



Election 2020: The Future of U.S.-Black Sea Relations

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Frontier Europe Initiative

The Middle East Institute (MEI) Frontier Europe Initiative explores interactions between Middle East countries and their Frontier Europe neighbors – the parts of Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus which form a frontier between Western Europe, Russia and the Middle East. The program examines the growing energy, trade, security and political relationships with the aim of developing greater understanding of the interplay between these strategically important regions.

About the briefing book

This briefing book is broken into two sections. The first, ‘Issues and Policy Recommendations,’ offers insights and analyses from MEI scholars on issues and challenges facing the Black Sea and identifies the core U.S. interests in the region. This section also offers recommendations for U.S. Government and policymakers in engaging with the Black Sea region. The second section, ‘Views from the Region,’ draws on external experts to offer a regional perspective, particularly in terms of possible implications of the U.S. presidential elections on Black Sea countries.

The briefing book does not necessarily represent a consensus of all MEI scholars’ opinions on any particular issue. Perspectives offered by external contributors do not necessarily reflect the opinions held by MEI and its scholars.

With thanks to our contributors

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Issues and Policy Recommendations

Issues and Policy Recommendations

Regional issues

The Black Sea is an increasingly important arena for geostrategic competition. The Black Sea region lies at the geopolitical fault line between Western Europe, Russia and China to the East, and Iran and Syria in the South. Today, the Black Sea region is a hotbed of great power competition. While Russia continues to militarize the region in order to project power into the Middle East, China is building inroads through Black Sea countries to access European markets.

Greater U.S. presence is needed to address growing conflict in the region. The Black Sea witnessed the outbreak of conflict in Georgia in 2008, followed by the annexation of Crimea and war in Ukraine in 2014. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has reignited once again. War wages on in Syria with two Black Sea powers, Turkey and Russia, heavily involved. Several conflicts in the region remain frozen and continue to be direct sources of insecurity while Black Sea borders continue to be redrawn. Stability and conflict resolution in the Black Sea depends largely on United States presence, but U.S. policies in the region vary from passive observer to committed ally.

Black Sea countries are facing the worst economic crisis in decades. All Black Sea countries are heavily dependent on Western markets. COVID19, nationwide lockdowns, and disrupted supply chains have further compounded pre-existing economic challenges facing the region. Smaller Black Sea countries – Georgia, Moldova, Romania, and Bulgaria – will need greater Western support if they are to avoid further economic and political instability.

Relations between the U.S. and Black Sea countries are complex. The Western-oriented Black Sea countries of Georgia and Romania have shown unconditional support for greater U.S. involvement. Others, like Turkey and Russia, will continue to challenge Western involvement. Relations between Black Sea countries reflect similarly complex cooperation and conflict patterns. Uniting all Black Sea countries is a belief that the next U.S. presidential administration will signal a shift in U.S. policy in the region.

US interests

The United States has four main interests in the Black Sea:

1. Develop a comprehensive regional strategy and implement a coherent engagement policy in the region;
2. Compete and counter the influence of great rival powers;
3. Contribute to Black Sea stability and security by supporting Black Sea allies; and
4. Promote greater economic, technological, and critical infrastructure development.

Policy recommendations

Coherent policy: East-West divisions dominate the Black Sea region. Inconsistencies in U.S. policy, particularly vis-à-vis Russia – from a lukewarm reaction to the 2008 war in Georgia to President Barack Obama’s ‘reset’ policy, reversed by the ongoing Donbas war – have had devastating effects on Black Sea security. The 2016 U.S. presidential elections further shifted relations with the Black Sea. Individual countries follow U.S. elections through an increasingly polarized lens and with growing concern around U.S. foreign policy. **The U.S should develop a coherent Black Sea policy, consolidating its role in regional security and demonstrating support for Black Sea allies.**

Regional stabilization: It is in the strategic interests of the U.S. to prioritize the Black Sea in terms of both security and economic development. This includes increasing presence in the region. While necessary, America’s European Deterrence Initiative and support for Black Sea security in recent years has been insufficient in contributing to Black Sea stability and security. Unresolved conflicts in Ukraine and Syria and the recent reignition of violence in Nagorno Karabakh are exacerbating Black Sea insecurity and impeding regional development and stability. **The U.S. should adopt a more active role in stabilizing the Black Sea region and its conflicts.**

Great power competition: It is in America’s interest to counter the rising influence of rival powers in the Black Sea. Western interests are compromised by Russian militarization, malign foreign influence, and disinformation, as well as Chinese attempts to make strategic investments and acquire critical Black Sea infrastructure. In recent years, the U.S. has taken initial steps to defend its role in the region by increasing economic and military support for Georgia, Ukraine, and Romania. **The U.S. should increase its support for Black Sea allies in the context of great power competition and encourage similar commitment from its European allies and partners.**

Critical infrastructure development: Greater U.S. economic investment, and the development of bilateral partnerships with Black Sea allies, is essential for the Black Sea’s economic development. The region is a critical bridge connecting Western markets with Asia and the Middle East. Energy, maritime and land-based infrastructure are vital in connecting the regions. **The U.S. should invest in the development of critical Black Sea infrastructure and energy diversification.**

This section was written by Julia Joja, Senior Fellow for the Middle East Institute Frontier Europe Initiative.

Views from the Region

Biden vs. Trump: Two views of US engagement in the Black Sea

Iulia Joja

Since the end of communism, Western-oriented Black Sea countries have traditionally backed the Republican Party in U.S. elections. Eastern European preference for the GOP stems from their fear of Russia. Republicans, particularly since President Ronald Reagan, have been traditionally known in the Black Sea region for a heightened threat perception of the Soviet Union. This perception aligns with Black Sea countries, who also tend to hold strong perceptions of threats from the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and now Russia.

The Black Sea is a critical region for American strategic interests on several levels. Russia's Anti Access Area Denial and power projection into the Mediterranean is the primary issue affecting U.S. interests in the region. Beyond Russian aggression, the Black Sea increasingly constitutes an area of power projection for China and Iran.

A gradual shift in U.S. Black Sea policy

The Clinton Administration developed the first proactive U.S. Black Sea policy after the Cold War. A strong supporter of democratization and open market expansion in Eastern Europe, the Clinton Administration launched NATO's expansion through the Partnership for Peace in 1994. Joined by all Black Sea non-NATO members, the initiative eased the path for Romania's and Bulgaria's NATO integration in 2004. During the subsequent administration of President George W. Bush, America's Black Sea allies – Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, and Ukraine – significantly eased America's burden in Afghanistan and Iraq. In exchange, Georgia became the largest per capita recipient of U.S. aid to Europe and Eurasia, with increased military aid after 9/11 through the Train and Equip Program.

Over the last two decades, Black Sea countries have been divided by their East-West orientations. While Georgia has been Western oriented since the turn of the millennium, it wasn't until the 2014 annexation of Crimea that Ukraine began to pivot away from its Eastern neighbor. At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, the U.S. raised Ukraine's and Georgia's prospects of NATO membership. Reluctance on the part of some Western European NATO member states to drive this forward, combined with Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, forced the U.S. to change its Black Sea policy.

President Barack Obama's pivot towards Asia, and away from Europe and the Black Sea, was interrupted by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and instigation of conflict in Eastern Ukraine. In response to an increasingly hostile Russia, the Obama Administration's security and defense leadership team created the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), enabling the first U.S. troop surge in Europe since the end of the Cold War. On the other hand, Obama's de facto sale ban of essential military equipment to both Ukraine and Georgia added to the perceived limited engagement of the Democratic Party in Eastern European security.

Trump's Administration ramps up engagement

U.S. support for Eastern European security was boosted by Trump's generals and a Republican-led Senate. The ERI (renamed the European Deterrence Initiative in 2018) increased from \$0.8 billion in 2016 to \$3.4 in 2017 and \$4.8 billion in 2018 to \$6.5 billion in 2019. The U.S. directed most of this money to bolster the Baltic States' defenses against increased Russian military presence. However, some funding has reached Black Sea shores through NATO's enhanced forward presence in Romania, increased Western military exercises in the Black Sea, and U.S. military aid to Ukraine and Georgia.

While the U.S. has become a constant presence in the region, and aid for Black Sea security has made a significant difference, the Ukraine scandal casts a political cloud over the Trump Administration's policy towards the region. Despite Ukraine finding itself caught in domestic U.S. crossfires without playing more than a passive role in the scandal, U.S. policy towards Ukraine has

generated plenty of negative press at home. It remains to be seen whether this scandal will have an impact on America's strategic interests in the Black Sea.

Two views of the Black Sea in 2021

Despite being one of the world's hotspots of conflict and insecurity, the Black Sea as a region of great power competition will most likely go unmentioned during the U.S. election campaign – with the exception of the Ukraine scandal. Though the Black Sea continues to suffer as wars wage on – on Ukraine's Black Sea shores; on the borders of Turkey, a few hundred miles South; and with old conflicts reignited, such as in Nagorno-Karabakh – the region's security is unlikely to be a top priority for the next administration.

The next administration's reaction to further Russian aggressions or landgrabs in its Black Sea neighborhood will depend on the president's staff. The Trump Administration's boost of the European Deterrence Initiative has been appreciated, but many of those in the security and defense leadership team responsible for this policy have since left government. U.S. allies in the Black Sea, such as Georgia, Romania, and Ukraine, are looking worriedly at the future security implications of the now reduced ERI budget (the request stands at \$4.5 billion for 2021, compared to \$5.9 billion in 2020).

China will play a more prominent role for the next administration, including in the Black Sea. Though here, policy implications will radically differ between a Biden or Trump Administration. Over the last two years, the Trump Administration's aggressive stance on China has been felt in the Black Sea, where China has been manifesting its interest in the acquisition of critical infrastructure, such as a defense company in Ukraine, a nuclear power plant project in Romania, and a deep sea port in Georgia. A second Trump Administration will mean increased U.S. interest in the Black Sea region – though not necessarily a change from the current unproductive policy of vetoing Chinese acquisitions without offering alternative Western investments to Black Sea allies. There is a chance, however, that the Black Sea will manage to attract American economic activity essential to countering China while strengthening Black Sea security.

In the event of a Biden Administration, many foresee that multilateralism will be revisited and hostility towards China will be reduced. For the Black Sea, this means renewed trust in NATO but also uncertainty around increased U.S. military or economic presence. Both are essential to Black Sea countries, and vital to non-NATO US allies Ukraine and Georgia.

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Bulgaria and the US presidential elections

Dimitar Bechev

Ensnared in its own political crisis, Bulgaria pays little heed to the United States presidential race. The country has been rocked by protests for months now and, in all likelihood, they will continue. Whether the government decides to throw in the towel or complete its full-term, the specter of forthcoming general elections is hovering above Bulgarian politics. Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, whose career from police chief, to mayor of Sofia, to national leader through the 2000s and 2010s has left a mark on the country, is fighting for his survival. There is little bandwidth for engagement with the outside world, with the notable exception of wrangling over the EU budget for 2021-27 which is not really a foreign policy issue. In other words, Borissov, as well as every other politician in Sofia, will be in wait-and-see mode in the weeks leading up to November 3.

Relations with the current U.S. administration have been productive. On November 25, 2019, Borissov met with President Donald Trump in the White House. The Bulgarian Prime Minister got approval to purchase a batch of F-16 fighter jets from Lockheed Martin. Worth \$1.67 billion, it is the biggest military procurement deal since the end of communism. Bulgaria has furthermore signaled interest in importing U.S. produced liquefied natural gas (LNG). State-owned utility Bulgargaz recently acquired a 20 percent stake in the future Floating Storage and Regasification Unit (FSRU) to be docked off the northern Greek port of Alexandroupolis. Greece's DEPA has a similar share, with Romgaz (Romania) expected to buy in soon too. Once the FSRU is launched, along with the Bulgaria-Greece interconnector pipeline, Sofia will be in a position to cover over one third of its annual consumption of natural gas from U.S. suppliers. This, of course, has been music to the ears of the U.S., both to the administration assertively pushing energy exports but also to Congress because Bulgaria currently receives nearly all its gas from Russia. The unprecedented expulsions of several Russian diplomats from Sofia suspected of being part of Moscow's military intelligence operations, including the 2018 Sergei Skripal affair in the U.K., has come as a sign that law enforcement cooperation between the U.S. and Bulgaria is on the upswing as well. At the same time, Borissov has been pursuing a careful balancing act. In the White House, he worked hard to portray Balkan Stream, TurkStream pipeline's extension into Bulgaria, as a self-standing rather than a Gazprom-backed venture. In theory it could be used by U.S. firms wishing to transport gas through Bulgaria to the Western Balkans. Whether Borissov won the argument is open to debate. On July 15, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo authorized punitive measures under the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) against companies involved in both TurkStream and Nordstream 2 pipelines. Washington has been signaling Balkan Stream, a project that serves Russia, is liable to sanctions too. That will be a central issue in Bulgaria-U.S. relations beyond the presidential election.

Though Bulgarians are not really invested in U.S. politics, there is no denying that Donald Trump's brand of right-wing populism strikes a chord with many. During the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, most commentators intuitively sided with the White House sparing no criticism of protestors wishing, as they allege, to rewrite history and impose the tyranny of political correctness. That includes opinion makers who are critical of Trump, his overtures to the Kremlin, and periodic attacks against the EU. Democrats were portrayed as beholden to the decadent far left and therefore bound to lose at the polls. Some of those views percolate through Russian language outlets and social media from which many Bulgarians over the age of 40 take their cues. Even self-described liberals and pro-Westerners in Russia were openly hostile to BLM along with other progressive causes such as climate change.

At the same time, Joe Biden has an overall neutral image in Bulgaria. The Democratic contender elicits neither negative nor positive response. By contrast, Hillary Clinton drew a great deal of fire four years ago, especially in anti-Western and Russophile quarters, over her association with Bill Clinton's presidency, the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, the U.S. intervention in Libya and hawkish stance on Syria. Trump, in turn, received praise as a Moscow-friendly and pragmatic candidate. Biden may easily become a target of criticism and disinformation as the election approaches. Again, much depends on how the Kremlin-

aligned platforms and channels frame the race. The flip side is that if Biden comes under attack, the hard-line pro-Western Bulgarians – a small but vocal minority in a country which overall supports both membership in NATO and EU and cooperation with Russia – will rally behind him.

A Bulgarian government will be able to work with either Biden or Trump. If Biden carries the day, Borissov, in case he gets to keep his job, will no doubt play up his ties to the Obama Administration and the meeting he held at the White House in 2012. The agenda will remain unchanged with energy and security as top priorities. Having issued a statement in support of the protest, the U.S. Embassy will continue pushing for the rule of law on the agenda. American media such as RFE/RL will be on the forefront of civic struggles too. Bulgarian authorities will mostly pay lip service.

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Georgia will stand by America no matter who is elected

Ana Khizanishvili

2020 marked 28 years of Georgia-U.S. diplomatic relations, established one year after Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union. Since then, Georgia has made significant progress in fighting corruption, strengthening democratic governance, and has committed to becoming a full-fledged member of the West.

Georgia has long enjoyed bipartisan support in the U.S. and will remain a strong ally and supporter of American policy no matter who is elected president in November. Vice President Joe Biden and Vice President Mike Pence visited Georgia in 2009 and 2017 respectively, with Pence's visit followed by the Georgia Support Act, passed in the House of Representatives in October 2019. The Act outlines a number of areas of Georgia-U.S. cooperation, including security assistance, cybersecurity cooperation, assistance in combating Russian propaganda, and a call for a bilateral free trade agreement.

With modesty often expected of small countries, Georgia shies away from 'demands' from its Western allies. However, there are three priority issues when it comes to its relationship with America: Russian de-occupation, NATO membership and bilateral security cooperation, and bilateral economic advancement. While these priorities have stayed constant for Georgia over the years, every U.S. administration has shown a slightly different approach in tackling them.

Russia continues to play by its own rules and remains a major threat for Georgia and the Black Sea region. Russian aggression was not curtailed by the Obama Administration's failed 'Reset Button,' nor has it improved with President Donald Trump's praising of President Vladimir Putin. While the relationship between the U.S. and Russia obviously extends far beyond Russian aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, the U.S. remains the only reliable partner for these countries. It is difficult to say which administration will take a stronger stance on Russian de-occupation, though Biden is likely to join America's European allies in publicly standing up to Putin's regime.

Like the U.S., Georgia is preparing for its 2020 parliamentary elections in the midst of COVID. Following strong debates between the government and opposition – much of which was facilitated by the international community, including U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan – constitutional amendments were passed by Parliament in June 2020 to ensure greater pluralism and increased parliamentary proportionality. Nonetheless, Georgia remains cautious of Russian soft power and interference. As Ambassador Degnan has warned, "Georgia should expect interference in the elections from Russia, because Russia has a scheme of interference, including disinformation campaigns and other efforts."

The U.S. has been a strong supporter of Georgia's NATO membership, but the potential parameters of membership is widely speculated on within Georgia. Despite fulfilling all of its democratic and military reform obligations and having become a leading non-member contributor to NATO-led missions, membership is still just a promise for Georgia. It is clear 20 percent of occupied land is not conducive to membership, but Georgia rightfully claims it has proven itself as deserving of full-fledged membership. In his comments on NATO, Biden has been clear on working with allies to strengthen the Alliance and has expressed concern over Trump's rhetoric while Trump's attitude towards NATO has caused unrest within the U.S. and around the world.

While the Georgian Government took quick and decisive steps to mitigate the effects of COVID, Georgia's economy, like much of the world, has taken a hit. The country is reliant on foreign capital and global trade. Opening a country to the international tourism will play a major role in rebooting Georgia's economy. Some in Georgia will hope for a Biden presidency given his backing in 2008 of \$1 billion in aid as Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And while the U.S. is facing its own economic challenges, Georgia is hopeful for deeper trade relations, no matter who is elected president.

Georgians will be watching the presidential elections on November 3 closely. One thing for certain is Tbilisi will be seeking stronger ties with either a Trump or Biden Administration.

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The US presidential election will take a backseat to domestic Moldovan politics

Armand Gosu

Like the United States, the small ex-Soviet Republic of Moldova is in the midst of a presidential election campaign, with voters set to cast their ballots on November 1. More than ten candidates will join the race, but the final showdown will, as always, take place between a pro-Russian and a pro-Western candidate, likely during the second round of voting. Bordering Romania and Ukraine, Moldova is at the frontier of NATO and the European Union. It is a region of strategic importance, given its location on the Black Sea – which many countries vie for influence over – and proximity to the Russian-annexed Crimean Peninsula.

Bilateral relations between the U.S. and Moldova have been volatile over the last three decades. Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Chişinău in 2011 confirmed America's interest in supporting Moldova's Western path. By that point, Moldova was Eastern Europe's new star – an exemplary pupil in the Eastern Partnership, launched by the EU during the Prague Summit in May 2009. Chişinău's determination to strengthen relations with the U.S. was also underlined by the visits of Prime Ministers Vlad Filat and Iurie Leancă to Washington in 2010, 2013, and 2014. Formal relations were established with the U.S.-Moldova Strategic Dialogue in 2014, which focused on rule of law, energy, trade, defense, and security. However, the U.S. suspended the strategic dialogue in 2016 due to the unstable political situation in Moldova.

In September 2019, former Prime Minister Maia Sandu visited Washington, and ties between the two countries appeared to reignite spectacularly. But Moldova's interest in developing a relationship with the U.S. declined when the Sandu government was removed from power just two months later. This isn't a surprise, given President Igor Dodon's pro-Russian political inclination and admiration for President Vladimir Putin and the fact that the new government, led by Prime Minister Ion Chicu, is supported by the pro-Russia, anti-Western Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova.

That said, the U.S. has invested nearly \$1.5 billion in various programs for Moldova since 1992. These were designed to strengthen democratic institutions, reform the justice system, encourage media independence, repair and expand infrastructure, secure borders, and integrate Moldova in the Euro-Atlantic space. U.S. financial assistance increased between 2009 and 2019, focusing on democratic governance, the rule of law and the fight against corruption, an increase in economic competitiveness, and support for Moldova's territorial integrity and sovereignty, including in the Transnistrian region.

Interest in the U.S. election is low in Moldova, with most people consumed by domestic politics and the political crisis in nearby Belarus. The current government's handling of COVID-19 has led to low approval ratings and political turmoil in Chişinău, offering the opportunity for challengers to steal their way through the electoral race.

However, there is one news story that will pique Moldovans' interest in the U.S. this year – the 'theft of the century.' In 2014, no less than \$1 billion disappeared from three Moldovan banks, the majority of which was public funds. Partially responsible was oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, who controlled Moldova's justice system, part of the Republic's economy, and the media. Plahotniuc fled Moldova in 2019, eventually settling in Miami where he faced several criminal actions brought against him by the American judicial system. The Moldovan public and its politicians have tied the extradition of Plahotniuc to the future of the country's relations with the U.S. After being denied political asylum in America, and with little chance to win an appeal, Plahotniuc entered Turkey on September 10, 2020. Ten days later, the General Prosecutor's Office of Moldova sent Turkey a formal request for Plahotniuc's extradition. Public debate in Chişinău revolves around whether the outcome of U.S. elections will result in either Plahotniuc's arrest or his victorious return to Moldovan politics.

Outside of this, Moldavans' sympathy for either Joe Biden or Donald Trump will depend on their preferences for liberal or illiberal democracy, rather than the geopolitical landscape or their attitude toward Russian aggression in the Black Sea region. Trump supporters are found, paradoxically, both among pro-Putin, anti-Western Russian speakers, and pro-Romania nationalists who support the union between Romania and Moldova and are concerned by a Russian threat.

Relations between the U.S. and Moldova – at least in the eyes of Moldavan politicians and public – will not be influenced by the outcome of the American presidential elections. However, Plahotniuc's move from Florida to Turkey will help to discredit propaganda disseminated by pro-Russian socialists claiming the oligarch is under American protection. Plahotniuc's move away from the United States will also enable the development of stronger bilateral Moldova-U.S. relations, as they aren't tainted anymore by his controversy and damage to Moldova's politics and economy. Bilateral relations can now be refocused on Moldova's path towards democratization and economic development.

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With national security at stake, Romanians will be watching the US race closely

Iulia Joja

Romania is a strategically important and loyal ally of the United States, to which the U.S. has historically paid little attention. Romania's steadfast pro-American stance is unlikely to waver no matter who is victorious in November. But the U.S. shouldn't be complacent in its knowledge of this; domestic politics in Romania – especially if instability continues – will heavily influence the country's bilateral relations.

Romania is set to hold its own parliamentary elections on December 6 and the stakes are high. This EU and NATO country has been rocked by repeated anti-government protests and government resignations in recent years, resulting in six governments since the last legislative elections in 2016. Meanwhile, economic and health crises have caused exceptional turmoil and instability. Romania's economy is in freefall following a hard lockdown at the beginning of COVID-19. Parliament has recently approved a 40 percent increase in pensions, ignoring warnings of economic unsustainability and jeopardizing Romania's post-pandemic economic recovery. Another national lockdown is unlikely, though Romania's COVID-19 numbers are worse than seen across most of Eastern Europe.

Although absorbed with their own domestic agenda, Romanians will follow the U.S. election closely because Romanian national security depends on America. Threatened by Russia in the Black Sea, Romania invests the vast majority of its defense efforts into a strategic partnership with the U.S. The country spends 2 percent of its GDP on defense and buys (mostly) American defense hardware. It is a strong supporter of freedom and democracy in Eastern Europe, most recently joining the Baltics and Poland in their engagement of Belarus' democracy. This direction has for decades been overwhelmingly and unwaveringly supported by public opinion and political parties on both sides.

Romania is a conservative European society, and many right-leaning Romanians support President Donald Trump and the Republican Party. Romanian media reflects the ideology of the right-leaning majority, with pundits often portraying major events in U.S. life – COVID-19, the economic crisis, Black Lives Matter protests – from a conservative angle. Still, Romanians are unsettled by Trump's demeanor and the perception that he is fond of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Likewise, the Trump Administration's increasingly close relationship with their autocratic and Russia-friendly Hungarian neighbor Prime Minister Victor Orban worries Romanians. Between 2016 and 2017, Romania's approval of U.S. leadership fell by 18 percent, from 58 to 40 percent.

Many believe the U.S. pays too little attention to Romania; the last time Bucharest hosted a high-level American visit was in 2008 as part of the NATO Bucharest Summit. Much of the bilateral relationship between Romania and the U.S. during Trump's Administration has been dominated by issues related to China. Despite Bucharest hosting Huawei's regional hub, Romania became the first country to join America's 'anti-Huawei coalition of the willing,' potentially causing huge economic costs for the country. Romania also annulled its Memorandum of Understanding with China on nuclear cooperation in favor of one with the U.S. Romania's unwavering loyalty towards the U.S. in the great power competition recently paid off. On October 8, U.S. Ambassador to Romania Adrian Zuckerman announced an unprecedented \$8 billion aid package for the development of Romania's nuclear power plant, the same plant China had wanted to develop. This significant support, framed as the West's fight against "malign foreign powers", will further increase Romanian support of the Trump Administration and Ambassador Zuckerman.

But there is much more to this relationship than China. High levels of corruption and the limited independence of the judiciary remain a problem in Romania, with the EU recently highlighting shortcomings in ensuring judiciary independence in its first report on Romania's law. Romania's progress on anti-corruption and rule of law is reliant on U.S support. The economic

dimension of the U.S.-Romania relationship could be improved. In 2017, the U.S. invested \$3.6 billion FDI in Romania, about 1.5 percent of total FDI received by Romania that year. In comparison, 90 percent of Romania's trade is with the EU. Last year, the Romanian-American Chamber of Commerce urged the Trump Administration to raise America's FDI to \$10 billion.

Black sea energy should be a priority for the U.S. and there is a need for the U.S. to work with Romania in ensuring regional security. Romania is the only energy-independent Eastern European country, but interconnectors to connect Romania's energy resources with the pipelines of its neighbors, key to reducing energy dependence on Russia, are still mostly in project state. Romania has also made significant offshore discoveries in its Exclusive Economic Zone in the Black Sea, potentially worth \$10 billion. But offshore drilling has been delayed for years due to the government's decision to increase taxes, forcing companies such as ExxonMobil to sell their shares or put drilling on hold. Offshore energy in the Black Sea is a valuable commodity with the potential to diminish Europe's dependency on Russian energy. New governments in both Romania and the U.S. could easily tip the balance of Black Sea geopolitics by changing Romanian law and increasing American investment in Black Sea offshore energy.

So, while there is little for the U.S. to worry about in terms of Romania's foreign policy — for the moment at least — there is plenty of concern on the Romanian side. The economic situation is in free fall. Russia shows signs of increasingly aggressive and belligerent behavior in Romania's neighborhood. While Romania has volunteered to align with the U.S. against China, chances of a more aggressive anti-Russia policy from the U.S. appear slim for the foreseeable future. With many Americans lobbying for a reset with Russia, and Moscow continuing to aggressively pursue its interests from Belarus to Syria, an enhanced Black Sea deterrence does not seem to be on the cards for the next administration, irrespective of whether it's Democratic or Republican.

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Russia-US relations, whether under Trump or Biden, are likely to get worse before they get better

Maxim A. Suchkov

For almost four years, Russia has played a dual role in the political life of the United States. For the first time in the post-Cold War era, Russia is not just a foreign policy issue for the U.S. – it has also become an unlikely factor in America’s domestic politics. Russia has been a long-time foreign policy and security concern for the U.S., but its interference in the 2016 presidential election brought that concern home to many ordinary Americans.

In Moscow, the narrative is distinctly different. Many believe Russia has been dragged into American domestic politics to serve as both a club – with which the Democrats and to a lesser extent the Republicans hit each other – and a scarecrow used by both parties to manipulate American voters. To suggest the Kremlin greenlit Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election is as much of a no-go in the Russian mainstream policy debate as it is to argue the opposite in America.

Russia’s interest in the U.S. election is not as monochromatic as mainstream discourse suggests. The image – or framing – of President Donald Trump as ‘the Kremlin candidate’ took hold during the 2016 campaign. This was based primarily on Trump’s complimentary remarks of President Vladimir Putin, the murky ties of some of Trump’s aides to Moscow, his support for Russian actions in Syria, and Trump’s apparent eagerness to let American allies in Europe pull themselves up by their own bootstraps in the face of Russian assertiveness. This perception was further reinforced by Russia’s actions, notably social media activity by the notorious ‘troll factory’ – the Internet Research Agency – which promoted content designed to hurt the Democrats. Meanwhile, Russian media swooned over Trump’s ‘witticisms’ and heaped criticism on his opponent Hillary Clinton.

There also was a cultural element to Trump’s reputation in Russia. His flamboyant personality appealed to Russians because it ran counter to the stereotypical Washington politician. Political correctness is viewed by many Russians as emblematic of the ‘fakeness’ and ‘insincerity’ of Western culture, while social taboos in the U.S. – such as humor around race, religion, sexual orientation, etc. – are perceived as largely artificial and self-imposed. Russian citizens view Trump through a different lens than his opponents in America; Trump is a man unafraid to speak his mind freely and someone who is openly challenging a political system they see as imperfect. This is why another political disrupter, Bernie Sanders, was also well-liked during the 2016 campaign. Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are often mentioned together in Russian media and policymaking circles.

Russia’s policymaking community was – and arguably remains – more cautious in their enthusiasm for either candidate. The view within this circle is that regardless of who takes the White House in November, Russia-U.S. relations will face further degradation. Trump may be genuine in his attitudes towards Putin, but the four years of his presidency haven’t materialized into anything positively substantial bilaterally. There are now more anti-Russian sanctions than when President Barack Obama left the office; America’s position on the conflict in Ukraine and Russia’s annexation (as seen by the U.S., Europe, Ukraine, and most other countries) of Crimea hasn’t changed; American troops, although fewer in numbers, still occupy an important oil-rich chunk of Syrian land thereby hampering Russian efforts to bring it back under President Bashar al-Assad’s control; and several Russian diplomatic facilities have been shut down, only to complicate bureaucratic procedures for Russia in the U.S. One of the last remaining areas for cooperation – arms control – is on the brink of collapse following Russia’s reluctance to accept Trump’s ‘framework agreement’ for the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. Moscow sees this as a disguised effort by the Trump Administration to provide the president with what may be seen by Americans as a foreign policy achievement.

There’s less personal animosity in Moscow toward Joe Biden than there was Hillary Clinton. While Putin had nice things to say about working with President Bill Clinton, he found his wife to be a more difficult partner. And there was no love lost between the two when Clinton, in her capacity as Secretary of State, supported mass rallies on the streets of Moscow in 2011 over Duma election manipulations and warned Putin against a third presidential term.

Biden is perceived and presented in two interconnected ways. The first characterization is that of a senior man with serious health issues who is likely to outsource most of his duties to Vice President Kamala Harris and others. This means Russia expects U.S. policies under Biden to be delivered via different 'influence centers' (the teams behind prominent individuals who have clout with Biden—) and defined by the relationship between these centers.

The second related portrayal is that a Biden Administration would signal a return of the Obama era in Russia-U.S. relations. Beyond Obama's 'reset policy' attempt in the late 2000s, this era is largely associated in Moscow with bilateral disagreements and political inertia that set Moscow and Washington on a downward trajectory. As Vice President, Biden may have occasionally looked hawkish on Russia – and his personal patronage of the post-Maidan Ukraine is a warning call for Moscow – but Russia has two other more pressing concerns. First are people around Biden who may adopt a 'revenge motive' to address some of the policy failures the Obama Administration is often criticized for, such as mistakes in Syria which enabled Russia to expand influence in the region. Second, a Biden foreign policy agenda that could once again see America reengage economic and trade alliances, greater emphasis on human rights and the fight against autocratic regimes, and a renewed commitment to the NATO Alliance.

Most Moscow policymakers and academics will say that Russia-U.S. relations, whether under a second Trump term or a new Biden Administration, are set to get far worse before they get better.

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From “tough guy” to “autocrat”: What would a Biden presidency mean for US-Turkey ties?

Gonul Tol

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan does not have many friends in Washington these days. Ever since Turkey voted against Iran sanctions at the U.N. in 2010, at a time when the Obama Administration was trying to pressure Iran into returning to international talks over its nuclear program, there has been a trust gap between the two allies. Then came the U.S. decision to air drop weapons and ammunition to Kurdish forces defending the northern Syrian town of Kobani against ISIS militants in 2014. As U.S. cooperation with the Kurdish militants — considered a terrorist group by Turkey — expanded, so too did the trust gap between Ankara and Washington. The failed coup in July 2016 brought tensions between the two countries to a whole new level. Turkey accused the U.S. of collaborating with Pennsylvania-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, who Ankara claimed was behind the coup attempt, and asked for Gulen’s extradition. Reports that Turkey and Russia were discussing the purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems in August 2016 only added to the tensions. An investigation by the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York into Turkish state-owned lender Halkbank and a Turkish-Iranian gold dealer named Reza Zarrab became another thorny issue in bilateral ties as well. Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his wife made personal appeals to then-Vice President Joe Biden to secure Zarrab’s release, fearing the investigation might implicate their family. Meanwhile, Turkey arrested Andrew Brunson, an American pastor living in Turkey for decades, for his alleged links to Gulen, giving rise to fears in Washington that Erdogan might try to use Brunson as a bargaining chip to secure Gulen’s extradition.

Welcome news in Ankara

By the time the U.S. elections were held in November 2016, Turkey-U.S. relations had been rocked by serious disagreements. For Erdogan, after a promising start, the Obama Administration ended up being a huge disappointment. Donald Trump’s election, therefore, was welcome news in Ankara. Erdogan hoped to turn a new page in relations with the U.S. and had the utmost faith in his friend in the White House. Four years on, Trump has proven himself worthy of Erdogan’s trust. At a time when Obama-era problems continue to haunt Turkey-U.S. relations, causing unprecedented frustration in Congress, at the Pentagon, and in the State Department, Trump still considers Erdogan “a very good friend.” He has gone the extra mile to shield Erdogan from congressional sanctions over Turkey’s purchase of Russia’s S-400 missile defense system and derail the Halkbank indictment. His announcement of the U.S. withdrawal from Syria was applauded in Ankara, which hoped that this would solve its Kurdish problem. Despite Trump’s best intentions, however, he could not fix the most critical problems in Turkey-U.S. ties. Gulen remains in Pennsylvania, Halkbank has been indicted, Congress is more determined than ever to punish Erdogan over the S-400s, and the few hundred U.S. troops that remain in Syria — recently reinforced — still consider the Kurdish militia a key U.S. ally. At times, Trump has even created new problems for Erdogan. He slapped sanctions on Turkey to secure the release of Pastor Brunson in 2018, prompting a sharp decline in the Turkish lira to a record low. He did it again in 2019 when he announced sanctions to prevent a Turkish assault against Kurdish fighters and civilians in Syria.

A terrifying prospect

While Trump has been unable to resolve the main issues affecting Turkey-U.S. ties, he remains Erdogan’s best bet, and the prospect of a Biden presidency is terrifying. Erdogan has reason to be anxious. Should Biden win, gone will be the days when he can pick up the phone and reach the U.S. president directly to ask for favors. Nor will the White House be as enthusiastic about shielding Turkey from the sanctions an infuriated Congress is so intent on imposing. Trump has not only failed to utter a word about Turkey’s authoritarian turn under Erdogan, he has even gone so far as to praise him for being a “tough guy.” Biden, by contrast, has described Erdogan as an “autocrat” and committed to putting strengthening democracy back on the agenda by convening a summit of the world’s democracies in his first year. That suggests he might be vocal about criticizing Erdogan’s

authoritarianism. In 2016, when then-Vice President Biden was on a two-day visit to Turkey, he angered the government with his remarks criticizing the lack of freedom of expression in the country and for meeting with the son and wife of the jailed journalist Can Dunder, arrested over the publication of footage purporting to show Turkish intelligence helping to send weapons to Syria.

Another worry in Ankara is Biden's pro-Kurdish stance in Syria and Iraq. Biden famously proposed the division of Iraq along ethnic and sectarian lines in 2006, a move that would, in effect, have led to an independent Kurdistan along Turkey's border — a nightmare scenario for a country that has been dealing with a Kurdish insurgency for several decades. More recently, Biden criticized Trump's decision to pull out troops from Syria and abandon the Kurds. Close aides have signaled that the U.S. would keep troops in Syria to help Kurdish forces fight ISIS if Biden were elected.

Turkey is concerned about a tougher U.S. approach to Ankara's policy in the Eastern Mediterranean as well. Turkey has been at odds with Cyprus and Greece over energy drilling and maritime boundaries. They also disagree over the status of Cyprus itself, which has been split in two since Turkey militarily intervened in the island in 1974. Things have not been rosy on that front under the Trump Administration either though. The U.S. has criticized Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean policy and called on Ankara not to escalate tensions further. Congress lifted the decades-old arms embargo on the Greek Cypriots in an effort to cultivate closer ties, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently announced the establishment of a regional security training center with Cyprus. Ankara fears Biden might cultivate even closer ties to Greece and get even tougher on Turkey.

A potentially tougher approach toward Russia and China under a Biden presidency could also cause further problems for Turkey. Despite serious disagreements between Turkey and Russia and Turkey's temporary hold on activating the S-400s, the two countries are still close partners with a wide-ranging relationship encompassing everything from trade to energy. Turkey is eyeing closer ties with China as well, another U.S. adversary. Keen to secure Chinese investment, Ankara is reportedly sending Uighurs, with whom Turks share ethnic and religious ties, back to China.

Erdogan's worries about a Biden presidency are not misplaced, but they may be overblown. Turkey will certainly face more challenges under a new U.S. administration, but at the end of the day Biden, who spent much of his early career during the Cold War, might very well revert to the reflex of those years when Turkey was seen as too important of an ally to let disagreements rupture ties.

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What the US presidential election means for Ukraine

Melinda Haring

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and official Kyiv view U.S. President Donald Trump with trepidation. While some commentators have defended Trump's policies toward Ukraine and Russia as more robust than his predecessors, the way in which Trump dragged Ukraine into the center of the hottest domestic scandal in the United States in 2019 left Zelenskyy and his team reeling and reluctant to engage. This line of argument is well known and does not require further explanation.

A second and arguably more important factor to consider as we assess the U.S.-Ukraine relationship is growing anti-American sentiment in Ukraine and in the Zelenskyy administration. Zelenskyy was keen to visit Washington but an official visit was taken off the table amidst the ongoing scandal. In addition, insiders say that Zelenskyy is increasingly suspicious of the West, its motives, and less interested in "being lectured" to by its diplomats and international financial institutions.

How things look from Kyiv

Ukrainians and official Kyiv is nervous about the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, and for good reason. Ukraine has been fighting for its territorial independence since 2014 and relies heavily on the support of the United States for military and development assistance, and moral might. Ukraine has strong bipartisan support in Congress, but many analysts suggest a second Trump term would seek to pull the United States out of NATO, concoct a grand deal with President Vladimir Putin at Ukraine's expense, potentially trading official recognition of Crimea for the Donbas in Eastern Ukraine or even something worse, suspending military aid to Ukraine, and slashing development budgets. It is hard to imagine Trump doing that with his current set of advisers and a Republican Congress that has decidedly different views, but in a second term, he might be tempted to try.

Joe Biden made Ukraine a signature part of his work as vice president, he knows the elite in Kyiv well, and he has displayed a fierce sympathy for the situation in which this poor nation of 40 million finds itself: under relentless assault from the Russians, captured by oligarchs, thoroughly corrupt and yet determined to join European institutions and free itself from the post-Soviet swamp.

Biden's policies toward Ukraine are no surprise: his top advisor on Russia and Ukraine, Dr. Michael Carpenter, told Politico that a Biden administration would massively ramp up lethal aid to Ukraine. Carpenter said Biden would send anti-ship missiles and patrol boats to help Ukraine defend its coastline from Russian attack, continue to send U.S. military trainers, and keep pushing Kyiv to reform.

The real worry

The real worry is that Zelenskyy may be tempted to turn Ukraine increasingly inward and away from the West and its close partnership with the United States regardless of the winner of the presidential election. To cut to the chase, the U.S.-Ukrainian relationship is tricky and will require enormous care.

The president of Ukraine has made it no secret that he doesn't want the West's advice, but he does want its money. While he pledged to make Ukraine rich, he has done nothing of the sort. Foreign direct investment declined on his watch in 2020 and many in his inner circle have no time for the list-making and hectoring advice of international financial institutions. It's also important to state that Zelenskyy comes from a different milieu than his predecessors. The comedian turned president doesn't speak English fluently and he spent his adult life entertaining millions in the Russian language. He hasn't had much exposure to the West.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's most notorious oligarch, Ihor Kolomoisky, unleashed a veritable campaign to promote an anti-Western agenda in Ukraine. Kolomoisky has his own motives as owner of PrivatBank, the largest private bank in Ukraine. PrivatBank was

nationalized in 2016 when he was caught looting it to the tune of \$5.6 billion. He wants to recoup his assets and then some. Insiders tell me that roughly 40 members of parliament are loyal to him, and rumors abound that the wily oligarch is working to overthrow the current government and install a more pliable prime minister.

Kolomoisky tends to use blunt force and his tactics are obvious, but still effective. He has waged war on the National Bank of Ukraine, smearing the independent board of governors, and tarring the institution's good name. Diplomats and insiders tell me privately that Zelenskyy and his government do not like the West and do not want their advice. Zelenskyy and his team do not lack confidence, for sure, but they still need the West for cheap loans and international standing.

If Trump is reelected and introduces new complications into the U.S.-Ukraine relationship, anti-Western sentiment in Ukraine may deepen. If Biden is elected, he too will have to contend with the growing anti-Western sentiment in Ukraine and will have to spend months repairing the frayed U.S.-Ukrainian relationship and showing Zelenskyy that he is a trustworthy interlocutor.

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