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PRESS RELEASE

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HOYT YEE, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EUROPEAN AND EURASIAN AFFAIRS -- ROUND TABLE WITH ROMANIAN JOURNALISTS

-- Transcript --

RELEASE IN FULL

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DAS Hoyt Yee: Thank you all first for your patience and apologies for being late. I am very happy to be back in Bucharest after some time now. The purpose of my visit is to try to meet with officials in the Government since the elections, both in the United States but also here to reaffirm America's support for the Alliance we have with Romania and the Strategic Partnership we have with Romania; to also discuss our cooperation across many different areas and how we can strengthen that cooperation; and I am happy to answer any of your questions.

Reporter: You already know that the main events here in Bucharest were the protests because of an action of the Romanian Government on the night of January 31 when they tried to change the penal legislation overnight and we had an open letter signed by six foreign ambassadors, the U.S. was among them. I quote: "the Government action can only undermine Romania's stand in the international community and risks damaging partnerships that are based on common values." I would like you to elaborate a little bit on this – what exactly could happen if the Romanian Government would try again to weaken justice legislation. What do you exactly mean by saying about the risk of damaging partnerships? Thank you.

Hoyt Yee: Well, thank you for your question. Let me begin by emphasizing that the United States and Romania have a very strong Strategic Partnership and we fully expect that that is going to continue and to get even stronger. That's our goal. Also, Romania and United States of course are in NATO, we're NATO allies, NATO partners, we're friends and in every way we can we're going to

work to strengthen our cooperation. The incident that you mentioned Dan is something that Washington and other capitals I think around Europe have followed very closely. Because we believe – as we understand the people of Romania also believe – that rule of law in any democracy is extremely important. Important first of all for the country itself; it's important for a democracy in order to be strong, to be resilient, to be able to meet the needs and wishes of its citizens, must have rule of law. And you probably heard last week in Brussels, also in Munich from some of the leaders of my government – Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Tillerson – that we believe that the relationship between Europe and the United States is based on the common values of democracy, freedom and rule of law. In other words, our shared goal of promoting peace and prosperity in the transatlantic area is not simply one that we've chosen randomly, but it's based on a shared heritage, shared experience and most importantly shared values. And those values are important as a foundation for our cooperation. So in any country – whether it's Romania or any other country with whom we have a strong relationship, in particular NATO allies, we of course pay attention to the state of rule of law, just as we do the economies, the political situations in all of our partners and friends' countries because it is important for the stability and security of those countries, but it's also important to the NATO alliance when it involves NATO countries, it's important to the United States. So I think what our message in that statement was – both the statement that you referred to, Dan, that was a joint statement from six embassies I think, the statement from Washington that was issued about the same time – our emphasis is on our strong attachment to rule of law, our belief that it's important to the relationship for both countries, all countries involved to be committed, to demonstrate that commitment to those values and it's like any organization, any institution, any structure, there has to be a base, there has to be a foundation. And for us that base is the values that I mentioned. If those values are strong, if the commitment to those values is strong, if actions taken by the governments uphold, reinforce those values, then the organization structure is going to be strong. If the foundation is weakened, if the commitment to those values is weakened, that is inevitably going to affect the rest of the structure. So our goal again is to help strengthen the rule of law, help strengthen the commitment to all those values, to all the commitments, including you heard also our leadership in Munich and in Brussels talk about the need for all NATO allies for example to devote 2% of their gross domestic product towards defense. This is another example where we want to see our allies meeting their commitments, fulfilling their obligations. Fulfilling obligations also entails commitment to rule of law.

Reporter: Dan already mentioned the protests that we've seen in the last weeks in Romania, there have been some unprecedented street movements supporting

the rule of law. The international press was covering these protests. I was wondering what did you think of them, did they come as a surprise? And what do you think the political establishment should learn from these protests?

DAS Hoyt Yee: Well, it was not a surprise to us that the people of Romania would demonstrate in large numbers in favor of rule of law and against any perceived efforts to weaken rule of law. That didn't surprise us, in fact it was inspiring, it was something that in Washington and I am sure in many capitals people admired very much to see democracy in action, to see people standing up for their beliefs and sending clear messages to their elected representatives. And I think it was very notable and I think we appreciated that the Prime Minister shortly after the demonstrations backed away from the initiative, the changes to the Criminal Code that had been the impetus, the cause for the demonstrations. That shows responsiveness to what the people were protesting against. So that gives us confidence that democracy is strong in Romania. I think it also is something that we want to continue watching just as there are I saw even today some protesters maintaining their vigil outside the Government buildings. I think that's symbolically important but also a reminder that all of us are interested and should be interested in what the next steps will be. We are hopeful, we are confident the Government will take the right steps to reassure the citizens of its commitment to rule of law and that it will take the necessary steps to reassure its allies, including the United States, that it remains committed to this very important value on which the Strategic Partnership, the NATO Alliance in fact is based.

Reporter: I guess you are aware or were briefed that many Romanians don't trust their government because they tried to pass the Emergency Decree no. 13... I have a simple question: do you trust this government as a reliable partner?

DAS Hoyt Yee: You know, it's a new government just as my government is relatively new and I think both governments are going through a process of discovery of initial steps and of reviewing policies, launching new initiatives. So, I think both governments are now getting to know one another, that's one of the reasons for my visit here, to get a better idea of which direction the government is going on various issues, including on rule of law – but also, beyond, of course, on security, economy, energy security. And all these issues are going to be examined very carefully through dialogue, through the normal diplomatic discourse before we make any definitive conclusions. What's important I think is that we do have this dialogue between all of our NATO allies. We have the open lines of communication, our Ambassador here, Ambassador Klemm, who you know is quite active, was quite active

over the last several weeks in explaining to the Government our concerns, our views on what should happen. We are confident the Government listened; the Government heard what our concerns were. And that is what is important at this stage, that we're able to exchange views, listen to each other, respect each other's views, and eventually to reach conclusions. So, I would say we are confident again that the Government is listening to us, the Government is aware of what's at stake and of the need to reassure its partners, its allies, that it is still committed to those values on which we have built, on which we want to continue building the strongest possible partnerships.

Reporter: The provisions of Emergency Ordinance no. 13 are no longer the problem of the Government because the Government abrogated the Emergency Ordinance. But we have reasons to believe that many politicians in the Parliament want to reenact the provisions of the Ordinance. So we have this problem now: what if the Parliament will really do such a thing because the rule of law includes all the law, not only... [incomprehensible]. How do you see this possible development in the future?

DAS Hoyt Yee: Well, you raise a very good question because of course let me begin answer by saying that we obviously, the United States obviously respects the sovereign right of Romania and its elected leaders to pass laws, to propose laws, to pass laws, to make policy, to make decisions. And the views I am expressing, again, are expressed on behalf of a country that is a close friend and ally of Romania. We certainly believe it's important for any friend, for any ally of Romania to express our views, to explain when we have concerns, as we have done and we should continue to do that. As I mentioned earlier, we certainly hope that the Government is going to take steps that first strengthen the rule of law, not weaken it...

Reporter: The law, not the rule of law...

DAS Hoyt Yee: Again, there are going to be I think a number of options and a number of possibilities and I don't want to speculate on which is the best one, on which is the right one. That's really up to the Government and the Parliament and ultimately the people to decide. But what I can say is that this new government in Washington, the Government of President Trump, through his Secretary of State, through his Vice President, has made very clear that an important value for us is rule of law, an important principle with regard to our relations with other countries is accountability; that we will hold accountable our allies and partners; just as we've heard for many weeks now, we will hold accountable our allies

for meeting their obligations within NATO, to meet the defense investment pledge – 2% of the GDP; we will also hold them accountable, in other words we expect that they will fulfill their commitment to rule of law, democracy and freedom. So we will be vigilant, we will express our concerns if we have them. Again, we expect, we are hopeful, we are even confident the Government is going to take steps that are going to reassure its citizens and its allies.

Reporter: Can you tell us who you met from the Government, Mr Grindeanu, the Prime Minister and who else? Mr. Dragnea?

DAS Hoyt Yee: Unfortunately I did not have that opportunity but I did meet with a member of the President's Office, an advisor to the President. I met with an official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I met with a prosecutor at the DNA and I'm meeting with you. Tomorrow I will see the Mayor of Constanta and speak to students at the Ovidius University.

Reporter: A very, very short question: do you have any information that Russia is involved in the recent decision of the Romanian Government or in the propaganda field in a way or another, or that it is intensifying actions in Romania?

DAS Hoyt Yee: I don't have any evidence that Russia has played a role in the Government's decisions, any of the Government's decisions. As far as Russia's involvement in media, you would know better than I, I think about Russian activities there. But we are concerned in Washington about what we describe as Russian malign influence, the spreading of misinformation, the spreading of rumors, reports through media outlets that are supported by or sympathetic to Russia or certain Russian politicians, not only in this part of Europe, but more widely and even in my country. That's why we feel it's very important to support free media, freedom of speech, professional free media; also to support civil society, not any one particular orientation or type of civil society, but a vibrant, diverse civil society that is able to act freely, without fear of retribution. We also feel it's very important for governments to have strong institutions generally, judicial, executive or legislative. Countries with weak institutions tend to be less able or less capable of resisting Russian malign influence or other outside malign influence. And that's another reason why we believe it's important for rule of law to be strong. Where rule of law is strong, where the free media is strong, where institutions are strong, Russian propaganda, Russian malign influence is less successful. And of course, I should mention

also economically, from the standpoint of growing economies, in difficult times in Europe, those economies which have rule of law, which have the advantages of functioning judiciary, functioning prosecutions and functioning legislatures, there is a better investment environment generally. Companies, whether they're American, or they're European countries, like to go where the rule of law is strong. So that's another reason why we hope very much the rule of law will continue to be strong in Romania.

Reporter: You have said that both governments are taking the initial steps to know each other after the elections in the U.S. and Romania. What would you say would be the main point of concern for the Strategic Partnership after the election, in this new situation, if there is any point of concern?

DAS Hoyt Yee: Well, I think our main concern, our main desire for the relationship between Romania and the United States is that it gets stronger, that our partnership and cooperation is broadened and deepened. So the many areas of cooperation we have now, particularly the area of security, where we have the closest possible cooperation, where our troops are shoulder to shoulder in Afghanistan. As you know there are American troops recently arrived here to Romania to show part of our reinforced deterrence in this part of Europe. In so many ways our security partnership is strong. We want to see it become even stronger; we don't want to see it weaken in any way. The same in the area of commerce and investment, we think there is potential to grow that relationship. So our concern again is that that continues to grow, not get weaker. And on specific area, not to repeat too often, but on rule of law, again, our desire is to see the rule of law strengthened, not weakened, and for that to continue to be one of the bases, one of the foundations of our relationship and of our Strategic Partnership.

Reporter: There are many American corporations in Romania. Do they feel threatened by the recent hostile messages from the Government? What is the risk of this kind of message? And I have another small question: what would you tell someone who believes that George Soros is behind the protests in Romania?

DAS Hoyt Yee: Well, the first question: I think you probably saw the statement from the American Chamber of Commerce, early in February, about the same time as the six embassies released their statement and Washington and European capitals released their statement. There was obviously a lot of concern for the reason I mentioned earlier: that there is a direct

connection between the rule of law and the attractiveness of a country as a destination for investment, commerce. So I think the businesses were alarmed by the change to the Criminal Code and the signal that sent about the Government's commitment to rule of law. By the same token I think governments were relieved to see the Government's step back from that move and hopefulness from businesses that have been quite happy in Romania, quite successful in Romania, that there will continue to be rule of law, there will continue to be an interest in maintaining – interest by the Government, institutions here – in maintaining an attractive business environment that will continue to receive foreign direct investment and more interest from other companies from around the world.

I think I have seen no evidence that there is any complicity, any kind of role by corporations, companies – whether American or others – in protests. Is that the rumor you're referring to? I have seen no evidence of that. In fact, at least for American companies I think it's highly unlikely that they would be involved. It's not something that American companies could justify to their stockholders. It would probably be illegal to participate in some kind of political process without transparency. So, I think it's highly unlikely. What seemed apparent to me is that the hundreds of thousands of people that were protesting peacefully – and I want to repeat, peacefully – in Romania, is that there was a genuine concern and a genuine desire to send a message to the Government. I don't think it was something that was fabricated or abetted somehow by corporations.

DAS Hoyt Yee: Soros? I'll be very quick on that. Again, I see no evidence, no factual basis for a claim that any one NGO, including the Soros Foundation or Open Society is somehow behind these protests or any of the demonstrations around Romania or I could say around Europe, because many other countries where there are demonstrations, where there is civil society activity that is not completely in line with the Government's, we see these same accusations, that somehow it is through Soros, or the United States Government or the European Union behind it. I think governments will begin to see that these citizens don't need this kind of encouragement or financial support to stand up for their rights, that the citizens themselves have a strong desire for rule of law, for a better future, for jobs and higher standards of living. No one needs to bribe them or fund them to stand up for that.

Reporter: One final question: this visit of yours was provoked by this Emergency Ordinance affair or was previously scheduled?

DAS Hoyt Yee: It was the wonderful weather that I heard Romania has. I have been planning to come to Romania for several weeks. In fact, I was trying to come earlier but there was a snow storm that interfered, so it's not in connection to the events. It's overdue, I would have preferred to come sometime earlier. Even though we've focused on this issue of rule of law and understandably, quite justifiably so, there are many areas in which we're cooperating extremely closely with the government and military of Romania. There are many areas in which we're trying to increase the cooperation and that was the main focus of my visit today. Of course, the rule of law issue did come up, but we will continue this dialogue, getting to know the new government, both ways, finding how and discussing specific ways we can strengthen the partnership and preventing it from getting weaker.

Richard Silver (U.S. Embassy Press Attaché): Thank you all very much. Deputy Assistant Secretary Yee, would you like to offer one final sentence to sum up your time here.

DAS Hoyt Yee: Just that it's wonderful to be here. I can't emphasize enough how much we respect the role of media in any democracy. You have a very difficult job, you have to deal with people like me, but we appreciate very much the effort that you put into ensuring that the citizens of Romania are informed about what is happening, about what people like me have to say and we hope that you will continue. We look forward to continuing our contacts.