

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Central Europe and U.S. Diplomatic Strategy ^[1]

BUDAPEST --- Here and there in downtown Budapest, the bullet holes remain. It was more than a half-century ago when Hungarian freedom fighters dared to take to the streets and do battle with the Soviet Union. Expecting help – apparently promised but never delivered – from the United States, the Hungarians were quickly outmatched and paid a terrible price at the hands of the Soviet military.

They endured Soviet control for more than 30 additional years, when communism finally collapsed and a new Hungary was born. Its path has not been easy. Democracy and a free-market economy require careful nurturing (and a generous allotment of good luck). Hungary's progress has sometimes been inconsistent, but it keeps moving forward.

Much the same can be said about other major players in Central Europe – Poland, the Czech Republic, and other nations that emerged from Soviet domination determined to shape their own destinies. Despite difficulties they all have encountered, these countries share hopefulness about their future.

Hungary and most of the other states known during the Cold War as “the captive nations” have, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and effectiveness, developed democratic institutions. Their economies have recently suffered along with those of most of the world's other nations, but there is good cause for optimism about their future.

These countries also share strategic importance. Although the United States is fixated on China, the Middle East, and places where it is engaged in combat, the long-term significance of Central Europe should not be overlooked. Don't forget the giant bear that lives just to the east. Russia might no longer preside over an “evil empire,” but its military capacity and economic power remain formidable, and its intentions toward the West are not always benign.

American policy makers should remember that no one has ever benefited from trusting Russia. Central Europe learned this painfully, and while the United States must continue to deal as amicably as possible with Russia, vigilance must never lessen. As an adjunct to this, the Central European countries, with friendly attitudes toward the United States, should not be neglected.

These important friendships can be enhanced through public diplomacy. Lots of good things are happening. Energetic and thoughtful U.S. ambassadors, such as Eleni Tsakopoulos Kounalakis in Hungary, provide upbeat American representation that the Central Europeans appreciate. But in conversations here with Hungarian officials and scholars, I found a desire for an even closer and more free-flowing bilateral relationship. An example: as in most of the rest of the world, the once popular American libraries, where films, cultural programs, and other U.S. offerings were easily accessed by the general public, have fallen prey to post-9/11

security and budget concerns and have been replaced by “American corners” at some universities. Safer and cheaper? Yes. Useful? Only in a much diminished way. New media tools provide virtual supplements to these ventures, but something significant is lacking without an on-the-ground, highly visible presence.

Hungarians are also eager for another kind of presence – a visit from President Barack Obama or Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Such a visit would, in the eyes of Hungarians with whom I spoke, help validate all that they have strived for during the past 20 years.

Any such pomp must be accompanied by the unending hard work of maintaining and strengthening relationships with Hungary and other Central European states. Without doubt, America has friends in this region. The task at hand is to remember the importance of these friendships and ensure their continued vitality.
