

## ANALYSIS OF CHANGES IN THE POSITIONING OF THE DONALD TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE FOREIGN POLICY OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

### АНАЛІЗ ЗМІН У ПОЗИЦІОНУВАННІ АДМІНІСТРАЦІЇ ДОНАЛЬДА ТРАМПА ТА ЇХ ВПЛИВ НА ЗОВНІШНЮ ПОЛІТИКУ ДЕРЖАВ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНО-СХІДНОЇ ЄВРОПИ

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The current transformations in the international arena have necessitated a revisit to the existing approaches towards foreign policy analysis. The goal of this article is to assess current trends in international politics and to propose tools for analyzing decision-making in IR, bearing in mind recent developments.

The change in the foreign policy strategy of the current administration of the current US president is an expression not just of the temporary political situation and the specific ideological orientation of several politicians, but also of more strategic changes in the entire so-called "grand strategy" of the United States of America. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, there has been a departure from multipolarity, strengthening existing partnerships and defending the liberal-democratic world order towards a "business" approach to policymaking, which involves transactional relations, a focus on foreign policy surplus and a departure from previously formed obligations. In the context of a change in the approach to Central and Eastern Europe, these trends are as expressive as possible and almost illustrative.

The authors assume that an efficient instrument for the respective analysis can be constructed by combining an assessment of current trends in the U.S. foreign policy (which serves as a trigger of global change) and an analysis of the regional Central and Eastern European responses, which are examined through the lens of Robert Putnam's two-level game analytical framework.

The authors conclude that states in the Central and Eastern European region do not respond as coherent entities or rational actors; they respond as arenas of political contestation. Understanding this dynamic is essential for explaining why Central and Eastern European responses to Trump's transactional approach are likely to be differentiated, unstable, and highly sensitive to both domestic political shifts and international signals.

**Key words:** US foreign policy, Trump administration, Central and Eastern Europe, two-level game.

Поточні трансформації на міжнародній арені зумовили необхідність перегляду існуючих підходів до аналізу зовнішньої політики. Метою цієї статті є оцінка сучасних тенденцій у міжнародній політиці та пропонування інструментів для аналізу прийняття рішень у міжнародних відносинах, враховуючи останні події.

Зміна в зовнішньополітичній стратегії поточної адміністрації поточного президента США є виразником не просто тимчасової політичної кон'юнктури та конкретної ідеологічної спрямованості декількох політиків, а й більш стратегічних змін в усій так званій «великій стратегії» Сполучених Штатів Америки. Вперше з кінця Холодної війни спостерігається відхід від багатополарності, укріплення існуючих партнерств та відстоювання ліберально-демократичного світопорядку в сторону «бізнесового» підходу до ведення політики, який передбачає транзакційність взаємовідносин, фокусацію на профіцитності зовнішньої політики та відступ від раніше сформованих зобов'язань. В контексті зміни підходу до Центрально-Східної Європи ці тренди є максимально виразними і майже ілюстративними.

Автори припускають, що ефективний інструмент для відповідного аналізу можна створити, поєднавши оцінку сучасних тенденцій у зовнішній політиці США (яка слугує рушієм глобальних змін) та аналіз регіональних реакцій Центральної та Східної Європи, які розглядаються крізь призму дворівневої аналітичної рамки ігор Роберта Патнема. Таким чином створюється не просто база порівняльного аналізу, а дієва інструментальна рамка для роботи подібної методології в умовах аналізу актуальних геополітичних процесів.

Автори роблять висновок, що держави Центрально-Східної Європи реагують не як узгоджені утворення чи раціональні актори; вони реагують як арени політичної боротьби. Розуміння цієї динаміки є важливим для

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пояснення того, чому реакції Центральної та Східної Європи на транзакційний підхід Трампа, ймовірно, будуть диференційованими, нестабільними та дуже чутливими як до внутрішньополітичних зрушень, так і до міжнародних сигналів.

**Ключові слова:** Зовнішня політика США, адміністрація Трампа, Центральна та Східна Європа, дворівнева гра.

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 signified not merely a rotation of political elites, but a fundamental rupture in the continuity of the American foreign policy tradition that the Joseph Biden administration had sought to restore. If the 2021–2024 period is viewed as an attempted "renaissance of Atlanticism," grounded in restoring trust in multilateral institutions and strengthening the liberal world order, then Trump's second term marks a definitive transition to the doctrine of "realistic transactionalism." This shift necessitates a profound reconceptualization of the very nature of American hegemony and its projection onto the Central and Eastern Europe (hereinafter – CEE) region.

The foreign policy architecture of the Biden administration was underpinned by the concept of alliances as assets. The strategic priority was the formation of broad coalitions to contain systemic rivals (China and Russia) through collective security mechanisms and normative unity [1, pp.37-38]. For CEE, this implied a role as the "eastern shield of democracy," where U.S. security guarantees were viewed as an unconditional imperative deriving from Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Washington's approach was predicated on predictability, institutional memory, and the perception of security as a public good provided by the U.S. to allies in the name of global stability.

Conversely, the strategic culture of the second Trump administration rejects liberal institutionalism in favor of Jacksonian nationalism. A key distinction lies in the redefinition of the alliance itself: it transforms from a "sacred obligation" into a "contractual agreement." Within this paradigm, security ceases to be a public good and becomes a subject of bargaining or a service rendered in exchange for economic loyalty, investment in the U.S. defense industrial base (the "Buy American" slogan), and total political subordination.

A principal innovation of the 2025 doctrine is the departure from the containment of Russia as an end in itself. While for Biden's team the war in Ukraine represented the frontier of the struggle between democracy and autocracy, for Trump's team (and his foreign policy architects, such as J.D. Vance and K. Kellogg), the CEE region is viewed through the prism of resource economy. China is identified as the unrivaled strategic rival, while the European theater is subject to optimization. This leads to the demand for the "Europeanization of the war" [2], [3] – transferring the financial and logistical burden of containing the Russian Federation onto the shoulders of European partners.

For the states of Central and Eastern Europe, this dichotomy creates a new reality. The Trump administration no longer views the region as a monolith. A clear segregation of partners is emerging: "loyalists" prepared to play by the rules of bilateral agreements and increase defense spending beyond 3-4% of GDP (e.g., Poland) [4], versus "free-riders," whose security is called into question. Thus, the pivotal change lies in the devaluation of multilateral formats (NATO, EU) in favor of direct bilateral interaction, where Washington acts not as a global policeman, but as a protectionist arbiter.

The transition from the Biden administration's "alliances as assets" approach to the Trump administration's "contractual realism" has manifested most acutely along NATO's Eastern Flank. Throughout 2025, the White House systematically dismantled the presumption of automatic American intervention, replacing it with a conditional security architecture. This new paradigm, articulated through high-level rhetoric and policy shifts, rests on three pillars: the ideological bifurcation of allies, the strategic shift from "forward defense" to "defense by punishment," and the imposition of coercive peacemaking in the Ukrainian theater.

The doctrinal foundation for the 2025 policy shift was laid by Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025. His declaration that "there is a new sheriff in town" was not merely colloquial bravado but a signal of a profound structural adjustment in transatlantic relations [5]. Vance's assertion that the United States aims to "support our allies... while restoring Europe's civilizational confidence" introduced an ideological litmus test to the alliance structure [5]. The administration signaled a preference for partners who align with a conservative, sovereignist worldview – specifically favoring the trajectory of Poland and Hungary over the liberal institutionalism of Western Europe.

This ideological alignment, however, remained secondary to the fiscal imperative. President Trump's statements following the NATO Summit in The Hague (June 2025) codified the "pay-to-play" nature of the new security guarantee. By designating Poland's defense spending (approaching 5% of GDP) as the "new gold standard," Trump effectively bifurcated the alliance. The message to the broader region was explicit: "If you want to stay under the American shield, you must wield the European sword. We will not be your infantry" [6].

This rhetoric marks a departure from the concept of indivisible security. Instead, the administration has fostered a tiered alliance system where "premium"

security consumers – those meeting the fiscal demands of the "Trump Corollary" [7] – receive preferential access to U.S. technology and political support, while "free-riders" face ambiguity regarding U.S. commitments.

Perhaps the most significant military-strategic evolution of 2025 was the redefinition of Article 5 implementation along the Eastern Flank. Under the previous administration, the strategy relied on "forward defense" – the physical presence of American troops acting as a "tripwire" to guarantee immediate U.S. involvement in a conflict. The Trump administration, guided by National Security Advisor Mike Waltz and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, has moved to dismantle this model in favor of "defense by punishment." This transition implies a withdrawal of U.S. "boots on the ground" in favor of providing high-end capabilities – intelligence, cyber dominance, and the nuclear umbrella—while delegating the burden of tactical, kinetic warfare to local actors.

This division of labor was further reinforced by National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, when he asserted that heavy mechanized warfare must be the purview of European powers, specifically demanding that Western European nations redeploy resources to the East. The U.S. role is thus narrowed to that of a logistics hub and an arsenal of democracy, rather than a frontline combatant.

Consequently, the security of the Suwałki Gap and the Baltic littorals has become contingent on the "technological interoperability" demanded by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth. His ultimatum in May 2025 – that "interoperability is... a condition of your survival" – places immense pressure on CEE states to procure American systems (e.g., Patriot batteries) to ensure their integration into the U.S.-led command and control architecture, further deepening the transactional economic link between security and the U.S. defense industrial base [8].

The administration's approach to the Russo-Ukrainian War has served as the primary stress test for CEE relations. The region's security calculus has been destabilized by the imposition of the so-called "Kellogg Plan," championed by Special Envoy Keith Kellogg. The shift from "as long as it takes" to a strategy of "coercive peacemaking" represents a fundamental misalignment between Washington's global priorities (China) and CEE's existential fears (Russia).

Kellogg's rhetoric throughout 2025 – ranging from the concept of reintegrating Russia into a "League of Real Nations" [9] to the assertion that negotiations were in the "last 10 meters" [10] – indicates a U.S. desire to freeze the conflict regardless of Kyiv's maximalist objectives. For the Baltic states and Poland, this signals a potential "Yalta 2.0," where great power interests supersede the sovereignty of smaller nations.

However, the administration has attempted to mitigate these fears through the "escalation dominance" paradox. While pushing for a ceasefire, officials like Elbridge Colby have publicly supported Poland's right to preemptive action against hybrid threats from Belarus, distinguishing between "unauthorized" escalation and "authorized" self-defense. This suggests that while the U.S. seeks to exit the Ukrainian attrition war, it is willing to endorse aggressive deterrence measures by its Eastern Flank allies, provided they shoulder the risk.

Finally, the 2025–2026 period illustrates the total erosion of the barrier between economic statecraft and security cooperation. The crisis triggered by President Trump's linkage of European tariffs to the acquisition of Greenland (January 2026) demonstrated that even strategic geography is subject to transactional leverage. For CEE capitals, this precedent is alarming; it suggests that Article 5 guarantees could theoretically be held hostage to disputes over trade balances or energy policy.

The administration's "Open for Business" stance, articulated by Vance in Munich, forces CEE governments to view their sovereign wealth funds and procurement budgets as tools of alliance maintenance. The purchase of American LNG, nuclear technology, and armaments is no longer merely an economic decision but a premium paid on an insurance policy against Russian aggression.

To understand how Central and Eastern European states respond to changes in U.S. foreign policy under a renewed Trump administration, it is necessary to first examine the political dynamics within the region. These dynamics, in synergy with updates to the American approach, shape foreign policy choices that must balance fulfilling commitments within the EU, aligning with Washington, and domestic acceptability.

A starting point is that populism has become a structural feature of politics in Central and Eastern Europe rather than a temporary deviation. As Vachudova [11] argues, populist actors in countries such as Hungary and Poland have moved from protest politics into long-term governance, using democratic mandates to weaken liberal constraints. Hungary is the clearest example of this trajectory. However, populist parties also constitute governmental coalitions in Czechia and Slovakia

At the same time, populism in the region takes different forms, which affects how states engage with external actors. Zulianello [12] highlights the prominence of so-called valence populism, especially in countries like Czechia and Slovakia, where political competition revolves around claims of competence, anti-corruption, and managerial efficiency rather than ideological confrontation. Such actors tend to be pragmatic rather than doctrinaire. Their foreign policy orientation is less about shared values and more about what delivers visible political benefits. This creates

a natural opening for transactional approaches to international relations, of the kind associated with Donald Trump.

Another important trend is the selective use of Euroscepticism. While Central and Eastern European societies remain broadly supportive of EU membership, political elites increasingly frame the EU as a distant and intrusive elite when it suits domestic purposes. Zulianello [12] notes that Euroscepticism in the region is often tactical rather than principled. This pattern is reinforced by empirical evidence from Pospíšil Macková et al. [13], who show that in the Visegrád countries, anti-EU rhetoric is closely tied to populist anti-elitism, especially during European election campaigns. Therefore, the EU becomes a convenient external reference point for mobilizing domestic support by the ruling elites in Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia and partially in Poland, even when governments remain economically dependent on European integration. This duality also shapes how shifts in U.S. policy are interpreted, particularly when Washington appears skeptical of multilateral institutions.

Political communication across the region is further shaped by the logic of permanent crisis. Sata [14] rightly highlights that in Hungary governing elites consistently portray politics as a struggle against successive existential threats, from migration and liberal values to Brussels and global elites. Crisis framing (particularly in the 2022 elections) allows leaders to justify exceptional measures and to personalize power. While Hungary represents the most systematic case, similar narratives appear elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. From a foreign policy perspective, this style of politics privileges strong leaders, symbolic gestures, and transactional bilateral deals, which align with the Trump administration's preferences.

Romania illustrates how these dynamics are no longer confined to the Visegrád group. The rapid rise of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians shows that populist mobilization can emerge quickly even in contexts without prolonged illiberal governance. As Armeanu et al. [15] demonstrate, support for AUR is mostly driven not only by economic hardship but by low political participation, cultural homogeneity, and dissatisfaction with mainstream elites. Bearing this in mind, it's fair to assume that the social foundations of populism are present across the region, expanding the audience for nationalist and sovereigntist narratives that resonate with elements of Trump's political style.

At the same time, Central and Eastern Europe, despite the current trends Perevezentseva [16] points out the existing anti-populist resistance. These forces, which may include both opposition (e.g. opposition parties in Czechia and Slovakia) and coalition parties (e.g., arguably, Hlas party in Slovakia) and civil society actors, limit the extent to which populist

governments can fully impact foreign policy without domestic costs. As a result, governments operate within constrained political spaces, balancing external commitments to the EU and the US with internal opposition (as explained in this two-level game, analytically framed by Robert Putnam).

Finally, the region is increasingly shaped by transnational populist linkages. Mos and Macedo Piovezan [17] show how Hungary has positioned itself as an international reference point for right-wing populist actors, offering an alternative model of governance that challenges liberal democratic norms. This internationalization of populism gives added significance to the U.S. Since the Trump administration is perceived as sympathetic to nationalist and sovereigntist agendas, it is therefore seen not just as another foreign partner but also as a potential booster of symbolic legitimacy for domestic political projects.

Taken together, these trends suggest that Central and Eastern European states approach shifts in the U.S. foreign policy through the prism of domestic political realities. Populist pressures, crisis-driven governance, selective Euroscepticism, and varying degrees of resistance all shape how governments and opposition interpret and respond to Trump's transactional approach.

Bearing in mind the political trends described above, the interaction between Central and Eastern European states and the United States under the Trump administration on the one hand and the EU on the other hand, can be well explained by Robert Putnam's two-level game logic. In his studies, Putnam [18] emphasizes that instead of asking whether domestic politics determines foreign policy or vice versa, attention should be shifted to the questions of when and how the two levels interact. This perspective is particularly applicable to the Central and Eastern European context, where foreign policy choices are often constrained by domestic political fragmentation, populist pressures, and competing elite coalitions – and these trends are being strengthened in recent years.

At the core of the two-level game lies the assumption that international negotiations (Level I) are inseparable from domestic ratification processes (Level II). Governments do not act as unitary rational actors; instead, they operate as coalitions of political actors whose preferences, interests, and veto powers define what outcomes are domestically acceptable. In Central and Eastern Europe, this internal fragmentation is especially valid. Under existing conditions, when populism, selective Euroscepticism, and crisis-driven governance are instrumentalized by fragmented elites (both ruling and opposition parties), only narrow and unstable "win-sets" for foreign policy alignment can be designed.

Interaction with the United States and the EU, particularly bearing in mind growing tensions between

these actors, become an exercise in adaptive positioning rather than strategic cooperation. Governments must simultaneously satisfy EU commitments, respond to signals from Washington, manage domestic political coalitions whose preferences often pull in different directions, and preserve their ratings, which can drop dramatically under pressure from opposition amid the constant fear of snap elections. Putnam's insight that agreements are more likely when they are both internationally advantageous and domestically popular is particularly relevant here. In cases where Trump's transactional approach offers visible benefits, such as security guarantees, energy cooperation, or symbolic recognition, domestic win-sets theoretically should expand, especially among populist or valence-oriented actors. Contrary to that, the EU's normative power application might be less attractive, although strategically beneficial.

Therefore, the Central and Eastern European case raises the possibility of a reversal of Putnam's classic logic. Instead of domestic actors constraining international negotiations, international signals may actively reshape domestic coalitions. Explicit encouragement from the U.S. in the context may result in a growing transnational right-wing movement, strengthen populist minorities within domestic political systems and push policies that are costly or destabilizing for the EU's cohesion (narrowing win sets in cooperation with the EU).

The problem is also fueled by the fact that in CEE, foreign policy authority is often fragmented between presidents, prime ministers, parliaments, and sectoral ministries. Poland and since recently, the Czech Republic provide a clear example of a situation in which the president and the government cohabit institutionally, representing different approaches to the EU and sending divergent foreign policy signals, reflecting different domestic coalitions and electoral calculations. From a two-level game perspective, this fragmentation complicates both negotiation and ratification, as external actors may misinterpret who controls the domestic win-set or fuel (intentionally

or unintentionally) the division lines within the governmental structures.

Things get even more complicated when political issues are highly polarized by populists. In such cases, groups for whom the cost of non-agreement is low (most often populists who remain in opposition, like AUR in Romania and KKP in Poland) become politically active, thereby shrinking the domestic win-set and increasing the likelihood of negotiation failure. Here it is important to note that in this case, the U.S. is not an actor participating in the negotiations but rather an exogenous factor of influence which impacts negotiations with the EU.

The notion of reverberation is particularly useful in the current context. Statements of the U.S. officials may function as external shocks that reverberate through domestic political environments, especially among right-wing and populist actors in the region. When international signals align with domestic narratives, a synergistic effect emerges. In such cases, the two levels cannot be modeled separately, as international and domestic dynamics reinforce each other and act as spoilers for the EU's relations with the national governments.

Overall, applying Putnam's two-level game to Central and Eastern Europe reveals that adaptation to a changing U.S. foreign policy is not simply a matter of strategic choice. It is the outcome of continuous bargaining between fragmented domestic actors operating amid external pressure and maneuvering between Brussels and Washington. States in the region do not respond as coherent entities or rational actors; they respond as arenas of political contestation. Understanding this dynamic is essential for explaining why Central and Eastern European responses to Trump's transactional approach are likely to be differentiated, unstable, and highly sensitive to both domestic political shifts and international signals. This differentiation also negatively impacts the EU's unity and narrows win sets in negotiations between the national capitals and Brussels.

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