

BRIEFING ROOM

Remarks by Vice President Harris and President Iohannis of Romania in Joint Press Conference

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*Cotroceni Palace
Bucharest, Romania*

4:14 P.M. EET

PRESIDENT IOHANNIS: (As interpreted.) Good afternoon. I'm pleased to welcome to Bucharest Vice President of the United States of America, Her Excellency, Madam Kamala Harris.

Dear Madam Vice President, welcome to Romania.

I would like to thank Madam Vice President for her presence in Romania in this challenging moment for the democratic community and for the Euro-Atlantic security.

Your visit, Madam Vice President, reflects once more the strength and solidity of the bilateral strategic partnership and the firm commitment of the United States for the security of Romania and NATO Allies from the eastern flank.

I have conveyed to Madam Vice President the appreciation of Romania for the efforts and leadership of the United States, of President Biden, of Madam Vice President, and of the entire Washington administration in this very complicated context.

The continuous dialogue and the close coordination of the United States with Romania and with all the Allies and partners had an essential contribution to delivering a unified and strong message of the international community to the actions of Russia.

Together, we have come up with a firm and prompt response, both from the point of view of assistance in multiple areas, both for Ukraine and for the individuals affected by the conflict,

both when it comes to the sanctions applied to Russia and to the measures for adopting the Allied posture in its entirety, especially on the eastern flank.

Madam Vice President has reconfirmed as part of our — today's discussions the full commitment of the United States of America for the Article 5 regarding the collective defense of the NATO Washington Treaty. This Article contains the essence and spirit of NATO and guarantees that any attempt to impact the security of one NATO state will receive a firm, prompt response of the entire Alliance.

I'm saying it with a great responsibility: NATO will act without hesitation to defend each and every Allied state, including obviously Romania. It is a scenario that all of us want to avoid. But we, as Allies — and I'm saying it while I stand next to our most important strategic partner — will defend every inch when it comes to respecting the commitments that bind us.

I have conveyed my gratitude for these unshakeable security guarantees as the Romanian society has never had in its history, and thanks to which every citizen of Romania can be confident about his own safety and the safety of his family.

I have also conveyed my gratitude for the consolidation of the United States military presence in Romania. We have also discussed about the need within this tense context to keep increasing the American and Allied presence in Romania in the long run as an additional measure to ensure the security of our country and of the entire region.

I have conveyed that, in turn, Romania understands that the security starts at home. And from this point of view, I have recently decided to increase the defense expenses from 2 percent, where it stands now, to 2.5 percent of GDP. And this is greatly appreciated by the American side.

Together with Madam Vice President, we have assessed the long-term implications of the aggression that is taking place in Ukraine, as well as the Russian military presence in Belarus and the Euro-Atlantic.

We have agreed to cooperate to further consolidate the defense measures and deterrence on the eastern flank with a focus on the southern part.

I have highlighted the fact that, in this context, it is necessary to operationalize as soon as possible the NATO battle group on the territory of Romania.

Overall, Romania's strategic assessment is that it becomes necessary to fundamentally rethink the concept, the structure, and the constituent elements of the NATO posture on the eastern flank, taking into account the fact that the current circumstances are considerably different compared to the moment when the current approach concerning the eastern flank was projected.

We need a united forward presence and a coherent one as soon as possible. We have discussed today about our common approach in order to come up with a common response to these unprecedented challenges, especially when it comes to the humanitarian area.

Romania, the United States, along with its Allied and partner countries, have offered assistance in different domains to Ukraine and its people that fights with heroism, courage, and determination.

As you know, I have decided the operationalization in Suceava of a humanitarian logistics facility — so-called hub — that, thanks to the support of the European Union, has the role to collect and transport the international donations in the area of humanitarian assistance for Ukrainian citizens. I have invited the United States to support the activity of this hub.

We have also discussed about the support that is so necessary to the Republic of Moldova. The situation of the neighboring country is unique from the point of view of a very high ratio between the number of refugees and population. This pressure overlaps with the economic and energy-related difficulties that the Republic of Moldova has to face.

Together with Madam Vice President, we have analyzed the energy security prospects. We agreed that this crisis can represent a historic opportunity to switch — to reach a true European energy independence from the Russian gas through investments in renewable sources in the civilian nuclear sector; through diversifying sources, imports of liquefied natural gas; and, obviously, through increased interconnectivity.

As you probably remember, within the context of COP26 Glasgow Summit, the common Romania-USA project to include small modular reactors in the Romanian national system — we agreed to continue and to intensify our cooperation in this strategic domain.

Last but not least, a fundamental aspect for the success of our efforts and to ensure — ensuring our common security is represented by the maintenance and consolidation of the transatlantic relationship by ensuring the unity and coordination of the European Union, United States, NATO, and G7.

Romania brought its own contribution in this regard by promoting the Bucharest Nine format, which was very efficient, even in this context.

This year, we celebrate 25 years from the launch of our strategic partnership that continuously developed during the last years and is currently at its highest level in its history.

In addition to the consolidated cooperation in the area of defense and security, and of the ambitious initiatives in the energy sector, I have discussed with Madam Vice President to continue expanding all the dimensions of the strategic partnership, from the economic one, including through the development of regional priorities, strategic projects related to the interconnectivity and that are of interest for Romania, and up to the consolidation of scientific cooperation and of, obviously, interhuman relationships.

We also discussed about visa waiver topic in regards to Romania, and we hope to have some results in this area as well.

Once again, I would like to thank Vice President Harris for coming to Romania. I'm sure that the substantive discussions that we had will be followed up by concrete measures and adequate — appropriate decisions for the unprecedented context in which we currently find ourselves in.

Thank you, Madam Vice President. You have the floor.

VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: Thank you, President Iohannis, for the warm welcome to Romania and for your steadfast friendship to the partnership that we have that is longstanding and enduring.

I also want to recognize and thank Prime Minister Ciucă for the conversation that we had last week.

If I may, Mr. President, I'd like to speak directly to the Romanian people for one moment, to thank you, on behalf of the United States.

Under the leadership of President Iohannis, Romania has been extraordinary in the generosity and the courage that you have shown in this moment. Around the world, we have watched as you have received refugees. Around the world, and I will speak for the United States, we know of the particular challenges that you face geographically, yet you have shown so much courage.

The meeting that the President and I had today was a very productive meeting to reaffirm the

strength of the relationship and friendship between the United States and Romania.

I've said many times, including this afternoon with the President and the President's leadership, but around the world, and I will say it here: America's commitment to Article 5 is ironclad. We take very seriously our role and the relationships that we have within the NATO Alliance.

We take seriously and are prepared to act on the words we speak when we say an attack against one is an attack against all. We are firm in our commitment — when I say and we say over and over again, President Joe Biden says: We will defend every inch of NATO territory.

So I am present in Romania today to reaffirm that commitment, in addition to thanking the president, your leadership, and the people of Romania.

The strength of our Alliance has endured and is now bigger and stronger than ever. The strength of our Alliance includes our mutual commitment to stand on the principles that we hold dear and share, that include the defense of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of independent states — and in this case, Ukraine.

We are clear that the work that is to be done in response to Putin's war includes standing strong within the Alliance to support the needs of our partners. To that end, and to demonstrate our commitment as the United States, in recent weeks we sent a 1,000-member Stryker squadron. That creates a total force of 2,000 American troops who are prepared to stand in defense of our commitment to the NATO Alliance and the eastern flank.

We have reinforced our recent commitments, all with the mention and with the meaning of strengthening our deterrence and our collective defense.

I want to thank you, President Iohannis, for your leadership on NATO's eastern flank. I want to thank you for in addition to doing all that you have been doing in your role of leadership, to modernizing and to increasing the resources that are available.

You and I talked about the importance of running a government in a way that we modernize and are efficient and effective with the resources we have. You have been a model in that regard, and I thank you.

In terms of our mutual support for the people of Ukraine — in Washington, in the United States Congress, we have taken recent action, including a commitment of \$13.6 billion

for Ukraine and the region in terms of security assistance and humanitarian assistance.

The President — Iohannis and I talked extensively, and I was very moved, Mr. President, by the stories you shared with me of the time you spent with refugees, and the heart-wrenching experience that they are having.

So we stand together, Romania and the United States, in ensuring that we will do all that is required to put resources into the humanitarian piece of this, understanding that the needs are significant and immediate.

To the extent that we are offering humanitarian assistance, in addition to the \$13.6 billion package from the United States Congress, \$4 billion of that will be directly committed to humanitarian assistance. That is on top of the \$53 million that I announced yesterday that, through the U.N., the United States will give to the World Food Programme.

But I must say, when we are talking about humanitarian assistance, Romania has been a hub of humanitarian assistance. And that is yet another reason that we are here to thank the President and the people of this great country for what you are doing based on the needs of this region. You have been welcoming tens of thousands of refugees, and doing it with such compassion and such grace.

So I'll conclude my remarks by saying that this is a strong and enduring relationship. It is an important relationship. And the importance of this relationship is being highlighted at this very moment. But it is a relationship that will continue over the years.

And again, I thank you, Mr. President, and the people of this beautiful country for all you do and all you represent. Thank you.

PRESIDENT IOHANNIS: Thank you so much, Madam Vice President. We have a couple of questions.

Q (As interpreted.) Good afternoon. Roxana Zamfirescu, State TV. I have a question for both officials. I would like to ask you if the United States plans to increase the number of troops and to create here a permanent presence. I'm asking this in the context of which 150 kilometers away from the Romanian frontieră take — bombardments take place. And I would like to ask you as well if — what are the chances of the war extending towards Romania and Republic of Moldova?

VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: I cannot repeat frequently enough that the United States is committed to our friendship and alliance with Romania. And to that end, we have a continuous and rotating commitment of U.S. troops to this country, most recently with the deployment of the 1,000-member Stryker squadron.

And as the people of Romania know, we also know that this is a dynamic situation, and we will, on a daily basis, assess the needs that we have to maintain stability in this region.

As it relates to what might be the future conduct of Putin, I cannot speculate. But we are clear in our position, which is that as a member of NATO, an attack against one is an attack against all.

PRESIDENT IOHANNIS: Thank you. (As interpreted.) I believe that the first part received a very clear response from Madam Vice President.

As for the second part, I can highlight the fact that we do not have information that would indicate that Romania would represent a target of an aggression. On the other hand, it is very clear that this Russian action, this war started against Ukraine, definitely created, definitely produced a result — a visible, a firm, a clear result. And it's represented by the unity of NATO and the determination of NATO Allies to stand together and to defend itself — each other.

VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: Nancy —

Q Hi, thank you.

VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: — from Bloomberg.

Q Thank you. Thank you. Madam Vice President, the humanitarian crisis is growing and the violence only seems to be getting worse. The White House and British government have both offered dire warnings about the possibility of the chemical weapons being deployed by Russia, and diplomatic efforts seem to have failed. Is there any discernible pathway out of the crisis? And what is the off-ramp?

And to the President of Romania: I'm curious if you think that there are any specific economic sanctions that you'd like to see the U.S. pursue that they have not done so already. Thank you.

VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: In terms of your question about off-ramp: You know, from the beginning, the United States has been attempting sincerely to engage in diplomacy — actively.

And from everything that we know and have witnessed, Putin shows no sign of engaging in serious diplomacy.

As many of you know, I gave a speech in Munich three weeks ago, before the invasion — the reinvasion of Ukraine started. And I said then what we have maintained all along: We're witnessing a playbook — the Russian playbook — and it includes lies, misinformation, and the acts of aggression that we are now witnessing.

We maintain that diplomacy is the way to resolve these issues that coexists with our commitment to ensure that our Allies are strong and that there must be serious consequence and accountability for what Russia is doing, which is why we have — to the other point of your question — engaged in historic sanctions and to the effect of basically a freefall of the ruble. The Russian stock market is still not open. Their credit rating is now “junk.”

And there will be more announcements about more action that we will take to ensure serious consequence for what is atrocious and outrageous conduct on behalf of the Russian people by Putin.

PRESIDENT IOHANNIS: The sanction packages have been discussed between the United States and the European Union. We worked very well together on this, and we will continue to work together on this. This is the economic side.

On the other hand, the two of us just stated that we stand strong together according to Article 5 of the NATO treaty, and we will continue this way. So, if new sanctions will be necessary, they will be discussed and applied.

Q (As interpreted.) Good afternoon. Oana Bala, Radio Romania. Madam Vice President, Mr. President, we have seen as the Russian troops attacked a maternity as well as humanitarian convoys. A lot of civilians were killed, including — a lot of people were killed, including children, and this triggered a huge international response. Do you believe that Russia committed war crimes in Ukraine?

VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: I think I've said it before and I'll say it again: We are clear that any intentional attack or targeting of civilians is a war crime. Period.

PRESIDENT IOHANNIS: (As interpreted.) We have discussed these topics because the images are, of course, shocking. I have discussed about this with Madam Vice President, and yesterday we discussed this topic as part of the European Union summit.

And it is very clear to everyone that such situations must be documented in such a way that when the right moment comes, the authorities and the competent institutions would be able to follow up on these — on these facts and to establish in a correct manner on the international level whether or not they constitute war crimes, who committed them, and what should be the appropriate consequences for them.

However, it is unimaginable for all of us to see such images now in the 21st century, in a war that takes place in Europe. It's outrageous.

VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: Aamer Madhani from the Associated Press.

Q Thank you. Thank you, Madam Vice President. I really appreciate it.

But may I ask, Mr. President, your country and many of your neighbors are enduring enormous cost aiding Ukrainian refugees, and you also face a really dire threat in the Black Sea. And I was just wondering if — what specifically you've asked the Vice President for. Particularly, do you need more U.S. troops here? Do you need any specific more materiel defense aid?

And if I can ask you, Madam Vice President: President Biden has said that Americans will feel some pain for the sake of defending freedom and liberty, but there does seem to be no endgame in sight. How long should Americans expect — how long should we be bracing for this really, sort of, historic inflation and some unprecedented gas prices?

VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: Sure. In terms of the discussions that the President Iohannis and I had, they ranged in subject, including the issue of the Black Sea, and I'll let him explain in more detail as he would like.

But we are, again, fully aware and apprised because we are in constant communication with the President, with his administration here about the concerns that they have about the entire region and, frankly, the vulnerability.

All you have to do is look at the map and see that where Romania exists geographically — and as is the case for our Allies on the eastern flank — that there are potential vulnerabilities, which is why we say very clearly: We will dedicate — and have been especially enhancing, over the last few weeks — our support based on their current needs.

When we look at Putin's actions — the previous question — there is — it is painful to watch. It is painful to watch what is happening to innocent people in Ukraine who just want to live in

their own country and have pride in themselves as Ukrainians, who want to be home speaking the language they know, going to the church that they know, raising their children in the community where their families have lived for generations. And by the millions, now, are having to flee with nothing but a backpack.

And then you compound that with what happened a couple of days — the President talked about it today; I talked about it yesterday — in terms of a maternity hospital, pregnant women. We are — we have the unfortunate experience, all of us right now who are not in Ukraine, of witnessing horror.

So we are committed in everything we are doing. And, yes, then the President did say in the State of the Union, there is a price to pay for democracy. Got to stand with your friends. And as everybody knows, even in your personal life, being loyal to those friendships based on common principles and values, sometimes it's difficult. Often, it ain't easy. But that's what the friendship is about, based on shared values. So that's what we're doing.

PRESIDENT IOHANNIS: Thank you. Russia started its attack on Ukraine from the south, from the Black Sea area. This is a scenario we have been warning about for many years now.

On the other hand, Romania has approximately 650 kilometers of land border with Ukraine. It's the longest land border of all allies neighboring with Ukraine.

So, yes, we are concerned. We are concerned about the eastern flank. And this is why we are working on making the eastern flank stronger.

And, yes, we discussed with Vice President Harris about these issues. And I raised the issue of the eastern flank, that the eastern flank has to be strong, it has to be well balanced. Because if one part of the eastern flank is strong and the other part is weak, it's obviously a weakness on the eastern flank.

So the eastern flank has to be strong to defend the entire NATO, to defend the Euro-Atlantic area.

And on the eastern flank, the Allies — and, in this case, we discussed specifically about U.S. and Romania — have to materialize a force that is strong enough to be deterrent. NATO relies on strength and deterrence. So to deter somebody, you have to be strong in that area.

So, yes, we discussed about the necessity of a NATO battlegroup in Romania. And, obviously, the United States play an important role in this.

We discussed about enhanced U.S. presence on the eastern flank, specifically, obviously, on our part of the eastern flank. And we discussed, obviously, about Article 5 of NATO and about the longstanding partnership between our troops, because soldiers from the United States have been in Romania for many years now, and they work very well together with the Romanian forces, and they are a real gain on the southern part of the eastern flank. And they are a significant reassurance for Romanians that we do not stand alone, that we stand with the United States and with all the other NATO Allies.

So, yes, we discussed all this, and we have a common approach, if I may say so. And this is what — specific for our partnership. We have — we enjoy a strategic partnership because we try to solve problems and we do solve problems together.

Thank you.

Q Is there a specific number for the enhanced presence you would like to see? Is there a number of U.S. or NATO troops, additionally, you would like to see in Romania?

PRESIDENT IOHANNIS: Well, why don't we let the military from the States and from Romania talk together, and then to NATO, and then all of this will be public after that.

VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: Thank you.

PRESIDENT IOHANNIS: No more questions? (Laughs.)

Thank you so much.

END 4:44 P.M. EET