

US relations with Eastern Europe

Realities and perspectives



Artur Lakatos

It is probable, that relations between the USA and the small countries of East-Central Europe have never been as important as nowadays. This may be because of the globalization process, which reduce the importance of frontiers and distances, or because of the new US geopolitical strategy. It may also be simply the result of an uncalculated, but natural evolution of international realities.

During the XIX century, the USA was an emerging power, not yet strong enough to interfere in European great power politics, and in East-Central Europe, a region not yet organized into nation-states, authoritarian great powers were dominant. The World War I's result was decided by the intervention of US troops on the side of Entente powers, and President Wilson's idealistic vision played a great role in the reshaping of borders in this specific area. After Wilson's political defeat, the leading Republicans chose to remove the USA from international politics and adopted an isolationist general policy. Just as Henry Kissinger wrote in his famous book (*Diplomacy*) for American policy-makers, Europe seemed to be too distant, with quarrels between states which often seemed for Americans to be senseless.¹ And for Eastern European small states, new, insecure, and usually embroiled in quarrels with their neighbors, alliances with European powers were much more important than connections with the distant USA, which lacked both power and will to intervene in these disputes.

During World War II, some of the East-Central European states found themselves in the Axis camp, others in the Allied one, and their wartime positions determined their positions and treatment among either the postwar winners or losers. Those which fought alongside the Axis (Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) declared war to the USA too, but this did not lead to serious repercussions, it seems, for further relations. The Western world considered these nations primarily as victims of Nazi Germany and their own pro-Fascist governments rather than real aggressors. Besides, after 1948, all the countries which were "freed" by the Red Army became parts of the Soviet Communist Empire, reinforcing their victim status.

During the Cold War, these countries were integrated into the bloc considered to be the enemy by the Western democracies. Yet, the inhabitants of these countries were

1 KISSINGER, H., *Diplomația*, București 1998, p. 343.

seen by American politicians² much more as the victims of a cruel totalitarian system than as enemies, and were treated in this way. There existed many cases in which one or more countries of the region received American sympathy for some act which was against Soviet interests, and this good will was often concretized in economic and political advantages too. Examples include Tito's opposition to Stalin, the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring in 1968 and the Romanian Ceausescu's opposition toward Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, and Polish Solidarnost. After a while, the USA even commercial relations and trading privileges to certain states, based on mutual cooperation and understanding at a certain moment, but these concessions could be used as coercive tools too. For example "most favored nation" treatment was given to Yugoslavia, Romania and Poland, but was withdrawn from Poland in 1981, because of the imposition of martial law.³ In Romania's case, the "most favored nation" treatment was revoked in 1988,⁴ as part of American pressures for the respect of Human rights by Ceausescu's regime.⁵ These relations never exceeded in importance those with the Soviet Union, till the collapse of Communist world order, in 1989.

After the repressive Communist regimes collapsed in East-Central Europe, these states and nations choose to adopt the model of Western democracy, trying to develop- with more or less success- functional pluralist democracies, with well-working administrative institutions, and economic welfare. On the level of foreign policy, the general goal was integration into "Euro-Atlantic" structures, mainly NATO and the European Union. But American and Western European politicians were suspicious regarding the viability of these new democracies, and asked for serious proofs and guarantees of their competence. The enthusiast application of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland in 1991 for "Western" structures was politely, but firmly rejected by Western governments in general.⁶ In 1990 and 1991 important Western leaders, like Francois Mitterrand, John Major and James Baker promised to Gorbaciov that NATO would not expand into former Communist countries.⁷ Even after the Soviet Union was gone, its main successor, the Russian Federation was immersed in its own internal troubles. Neither the USA, nor the European Union's main members were in

2 American foreign policy during Cold War has a large bibliography, and among its resources we have to mention: KISSINGER, H., op. cit.; MCCAULEY, M., *Russia, America and the Cold War 1949-1991*, New York 2004; MAIER, Ch. S., *The Cold War in Europe (era of a divided continent)*, New York 1991; MCWILLIAMS, W. C., *The World since 1945: politics, war and revolution in the Nuclear Age*, Colorado 1988; WESTAD, O. A. (ed.), *Reviewing the Cold War, Approaches, Interpretations, Theory*, London 2000; etc.

3 HOLSTI, K. J., *International Politics*, London 1995, p. 168.

4 PUȘCAȘ, V., *Sticks and Carrots. Regranting the most-favored Nation Status for Romania (US Congress, 1990-1996)*, Cluj-Napoca 2006, p. 318.

5 HARRINGTON, J. F. — COURTNEY, B. J., *Relații româno-americane 1940-1990*, București 2002, pp. 505-538.

6 ZHONY, Y., *The Fallen Wall and its Aftermath: Impact of Regime Change upon Foreign Policy Behavior in Six East European Countries*, in: *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2, June 1994, pp. 235-239.

7 SOLJENÎȚIN, A., *Rusia sub avalanșă*, București 2000, pp. 31-32.

a hurry to embrace former Communist countries, and even less enthusiastic about accepting them as new members in Euro-Atlantic structures. For example, Ronald Steel in one of his essays wrote: “For the time being Eastern Europe is a no-man’s-land, detached from Soviet control, but not yet capable of being absorbed into the democratic West without dangers for all concerned.”⁸ Professor Stephen Fischer-Galați summarized that: “The highly competitive economies are only marginally interested in providing economic assistance or in developing markets in heavily indebted countries with worthless currencies, inefficient work forces, and obsolete industrial plants.”⁹ In 1997, admission in NATO was refused to most of the candidates with the exception of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. And in the immediately following years there was no sign that this kind of attitude would change into a more permissive one. Jonathan Dean wrote, arguing against further expansion, in 1998: “defending Romania and Bulgaria in the south will require major NATO ground, air and naval installations on the Black Sea, challenging Russia’s traditional influence there.”¹⁰

What were the reasons for this attitude of the USA – and other Western states – toward the efforts of former Communist countries to become part of the “club”? They were multiple. One of them could be their cautious approach to offending Russia. Russia ceased to be a superpower for most of the nineties, but its large size and nuclear arsenal made it a presence to be reckoned with, at least in its immediate neighborhood. Looking back on American foreign policy of the nineties, there can be distinguished two main currents in the Department of State: one more enthusiastic, dedicated to enlargement, whose main representative was Richard C. Holbrook, and the “Russia first” current, represented mainly by Strobe Talbot.¹¹ Even if during the last two decades, in most of the cases a violent reaction of the Russian Federation did not happen, and fears from it seemed to be exaggerated, the current situation in Ukraine is proving that Russia is still a force to reckon with. Another reason could be that fears regarding the unprepared condition of these states for becoming full members of the Western community. There were real reasons for these concerns, notably the economic decline during the years of transition, the rise of unemployment, poverty and organized crime, the rise of extreme right and Nationalist tendencies in many countries. A third motive could be that there existed internal fears in the USA that hasty expansion could have major financial consequences that exceeded the benefits that might accrue. For example there were three major studies of the costs of NATO’s 1997 enlargement, by the Congressional Budget Office the RAND Corporation and a Pentagon report to Congress. Based on their data, experts deduced the following: “The costs of incorporating the backward states and armies of such countries as Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia into NATO — not to mention providing a credible

8 STEEL, R., *Europe after the Superpowers*, in: HELD, J. (ed.), *The Columbia History of Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century*, New York 1992, p. 171.

9 FISCHER-GALAȚI, S., *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century: “Old Wine in New Bottles”*, in: HELD, J., op. cit., p. 15.

10 MENDELSON, J. et al., *The Case Against NATO Expansion*, in: *Current History*, Vol. 97, March 1998, pp. 133–135.

11 STAN, V., *România și eșecul campaniei pentru Vest*, București 1998, p. 37.

defense of the Baltic republics — will be staggering. If those factors are considered, even the high-end CBO estimate of \$ 125 billion might have to be doubled”. It seems this was one of the motives invoked by US officials in private meetings to their Romanian counterparts, at least this is said by analysts familiar with both the American and Romanian culture.¹² And there existed a fourth reason, which can affect very seriously National pride of several people, but which is no less important than the others: for the USA, in this period, Central and Eastern Europe represented only some secondary interests in comparison with other region of the world, like Western Europe, the Far East, the Middle East or Latin-America. Representing relatively inconsequential military power, reduced and unsure prospects for economic investments and fertile ground for revival of aggressive nationalist tendencies, East- and Central European countries could only be seen as “poor relations” by the Western powers.

The situation changed a lot after September 11, 2001. This date can even be seen as the point at which visible unipolarity and US hegemony (illustrated by statistics of economic development, high living standards in the country, strong corporations and wars waged with full success and small losses) started to decline and the world began moving toward a more complex and diverse international structure. The USA is still the world’s largest power from political, military and economic perspectives, and it will probably remain so for the next decades. But the terrorist’s attacks demonstrated that the world’s only superpower is also vulnerable, and the expensive, but unsuccessful hunt for Osama bin Laden provides a constant reminder of the limits on US power. The Bush administration’s disastrous management of the Iraqi problem has also revealed these limits. Clearly there are other independent – and formidable – actors in the world, including China, the world’s future superpower, a resurgent Russia, the “Big Tiger” Japan, and perhaps even the European Union too. In these conditions, the strategic importance of East- Central European states has to be reinterpreted, especially from a strategic point of view.

Nowadays, the most important ally of the USA from the region is Poland. The causes are multiple: Poland is the biggest state from the region, with strongest army and largest population, the only one from non-Soviet former Communist states which can be a really useful ally for the US in its worldwide plans. Poles consider the USA, by definition, a traditional friend and ally. In a Paris Match poll, taken in 1983 (after suppression of Solidarnost) Poles rated France, Hungary and the USA as their country’s “best friends”, and USSR, GDR and Czechoslovakia as their “worst enemies”. And things did not change from this perspective. Traditional Polish nationalism perceives the nation as “being squeezed between a Russian rock and a German hard place”¹³ And Polish lobby is extremely important in the USA’s internal affairs, because of its size and its power. Americans of Polish origin represent the largest ethnic group among Americans of East European origins. From the beginnings of America’s image as “the promised land”, Polish immigration has always been large; In 1930 there

12 GROSS, P. — TISMĂNEANU, V., *No NATO Shelter for Romania*, in: *Transitions*, Vol. 4., No 7, December 1997, pp. 26–32.

13 SHARP, J. M. O., *Security Options for Central Europe*, in: CRAWFORD, B. (ed.), *The Future of European Security*, Berkeley 1992, p. 64.

were almost 2 millions of first and second generation Poles in the US, concentrated mostly in the great cities,¹⁴ and their number grew in time. Probably because of this important group of US voters, but also because of Poland's size and relative power in its geographic region, Poland is one of those countries which feels free occasionally to US policies, when they are not affecting truly important problems. When the Clinton administration launched with great fanfare the "Partnership for Peace" program, the Polish president of those years, Lech Walesa could adopt a skeptical position, calling the initiative "too little", and "blackmailing".¹⁵ But this does not mean that American-Polish relations ever suffered some serious crises. Actually, Poland is one of those allies of the USA which can offer not only moral, but serious military and diplomatic help too as; it did several times. Poland supported recent US military actions, and in case of Iraq, it was rewarded with command of a whole region. During Ukraine's Orange Revolution, the Deputy Secretary of the US was in regular contact all the time with Polish president Kwasniewski too¹⁶ — among other important politicians—for information exchange and coordination of strategies. Overall, Poland remains a steadfast ally of the United States.. The F-16 affair early in 2004 provides a good example of this stance. Poland decided to buy 48 US-built F-16 (Fighting Falcon) airplanes to modernize its air force, in this way refusing two European alternative offers. The gesture was not welcomed by European powers, but this was secondary for the Polish administration. As Janusz Reiter a former Polish ambassador to Germany, head of the Warsaw Center for International Relations noted: "If you make people in Poland choose between the U.S. and Europe in the security field, they will choose the U.S. Why? Because of history, but also the feeling that in security policy, Europe still is a promise. The U.S. is reality."¹⁷ The bilateral cooperation was even more strengthened recently by the current crisis in Ukraine, Poland acting as a loyal ally of the West in its conflict with the Russian interests.

Another reliable ally for the USA from the region is the Czech Republic. As Professor Murray Wanderbaum wrote, "Traditionally, the United States has a very special relationship with the Czech people. There is a substantial reservoir of goodwill towards Americans. The United States was instrumental in establishing an independent Czechoslovakia".¹⁸ The USA offered important help to the Czechs during the nineties for a successful transition into an open market economy, and the US remains ranked among the top five foreign sources of investment. Investors were and are among the first five in the country. The Czech Republic committed itself also to the American

14 GARRET, S., *Eastern European Ethnic Groups and American Foreign Policy*, in: *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 2, Summer 1978, p. 302.

15 ALBRIGHT, M., *Doamna secretar de stat*, București 2004, pp. 226–227.

16 CLARK, W., *Broken Engagement. The strategy that won the Cold War could help bring democracy to the Middle East- if only the Bush hawks understood it*, in: <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2004/0405.clark.html> [20. 11. 2006].

17 MORAN, M., *For Poles, the choice was easy. But Warsaw's U.S.-Europe balancing act will get harder*, in: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4038199/> [28. 08. 2006].

18 WANDERBAUM, M., *An American Look at the Czech Republic*, in: *Vital Speeches of The Day*, Vol. 72., Nov. 2006, Issue 25, p. 736.

side in the international struggle against terrorism, which is acknowledged by US officials.

The Czech Republic and its government can be vulnerable to serious pressures, as an example from the middle of the nineties shows. In 1996, Czech officials had to answer to international pressure, coming from the Council of Europe, US Congress and US State department, and the Parliament amended the provision requiring two years of residence and five years of a clean criminal record for obtaining citizenship, and gave to the Ministry of Internal Affairs discretion to enforce this condition for Slovak citizens residing permanently in the country since the dissolution of Czechoslovakia.¹⁹ Czech intellectuals — especially from the nineties — do not necessarily follow blindly any kind of Western directives. For example, Vaclav Havel in first post-Cold War years proposed the dismantling of both NATO and Warsaw Pact and the removal of American forces Europe.²⁰ But these proposals never caused any serious conflict, not even at a diplomatic level, and ties between the two countries continue to be strong. The vote given in November 2012 in the General Assembly of the UN concerning the according to Palestine the status of non-member observer state, illustrated well how stable harmony is between American and Czech diplomatic actions. From the nine votes against, the Czech vote was the only one coming from Europe,

A similar, but in some aspects different evolution took place in American relations with the second successor state of former Czechoslovakia, Slovakia. Slovakia always kept good and correct relations with the USA, but some aspects of Slovakian internal political life, notably the strong nationalism, often causes disquiet among neighboring countries and Western officials. The example of the Meciar government (1994–1998) clearly shows how damaging an extremely Nationalist government can be for integration of a country in transition. Slovakia became under Meciar's rule the pariah of the Visegrad Four, and at the NATO summit in Madrid Madeleine Albright told him frankly that because of him, Slovakia was not accepted in the same wave of NATO enlargement with the other three.²¹ And in his book about American supremacy George Soros openly admits, that his Foundation did everything to contribute to Meciar's fall from 1998, just as it did later in the cases of Milosevic and Tudjman too.²² But there existed no serious sanctions, just as they do not exist right now, when another Nationalist coalition is on power, and official US-Slovak relations continue on a positive track. Diplomatic relations are normal, the flow of investments and people are not made harder, and Slovakian troops were also in Iraq, along with those of neighboring countries. Aggressive aspects of Slovak nationalism can be source of tensions for the future, but it is less likely to affect general strategic issues.

Hungary is one of the most stable pillars of Central Europe, from a general Western point of view, and US officials generally hold this view. Diplomatic and political

19 KAVAN, Z. — PALOUS, M., *Democracy in the Czech Republic*, in: KALDOR, M. — VOJVODA, I. (eds.), *Democratization in Central and Eastern Europe*, New York 2002, p. 90.

20 FAWN, R., *Symbolism in the Diplomacy of Czech President Vaclav Havel*, in: *East European Quarterly*, Spring 1999, Vol. 33, No. 1, p. 3.

21 ALBRIGHT, M., *op. cit.*, p. 344.

22 SOROS, G., *Supremația americană: un balon de săpun*, Cluj-Napoca 2004, p. 113.

relationships are and continue to be strong, and officials of both countries often talk about the need to develop these connections. American sympathy toward Hungary started to become strong after the Hungarian revolution of 1956, and in the following decades, Hungary took a somewhat different path from other Communist countries in the region: at the level of official foreign policy it created no problems for the USSR, and in exchange it was allowed to liberalize its economy. The existence of private small businesses, and foreign companies were also welcome in the country's economy. The transition during the nineties was not as painful and worrying as in neighboring countries, so Hungary was — for most western officials — quite a positive example, and relations of the country were strengthened with Western states, among them the USA too.²³

American government officials generally view with approval events which improved Hungarian relations with its neighboring states. As an example, in September 1996, US ambassadors to Hungary and Romania jointly wrote a congratulatory text in the “Washington Post” newspaper on the occasion of the signing of the “basic” treaty between the two neighbor countries.²⁴ But there existed cases of unhappiness as well. After September 2001 Hungary decided to buy Swedish Grippens instead of American F-16s for modernizing its air force, a decision which was not very welcomed by USA officials, and according to Hungarian diplomatic sources, this seems to be one of the reasons Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was not received in Washington by Bush during the next year.²⁵ But since Hungary otherwise committed itself to the war against terror, there were no visible angry disputes between the two countries. On the other hand, Hungary considers itself part of Western civilization and desires to act in this way. As former Socialist Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, László Kovács pointed out with the NATO ascension of the country, in 1997: “In seeking to join NATO, Hungary is not motivated by the fear of a military threat. Our determination to become a member of the Alliance is based on shared values and the desire to contribute to a favorable security environment. In our opinion, NATO enlargement represents the eastward expansion of the region of security and stability in Europe. It is our goal to be part of this region, and to enjoy the benefits of security that NATO membership guarantees. At the same time, we clearly understand the obligations of membership and intend to make our contribution to mutual defense and enhanced security and stability in our region and Europe as whole.”²⁶ And even if US officials tend to criticize the current Orbán government, it is less likely that these could turn into sanctions, and they certainly do not affect interstate level affairs. The current relative coldness installed in American-Hungarian relations is a consequence of

23 GOLDMAN, M. F., *Revolution and Change in Central and Eastern Europe. Political, Economic and Social Challenges*, New York 1997, p. 212.

24 MUNGIU-PIPPIDI, A., *Romania: From Procedural Democracy to European Integration*, in: KALDOR, M. — VOJVODA, I. (eds.), op. cit., p. 145.

25 András KIRÁLY, Összefoglalja a Csurka-táviratokat a külügy, in: <http://index.hu/politika/belfold/ujcikk9390/> [15. 08. 2006].

26 KOVÁCS, L., *Hungary's contribution to European security*, in: NATO Review, Vol. 45, No. 5., September-October 1997, p. 9.

personal and principia-based misunderstanding, and does not seem to affect major strategic goals.

Romania's importance for the USA increased considerably in recent years. In the first half of the nineties, Romania, mostly because of its economic problems was a kind of outsider for the West among those countries which sought to become parts of the prosperous world. Even if after the fall of Ceausescu's regime US-Romanian relations improved, especially with Romanian support for the Gulf War there remained serious question marks regarding the commitment of the Romanian post-Communist elite to individual and communitarian human rights, the market economy and democracy.²⁷ For Romanian public opinion, it was especially shocking that their country — in spite of all its efforts — was not admitted in the first wave of NATO enlargement, despite of the support of several European powers. Madeleine Albright admits in her memories that US officials felt themselves a bit guilty regarding this, during their visit to Romania.²⁸ There is no wonder that after Madrid, beside Poland, Romania was the only country visited by Clinton and Albright. Nevertheless, Romanian public opinion did not turn against the USA, not even in the bitterness caused by this. As Vladimir Tismăneanu writes: "Romania's leaders understood that in 1997 they were rejected because of US internal political issues, even the leaders of opposition did not speculated it."²⁹ The situation for Romania changed drastically after September 11th 2001. The new conditions favored the geopolitical situation of the country. At NATO summit in Prague, Romania was admitted without any question, and was also one of the two countries which President Bush visited immediately after the summit. Romanian troops participate with American forces in peacekeeping actions in Iraq, Afghanistan and former Yugoslavian territories, and Romanian foreign policy is very pro-American, but also tries to exploit some traditional, historical ties with European powers like France, Germany and Italy. When there are disputes, Romanian diplomacy traditionally tries to balance between the EU and the USA. As president Bănescu formulated in one of his recent speeches from January 20, 2006: "Romania will remain a strong supporter of a strong connection between Europe and the United States."³⁰ Currently, since Romania's access is still denied in the Schengen zone, Romanian leading politicians are going to search even more improvement of relations with the USA. Due to the current events in Ukraine and the Middle East, the geopolitical importance of Romania can only grow for politicians and military leaders of the USA.

Bulgaria is an even more special case. Perhaps Bulgaria is the least enthusiastic regarding relations with the USA of all these countries, but at the same time, it is a potentially important ally too. Traditionally, Bulgarian nationalism was pro-Russian and pro-German at the same time, and even today, in Bulgaria frustration because of former Soviet domination is incomparably much lower than in Poland, Hungary or

27 GOLDMAN, M. F., op. cit., pp. 296–298.

28 ALBRIGHT, M., op. cit., pp. 345–347.

29 GROSS, P. — TISMĂNEANU, V., op. cit., p. 27.

30 Extract from President Bănescu's speech at January 20 2006, in: *Lumea*, 2006, Year XIII, Nr. 2 (154), p. 14.

Romania. Just as Romania, Bulgaria was considered to be in a second later group than the Visegrad Four regarding integration in Euro-Atlantic structures, partly because the Bulgarians always have been much less enthusiastic regarding this, than their neighbors from the North. During 1997's NATO enlargement, in Sofia, US academics were much more interested in events surrounding the expansion process than their Bulgarian hosts.³¹ Bulgaria in the level of its foreign policy kept its distance from Yugoslav conflict and strengthened economic cooperation with Western Europe, especially with Germany and Italy.³² However, exactly the Kosovo phase of the Yugoslav conflict illustrated the importance of Romania and Bulgaria in the Balkans, a conflict where Bulgaria took the side, with all of its sympathy for Russia, of the Western powers.³³ In 2002, it became a member of NATO, and from January 1st 2007, also a member of the European Union, together with Romania. Bulgarian troops also participated in Iraq, and the country's territory is playing a key role in US strategy for the Middle East, Black Sea and Balkan areas.

It is very probable that in the nearby future, USA relations with Eastern European countries are going to be strengthened, and the American government is going to take steps in this direction, even if they will never reach the importance of relations with regional great powers of the world. The causes for this are multiple: political, geostrategic and economic causes can be distinguished.

Political causes are simple, the need to nurture the new democratic regimes of the region and the strength of ethnic lobbies in the United States, and their influence on domestic politics. Their role is not decisive in absolute terms (these immigrants represents a relatively small minority in comparison with African Americans or Hispanics) but they are not to be neglected. Larry Diamond characterized the former Communist countries from East and Central Europe: "... do not generate problems for the United States. For the most part, they are our pillars of regional stability and freedom or at least countries with which we can do business and expect cooperation. They are not sources of the criminal and terrorist violence that threaten the United States."³⁴

And this fact is especially important from a propagandistic point of view for American foreign policy. Traditionally, the USA defines itself as the main promoter of the values of liberal democracy in the world, among which the most important are pluralist liberal democracy, open-market economy and respect for individual human rights. The USA in both World Wars, and after them, in regional conflicts during Cold War, proclaimed the importance of protection of these values from their enemies. But many times circumstances caused the US to ally itself with states seen elsewhere

31 LEONARD, T. M., *NATO expansion: Romania and Bulgaria within the Larger Context*, in: *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 33, January 2000, p. 517.

32 LEFEBVRE, S., *Bulgaria's foreign relations in the Post-Communist Era: A General Overview and Assessment*, in: *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 28, January 1995, p. 453.

33 GALLAGHER, T., *Balkanii în noul mileniu în umbra războiului și a păcii*, București 2006, p. 255.

34 DIAMOND, L., *Building a World of Liberal Democracies*, in: HENRIKSEN, H. T., *Foreign Policy for America in the Twenty-First Century: Alternative Perspectives*, Stanford 2001, p. 54.

as dictator states or violent, evil movements. Even today, it is hard to “sell” to any educated person, related to anti-terrorist war, the view that some of the allies, like Pakistan, Saudi-Arabia or even more, China or Libya, to be “democratic” regimes; and it is even harder in the case of Iraq, in which Western European democracies, like France and Germany continue to oppose intervention. And since the USA emphasizes the importance, in most of the cases, of popular support for its military intervention, support of smaller, but democratic allies, and their votes in international organizations, like UN or NATO, is essential.

Traditionally, ethnic lobbies are very influential in American foreign policy, and this is true especially in the case of ethnic lobbies with East European origins. The strongest one is the Polish lobby, which represented at the beginning of the nineties, 12 million US citizens with Polish origin,³⁵ but the other ones are also significant. These communities are well-organized, with their own cultural and social institutions, even with virtual communities on the Internet, and have a word to say in important questions, for example political elections. And even if they are not deciding only by themselves, by their own will, their influence is not small at all. For example, in the beginning of the sixties during the last century, Yugoslavia did not receive the “most favored nation” clause partially because the strong Croatian lobby.³⁶ And these communities desires to be ties, bridges between their country of origins and their actual homeland, and especially nowadays, when strength of the two main American political parties are almost equal, these communities, if they play their cards well, can do a lot for improving bilateral relations.

Even more immediate causes relate to US geopolitical strategies. For the USA, Eastern Europe and the Balkans can be vital in three main directions: toward Russia and other post-Soviet territories, toward the Middle East and toward the European Union “Contrary to established opinion”, Stephen Garret noted, “the gravest threats to America’s national security are still in Russia. They derive from an unprecedented development that most US policy-makers have recklessly disregarded, as evidenced by the undeclared cold war Washington has waged, under both parties, against post-Communist Russia during the past fifteen years”.³⁷

Even with the end of the Cold War, with the collapse and disappearance of the Soviet Union, Russia remains a great power, despite its internal issues and weakness. And even if economically or in the field of conventional weapons it cannot compete with the United States today, Russia still has the world’s second largest nuclear arsenal, experiencing nowadays an economic and military revival, gifted with great natural potential and the largest territory of all of the countries. And if we want to view the events of last 25 years in the framework of a Russian-American conflict, we can say that till this moment, the US has become a major presence in most of the former Soviet zone, Russia’s ability to control not only Central-Eastern Europe, but

35 CHAWANIEC, I. — HARBINSON, D. K., *An Alternative Approach to American Foreign Aid: Regional Partnership in Poland*, in: *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 27, Spring 1994. No 1, p. 144.

36 GARRET, S., *op. cit.*, p. 307.

37 COHEN, S. F., *The New American Cold War*, in: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060710/cohen> [28. 08. 2006].

also most of the former Soviet Union has disappeared. As Solzhenitsyn wrote, the incorporation of Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic was not as painful for Russia as NATO expansion toward Baltic States.³⁸ Especially annoying for Russian officials was the Kosovo crises, in which Russia's last trusted European ally, Milosevic's Yugoslavia was humiliated by the world's only superpower, and more recently, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine proved once again, how effective western pressure can be — even in the near neighborhood of Russia. So recently there are more signs than ever that Russia does not want to give up its remaining influence, especially in Central Asia. And we cannot exclude the possibility that once recovered; this great power will try to regain at least partially its recent influence there. The first steps — through the South Stream pipeline project, the Rosstatom's investments and similar actions on economic plan — were already done. This process is slowed down by the embargo dictated by the European Union for Russian involvement in Ukraine, but this slowing down is probably just a temporary issue.

In any kind of future conflict with Russia, the USA could expect the former Communist states of Eastern Europe to be allies, as well as a vital buffer zone. American prestige is very high in these countries, and at the same time, most of the people have not forgotten the horrors of Communist rule and many historical grievances either. For Russia it could be easier to find a trustful ally in Germany or France, than in Romania or Poland. And because of this, there is even more reason for the USA to keep these countries in its orbit, rather than to give them up to the influence of some other power.

Conflict with Russia is likely, but nonexistent yet, and with all the turmoil from Ukraine, the chances that the conflict of interests will escalate on the scale of a violent clash are minimal. On the other hand, US involvement in the Middle East is a reality, and there is no hope that this will end soon, with all the efforts for withdrawal of the Obama administration. East-European states all supported US actions in Afghanistan and most of them sent troops to Iraq too — it is also true, on the other hand, that currently they are less willing to fight the IS than their Western counterparts. Besides offering moral support and the appearance of an international effort, Eastern European assistance for US actions in the Middle East can be considered useful—from two perspectives: effective military support and useful territories for US military strategy—over flights and bases. And even if the military power of these states should not be taken too seriously, their participation in these actions had more than symbolic value, and their territory from a strategic perspective is not inconsequential.

After Germany's critical reaction to the Iraqi invasion, the US started to consider moving American bases from Western Europe to the territory of East European states. This change, possibly considered for punitive as well as strategic reasons, would have significant impact on local economies. Bases already exist— among them Mihail Kogălniceanu airport, outside of Bucharest,, Romania These countries are located closer to the Middle East than Western Europe, which means shorter and quicker air routes to hot spots in Central Asia and Middle East. Maintenance costs in these countries are also lower—and cost-efficiency can be a very important argument,

38 SOLJENIȚÎN, A., op. cit., p. 55.

especially for the long term. And important factors actually make these countries safer in some ways than their more prosperous neighbors. The lack of large Muslim population, the relative unfamiliarity of Islamic radicals with the territory makes terrorist operations less likely. Till this moment, none of these countries have become targets of terrorist attacks, and it is not likely that they will, in the nearby future. They simply do not have that potential impact that Western targets have. It is very unlikely that the Al-Queda, the ISIS or any other terrorist organization, in its *jihād* is going to choose as targets Bratislava or Sofia, instead of London or Madrid.

Of course, there exists important opposition too toward the idea of moving these bases from Western Europe — especially from Germany — to these countries, supporters of this being well-prepared with arguments too.³⁹ A third area in which these countries could be useful for the USA concerns its relationship with the European Union. During the Cold War, the USA and the European Community were parts of the same camp. But since its end, it is clear that, the two entities are choosing different directions concerning most international issues. In June 2002, related to customs duties on steel, the EU proved that it even can challenge the USA from an economic point of view.⁴⁰ But the USA has a great advantage, which will protect its world's Number One position from the EU at least in the next 50 years, in any conditions: while the USA is a good working, functioning federal structure, with coherence on the issues of foreign policy, military actions and national economics, the European Union is still a loose structure, a formal unity of nation-states with common supranational institutions, but without a common army and foreign policy. And this is one of the reasons that the USA continues to direct its diplomacy toward the member states rather than to the institutions of the Union.⁴¹ And this is an important aspect, especially in light of recent developments. It became especially clear related to the issue of Iraq, that European governments are not necessarily blind subjects of US initiatives: especially France, Germany and the states with strong ties to them. Spain and Italy are also quite unsure allies, so the attitude of former Communist countries can be important.

For the USA, these countries can play the role of internal ally, contributing in the European Parliament, Committee or Council on tempering anti-US attitudes and regarding adoption of rules which could damage US interests. It is very likely that Poland is the most reliable from an American point of view, but with the others too, it is easily negotiable. Anyway, the “price” in loans, debt-remissions, and political support of these countries is incomparably smaller it might be elsewhere. And the economic importance of these countries, as potential places for US investments, is not inconsiderable. At this moment, Hungary, Slovakia and other countries from the region do not represent as a tempting a market for big corporations as some other

39 For example: KORB, L. J., *The Pentagon's Eastern Obsession*, in: http://www.cfr.org/publication/6172/pentagons_eastern_obsession.html [28. 08. 2006].

40 TODD, E., *Sfârșitul imperiului, eseu despre descompunerea sistemului american*, București 2003, p. 213.

41 PĂUN, N. — PĂUN, A.-C. — CICEO, G. — ALBU-COMĂNESCU, R., *Finalitatea Europei*, Cluj-Napoca 2005, p. 348.

countries from different regions of world and for small enterprises, distances make it harder to invest over here. These are going to choose closer territory. But in the not so distant future, things can change very easily. And currently, American passiveness toward this region is highly encouraged by the fact that the importance of this region on a global scale is not among the highest one from the point of view of American politics, compared for example to the importance of relations with the far East, the Gulf region, or Latin America.

Although the USA is still the largest economic power in the world, it is not the only one. US based companies like General Motors, Coca-Cola, Ford and others are still large and important, well-represented all over the globe, they are not alone. Chinese, Japanese, European and Russian economies are also growing and expanding, as are companies from these countries. There exist two big trends in international economics, coexisting and complementary, but also opposing trends, which can define evolution of global economic relations. One of them is related to the globalization process, and globalized capital markets in particular, the general trend for reducing customs taxes and trading restrictions. Huge corporations have become truly “multinational” ones, with activities unaffected (or only in a very small measure) by the nationality of majority stockholders. Another perspective holds that the political climate is going to evolve in such a manner, that states and big companies won’t only coexist, but also that competition will grow on such a level that it is going to become visible for everyone, in a similar way that existed in the 1871–1914 period. And in such a competition, American companies have the great advantage in the states of Central and Eastern Europe that people from here generally have pro-American feelings. Even right now most of investors in the region are not Americans, but mostly firms from Western Europe. And in most of these countries, there still exist economic sectors with quite promising investment possibilities. And these possibilities should be considered, especially now, since the current Economic Crisis seriously weakened the American economy and caused a serious decline to its prestige and global positions. And in these circumstances, all regions of the world are turned into an environment of economic competition, in which the USA, in most of the cases, still has the pole position in front of China, India, Russia and the European Union. But a passive approach can completely annihilate this advantage.

On the other hand, from the perspective of these countries, the USA can offer a lot, much more than any other power right at this moment. But over time, this advantage is going to diminish, and more alternatives will appear. For example, regarding safety of the entire region from an eventual Russian invasion the guarantee is not so much in the presence of US troops and bases, but the existence of a politically and economically stable Russia, which does not see its security threatened and in the lack of provocation, has no motives for performing such a dangerous act for itself too. Protection from Islamist terrorist attacks does not rely on any kind of security measures, but is based on the fact that such actions never happened here and won’t happen for a long time, because this region is not perceived as a threat to Islam by any of the Islamic radical groups. Issues related to existing borders and the situation of minorities in these states cannot be solved in a correct way only by the intervention of strong “outsider” powers, but only by bilateral negotiations,

cooperation and internal development of living standards and democratic values, in which the West can help, but cannot by itself provide a solution. And finally, economic welfare and high living standards are not the consequence of foreign aid by itself, but of a certain level of social security laws, a competitive internal market economy and foreign investments that brings mutual advantage and profit for both the investor and locals.

In the future, states from Central and Eastern Europe will remain reliable allies of the USA, an allegiance guaranteed by common and similar values and interests. As former Vice-President Dick Cheney formulated at the 2006 Vilnius Conference, "The young democracies in our great alliance have renewed it- bringing energy, and wisdom, and moral clarity to the councils of Europe. For them, the experience of tyranny is real, and recent. So they understand the need for vigilance against danger, the duty to call evil by its name, and the responsibility of free peoples to defend the innocent and to confront the violent"⁴² Sympathy and respect is mutual, and there is no reason for this to change in the immediate future. But we also have to admit that in this moment, East-Central Europe is not among priorities of US policy, a situation that can change. On the other hand, for these states, good relations with USA are and will remain important, but they are not the only important connections seen from inside the European Union. It is very probable that these mutual relations will get stronger and diversified in the future, but there will appear lots of alternatives too for East-Central European countries, from other directions. American influence will be challenged by the influence of a centralized European Union, Russia and China, and depends on the skills of the Foreign Office, how the USA will be able to deal with these new frontlines. But this is an issue of the future.

ABSTRACT

US RELATIONS WITH EASTERN EUROPE REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

This paper refers on several issues related to American relations with several states from Central and Eastern Europe. The evolution of these are analyzed in great lines during the twentieth century, followed by a most consisting analysis regarding evolutions of recent events, from the end of Cold War. There are presented the evolution of these relations, from general and specific (the case of each state in part) point of view, major stimulants and lacks of their evolution, and are projected several perspectives which can influence the future evolution of these. In conclusion, are presented the main arguments of possible future changes and developments in this field, in the larger context of worldwide existing realities.

KEYWORDS

USA, East-Central Europe, European Union, geopolitics, strategy, diplomatic relations

⁴² Vice President's Remarks at the 2006 Vilnius Conference, Reval Hotel Lietuva, Vilnius, Lithuania, May 4, 2006. 10:06 A.M. (local), in: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/05/20060504-1.html> [28. 08. 2006].

ABSTRAKT**AMERICKÉ VZTAHY S VÝCHODNÍ EVROPOU
SKUTEČNOST A VYHLÍDKY**

Studie pojednává o událostech týkajících se amerických vztahů s vybranými zeměmi střední a východní Evropy. Vývoj šířeji analyzovaných vztahů v průběhu 20. století následují analýzy soustředící se zejména na vývoj nedávných událostí od konce studené války. Vývoj vztahů je zde prezentován od obecného pohledu až ke konkrétním událostem (případy z jednotlivých států), studie také analyzuje hlavní podněty a nedostatky vývoje, rovněž předkládá několik perspektiv, které mohou ovlivnit budoucí vývoj těchto vztahů. Autor na závěr předkládá hlavní důvody možných budoucích změn a pro rozvoj v této oblasti v širším kontextu současných světových událostí.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

USA, východní Evropa, střední Evropa, Evropská unie, geopolitika, strategie, diplomatické vztahy

Artur Lakatos | Independent researcher | lakatos_artur_lorand@yahoo.com