁶ Teri Schultz, *NATO’s ‘Four Thirties’ Plan – Does It Add Up?*, in <https://www.dw.com/en/natos-four-thirties-plan-does-it-add-up/a-44357190> (Accessed on 16.03.2020).

avoid publicly criticizing Putin.⁵⁷ In her first official statement as ambassador, Haley used her entire speech to criticize Russian acts in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea and pointed out that “the dire situation in Eastern Ukraine is one that demands clear and strong condemnation of Russian actions.”⁵⁸ Haley also tried to assure the European allies that the United States will not leave them alone against the Russian threat. “[G]reater cooperation with Russia cannot come at the expense of the security of our European friends and allies,” Haley said in an attempt to mollify concerns about Trump’s relations with Putin.⁵⁹ All in all, without publicly clashing with the president, Haley used her post to balance Russian power in the United Nations while frequently warning the president about Russian intentions.

It is possible to add more names to the list of traditionalists within the Trump administration such as John Bolton, Mike Esper or Robert O’Brien. Some of these traditionalists left the administration frustrated, as Mattis did after Trump announced the withdrawal from Syria. In his resignation letter, Mattis pointed out that his disagreement about the treatment of America’s allies is one of the main reasons for his leaving and urged the president to treat allies with respect and be “clear-eyed about both malign actors and strategic competitors.”⁶⁰ Tillerson and Bolton also resigned after serious confrontations with the president over foreign policies. Yet, these traditionalists were replaced by people who also have a traditional mindset albeit with different personal characteristics.⁶¹ Despite their differences in personality and their relationship with the president, all traditionalists believe that American leadership in the world is necessary; some strategic com-

⁵⁷ Haley, *With All Due Respect*.

⁵⁸ *Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Ukraine*, in <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-ukraine/> (Accessed on 18.03.2020).

⁵⁹ *Washington Committed to Europe Alliances, Says U.S. Envoy to UN*, in <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-haley-un-ambassador-european-allies/28323321.html> (Accessed on 18.03.2020).

⁶⁰ *James Mattis’ Resignation Letter in Full*, in <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46644841> (Accessed on 18.03.2020).

⁶¹ For example, Robert O’Brien, the president’s National Security Adviser, was less confrontational with the president than his predecessor John Bolton, but he also believed the American leadership role in the global affairs. For more information on O’Brien’s foreign policy views, see Robert C. O’Brien, *While America Slept: Restoring American Leadership to a World in Crisis*, New York, Encounter Books, 2016, What is more illuminating for our subject is that O’Brien starts the book by explaining Hitler’s occupation of Czechoslovakia and Putin’s aggression in Ukraine with the same excuse: to protect ethnic kinship ties.

petitors and enemies need to be balanced; alliance ties are vital to protect American interests around the world. As a result, all of them, with different level of success, try to convince the president to follow traditional leadership policies by curbing the self-interested characteristics of the America First strategy.

Unlike the Western European countries that are quite critical of Trump's rhetoric and unilateral actions, the CEE countries have no reason to oppose the American president as long as security cooperation continues. They also do not have many options. For many years, the European Union has proved incapable of preventing security problems in the CEE region. The organization was slow not only in responding against Russian aggression but also to other non-traditional security problems including the refugee crisis, economic problems and finally the recent coronavirus pandemic.⁶² While the organization is still popular in the CEE region mainly because of its economic benefits,⁶³ the security cooperation with the United States and NATO is difficult to neglect for these countries as long as Russian aggression in its neighbourhood continues. In addition, the growing power of right-wing parties in the CEE countries also makes cooperation with the United States more attractive, especially during the Trump administration. The right-wing political parties are prone to criticize the European Union both on political and economic grounds. The supporters of these parties believe that the organization hurts national economies while the democracy and human rights standards of the EU contradict with some policy choices of these parties. As Trump is not willing to judge the countries according to liberal values, it is possible to argue that for those countries which have right-wing parties in power – not only in Poland and Hungary but Baltic countries as well – Trump is the ideal politician to occupy the White House, as long as security cooperation continues, of course.

CONCLUSIONS

This article argues that in spite of a nationalist president who has questioned America's leadership role in global affairs and his country's commitment

⁶² Daniel Boffey, *Italy Criticises EU for Being Slow to Help Over Coronavirus Epidemic*, in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/italy-criticises-eu-being-slow-help-coronavirus-epidemic> (Accessed on 19.03.2020).

⁶³ *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism*, in <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/10/Pew-Research-Center-Value-of-Europe-report-FINAL-UPDATED.pdf> (Accessed on 19.03.2020), p. 52.

to the protection of allies, the security cooperation between the United States and the CEE countries increased in the first three years of the Trump administration. This finding is interesting as there are several researchers and analysts who argue that America has abdicated its global leadership position and paint an apocalyptic picture about the future of great power politics. These fears were not baseless. Trump's pre-election promises, his America First strategy and his intention to build good relations with strategic competitors and enemies – Russia, China and even including Iran⁶⁴ – all indicated that American grand strategy would have fundamentally changed if Trump had been elected. These fears can be observed with the growing concern within the CEE countries after Trump declared victory in 2016.

Yet, the fears did not materialize. Opposite to expectations, the political and military ties between Washington and the region increased even more than before. How can we understand the contradiction between the rhetoric and action then? If we look at the system level, we will see that there was no fundamental change in the power dynamics between the United States and Russia. At the individual level of analysis, we also do not see a transformation in Trump's personality. The state-level is the most appropriate level of analysis to explain the increasing relations between the United States and the CEE countries. Similar to the bureaucratic politics model,⁶⁵ I argue that the interactions among government members are critical in shaping American policies towards the CEE region during the Trump administration. Trump came to the presidency with specific political thoughts. However, because he was not able to surround himself with like-minded people who would share his "America First" strategy, he was soon influenced by traditionalists who were determined to pursue the American global leadership role. These officials formed the majority of the administration and provided for the continuity of American competition with Russia in the CEE region.

The future is not as uncertain as it was at the time Trump came to power. Although traditionalists leave the administration one by one, other traditionalists replaced them. As a result, even if Trump will be re-elected in 2020, it is unlikely that he would cause a fundamental change in American grand strategy in the CEE region. The other likely presidential candidate, Joe Biden, represents the views of the traditional elements in American foreign policy, so his election would not hurt

⁶⁴ Anonymous, *A Warning*, New York, Twelve, 2019, e-book edition.

⁶⁵ For more information, see Graham T. Allison, Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications*, in "World Politics", 1972, Vol. 24, p. 40-79.

American security commitments as well. The only presidential candidate that may cause a significant change in American foreign policy is Bernie Sanders who, like Trump, resists the traditional power structure in American politics but from the Democratic Party side. If he comes to power, the United States may focus on domestic reforms and social welfare more than costly commitments abroad. Yet, as the Trump case shows, the traditional elements in American politics are quite powerful, and they would resist whoever wants to change the direction of American foreign policy away from a global leadership role.