
**US State Department Memorandum of Conversation between Emil Bodnaras, Vice President,
Romanian Council of State, and Harry G. Barnes, American Ambassador to Romania, US
Embassy, Bucharest**

Memorandum of conversation

PARTICIPANTS:

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SUBJECT: Tour d'Horizon on Political Subjects

The Ambassador's courtesy call, his first full meeting with Bodnaras, stretched out to nearly two and a half hours as the number two-ranked Romanian leader touched on nearly all of Romania's key foreign policy preoccupations, often with surprising candour. Displaying a keen, detailed sense of history, Bodnaras, now in his 71st year, prefaced the conversation with a 20-minute monologue about Romania's millennia-long struggle for national existence – background, he said, to today's Romanian 'socialism.' Bodnaras was lucid and forceful, occasionally slapping the table for emphasis. After meandering through an anecdote or an aside, he never failed to snap the discussion back into focus in ways which revealed that his discursiveness had some illustrative purpose.

Soviet 'Imperialist' Mentality Decried. As he had done with Senator SCOTT several weeks before (refair A), Bodnaras returned repeatedly to his thesis that the current Soviet leadership is so thoroughly imbued with an 'imperialist' mentality that it has little to do with real 'socialism.' Lingering for effect over the phrase, he said the Chinese were entirely correct in terming the Soviet rulers 'new tsars'; he recalled Peter the Great's last testament which, he argued, Moscow seemed to be following to the letter, notably in expanding into the Near East. Bodnaras opined that while the word of an English gentleman or even a Chinese Communist, for example, was as good as his bond, not even a whole shelf of dictionaries would suffice to pin down the Soviets in negotiations and agreements.

Reviewing the USSR's internal scene, he characterized Soviet rule as similar to that of the old Tsarist guberniya system in which captive provinces were dominated primarily by raw military force as well as by imposed Russian satraps. When the Ambassador mentioned his having done historical research on the Bessarabian question in 1917-18 and asked about the status of that area now, Bodnaras discussed at some length how some of the Romanian population in Soviet Moldavia had earlier been deported and bribed into going to Central Asia, but mused that with modern means of communication (seeming to include those beamed from Romania) it was becoming harder for Moscow to isolate such people as the Moldavians

(Romanians), whose identity he said was still intact. Bodnaras lamented the tragic fate of the Crimean Tatar nation which had been packed off to Central Asia by Stalin ‘in two nights’ with terrible loss of life. He again (refair A) touched on Soviet mythmaking aimed at rationalizing Moscow’s power grabs, citing the division of Germany into two ‘so-called’ nations as comparable to the attempt to portray Moldavia as something apart from Romania.

Bodnaras recalled a half-gleeful, half-worrisome anecdote: when Gheorghiu-Dej on his own agreed to the stationing of two Soviet military officers in Romania to represent the Warsaw Pact’s unified command after Soviet forces had been withdrawn from the country in 1958. One of these, the Soviet naval representative, promptly began touring Romanian installations to recruit agents from among Romanian personnel who had been trained earlier in the Soviet Union. When he was called in and roughly ordered to stop by General Ionita, the Soviet officer sat transfixed (‘like a bird watching a cobra’) and at the end had only one question: ‘If there was so much as one Soviet regiment on Romanian soil, would you dare treat me this way?’ Bodnaras added, ‘He was right!’ This was another demonstration, he said, of the Soviet reliance on force only; their policy, he summed up, is that of ‘diktat’ and ‘hegemony.’ He went on to note that Romania has to try to maintain good relations with the USSR since the Soviet Union is, after all, a big neighbour, but Romania is in deep disagreement with the ‘anti-socialist’ policies of what he referred to as the ‘transient’ (trecatoare) Soviet leadership.

Low opinion of Brezhnev Revealed. Although Bodnaras had little good to say about any current Soviet Politburo member and scorned them as a collective (he said Khrushchev was worth more than the whole current leadership put together), he was particularly unflattering toward Brezhnev whom he termed an ‘apparatchik’ of little breadth or depth, spread too thin for his abilities, and tired and ill despite a seemingly bluff, robust exterior. Bodnaras claimed that Brezhnev was the most poorly informed of any top USSR leader he had dealt with, a man who only penetrated superficially into his subject matter. Bodnaras said this flaw made for unpredictability and danger, for Brezhnev was in large measure dependent for information on what the apparat fed him. Statecraft, Bodnaras smiled sadly, is difficult enough even for well-informed leaders.

Bodnaras recalled that in 1970 when serious floods had ravaged Romania, Moscow had decided the time had come to ‘force Romania to her knees.’ Brezhnev, however, made his case to Ceausescu reading woodenly from briefing papers prepared by others, and Ceausescu rather easily disposed of the Soviet arguments. On another occasion, in early 1965 after the ouster of Khrushchev, Bodnaras said, he had been present with Gheorghiu-Dej when Brezhnev had called to say that the Chinese were proposing that Chou and Liu come to Moscow (‘everyone but Mao himself,’ Bodnaras shook his head). But Brezhnev clearly had no idea what the purpose of this gesture was nor what to do, and simply floundered (here Bodnaras lapsed into caustic mimicry, in good Russian, of a buffoon-like Brezhnev). Unfortunately, Bodnaras went on, Brezhnev listened not to Romanian counsel but to that of Marshal Malinovski’s ilk and let slip by an historic chance to moderate Sino-Soviet tensions. Khrushchev, Bodnaras added, should have finished off apparatchiks like Brezhnev before they finished him off.

Andropov and Soviet Military Also Rapped. Soviet KGB chief and Politburo member Yuriy Andropov, Bodnaras said, was another example of a Soviet leader who ‘doesn’t understand politics’ and has narrow, limited insight, a shortcoming particularly regrettable in a security policeman, he added. Bodnaras recalled that it had been Andropov’s misleading reporting which had caused Khrushchev to mishandle the onset of

what Bodnaras termed the ‘revolt of the Hungarian military’ in 1956. Bodnaras was also scathingly contemptuous of the Soviet military leadership, whom he called the ‘most backward in all of Eastern Europe;’ lacking any political sense, he said, they thought only in terms of brute power and force to achieve Soviet ends. Bodnaras said he was ‘sure’ that if the Dubcek regime had resolved to fight in 1968 and had made[line missing]..nothing more than a tentative ‘armistice’ arising from mutual fear of atomic weapons held by both. D tente will be mere ‘smoke, mist,’ Bodnaras feared, until both sides understand it in the same way, which is not now the case. Brezhnev thinks he now has a free hand. The Soviets, Bodnaras went on, feed on tension; he wondered who was more interested, for example, in maintaining NATO, Brezhnev or Nixon. For the Soviets, NATO serves as the sole remaining justification for retaining the Red Army’s ‘occupation troops’ in Eastern Europe. The Soviets have never been seriously interested in a German peace treaty, he charged, because this would mean talking about East Prussia, the unity of Germany, and other hard issues. Soviet leaders had brusquely dismissed Romanian queries about such a treaty saying the German question had been settled, the division was permanent, and Brandt’s policy was its guarantee: ‘As if Germans, east and west, will not eventually come together!’, Bodnaras exclaimed. He glumly maintained that Brandt had made far too many concessions to the Soviets for too little in return.

To the Ambassador’s queries whether Bodnaras saw any alternatives to the quest for a US-Soviet d tente and whether a demise of NATO would not be highly dangerous to Romania given the type of Soviet mentality Bodnaras had described, Bodnaras had no ready answers. He tossed the ball back by saying the US needs to think of some way to make use of this ‘armistice’ with the Soviets to reduce the utility to them of the NATO excuse. He appeared to believe that existing contradictions in the Soviet environment (internal problems, China, etc.) would be effective brakes on Muscovite behaviour even without the NATO factor as prominent as it now is. Seeming to favor letting the Kremlin stew in its own juice, Bodnaras singled out the Soviet national minorities as a potentially serious ‘unresolved’ problem with which the Kremlin has yet to cope: ‘Brezhnev can expel one Solzhenitsyn,’ Bodnaras remarked, ‘but hardly millions of Uzbeks or Azerbaidzhanis.’

Middle East. In Bodnaras’s view, Moscow was clearly trying to undercut Secretary Kissinger’s essentially constructive peacemaking efforts. He considered the terrorist incident at Maalot as probably a Soviet-sponsored provocation. He saw Soviet behaviour in the Middle East as another example of Moscow’s reliance on continued tensions and military force to gain influence. He cited Iraq. Moscow had poured in weaponry to benefit whichever army general happened to be in control and in the process had wrecked a promising Communist party with a substantial workers’ base along with allied ‘progressive forces.’ The same lack of a Marxist class approach was seen in the USSR’s dealings with Syria, Jordan and especially Egypt, where Bodnaras thought the irony was exquisite: ‘Soviet missiles guarding Egyptian cities, the jails of which are filled with Communist Party members!’

The Syrian Communist leader Khalid Bakdash, Bodnaras claimed, had returned to Syria only after having been turned by the Soviets into a ‘human wreck, an alcoholic.’ Soviet weapons, he noted, had gone to work suppressing the Kurds whose leader Barzani the Romanians had assisted (Bodnaras said he had personally been involved) in returning to Iraq during the late 1950s from the USSR where he had been forced to work with his brothers as a simple collective farmer because the Soviets had disliked his independent attitude.

Bodnaras said the Soviets had gone so far as to dog the steps of Romanian commercial representatives in Arab countries (and in Latin America) and deliberately underbid them, even to the point of giving away free

goods and services. Bodnaras advised the US to be cautious in its policy towards Egypt, but it was not clear whether he thought the US should avoid too close a diplomatic relationship with Egypt because this might provoke a Soviet counter-response and perhaps complicate progress toward a peace settlement, or whether by trying to replace the Soviets in running the Middle East show the US might therefore incur renewed Arab hostility.

Warsaw Pact. To the Ambassador's question on Romania's position toward the Warsaw pact and CEMA, Bodnaras first emphasized that in the Romanian view the two entities were entirely separate (perhaps reflecting previously rumoured Soviet attempts to drag CEMA matters into April's Warsaw PCC meeting). He said Brezhnev had spent two hours at Warsaw trying to get Ceausescu to agree to a condemnation of China in the PCC communiqué, which was the reason the bilateral communiqué had referred to their meeting as only 'comradely.' Ceausescu of course refused. Bodnaras said Ceausescu had won a point on inclusion of language on the dissolution of NATO and the Warsaw Pact which, although already embodied in the original text of the Pact itself, was 'not so easy to get the Soviets to recognize lately.'

Bodnaras agreed with the Ambassador that in both the Pact and CEMA the Soviets were pursuing a dialectical approach of increasing efforts to tighten up as a reaction to the challenge of détente. Bodnaras was categorical that Romanian policy would continue to oppose Pact manoeuvres on Romanian soil except for map drills and air defense exercises over Romania. He said Romanian forces in the past had used Soviet test ranges for tactical missileery but now had their own range from Cape Midia to Sulina so no longer need Soviet help. Romania now manufactures some of its own military hardware, Bodnaras noted. He said the GOR [Government of Romania, editor's note] had proposed to the Soviets a joint fighter aircraft project, but when Moscow refused, Romania turned to the Yugoslavs and the British for cooperation in this field, which is now underway. At the same time, Romania was trying to cut down its own military expenditures somewhat, figuring it might profit a bit from détente.

Bodnaras stated that Romania gave some thought to withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact as the Albanians had done in 1968 but had concluded that it was better to stay inside the Pact's councils where, although without any influence in running the Pact's military affairs, Romania could at least ask questions and try to keep informed. He recalled that Ceausescu had berated Brezhnev for not consulting with him about intervening in Czechoslovakia. Brezhnev replied that he had not because he knew Ceausescu would be opposed, to which Ceausescu replied he would have told Brezhnev how reckless and harmful an adventure it was. Bodnaras reiterated in this context the constant use by the Soviets of the argument of the existence of NATO against any loosening of Pact bonds.

CEMA and Bulgaria. Bodnaras stressed Romania's concept of CEMA's 'openness', which he defined as the right of member states to cooperate only selectively according to their national economic interests and receptivity to other states to join in the organization. He stressed that the Soviets really mean 'diktat' or 'subordination' when they say 'integration' as the Bulgarian and Hungarian experience showed. He averred that although the Romanians had agreed as a compromise to inclusion of the word 'integration' in the title of the 1971 CEMA complex program, they had been able to keep the concept out of the text itself except in terms acceptable to them. Romania does not accept, for example, the overall unified plan approach of the Soviets.

Bodnaras touched briefly on differences between the advanced and underdeveloped CEMA partners. He noted that the Bulgarians despite their very successful agriculture had trouble provisioning their population because too much produce was being sent to the USSR. In this same vein, he cited Habib Bourguiba's visit to Eastern Europe when the Tunisian leader had sought to see whether it was possible to build a socialist society in a small country and how Bourguiba had been appalled at the degree of Soviet domination of Bulgaria, and the contrasting independence of Romania. (In an earlier remark in another context, however, he alluded to his belief that the Bulgarians are not always quite as docile as others think they are.)

US-Romanian Relations. Bodnaras hammered away at the political significance MFN could have for Romania. He argued that, above all, it was important that the Soviets not get the idea that Romania's relations with the US were a function of US-USSR relations, or that MFN for Romania was conditioned on the USSR's receiving similar status. Bodnaras recalled that in 1969, Romania had wanted to welcome the visit of President Nixon even though it had caused friction with the Soviets (who had refused to send a high-level delegation to the Romanian Party Congress immediately afterward); nevertheless, Romania had hoped to show through this visit that the Yalta Agreement was dead, that Eastern Europe was not the exclusive province of one great power. He cited this behaviour as an example of the fact that Romania had a very clear idea of its own interests and sees no point to doing things simply for the sake of words or gestures of 'friendship.'

He went on to say that it was important the way Romania was accorded MFN, and if the Soviets were not going to get MFN, as Bodnaras now thought, MFN for Romania should not be held up further or tied to the USSR's problems. (COMMENT: Although Ceausescu had told US CODEL IP members in mid-April just after his return from Warsaw, that it would be greatly preferable if MFN were given to all socialist states, including the USSR at the same time, both Manea Manescu and now Bodnaras have seemed to stress the original Romanian line that the GOR will be glad to receive MFN even if the Soviets do not.)

Bodnaras claimed that Husak in Czechoslovakia had wanted to invite President Nixon (he was not clear when) but had of course bowed to Soviet disapproval; similarly, the Portuguese Communist leader Alvaro Cunhal had refused to see Ceausescu's recent emissary to Portugal Mihnea Gheorghiu because Cunhal had not obtained permission from Moscow. The Romanian CP, he pointed out, behaved otherwise.

Emigration and Jewish Transits. The Ambassador pointed out that Romania's record in emigration, particularly to the United States and transits from the USSR to Israel, would probably get more attention in the United States if the trade Bill failed and legislation on MFN for Romania separately came under active consideration. Bodnaras responded that it was hard for him to see how anyone could fault Romania's emigration record; 400,000 Israelis were of Romanian origin, and only 60,000-70,000 Romanian Jews were left, less than 20,000 of whom had exit applications pending. Bodnaras added that although it was known in general terms, Romanian diplomacy had been extremely active after the October 1973 war in Middle East diplomacy, urging various Arab governments and groups toward a political solution. While this was not due to any altruism – if general Middle East hostilities again broke out, Romania would at best be troubled by Soviet overflight and transit requests and at worst could be occupied on various pretexts – it had affected what Romania could do in Jewish emigration. This was true, especially in the transit operation, where an additional complicating factor was the presence of what Bodnaras called 'Soviet provocateurs' among the Jewish emigrants. Bodnaras claimed that perhaps 30 per cent of Soviet Jews had signed some sort of agreement with the KGB in return for permission to emigrate, and that not a few of these had staged anti-Soviet demonstrations at the Gara de Nord station in order to embarrass Romania. These he did not think

were genuine since Jews going through Bulgaria (sic) – he apparently meant by train – had been quiet and had not caused trouble. With regard to the future, he added only that if conditions (unspecified) improved, Romania might consider allowing transit to resume.

On the more general question of emigration from Romania, he expressed some exasperation with Senator Jackson, the sincerity of whose motives he questioned. He noted that Rabbi Rosen had returned from America and urged that another thousand Jews be allowed to leave for the beneficial effect this would have on MFN. Bodnaras snorted that he doubted another thousand one way or the other made any difference to Jackson.

China. Bodnaras generally followed many of the lines of his discussion with Senator Scott (refair) but sounded somewhat less sure this time that Chou's position was altogether secure. He termed Chou as the 'pivotal figure' throughout the last few years, able to deal with all factions, whose resurrected 'Bandung' foreign policy was again in force. Although discounting the 'anti-Confucius campaign,' however, he remarked on Chou's age and heavy work schedule: when Bodnaras had visited China in August 1973 he had found Chou working from 5am to 1am. He also spoke of how talented an individual Teng is. Bodnaras, in answer to the Ambassador's question, said he saw no chance at all that China would again withdraw into itself and shrink back from the world stage. By way of proving the point, Bodnaras noted, the Chinese had invited Makarios just a few days previous, and had earlier set up relations with a country as relatively insignificant as Malta. He went on to quip that 'there may soon be Chinese submarines in the Mediterranean Sea along with the others.' Bodnaras said Romania had long urged the Chinese to join the UN but Peking for many years had felt it could do better on the outside. Now, Chinese diplomacy was feeling its way and gaining confidence; in time it was sure to be a powerful factor.

Why Khrushchev Withdrew Soviet Troops from Romania. Turning to recollections of Khrushchev, Bodnaras termed him 'open' in contrast to the current crop of Soviet leaders, a man with a lively intelligence who listened and could 'assess and adapt to realities'; even he, though, at the end became a prisoner of the apparachiki.

Responding to the Ambassador's question, Bodnaras went into considerable detail on how Khrushchev had agreed to withdraw Soviet troops from Romania (refair A), a story that spanned the years 1956-58. By 1956 it had become clear, he said, that the Soviets were insisting on whittling down national military forces in Eastern Europe while maintaining the size of their own 'occupation' armies. In May of that year, just after the Soviets had insisted on another 10,000- man cut, an Observer correspondent by coincidence happened to ask a general question on this line in a list of questions submitted to Gheorghiu-Dej who was at the Black Sea shore with Bodnaras. The query was checked out from Bucharest (without Dej's knowledge) by the then Romanian Politburo member Chisinevski with Molotov, who responded that 'no reply should be given.'

The RCP leadership, who had been longing for a chance to raise the question themselves, meanwhile had decided to ask Khrushchev, who was then visiting Bulgaria, to stop in Bucharest on the way back and was not deterred by the complications of what Molotov had said. Bodnaras, who was given the job of speaking for the Romanian leadership, suggested to Khrushchev [words illegible] consider withdrawing Soviet occupation troops so that it would not appear, as Western propaganda was alleging, that socialism could not survive without Soviet weapons. Khrushchev got mad (s-a suparat) and refused to consider the suggestion.

In 1958, however, on the way back with Chivu Stoica from a trip to Asian Communist countries where the Romanians had made sure to include ‘withdrawal of foreign troops’ in all communiqués signed, Bodnaras and Stoica were asked to stop in Moscow. In the presence of the full Soviet Politburo they were the surprised recipients of Khrushchev’s declaration that ‘at Romania’s request Soviet troops would be returned to the USSR.’ A nine-hour luncheon followed, at which all eleven Soviet Politburo members each gave three speeches and smothered the Romanians with ‘fraternal affection.’

Why did Khrushchev do it? Bodnaras said he probably saw the move as a trial, thinking that he could trust the Romanian leadership (a faith that was fully justified, Bodnaras hastened to add) and that Romania’s geographic position precluded too much contact with the West. Events earlier in other East European countries had probably moved him to reconsider the ‘occupation’ policy in effect before.

Warning on Telegraphic Transmission Security. At the end of the meeting, Bodnaras, rethinking the frankness of his remarks about the Soviet leadership, asked the Ambassador that any report on them be sent by pouch, not cable, adding that ‘one never knows who is listening in.’ He even remarked to the MFA officer present that it would not be necessary to have the usual transcript prepared. It was not clear whether Bodnaras knows or thinks he knows something about US communications security but he seemed genuinely concerned that his comments be kept strictly confidential. Earlier in the conversation he remarked that he was being unusually frank with the Ambassador because he knew the latter had been present at both summit meetings between Presidents Nixon and Ceausescu.

[Source: Selected US Documents on Sino-American and Romanian/Soviet Relations (1969-1974) obtained by Mircea Munteanu, Cold War International History Project, from the National Archives, College park, Nixon NSC Box 701/703, for the George Washington Cold War Conference on the Sino American Opening and the Cold War (1969-1972), George Washington University, 8-9 February 2002]