

BUDAPEST'S BALANCING ACT

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WHATEVER ITS OUTCOME, THE UPCOMING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS LIKELY TO IMPROVE THE OPINION OF HUNGARIANS ABOUT THE UNITED STATES.

BY ÁKOS BEÖTHY

The 10 million-strong Central European republic of Hungary finds itself in a delicate position as the Bush administration prepares to leave office. A staunch ally in what former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld hailed as “New Europe,” the country supported the launch of the war against Iraq in 2003, and currently has troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Budapest is also indirectly affected by Washington’s plans to set up a missile defense system by deploying interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic. Finally, it has an important role to play in the debate on the future of Europe’s energy supply, where Washington — concerned with Russia’s ever-growing energy muscles — wants its say.

While the two governments have cooperated closely, there is a widespread perception of American arrogance among Hungarians. This has many roots, starting with opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a war that many people here deem unlawful and based on lies. News of

secret renditions, human rights abuses in Guantanamo Bay and in Iraqi prisons, and alleged manipulation of intelligence data regarding the Iranian nuclear program all made matters worse. And many Hungarians see the refusal of the Bush administration to submit the Kyoto Protocol for ratification, take any real action to combat global warming or support international organizations as selfish and irresponsible decisions.

Although the war in Iraq is probably as unpopular in Hungary as in the United States, being part of the “coalition of the willing” has contributed to one development that is welcomed by all Hungarians. It appears that Washington may admit the country to its visa-waiver program, greatly facilitating travel to the U.S. by Hungarian tourists and businessmen, as early as the end of this year. Obviating the need to endure the long, costly and tedious visa application procedure will certainly improve the somewhat negative image of the United States many Hungarians hold.

Improvement Is on the Horizon

Whatever its outcome, the upcoming U.S. presidential election is likely to improve the opinion of Hungarians about the United States. John McCain is respected as a war hero and as a man of principles as opposed to George W. Bush, but a win by Barack Obama would result in real

Ákos Beöthy has been writing and editing for Világgazdaság (World Economy), Hungary's leading daily business newspaper, since 2000. He covers international and policy issues, macroeconomic trends and the European Union. Earlier this year he spent five months at The Philadelphia Inquirer as an Alfred Friendly Fellow.

excitement. Such a victory might even rebuild the image of the “American Dream,” so the fate of his promises of changing how politics is conducted in Washington will be closely watched by many Hungarians.

For many people here, the restoration of America’s promise goes beyond the end of the current antipathetic foreign policy. After all, it is not just international relations that determine the life of a nation; Hungarians watched astonished as this land of the free responded to the threat of terror by curbing civil liberties after 9/11.

It seems that Americans continue to worry more about their security than about their liberties. Both presidential candidates strive to look tough on national security, and the controversial provisions of the renewed Patriot Act are not a campaign issue. This surprises many in Hungary, who will be keen to see how these domestic aspects of the war on terror will unfold during the next American presidency.

On the level of intergovernmental relations, Hungary will remain a partner of the United States in stabilizing both Iraq and Afghanistan, irrespective of the election outcome and whether it is McCain’s or Obama’s policy that will start to take shape in the Middle East.

In October, Budapest will send 80-100 troops to Afghanistan to join the 230 currently serving with the International Security Assistance Force. And at the Bucharest NATO summit this past April, it offered a special unit that can be deployed anywhere in Afghanistan, including its most dangerous regions. Meanwhile, the nations of “Old Europe” largely rule out a greater combat role for their troops.

In the case of Iraq, however, there has been some disappointment. When Hungary joined the U.S.-led coalition forces there five years ago, it expected that its companies would be able to share in the billions of dollars being spent to rebuild the country. But most of the bidding firms have realized by now that they have no chance against their American and Middle Eastern competitors.

The Role of Russia

For Hungary, just west of the ex-Soviet republic of Ukraine, the most important issue for the next American

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president to address is how to handle a resurgent Russia. Moscow’s August intervention in Georgia, purportedly to defend South Ossetians against Tbilisi’s “aggression,” conjured up alarming memories of Cold War rhetoric. So did its earlier response to U.S. plans to establish missile defense facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic: suspending its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and warning Warsaw and Prague that it

would target sites in their territories with its own missiles.

Budapest hosted one of the talks between the United States and Russia last year, where Washington tried to persuade the Putin government that its missile defense plans are justified by the threat posed by such rogue countries as Iran and North Korea. It also offered to share data with Moscow that it previously shared only with its NATO allies.

The U.S. presidential elections might have a direct impact on the fate of this conflict. The Czech Republic signed a treaty to allow Washington to set up a radar base in July, though its ratification in Parliament is far from certain. In response to Moscow’s growing belligerence, Poland may soon do so as well, though it remains unsatisfied with what Washington has offered in compensation and worries that the U.S. may drop the whole plan if a Democratic president is elected in November.

The problem for Hungary is that it might find itself in a no-man’s land between the United States and Russia. In economic terms, such a buffer zone has already developed in the region, as Russia tries to build an economic stronghold. The main field of Russian expansion is, of course, energy, and the consequences are not limited to Eastern and Central Europe. They also concern the United States, which is interested in finding ways to channel Central Asia’s wealth toward Europe without crossing Russian territory. It is also trying to help the ex-Soviet states in that region break free of the Russian embrace and to find transit routes for their natural gas, so that they do not need to rely on Moscow as their only buyer.

Budapest also has to decide how to handle several del-

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icate strategic questions regarding Moscow's dealings with its Balkan neighbors. First, there is the ongoing Russian confrontation with the European Union and the United States over their decision this spring to recognize the independence of Kosovo. Moscow was a strong opponent of the secession of that province from longtime ally Serbia, so Western backing for the independence of Kosovo has turned many Serbs against European integration and allowed Russia to strengthen its influence.

Meanwhile, Belgrade joined Moscow's South Stream Project to build a pipeline to carry Russian gas to Europe. The Russian-Serb agreement, signed in January, gives majority control to Russia over the Serb section of the pipeline. What is more, Russia also gained control over the biggest Serb oil company. It thus cemented a very strong presence in the backyard of Hungary, whose current leaders — their critics say — do not even try to resist Moscow's growing influence.

To the disappointment of the United States and the European Union, Hungary also joined the project at the

end of February. Both Washington and Brussels favor another pipeline, the Nabucco, which would bring gas from the Caspian Basin and the Middle East to Europe without crossing Russian territory.

The concerns about Hungary's eastern shift have triggered a campaign within the ranks of the largest opposition party, Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union, to improve its own ties to the United States. Bilateral relations between 1998 and 2002 under the conservative government of Viktor Orban were not always unclouded. The main bone of contention was Hungary's decision in 2001 to buy Swedish Gripens for its air force instead of American-made F-16s.

Even before the Hungarian-Russian agreement on the South Stream Project, Orban had denounced what he called an undue amount of Russian influence in Hungary. During a 2007 visit to the United States last year, he cited Russia's huge role in some of his country's key industries, and also criticized the government's decision to nominate someone who had studied at the acade-

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my of the Soviet KGB to head the Hungarian National Security Office.

Orban has a good chance of becoming prime minister again in 2010 — or, given the current political turmoil in Hungary, even sooner if early elections are held. Hungary's foreign policy orientation may well become a campaign issue, and trying to gain the support of the incoming U.S. president will surely play a role in this game.

A recent study by the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs (a government-sponsored foreign policy research center) predicts that Obama and McCain would take the same basic approach toward Moscow. Obama regards Russia as “neither an enemy nor a friend,” and there is no sign of willingness on his part to restore closer relations. And McCain's traditional realist logic does not even contemplate the possibility of a partnership with Russia. This suggests that whoever will be the next U.S. president, the distance Budapest will have to bridge between Washington and Moscow will not become shorter.

Other Issues

As for the future of transatlantic relations, the author of the study points out the fact that figures close to McCain hold highly skeptical views about Europe's capabilities. It is thus unlikely that he would make an effort to create a common platform for what he calls “democratic states.” The European countries cannot expect to be regularly consulted on American foreign policy steps by a McCain administration.

It is more likely that he would choose his partners according to his goals, much like the “coalition of the willing.” This approach could lead again to frictions in Europe, similar to that of “Old Europe” and “New Europe,” potentially enhancing the role of small countries like Hungary.

Obama's presidency holds the promise of a more multilateral approach. For Hungary, this suggests that the main institutions shaping its American relations would be NATO, then the European Union. But as expectations about Obama's multilateralism fly high across the world, it is worth noting that such an approach might lead Washington to demand more from its partners.

Trying to gain the support of the new U.S. president will surely play a role in the upcoming Hungarian elections.

For Hungary, just like Europe as a whole, one of the most important factors in judging the next American presidency will be its willingness to cooperate in the field of global warming. As the United States is seriously affected by high oil prices, there is a chance that the next president will step up the efforts to lay down the foundations of a more sustainable economic development. The Democratic Party's majority in Congress might also make this task easier.

Both McCain and Obama demand mutuality in reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases, but much will depend on China and India. The two governments received a promise at the G-8 summit in July that rich countries would take the lead in curbing emissions. But the documents issued at the summit had very few of the concrete goals needed to keep greenhouse gases from growing, and Europe would like to see a much more determined commitment from the United States. The European Union, for its part, made a unilateral pledge to reduce carbon emissions by 20 percent by 2020, irrespective of what other countries do.

Finally, the next administration's approach to global trade issues will also be closely watched in Hungary. While McCain stands for an open world trade system, Obama gives voice to the more and more widespread anti-globalization and protectionist views of the American public. This suggests that he might engage in trade conflicts as president — most probably with China.

If that happens, protectionist efforts might also be reinforced within the European Union, where there is already a constant battle between member states on how to deal with the influx of cheap — and often low-quality — Asian imports.

For all these reasons, Hungarians are probably more interested in this year's U.S. presidential election than ever before. Not only Americans think of it as a battle of historic significance; it seems so from the other side of the Atlantic as well. Seen from Hungary, the prospects are bright: each of the candidates has the potential to become a respected U.S. leader. However, there are several issues that will test bilateral relations in the coming years. ■