

U.S. Public Diplomacy in Hungary: Past and Present

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In this paper I will be looking at United States public diplomacy efforts in Hungary. It will be broadly divided into two parts. In the first section I will be exploring the history of American public diplomacy in Hungary. I will start with a brief survey of the historical and political background of this small Central European nation, with a special focus on the 1956 revolution in Hungary. I will then look closely at the effects of Radio Free Europe on the revolution, which has been the subject of much debate. At the end of this section I will examine the role that American public diplomacy played in Hungary at the end of the 1980's, when the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse and huge changes were afoot.

In the second part of my paper I will jump to more recent times, and look into the public diplomacy apparatus currently in place in Hungary, as well as the international political issues at the fore. I will also explore Hungarian public opinion towards the United States, and the interests the United States currently has in shaping this public opinion. Finally, I will evaluate the effectiveness of our current public diplomacy programs and make recommendations for changes which could improve things.

The broad questions I seek to answer in this paper are varied yet related: Was the United States, and particularly Radio Free Europe, partly to blame for the tragedy of 1956? What lessons can be drawn from this episode? Today, with the Cold War over, what is America's interest in pursuing public diplomacy in Hungary? And how effective are American public diplomacy efforts there? What can be done to improve the situation?

## **Part I: The History of U.S. Public Diplomacy in Hungary**

### **Background**

In order to begin to understand public diplomacy in Hungary, it is necessary first to become acquainted with the country's recent history. The 1920 Treaty of Trianon was, for Hungary, one of the most significant events of the twentieth century. During the First World War, Hungary fought, in alliance with Germany, Austria and the Ottoman Empire, against the Triple Entente of Great Britain, France and Russia. Having been defeated, Hungary was punished. As a result of the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost almost three quarters of its land and about two thirds of its inhabitants to Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia and Austria (see Map 1). The psychological effects on Hungarian public opinion caused by this event are still felt today. According to the New York Times, it is still referred to as "the Trianon Trauma<sup>1</sup>." János Széky, an accomplished journalist, editor, and translator, has noted that "Trianon is of course present in our political thinking not only subjectively, but also through the problems of Hungarians living abroad.<sup>2</sup>"

The conservative leader Miklos Horthy ruled Hungary between the Treaty of Trianon and the Second World War. According to Victor Sebestyen, who recently wrote an account of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, "[Horthy's] primary aim was simple: to win the return of historic Hungarian lands lost after the First World War. Hitler had promised to restore to Hungary most of Transylvania, Slovakia and Croatia... From the

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<sup>1</sup> The New York Times, "Kosovo's Actions Hearten a Hungarian Enclave," 4/7/08

<sup>2</sup> From the transcript of a panel discussion on Trianon on 10/18/06 in Budapest, accessed at [www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=1095&articleID=9903&ctag=articlelist&iid=1](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=1095&articleID=9903&ctag=articlelist&iid=1)

mid-1930s, with Horthy's blessing, Hungary became increasingly Nazified.<sup>3</sup> The effects of the huge loss of territory, and Hitler's subsequent agreement with Horthy, almost certainly influenced Hungarian public opinion during the period. There was likely a sense of resentment towards the West and the United States for treating Hungary unfairly after World War I, and an increasing sense of insularity and nationalism during the years preceding the Second World War. During the Second World War, Hungary fought on the side of the Germans, and significant portions of land ceded in 1920 were returned to Hungary, though they were to be lost once again after the defeat of the Axis Powers. World War II left Hungary in a wretched state; Istvan Deak, who left the country in 1948 and became an expert on the history of Central and Eastern Europe at Columbia University, writes that "the war, including the death of perhaps a million Hungarian citizens, half of them Jews whom the right-wing regime of Regent Miklós Horthy deported to Auschwitz, destroyed public morality and left the country in ruins."<sup>4</sup>

Hungary was occupied by Soviet forces in 1945, after a vicious 51-day battle with the Nazis in and around Budapest<sup>5</sup>. The previous year Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill had made an agreement, known as 'the percentage deal' (and referred to as 'the naughty document' by Churchill); according to the terms of the deal, the Soviets would control Romania, the West Greece, and each side would have a 50% influence in Hungary and Yugoslavia<sup>6</sup>. As it turned out, in Hungary the Soviet Union took much more than 50%. Stalin installed a cruel apparatchik named Matyas Rakosi to run things in

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Sebestyen, *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 8

<sup>4</sup> Istvan Deak, "Did the Revolution Have to Fail", *The New York Review of Books*, Volume LIV, Number 3 (March 1, 2007)

<sup>5</sup> Sebestyen, 9

<sup>6</sup> Sebestyen, 7

Budapest. Rakosi had become a passionate communist while a prisoner of war in Russia during the First World War, and he ruled Hungary viciously. By 1948 he had consolidated power for the Communists.

As after the Treaty of Trianon, the “post war division of Europe had a massive psychological effect in Hungary.<sup>7</sup>” According to Hungarian Eva Walko, described by Sebestyen as a “well-informed” and “astute” woman who traveled widely, “after the war we felt abandoned by the West, and our feeling proved to be right.<sup>8</sup>” Deak writes that “in the early postwar years, Hungary's weak democratic forces were unable to resist the power of the Communists, who had the support of the Soviet occupation forces in establishing a Stalinist regime.<sup>9</sup>” Rakosi ruled brutally and tortured many innocent people. During his time as President, the feared AVO<sup>10</sup> became extremely powerful. According to Sebestyen, “between 1950 and 1953 more than 1.3 million people were prosecuted (and many of them jailed).<sup>11</sup>” This accounted for well over 10% of the population.

In 1953, Joseph Stalin died, and Nikita Khrushchev became First Secretary of the Communist Party. Almost immediately, the Soviet policy towards Hungary changed, probably as a response to Stalin’s excessive and counterproductive reforms, which had weakened the Soviet bloc in relation to the United States. The Soviets were perhaps also concerned that public opinion in Hungary and other satellite countries would become increasingly anti-Soviet and pro-American were the draconian tactics of Rakosi to persist.

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<sup>7</sup> Sebestyen, 8

<sup>8</sup> Sebestyen, 8

<sup>9</sup> Deak

<sup>10</sup> The AVO, the State Security Department, was the Hungarian version of the Soviet Union’s KGB. It later changed names and became the AVH, the State Security Authority.

<sup>11</sup> Sebestyen, 41

At any rate, Rakosi was forced to share power with Imre Nagy, an agriculture expert and a “less fanatical Communist,<sup>12</sup>” who was appointed as Prime Minister. Rakosi was to remain as the Communist Party of Hungary’s First Secretary. According to Charles Gati, an expert on Eastern Europe and Russia at Johns Hopkins University and the author of a recent work exploring the complex international politics of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, the Soviets were “dissatisfied with Hungary’s Stalinist diehards, and worried about signs of instability.<sup>13</sup>” Whereas Rakosi had parroted the Soviet leader’s every move, and referred to himself as “Stalin’s best pupil,<sup>14</sup>” Nagy “disapproved of the rapid pace of collectivization in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and Hungary in the 1940s.<sup>15</sup>” While Nagy was for most of his life loyal to the Soviet Union, his “idealistic commitment to making socialism work” was more important to him.<sup>16</sup> Nagy wanted “to show that there was such a thing as communism with a human face.<sup>17</sup>” The changes afoot in Hungary and elsewhere (notably, Poland) were welcomed by the US government as signs of a potential thaw in the communist bloc.

Rakosi and Nagy were not able to work together; Sebestyen notes that “from the first day Rakosi worked tirelessly to sabotage Nagy’s premiership and take absolute power back for himself.<sup>18</sup>” In 1955 he did just that, with the approval of the Soviets, forcing upon Nagy a round of self-criticism for his more moderate views towards

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<sup>12</sup> Deak

<sup>13</sup> Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), 26

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Held, *The Columbia History of Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 214

<sup>15</sup> Gati, 33

<sup>16</sup> Gati, 33

<sup>17</sup> Sebestyen, 81

<sup>18</sup> Sebestyen, 73

agriculture. Nagy refused, and was expelled from the Communist Party, although this episode only strengthened his standing in the eyes of the Hungarian population. According to Gati, the Soviets “did not fully appreciate [Nagy’s] popularity with his countrymen,<sup>19</sup>” and “the integrity he projected, the commitment to make things better...and the willingness to take on Rakosi and his hated acolytes combined to make him a folk hero.<sup>20</sup>” Eva Walko notes that, by refusing to cooperate, Nagy “salvaged his reputation, his honor, and his pride” in the eyes of Hungarians.<sup>21</sup> Nagy’s refusal is significant with regard to US public diplomacy because it illustrates how out of touch the American government was with regard to the situation in Budapest—in the words of Gati, the U.S. Government was “both uninformed and misinformed about the prospects for change” when it chose to strongly criticize Nagy.<sup>22</sup> This unfortunate fact will be explored more fully later in this paper.

In early 1956, Khrushchev gave his famous “secret speech” entitled “On the Personality Cult and its Consequences” at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, in which he denounced Stalin. According to Sebestyen, “immediately it became apparent that Khrushchev had created a problem for all the satellite states, but especially for Hungary.<sup>23</sup>” When people in Budapest learned of the speech they began to openly ridicule Rakosi and his ilk, seeing in Khrushchev’s words license to call for more change. The writer Stephen Vizinczey, a student in Budapest at the time, noted of the situation

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<sup>19</sup> Gati, 34

<sup>20</sup> Gati, 52

<sup>21</sup> Sebestyen, 79

<sup>22</sup> Gati, 5, italics removed

<sup>23</sup> Sebestyen, 84

that “there’s nothing so impotent as a dictatorship that’s weakening before your eyes.”<sup>24</sup> By July, Rakosi had been replaced by Erno Gero, his “sinister, cadaverous number two.”<sup>25</sup> The Petofi Circle debating group, named after Hungary’s national poet, who had been a key figure in the 1848 revolution against the Hapsburg Empire, began meeting in March. The group was established by the Hungarian Communist Party’s youth organization DISZ (Association of Working Youth), which is notable because it shows that in Hungary revolution arose from within rather than from without the communist party<sup>26</sup>. (This perhaps should have been a sign to the folks at Radio Free Europe that calling for wholesale regime change was perhaps not the best approach, which will be discussed more fully later). According to Sebestyen, “its meetings became huge public events, unique in the Soviet bloc, where for the first time since 1948 politics could be freely discussed.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The Revolution of 1956**

The summer of 1956 was an exciting time in Budapest as people were freer to organize and debate than they had been in decades. Tension was mounting as Russia’s puppets tried to extinguish the growing thirst for change and the anti-Soviet sentiments awakening around Hungary. By October, events were coming to a head. On the 6<sup>th</sup>, Laszlo Rajk, the former Interior Minister, was buried. Though he was widely hated in his

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<sup>24</sup> Sebestyen, 85

<sup>25</sup> Sebestyen, 22

<sup>26</sup> This might also be said of the changes that took place in Hungary in the late 1980’s: Hungary, unlike Romania, East Germany, Albania, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, experienced a smooth transition to democracy without a confrontation between those holding power and those seeking to take it. Changes arose from within the system itself.

<sup>27</sup> Sebestyen, 87

lifetime for being one of the architects of the police state, over 100,000 people came out to watch his burial, for Rajk had been killed by the AVO. Sebestyen notes that “as one of the most prominent victims of the Terror, he had been transformed into a patriot.”<sup>28</sup> This funeral was an ominous sign of things to come later in the month.

In late October, after a tense standoff, the Soviet Union gave in to Polish demands for more autonomy, withdrew their military and allowed “a Polish road to socialism.”<sup>29</sup> Soon after, Władysław Gomułka was elected as First Secretary of the Polish Communist Party. These developments added to the highly charged atmosphere in Budapest. At 3pm on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, more than 5,000 students attended a meeting and decided to leave the communist youth organization DISZ and start their own. The students ended up staying until midnight, and the historic “Sixteen Points” were drafted, calling for complete Soviet military withdrawal, fair elections, and the return of Imre Nagy to the head of the government. A demonstration was called for the next day. This turned into a riot and mobs took over the city, attacking Soviet forces. The fighting lasted until the 28<sup>th</sup>, at which point the Russians announced a ceasefire.

For about a week, the Hungarians thought they had somehow emerged victorious. A new Social-Democratic government emerged with Nagy at the top. But on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, the new Hungarian military leadership was invited for talks on Soviet troop withdrawals at a Soviet military base. This was a trap, and the men were arrested. Early the following morning, the Soviet military attacked Budapest again and ruthlessly

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<sup>28</sup> Sebestyen, 96

<sup>29</sup> Sebestyen, 100

restored order in the city. Over 2,500 Hungarians were killed in all, to the Soviets' 722<sup>30</sup>. By the 10<sup>th</sup> of November the revolution had been crushed completely. About 200,000 Hungarians managed to escape and flooded into Western Europe. Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty, the influential Catholic leader of Hungary, took shelter in the U.S. Legation in Budapest and spent the next fifteen years there. Janos Kadar was installed as the new leader. He would hold power until 1988.

### **Radio Free Europe**

The United States had cut off diplomatic relations with Hungary because of the Second World War. After the war ended, according to the U.S. State Department's website,

full diplomatic relations were established at the legation level on October 12, 1945... After the communist takeover in 1947-48, relations with Hungary became increasingly strained by the nationalization of U.S.-owned property, unacceptable treatment of U.S. citizens and personnel, and restrictions on the operations of the American legation... [R]elations deteriorated further after the suppression of the Hungarian national uprising in 1956.<sup>31</sup>

Given this context, what were the main public diplomacy instruments at the United States' disposal before and during the crisis of 1956? Apparently, and unfortunately, it seems that there was little potential for public diplomacy efforts other than through such broadcasters as Radio Free Europe and Voice of America. According to Gati, at the time of the revolution "the U.S. Legation in Budapest had but one fluent Hungarian speaker

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<sup>30</sup> Mark Kramer, "The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises in Hungary and Poland: Reassessments and New Findings," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.33, No.2, April 1998, p.210.

<sup>31</sup> From the U.S. State Department's "Background Note" on Hungary, accessed at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/26566.htm>

who, during the revolution, was busy accepting petitions from various Hungarian groups and individuals. Earlier in the 1950s, the CIA did not have an active program in or toward Hungary, which was assigned *the* lowest priority among the satellites of Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>32</sup> Even during the revolution, “the U.S. Legation ... did not have high-level personnel to do its job of observing and reporting on Hungarian developments,” though “a new minister—Edward T. Wailes—who was quite unprepared for his assignment—arrived in Budapest on November 2.<sup>33</sup>” There were no exchange programs, no American cultural programs, and there was seemingly no effort on the part of American diplomats to work with local media in order to influence and shape their views towards America. There were efforts to use printed leaflets dropped from balloons in order to influence the Hungarian population, although these proved less effective than radio broadcasting. Voice of America and Radio Free Europe both had large audiences in Hungary, although, according to some audience research done shortly after the revolution, RFE was more popular, if less credible, which will be discussed in more depth shortly.

Radio Free Europe was started during the Truman Administration in 1949 to help the United States win the Cold War. According to A. Ross Johnson, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, it “was organized and funded by the U.S. government and beamed into Eastern Europe both to keep alive the hope of a better future and to make the Soviet empire a less formidable adversary.<sup>34</sup>” George Kennan, then head of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, envisioned an organization devoted to bringing

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<sup>32</sup> Gati, 5, italics in original

<sup>33</sup> Gati, 180

<sup>34</sup> A. Ross Johnson, “To the Barricades,” *Hoover Digest*, 2007, No. 4

democracy to Eastern Europe, using the talents of refugees from these countries, and he asked Ambassador Joseph Grew to lead such an effort. According to Cissie Dore Hill, also from the Hoover Institution, the organization had several objectives from the start: “find work for the democratic émigrés from Eastern Europe; put émigré voices on the air in their own languages; and carry émigré articles and statements back to their homelands through the printed word.<sup>35</sup>” The station was embraced by Dwight Eisenhower when he became President in 1953. Eisenhower once said that “in the final analysis public opinion wins most of the wars and always wins the peace.<sup>36</sup>”

Radio Free Europe was instrumental in disseminating news of the changes underway in the Soviet Union: it had “reported [Khrushchev’s] speech in detail within a few weeks... [which] boosted the station’s reputation for providing accurate news from behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>37</sup>” RFE had also reported Stalin’s death before official statements had been released, embarrassing the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup> According to Gati, Radio Free Europe “was the only influential tool of U.S. policy; it made itself present throughout the Soviet bloc, including Hungary. Despite jamming, Radio Free Europe’s message of hope was widely heard and widely believed.<sup>39</sup>” Similarly, a 1952 report on RFE completed by General Motors noted that, in Eastern Europe in general, “it... appears that [RFE] is much more popular than the other Western radio stations like the Voice of America, the BBC, Radio France, or Radio Belgrade, which all have special programs for

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<sup>35</sup> Cissie Dore Hill, “Voices of Hope: The Story of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty,” *Hoover Digest*, 2001, No. 4

<sup>36</sup> Sebestyen, 58

<sup>37</sup> Sebestyen, 84

<sup>38</sup> Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War 1945-1961* (Macmillan: London, 1997) 62

<sup>39</sup> Gati, 74

the Iron Curtain countries.<sup>40</sup> By 1954, RFE was broadcasting “twenty hours a day throughout most of the Soviet satellites.<sup>41</sup>” Johnson nicely summarizes the operations of RFE during this period:

Located in Munich and broadcasting on short-wave transmitters from Germany and Portugal, RFE also gave East Europeans information about their own countries that was suppressed in the communist-controlled media. It was organized on a national basis— Hungarians talking to Hungarians, in this case—in a decentralized structure with entities such as the Hungarian Service (then called the Voice of Free Hungary) having primary editorial responsibility under the general oversight of American senior management. The Americans were in effect the publisher; the émigré Hungarians were the journalists and editors of daily programming that encompassed a wide array of topics focused on internal political affairs in Hungary, as well as cultural affairs and world events.<sup>42</sup>

### **RFE during the 1956 Revolution**

With Operation Red Sox and Operation Focus, RFE used balloons to drop millions of leaflets with messages like “the regime is weaker than you think” and “the hope lies with the people.<sup>43</sup>” According to Granville, some of the balloon efforts substantially worsened the American position in Hungary:

While the balloon operations perhaps served a constructive purpose by raising citizens' awareness of what they could legitimately demand from their government, they sometimes backfired by irritating communist leaders, indeed even drawing them closer to the Soviet regime and to the masses. Aimed at eroding his popular support, Operation Focus made Nagy livid and leery of US intentions.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “Report on Radio Free Europe,” 12/15/52, Business Research Staff of General Motors, C.D. Jackson Papers, Free Europe Committee, Box 54, pp. 9-10, Eisenhower Presidential Library. Declassified 10/10/96.

<sup>41</sup> Sebestyen, 58

<sup>42</sup> Johnson

<sup>43</sup> Sebestyen, 59

<sup>44</sup> Johanna Granville, “Radio Free Europe's Impact on the Kremlin in the Hungarian Crisis of 1956: Three Hypotheses,” *Canadian Journal of History*, 12/04

On October 15, 1956, after Nagy had been allowed to return to a position of power, and just as the revolution was about to begin, the U.S. charge-d'affaires in Hungary, N.

Spencer Barnes, sent the following telegram to the State Department, wishing to avoid angering Nagy further:

Legation believes tone if not explicit wording of media comment on restoration should be benign and that media's main role in treating Hungarian affairs in future will be to give minimal publicity to Nagyist statements and actions. Nagy as premier reacted openly and violently to attacks on his regime by American radio, and Legation feels we should do all we can to forestall such occurrence once more.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the views of Barnes, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles wasn't convinced that Nagy would refrain from physically punishing the student protestors. In a telegram to the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade from October 25, he "expressed his fears that the Nagy-Kadar government might take 'reprisals' against the Hungarian 'freedom fighters.' By the next day, 26 October, State Department officials in Washington assumed the worst about Nagy, asserting in a top secret memorandum: 'Nagy's appeal for Soviet troops indicates, at least superficially, that there are not any open differences between the Soviet and Hungarian governments.'<sup>46</sup>"

Granville speculates that "RFE's lack of support for Nagy... may have helped to sabotage the revolution by causing the Hungarian population and the Kremlin to doubt the Hungarian leader."<sup>47</sup> An RFE report on interviews conducted with a group of Hungarians in Western Europe in March 1957 noted that "sources were unanimous in their opinion that RFE 'pushed much too hard' during the revolution. At the beginning, RFE demanded the return of Imre Nagy; but when Nagy actually returned, RFE attacked

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<sup>45</sup> Granville

<sup>46</sup> Granville

<sup>47</sup> Granville

him. This was a serious mistake... The real achievements of the communist regime should not be attacked just because they are communist achievements.<sup>48</sup>”

Radio Free Europe has been criticized for decades for its supposed encouragement of an uprising by the Hungarian against the Soviets, despite the intentions of the United States to stay out of the issue altogether. So it is necessary to look at what was actually said during the days in question. And it turns out that RFE’s role has been overstated. There were indeed some ‘defamatory statements’ made about Nagy. On October 24, announcer Janos Olvedi said that ‘instead of introducing real reforms, the [Nagy] regime tried to solve every problem by introducing only half-measures. They ignore the will of the people. Instead of setting up a popular representation, they continued to govern by way of a sham parliament.’<sup>49</sup>” On the following day, Andor Gellert, RFE’s chief Hungarian editor, claimed on the air that

Imre Nagy agreed to the invasion of Soviet troops. Already on this very day this step of his is put down as one of the greatest acts of treachery in Hungary's history. And this will be remembered forever... Imre Nagy, who covered his hands in Hungarian blood... Where are the traitors... Who are the murderers? Imre Nagy and his government.<sup>50</sup>

Had the U.S. known of Nagy’s tensions with the hard-liners in the Soviet Union, the provocative RFE policy of castigating Nagy as just another communist stooge and calling for revolution might have been reappraised. Johanna Granville notes insightfully that “the Americans’ premature distrust of Imre Nagy perhaps points to a larger pattern of bias in US foreign policy during the Cold War: a fundamental prejudice against communist leaders. Just as Soviet officials were blind to the concept of neutrality, so Eisenhower and

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<sup>48</sup> “Interviews with a Hungarian group,” Audience Analysis Section, Special Report No. 13, March 1957, 7-8 accessed at <http://www.osa.ceu.hu/digitalarchive/h Hoover/index.html>

<sup>49</sup> Granville

<sup>50</sup> Granville

other US policymakers in the 1950s appeared blind to the existence of scrupulous, reform-minded communists.<sup>51</sup>”

But despite these inflammatory and perhaps misguided statements, during the entire revolution there was only one broadcast which seemed to indicate that military assistance could be expected from the United States, and, notably, this broadcast explicitly went against RFE policy. In this program, from November 4, the same day that the Soviets came back into Budapest to put down the uprising, RFE announcer Zoltan Thury related a story from the British newspaper *The Observer*, which predicted that the United States would send troops in response to a Soviet invasion:

The article goes on: “If the Soviet troops really attack Hungary, if this our apprehension should become true and the Hungarians will hold out for 3 or 4 days, then the pressure upon the government of the U.S. to send military help to the freedom fighters, will become irresistible... If the Hungarian continue to fight until Wednesday, we shall be closer to a world war than at any time since 1939.” The reports from London, Paris, Washington and other Western reports [sic] show that the world’s reaction to the Hungarian events surpasses every imagination. In the Western capitals a practical manifestation of Western sympathy is expected at any hour.<sup>52</sup>

According to RFE’s own policy review of their handling of the revolution, written by RFE political advisor William Griffith and released on December 5, 1956, this “probably constitutes the most serious violation” that occurred during the revolution and was “undoubtedly the one several Hungarian refugees and correspondents have referred to as ‘the promise that help would come which RFE broadcast on the weekend of 4

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<sup>51</sup> Granville

<sup>52</sup> William Griffith, “Policy Review of Voice for Free Hungary Programming, October 23-November 23, 1956,” December 5, 1956,” in Csaba Bekes, Malcolm Byrne, and Janos M. Rainer, *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents* 2002, Central European Press. New York, 468 (hereinafter “Bekes”)

November<sup>53</sup>.” The problem seems not to have been RFE policy but rather the overzealous Hungarian announcers going too far in their statements.

According to Griffith, “the Hungarian Desk was constantly advised both from New York and in Munich to avoid giving the impression that the VFH [Voice for Free Hungary] was trying to direct the Revolution in Hungary... [and] to avoid discussing events in Hungary in too dogmatic terms, but instead to emphasize that our information was incomplete, that the situation was so complex that it could not be judged entirely from the outside.<sup>54</sup>” Nonetheless, there was often a marked difference between the planned programming and what was actually aired, in terms of tone more than subject-matter: “While the summaries presented in advance are measured, qualified, logical presentations of arguments and points of view, too many of the programs emerged in final form as bombastic, rhetorical, overly emotional blasts at the Nagy Government... In short, major mistakes of tone and techniques were made in many of these programs.<sup>55</sup>” Shortly after the crisis, upon Eisenhower’s request, Allen Dulles presented a classified four-page report on 20 November 1956, which read: “RFE broadcasts went somewhat beyond specific guidance in identifying with Hungarian patriot aims, and in offering certain tactical advice to the patriots.<sup>56</sup>”

Griffith’s policy report listed three other clear violations of RFE policy, all of which provide provided “detailed instructions as to how partisan and Hungarian armed forces should fight,” from information on how to sabotage railroad and telephone lines to

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<sup>53</sup> Bekes, 467-8

<sup>54</sup> Bekes, 470

<sup>55</sup> Bekes, 470

<sup>56</sup> Granville

techniques of anti-tank warfare<sup>57</sup>. One of these programs “fairly clearly implies that foreign aid will be forthcoming if the resistance forces succeed in establishing a ‘central military command.’<sup>58</sup>” Another “implies that the UN will give active support to Hungarians if they keep on fighting.<sup>59</sup>” However, despite the foolishness of these programs, they are in truth nothing more than implication and do not amount to a ‘smoking gun.’ A CIA report completed shortly after the revolution claimed that

after the revolution was well under way a few of the scripts do indicate that RFE occasionally went beyond the authorized factual reports...to provide tactical advice to the patriots [on] the course the rebellion should take...As soon as these deviations from policy were noted, steps were taken to impose rigid supervision of broadcasting content...Radio Free Europe did not incite the Hungarian people to revolution, which was the result of ten years of Soviet repression.<sup>60</sup>

According to A. Ross Johnson, during the revolution military assistance was explicitly promised by only two foreign stations, one from a group of Russian émigrés in Germany, and the other from a group of Hungarian émigrés in Spain<sup>61</sup>. Johnson also notes that

no broadcast before the revolution called for insurrection, violent confrontation of the communist authorities, or maximalist anticommunist policies, and...no broadcast during the uprising appealed to Hungarians to continue armed struggle against the Soviet army. Among 500 Hungarian-language programs aired during a month of nearly round-the-clock broadcasting, only one...said...that a ‘practical manifestation of Western sympathy is expected at any hour’ [i.e. Thury’s broadcast].<sup>62</sup>

Yet, according to audience research done by the company International Research

Associates in December 1956, 38% of the 1007 refugees interviewed thought that “the

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<sup>57</sup> Bekes, 466-67

<sup>58</sup> Bekes, 466

<sup>59</sup> Bekes, 467

<sup>60</sup> Sebestyen, 296

<sup>61</sup> A. Ross Johnson, “To the Barricades,” *Hoover Digest*, 2007, No. 4

<sup>62</sup> Johnson

American broadcasts gave the impression that the U.S. was willing to fight if necessary to save Hungary.<sup>63</sup>”

How could this be? Johnson believes that “RFE projected to Hungary the sympathy and moral and humanitarian support of the Western world. In the context of the revolution, this reporting— both accurate and journalistically responsible, with few exceptions—inadvertently became a source of false hope.<sup>64</sup>” Gati notes that, despite what RFE was actually saying, “what the Hungarians heard from the beginning was that *they should not trust Nagy Imre and they should press ahead vigorously for all they sought— up to and including, of course, the overthrow of Nagy’s government*<sup>65</sup>.” Both of these assessments seem to be accurate: despite what the United States was intending to say to the Hungarians, they were hearing something different, and U.S. broadcasting could have done a better job of making sure our message was not misunderstood.

According to one U.S. Official who asked to remain nameless, there was a “mass psychosis” and a lot of “wishful thinking” on the part of the Hungarians, who believed what they wanted to believe: “All [Thury’s broadcast] shows is that a Hungarian émigré working for RFE picked up a story from the world press, in this case from a British correspondent in D.C. who voiced those hopeful expectations of help for the Magyars for his British paper...Not quite the same as a promise by the USG to offer military assistance.” That said, it is also true that the United States perhaps didn’t do enough to make clear that we had no intention of providing military aid to Hungary. Gati notes that after 1956 “the United States soon and abruptly abandoned the hollow slogans of

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<sup>63</sup> “Hungary and the 1956 Uprising,” International Research Associates, March 1957, 13, accessed at <http://www.osa.ceu.hu/digitalarchive/hover/index.html>

<sup>64</sup> Johnson

<sup>65</sup> Gati, 167, italics in original

liberation and rollback, but Washington never came clean by publicly acknowledging the damage it had done.<sup>66</sup> I will discuss possible reasons for the U.S. Government's lack of clarity during the revolution shortly. But first I will turn to public opinion in Hungary.

Why was RFE more popular than other radio stations such as the Voice of America or BBC? Perhaps it had something to do with the fundamental rationale of Radio Free Europe, which was, in essence, “we’re the radio that they would have here if they had free radio,<sup>67</sup>” according to Csaba Chikes, Public Affairs Officer in the US Embassy in Budapest in the 1980’s. This was a markedly different approach than that of an explicitly United States Government entity such as the Voice of America, and one that certainly appealed to Hungarians’ sense of national solidarity. Some of the programs featured such colorful fictional characters as “Farmer Balint,” “Gallicus,” and “Colonel Bell,” which helped to differentiate RFE from the more traditional news stations like VOA and BBC. According to former RFE employees Geza Ekecs and Janos Kund, “Imre Györi-Mikes (‘Gallicus’), his pen dipped in vitriol, was castigating the communist regime in his program series *Reflector*... Idiomatic Hungarian, rustic pronunciation, and sharp wit characterized Bálint Czupy (‘Farmer Bálint’) when he spoke to millions of listeners. Julián Borsányi (‘Colonel Bell’), a former high-ranking officer of the Hungarian Army, informed the audience about topics of science, technology, and military strategy.<sup>68</sup>” According to a January 1957 RFE report, when a group of Hungarian refugees were asked “whether they could recall the names of any specific programs or personalities in Western broadcasts, 329 of the 800 subjects mentioned RFE programs

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<sup>66</sup> Gati, 19

<sup>67</sup> From conversation with Mr. Chikes, 2/16/08

<sup>68</sup> Geza Ekecs & Janos Kund, “Bye-bye SZER [Szabad Europa Radio, Hungarian for Radio Free Europe]” accessed at <http://www.janoskund.de/artikel.html>

490 times, BBC programs 30 times and VOA programs 3 times by name.<sup>69</sup> Gallicus was the most popular with 195 mentions, and Colonel Bell was second with 101. The aforementioned report prepared by International Research Associates found that, from a sample of around 1000 refugees, “almost nine out of ten listened to RFE, more than seven out of ten to VOA, and six out of ten to BBC.”<sup>70</sup>

Radio programming from abroad as a whole was widely popular at this time in Hungary. According to Johnson, “a 1956 survey of a thousand Hungarian refugees in Austria concluded that foreign radio had been their major source of information during the revolution. Ninety percent said they had listened to foreign programs; of these, 81 percent frequently listened to RFE and 67 percent listened to both the Voice of America and the BBC. RFE unquestionably had large audiences and a great impact in Hungary during the 1956 revolution, but all Western broadcasters played a role.”<sup>71</sup>

According to a report conducted by RFE, “BBC was cited as being the most popular station among the better educated listeners—largely because of people’s belief in its news objectivity.”<sup>72</sup> But, notably, “RFE seems to have been listened to more frequently, and its programs are recalled far more frequently by people who are asked to name any Western radio personality or programs to which they listened.”<sup>73</sup> But this salience was not always a good thing. In this same report there is a quote from a

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<sup>69</sup> “Hungarian Refugee Opinion,” Audience Analysis Section, Special Report No. 6, January 1957, 18 accessed at <http://www.osa.ceu.hu/digitalarchive/hover/index.html>

<sup>70</sup> “Hungary and the 1956 Uprising,” International Research Associates, March 1957, 5, accessed at <http://www.osa.ceu.hu/digitalarchive/hover/index.html>

<sup>71</sup> Johnson

<sup>72</sup> “Some aspects of Hungarian Audience Reaction to RFE News, Information, and Commentaries,” Audience Analysis Section, Special Report No. 7, January 1957, 1 accessed at <http://www.osa.ceu.hu/digitalarchive/hover/index.html>

<sup>73</sup> *ibid*

Hungarian engineer who supported Imre Nagy: “RFE always distinguished between bad and worse, never or rarely between bad and less bad. When the whole nation turned toward Nagy as the less bad, the Reflector only said that a communist remained a communist.<sup>74</sup>” There was widespread skepticism about RFE’s credibility: “in political arguments, the participants countered the charge of ‘that’s a communist lie’ with ‘that’s a Free Europe lie!’ Another source compared RFE with the communist press. He said listening to RFE was like reading Szabad Nep [Free People, the Communist newspaper]: ‘When reading Szabad Nep one always tried to read between the lines and while listening to RFE one had to listen between the words.’<sup>75</sup>”

Though it was closely connected to the CIA, the organizers of RFE wanted to maintain the illusion of independence. RFE was founded by the “National Committee for a Free Europe,” which was from the first, according to Gati, “financed almost exclusively by the CIA.<sup>76</sup>” There was private funding as well, through the RFE’s “own fund-raising arm, the so-called Crusade for Freedom,” which was, as Gati notes, “but a front to cover up CIA’s secret role in funding and supervising RFE’s operations.<sup>77</sup>” According to Johanna Granville of the Hoover Institution, “in 1956 alone RFE's annual budget was \$21,000,000, of which \$16,000,000 was furnished by the Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>78</sup>” The connection between the CIA and RFE was not widely known, though there were rumors that such a relationship existed. Stacey Cone, a professor of journalism at the University of Iowa, notes that “although it took nearly two decades, the rumors were

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid*, 3

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*, 4-5

<sup>76</sup> Gati, 97

<sup>77</sup> Gati, 97

<sup>78</sup> Johanna Granville, “Radio Free Europe's Impact on the Kremlin in the Hungarian Crisis of 1956: Three Hypotheses,” *Canadian Journal of History*, 12/04

eventually confirmed when RFE was identified by the New York Times in 1967 as being CIA sponsored.<sup>79</sup> RFE was funded by the CIA until 1971, and “thereafter by open congressional appropriation,<sup>80</sup>” according to Johnson.

RFE’s aforementioned desire for maintaining the appearance of autonomy was rendered somewhat difficult by the Central Intelligence Agency’s rather austere rules. A 1951 CIA handbook had endorsed a focus on “the monstrous all-devouring ambitions of Soviet imperialism, the cruelty and unworkability of communist institutions, and the proven advantages of the democratic way of life,” and its central purpose was “to contribute to the liberation of the nations imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain by maintaining their morale and stimulating in them a spirit of non-cooperation with the Soviet-dominated regimes.<sup>81</sup>” According to Sebestyen, “broadcasters were barred from using such words as ‘peace’ and ‘disarmament’ in relation to the Soviet bloc, as these might signal international acceptance of Russian control over Eastern Europe. No restraint was placed on RFE’s anti-communism or its ‘outspoken belligerence.’<sup>82</sup>” And according to Walter Hixson, “broadcasts were to exploit every opportunity to point out lies, weaknesses, and repression, contrasting these actions with the moral, political, and economic superiority of the West.<sup>83</sup>” Judging from these comments, it comes as a surprise that so many Hungarians believed RFE’s broadcasts to be true. But RFE seems to have taken a more nuanced approach at times as well:

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<sup>79</sup> Stacey Cone, "Presuming a Right to Deceive: Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, the CIA, and the News Media," *Journalism History* 24.4 (1998-99): 148-56

<sup>80</sup> A. Ross Johnson, "To the Barricades," *Hoover Digest*, 2007, No. 4

<sup>81</sup> Hixson, 61

<sup>82</sup> Sebestyen, 59

<sup>83</sup> Hixson, 61

RFE guidelines targeted programming for East European youth groups, workers and peasants, but the station refrained from directly addressing underground resistance groups... RFE appealed to Eastern European youth with programs on sports, entertainment, science and technology, and features on youth in the West. RFE offered invidious comparisons with life in the West in its programming targeting workers and peasants... RFE broadcasters constantly emphasized their common national identity with the listener by calling their programs "Poles Speaking to Poles," and "Hungarians to Hungarians," and so on.<sup>84</sup>

Another interesting question is the effect that RFE had on decision-makers in the Soviet Union. Johanna Granville claims that "RFE's broadcasting was perhaps a key causal factor in the Soviet crackdown for at least three distinct, but interrelated, reasons: the broadcasts contributed to Moscow's lack of faith in Nagy's ability to control the situation; they aroused Soviet fears of Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact long before Nagy himself announced it; and the broadcasts contributed to the disbandment of the Hungarian security police (AVH), thus convincing Soviet (and Hungarian) communist leaders that Soviet troops were needed to fill the security vacuum in Hungary."<sup>85</sup> While Granville presents intriguing insights, it is always difficult to quantify the extent to which one event 'caused' another, especially without hard evidence, of which there seems to be none in this case. Granville admits that "nowhere is there a transparent, fool-proof statement such as: 'We think Nagy has lost control because we heard RFE denouncing him and therefore we have decided to intervene.' So one is left to wonder to what extent the Soviet elites were influenced by RFE, although it would be surprising if there were no effect at all.

The effect of RFE on Western elites warrants mention too. Gati, citing the 1953

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<sup>84</sup> Hixson, 61

<sup>85</sup> Johanna Granville, "Radio Free Europe's Impact on the Kremlin in the Hungarian Crisis of 1956: Three Hypotheses," *Canadian Journal of History*, 12/04

meeting of Chiefs of Mission in Vienna, notes that those officials who served in

Embassies in Communist nations were more inclined to limit RFE activities:

By 1953-54, diplomats in both the United States and in Western Europe often thought their work would be made easier if RFE did not exist or if it became less confrontational... Those engaged in or favoring psychological warfare against the Soviet Union believed RFE would make life more difficult for the Communists and therefore it was a good idea, while Western diplomats who dealt with Communist governments on a daily basis found that RFE's unsparing attacks on those governments made the task of diplomacy more difficult; they felt RFE should be less inciting and more informative.<sup>86</sup>

In the meeting cited by Gati, "it was agreed that the discussions had shown that conditions in the individual satellite countries vary considerably and thus that we should consider each country individually rather than lumping them together more or less indiscriminately,<sup>87</sup>" which the broad policy goals of the RFE, mentioned above, served to do. It seems clear that RFE had broad influence not just on the people in Hungary, but also on decision-makers in both Washington and Moscow, although as stated above, this influence is difficult to quantify.

Charles Gati sums up the importance of RFE to United States diplomatic efforts in Hungary in the 1950's:

For most Hungarians, RFE was the United States and the United States was RFE. There was little diplomatic or economic intercourse between the two countries in the 1950's. By sharp contrast, although most Hungarians in the countryside did not have shortwave radios capable of picking up foreign stations' signals, RFE's broadcasts had a steady, growing, and receptive audience in Budapest and other cities. Its advantage over the BBC, which was respected by intellectuals for its objectivity; over the Voice of America; and over Deutsche Welle had to do with the RFE's extensive programming: it was on the air (almost) around the clock. Also, with its persistent attacks on communism and hopeful message about the future, RFE made its listeners *feel good*.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Gati, 97

<sup>87</sup> Summary minutes of the Chiefs of Mission Meeting at Vienna, September 22-24, 1953, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-54, 8:87

<sup>88</sup> Gati, 96

But Radio Free Europe was not just involved in propaganda. There was an “active information network, aided by hundreds of agents who had infiltrated the Soviet empire, [which] enabled the station to disclose the identities of secret police officials.<sup>89</sup>” In Hungary, for example, RFE “revealed the identity of a smuggler who took money from anti-communist Hungarians, promising to sneak them over the border into the U.S. zone of Austria, but instead routinely delivering them to the secret police.<sup>90</sup>”

### **The International Politics of 1956**

According to Gati, in addition to Stalin’s death and subsequent censure, two other facts bolstered Hungary’s chances at gaining concessions from the Soviet Union. The first was the fact that only one year earlier, Russia had withdrawn its troops from Eastern Austria, which had subsequently become pluralist and embraced the free market. The second was the fact that “Hungary, unlike Poland, where anti-Soviet sentiments were also rising, had little or no strategic significance for Russia.<sup>91</sup>” Gati concludes that had the Hungarian demands not been so radical, Khrushchev might have allowed Hungary some autonomy so he could focus on the problems in Poland as well as maintain his anti-Stalinist policies in Moscow.

Yet many of those involved in the revolution expected help from the Western powers, which surely encouraged Hungary’s demands for sweeping change. And there was, arguably, reason to think help was on the way. As noted above, throughout the

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<sup>89</sup> Hixson, 62

<sup>90</sup> Hixson, 62

<sup>91</sup> Gati, 5

decade Radio Free Europe had been subtly and indirectly urging the Hungarian people to stand up to their Soviet masters. But when this long-awaited event actually came to pass, America refused help of any kind. How could this have occurred? In order to answer this question one has to look at the broader context of the revolution. Multiple factors were at play.

First of all, the American domestic political situation was a key factor. When the above events occurred in Hungary, the Republican Dwight Eisenhower was in the final stages of his reelection campaign against Democrat Adlai Stevenson. At the time, there were three discrete ‘dimensions’ of U.S. policy towards the Soviet bloc: confrontation, competition, and cooperation. As Gati notes, “*Confrontation* signified efforts to obtain freedom for the region; *competition* signified efforts to encourage the rise of national Communist or Titoist regimes; and *cooperation* signified interest in reform and long-term evolution within the confines of the Soviet bloc.”<sup>92</sup> Clearly these ideals were somewhat at odds, and by 1956, with the Soviet Union appearing to be thawing after Stalin’s death, many in the administration, including Kennan, felt that confrontation should be abandoned. Eisenhower was inclined to support Kennan’s view, but this was impossible because any appearance of compromise with the Soviets would enrage the hard-line right wing of the Republican Party. Gati writes that,

In this atmosphere, there was no way to reconcile the appearance of sacrificing the vision of a free Eastern Europe on the altar of either détente or Titoism with attendance at self-satisfying prayer breakfasts devoted to the enslaved peoples of Eastern Europe. The dimension of confrontation or at least the rhetoric of confrontation had to remain the central part of the policy mix that the United States presented both to its own people and to the world.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Gati, 98

<sup>93</sup> Gati, 99-100

Secondly, at just the same time as the events in Hungary, another predicament was emerging in the Suez Canal. On October 29, Britain, France, and Israel cooperated on an invasion of Egypt, following Egypt's decision earlier that year to nationalize the Suez Canal. This crisis took its place as Eisenhower's biggest priority. According to Sebestyen, the President's "major concern... was the yawning crack in the Western alliance and a conflict in the Middle East that he feared could extend the cold war to another continent... Over the next few days he had dozens of meetings and telephone calls about the Middle East and very few about Hungary."<sup>94</sup>

The third and perhaps most significant factor influencing America's policy towards Hungary was the Soviet Union itself. Eisenhower was receiving "confusing and contradictory" reports from Budapest and Moscow, and wasn't sure what to make of them.<sup>95</sup> The President didn't want Hungary to turn into a third world war: "Eisenhower had decided almost at once that he would not interfere in Hungary. From the moment he heard that an armed uprising had begun in Budapest, the President's main anxiety was to reassure the Soviet Union that the United States had no interest in the satellite states."<sup>96</sup> Moreover, Hungary was not strategically important for the United States. According to Gati, "Hungary's low priority... was largely due to its location; it was harder to reach than East Germany or Czechoslovakia. Until 1955, the part of Austria that bordered on Hungary was under Soviet military occupation. After 1955, neutral Austria, which took its treaty commitments seriously, did not welcome American intelligence or paramilitary

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<sup>94</sup> Sebestyen, 208

<sup>95</sup> Gati, 199

<sup>96</sup> Sebestyen, 139

agents on its soil.<sup>97</sup>” Gati concludes that despite the lack of good intelligence about Hungary, in the final light of day, the reason that America didn’t do more for the Revolution “was *not* the absence of information; it was the lack of interest in partial change.<sup>98</sup>”

As early as 1952, the Economist was reporting that “to encourage in any way, even by accident, the belief that the West is preparing to go to war for the liberation of Poland, Czechoslovakia and the rest is to mislead millions of gallant people” and that “what is dangerous is that an unofficial and covert policy of ‘actively supporting passive resistance’ should run parallel with an official policy of doing next to nothing about Eastern Europe.<sup>99</sup>” These sentences proved remarkably prescient.

In summary, it seems that the United States is neither as guilty as is commonly supposed for encouraging Hungarian resistance to the Soviet Union, nor as innocent as we might like to believe. Had the U.S. Government had a more discerning view of the situation on the ground in Hungary, and the likely consequences of its seeming support for resistance, the tragedy might have been mitigated or even averted altogether. There seems to me to be three lessons for the United States from the events of 1956. First, even if our policies are correct, we have to be vigilant in making sure that those carrying them out are not distorting them. Though there were no major problems with RFE’s stated policies during the revolution, a few of the announcers chose to disregard them. Second, we should always seek the most nuanced, subtle, and accurate information. The temptation to embrace simplistic Manichean preconceptions exists, though it should be

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<sup>97</sup> Gati, 73-4

<sup>98</sup> Gati, 108

<sup>99</sup> *The Economist*, April 26, 1952, 203-4

rejected out of hand. Had we known the truth about Nagy's standing in Hungary, our broadcasts could have been a lot more helpful to the struggle against Soviet domination. And finally, we should always seek to make the policies of the United States clear and explicit to all relevant parties. Had the Hungarian people known that the United States was not coming to their aid, it seems very likely that the tragedy could have been avoided.

### **A Modern Analogue**

A situation remarkably similar to Radio Free Europe's perceived assurances of assistance occurred at the end of the First Persian Gulf War, in February 1991. After about a month of fighting between the United States and Iraq, a radio station run by the CIA, The Voice of Free Iraq, called for the people to stand up to Saddam Hussein's regime. Most of those who would rise up were Shias. According to Robert Fisk, a respected journalist who has covered the Middle East for decades,

[the February 24<sup>th</sup> broadcast] was explicit: the war and destruction would continue unless the Iraqi people overthrew their dictator. The radio didn't say the moment of liberty was at hand. Iraqis were told that if they wanted to survive, they must rebel. 'Hit the headquarters of the tyrant and save the homeland from destruction,' the radio said. But anyone listening to the station was entitled to believe that the Western and Arab armies would come to their rescue.<sup>100</sup>

Transmitting from Saudi Arabia, the voice was that of Salah Omar al-Ali, who had at one time been a member of Saddam Hussein's Revolutionary Command Council and the Regional Command of the Arab Socialist Baath Party. In 1992, he had been purged by Saddam personally. al-Ali continued:

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<sup>100</sup> Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilization*, (New York: Random House, 2005), 646

Prove to your people and nation that you are faithful and honourable sons of this generous country... Stage a revolution now, before it is too late...He [Saddam] will flee the battlefield when he becomes certain that the catastrophe has engulfed every street, every house and every family in Iraq.<sup>101</sup>

According to Fisk, it was not just the CIA's station that was fomenting an imprudent uprising. Apparently the Voice of America also called people to arms: a seventeen-year-old Shiite named Haidar al-Assadi listened and expected "the allies to liberate Iraq and rid us of this criminal. I remember listening to the Arabic service of the Voice of America which told us that the uprising was large and we would be liberated."<sup>102</sup> As in Hungary, there seem not to have been explicit promises of U.S. military support, but instead a policy that amounted to allowing the beleaguered Iraqis to believe what they wanted, with little regard for the repercussions. In the event, the uprising was crushed by the Iraqi army and thousands of people were executed mercilessly. February 28<sup>th</sup> marked the end of active hostilities; the 'war' was over, despite what many brave Iraqis hoped for and expected. It is unfortunate and alarming that after the events of 1956 in Hungary, such similarly misleading programming was coming from American broadcasters in Iraq, with such comparable results.

### **Public Diplomacy in Hungary in the 1980's**

After 1956 things in Hungary quickly calmed down. At first Kadar was vilified as a collaborator, but slowly he relaxed his iron grip and the people began to grudgingly respect him. In 1962 almost all the prisoners from the revolution were released. The events of 1956 were largely forgotten or ignored, and a collective amnesia took hold;

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<sup>101</sup> Fisk, 646-7

<sup>102</sup> Fisk, 647

only relatively recently, in 1989, was Imre Nagy officially reburied (he had originally been interred in an unmarked grave). Hungary was the most relaxed and most prosperous of the Soviet satellites, and continued to make slow reforms through the 1980's. Kadar's lenient policies became known as 'Gulyas Communism.' He famously said at one point that "he who is not against us is with us," and indeed this seemed to be the guiding philosophy of his government.

Hungarian-American Csaba Chikes went to Hungary in 1983 as the Public Affairs Officer in the U.S. Embassy. I had the chance to meet with Mr. Chikes in February at his home in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., and he told me that the United States policy in Hungary during the time he was there was one of "differentiation," of exploiting perceived differences among the Eastern Bloc nations. Given this nuanced goal, which contrasts quite starkly with the more black-and-white, us-and-them approach taken by the United States before and during the 1956 revolution, more attention and resources were devoted to public diplomacy. One significant public diplomacy event during this period which illustrates the extent to which relations were improving between the United States and Hungary involved the Crown of St. Stephen (pictured).



According to myth, Pope Sylvester II gave the Crown to St. Istvan (Hungarian for Stephen) on Christmas day in the year 1000 CE. Stephen had resolved to raise Hungary to the status of a Christian kingdom, placing it on an equal footing with other European

states; thus he shrewdly requested his crown from the Pope, the spiritual leader of Western Europe, rather than from the Holy Roman Emperor. This crown became one of the most powerful symbols of Hungarian nationhood.

At the end of World War II, in 1945, with the Russians rapidly advancing into Hungary, the Royal guard watching the crown placed it in a black satchel and smuggled it to Austria. There a Hungarian general gave it to an American colonel. At first it was kept in the American zone of Austria but was later transferred to Fort Knox in Kentucky, where it remained until 1978. At this point there was a debate in the Carter administration about the possible return of the crown to Hungary. Some in the United States didn't want to give the Crown back to a Communist regime, but, according to Chikes, "intelligent minds won out,<sup>103</sup>" and it was returned. "And it actually served our interests, by encouraging Hungarian nationalism," Chikes said.

The Hungarian government stipulated that, officially, Kadar had had nothing to do with this deal. So while he was on vacation, the Carter administration turned the Crown over to the people of Hungary. There was one more condition—it had to be displayed publicly, which the U.S. government hoped would contribute to a rising sense of pride in the Hungarian people. The positive aspects of this event were not lost on the State Department, which has posted a story about this episode on the U.S. Embassy to Hungary's website:

The decision by President Jimmy Carter to return the Crown in 1978 was a controversial one, and one which took political courage. President Carter made his decision based on the evidence that Hungary's record on human rights—its tolerance of religious expression, its facilitating of travel and communication—while not perfect, deserved recognition as an example to other Soviet-bloc countries. Many people on both sides of the Atlantic adamantly opposed the

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<sup>103</sup> This and subsequent quotes come from an interview with Mr. Chikes on 2/16/08

return of the Crown at a time when Hungary was still under Communist rule. Carter felt that it was only right that the Crown be returned before a whole generation of Hungarians came of age without understanding its symbolism. After all, he said, the Crown belonged to the Hungarian people. As hoped, the return of the Crown was both an occasion for improving U.S.-Hungarian relations and a device for pulling Hungary towards the west. It allowed the traditional warm relations between the two countries to resurface.<sup>104</sup>

The delegation sent by the Carter administration included Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Adlai Stevenson, Congressman Lee Hamilton, and Nobel Prize Winner Dr. Albert Szent-Györgyi.

As evidenced by this episode, relations between Hungary and the United States were improving. However, according to Chikes, when it came to radio programming, Radio Free Europe continued to denigrate the Communist leadership. The contrast between RFE and VOA was much the same as it had been in the 1950's: whereas VOA was "projecting a benign view," RFE was still "vigorously, vehemently anti-Communist" and their programming was a "terrific screed." Chikes notes that RFE referred to Kadar as a "crook," even though "the Hungarian people as a whole didn't think he was such a bad guy...they knew [life in Hungary] wasn't like Czechoslovakia or Romania or Bulgaria, or Russia for that matter... This kind of hysterical rant is just not very helpful." This recalls the counterproductive vilification of Imre Nagy by RFE in the 1950's which undermined RFE's credibility in Hungary.

Chikes told me that at one point he was able to negotiate with his counterparts in the agitprop department of Hungary a visit by the Director of VOA in order to see first-hand how things really were in Budapest. He was unable, however, to negotiate a similar visit by the director of RFE. The Hungarians had a very "sophisticated" approach to this;

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<sup>104</sup> From the U.S. Embassy in Budapest's website ([http://hungary.usembassy.gov/holy\\_crown.html](http://hungary.usembassy.gov/holy_crown.html))

in essence, they saw no upside, according to Chikes. If the Director was impressed by Hungary's openness and RFE programming were to reflect this new perception, but continued to criticize the more repressive East Germany and Czechoslovakia, Hungary would be seen as drifting too far to the West and its position among the Warsaw Pact countries would weaken. On the other hand, if the Director were to confirm that everything was as bad as RFE had been saying all along, giving subsequent broadcasts added credibility, that wouldn't help the Hungarians either. So no such visit was made.

According to Chikes, the International Visitor exchange program was the most effective instrument for U.S. Public Diplomacy during his career:

[It's] the single most important thing we do... Whatever they think about the US, if they come and see 30 days in the states that's laid out, designed to their interests, they tell us what they want to see, and they come back invariably with a positive [view of America]. They may come back and say I still think your policy stinks, but boy, the people are great, what goes on in America is really [great]. Otherwise what they get is Hollywood and TV.

Chikes told me that a "cultural agreement... was necessary in all these Communist countries... In most Communist countries they used the cultural agreement to define the outer limits of what they would let you do," for example 10 Hungarian scholars for 10 American scholars, 10 leaders for 10 leaders, etc. "The typical Communist cultural agreement would delineate what you can do and no more. But in the Hungarian case, that provided the floor to your activities. We would do no less than this... At one point we had the highest number of both Fulbright scholars and International Visitors." Hungarian officials chose the visitors to the U.S., though the Americans had veto power over the selections. Chikes only used this power once, when he knew that one of the individuals selected by the Hungarians had worked with the KGB and had "done in" some of Chikes' other contacts by recording their conversations. Chikes felt that this individual wasn't a

scholar and wasn't the kind of person that the United States wanted on a Fulbright. The problem was that one of the American Fulbrighters who was planning on visiting Hungary would have had to give up his trip in return, so in the end this individual was allowed to travel to the U.S. According to Chikes, this was the only case where such a questionable individual was sent to the U.S. from Hungary.

The cultural agreement also included exhibitions. These were very popular during the Cold War and focused on such subjects as American theatre (which included the performance of one-act plays), American design, Native American culture and history, and American film. Chikes travel around Hungary putting on such events, and he told me that in every case there was 100% cooperation from the Hungarian side. These were exhibitions that the Hungarians wanted to see, and that the Americans wanted to provide. The Embassy also put on a series of first-run American movies, such as *Amadeus*, which was hugely popular. There were also occasionally visits of well-known American writers to Eastern Europe, including John Updike, Edward Albee, and William Styron.

The ambassador at the time, Mark Palmer ('86-'90), was very media-savvy and he appeared on television in Hungary quite frequently, and would also do Q & A's with students at universities. There were also live panel discussions in the mid 1980's on WORLDNET TV, USIA's satellite station, which was linked up with local Hungarian television stations. A heart surgery panel discussion in Hungary was the first such program in the Warsaw Pact, "an anodyne topic, but pretty amazing, because WORLDNET was known for the program *Let Poland Be Poland*, which was incredibly provocative and anticommunist," according to Chikes. Such programs evolved into live interviews via satellite.

Chikes told me that a significant amount of his time was spent cultivating relationships with universities in the major cities of Hungary (Szeged, Pecs, Debrecen, and Budapest), most often with English professors but occasionally also with the university rectors. These meetings were very formal and had to be set up with the government in Budapest. Chikes met regularly with the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education, the Foreign Ministry, and the so-called “White House” (the producers of agitprop) in order to discuss upcoming programming and events.

The work environment seems to have been very fast-paced and somewhat stressful. Chikes told me that “we always knew that what you’re able to achieve is limited by what you’re able to do yourself...[the Hungarians] didn’t put up any barriers. And so you tend to work yourself into a frenzy.... We were always ahead of our resources. You yell charge and you’re through the enemy lines and you turn back and your baggage train is a couple miles back there and you’re in big trouble all of a sudden. We kept feeling that that was the case.” Chikes was flooded with assignments from headquarters: “You have to imagine, there are hundreds of people back here [in D.C.] who each have something they want you to do: pamphlets, articles, films, exhibits, VOA. You had to rank them in order of importance. You could spend all your time just doing that if you wanted to.” The public affairs officers had to do all the paperwork and legwork for the Fulbright and International Visitor grants themselves (whereas nowadays there is the Hungarian American Fulbright Commission, which has a staff and a director), and at the time these programs were the largest in the region, according to Chikes. He also noted that at times the job was wearying, that always being on-duty, even in social occasions,

“grinds you down.” “That is really hard work. I used to have like 100 people over to my house, and every person wanted something from me, or else, why bother?”

The public opinion of the Hungarians at the time was complex and merits further elaboration. Csaba referred to a perception in the United States of a “smoldering hatred” of the Russians on the part of the Hungarians. He doesn’t think this was the case. Rather, the Hungarians tended to view Russians as “poor ignorant slobs” in a patronizing way. ““They’re a bigger richer country, and they can’t do for their people what we’re doing here,” is how Csaba characterized the general attitude as he saw it. Thus the ground was fertile for American public diplomacy efforts. According to John Menzies, who started his distinguished Foreign Service career as a Junior Officer Trainee in Budapest in 1982, the general attitude towards America were very positive: “They loved America, as a beacon of hope and freedom, that stood by them even at great distance.<sup>105</sup>” The job of the Public Affairs section was simply “to poke holes in the system and let light in from the outside.”

Menzies, who had graduated from UC-Santa Barbara, expanded the Fulbright program to include two additional slots at his alma mater. One of these slots was filled by Geza Jeszensky, who later became Hungary’s Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the United States. Menzies also played a role in the efforts of Hungarian-American businessman George Soros to create a “foundation in Hungary to support culture and education and the country’s transition to democracy.<sup>106</sup>” When Soros first arrived in Hungary in the early 1980’s with the intention of spending four million dollars a year,

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<sup>105</sup> This and subsequent quotes are taken from a telephone conversation with Ambassador Menzies on 2/20/08.

<sup>106</sup> From the Soros Foundation website: [http://www.soros.org/about/bios/a\\_soros](http://www.soros.org/about/bios/a_soros)

Menzies met him at the airport and helped him get started. Eventually, the Hungarian government decided to match the contributions of Soros, which had a galvanizing effect. Today, the Soros Foundation has developed extensively around the world, especially in Eastern Europe. Soros also helped to found the Central European University in Budapest, a graduate school which focuses on political and social development. Allowing Soros to set up his organization in their country in the 1980's gave Hungary a lot of good press, according to Chikes, and contributed to their being the first Warsaw Pact country to host a meeting of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, in 1986.

Both Chikes and Menzies informed me that Hungary was more open than any other Warsaw Pact country. Menzies referred to Hungary as “the happiest barracks in the camp... [The government] cut people a lot of slack in terms of economics and private business. They also offered a good deal of latitude with cultural materials [relative to the Soviets and the East Germans, for example].” In 1984, U.S. Ambassador Nicolas Salgo ('83-'86) endowed a Visiting Professorship of American Studies in the English Department of the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. According to Chikes, the first American professor chosen was left completely untrammelled by the Hungarian authorities, something “unimaginable” in the neighboring Communist countries during this period. According to Chikes, “[the Hungarian authorities] would generally let things pass. You had to really go for it” to anger them.

Chikes told me that only once did he get into trouble with the agitprop officials. During this period the United States was distributing *Dialogue* magazine to countries in the Eastern Bloc (it has since been discontinued). The magazine was a quarterly which contained a selection of apolitical articles from high-brow American periodicals like *The*

*New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly* on such subjects as literature, the sociology of the U.S., and architecture, and it also contained about 15-20 pages of articles that pertained to the bilateral relationship between the United States and Hungary in some way. (full disclosure: my father, Thomas Eichler, helped to edit this magazine in Vienna from '85-'87). Chikes was called in by the agitprop for distributing thousands of VOA listener guides with the magazine after some Hungarian citizens had complained: there was an article in the guide criticizing Nicolae Ceausescu, the vicious leader of Romania, and another one criticizing Soviet disinformation. According to Chikes, he was the only officer in any Warsaw Pact country to whom this happened. Chikes had his "wrists slapped," but the magazines had already been sent out with the enclosed listening guides. Chikes told me that the reaction by the authorities was in his view rather perfunctory, since the general consensus in Hungary at the time was that the Russians were liars and that Ceausescu was despicable.

Chikes also noted that, in his opinion, the fall of the Soviet empire began in Hungary, which is perhaps not surprising given its openness relative to the other Warsaw Pact countries. East Germans were fleeing to Hungary through Czechoslovakia, and once in Budapest they would go to the West German Embassy to seek refuge. In 1989, Hungary decided to take down the Iron Curtain on the border with Austria; from there the Germans had an easy trip to West Germany. In Chikes' view, this flow of refugees, which undermined the entire Warsaw Pact, amounted to freedom of movement and led eventually to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The biggest handicap Chikes faced in Hungary was not overcoming the Soviet empire but navigating the bureaucracy of the U.S. Government. He told me that "Poland

had always been the darling of the State Department and USIA bureaucracies within the Warsaw Pact.” To start with, there is a much larger Polish community in the U.S. compared to Hungarians. The Poles had also been more spirited in their fight against Communism, which lent them more ardent support from Washington (e.g. the widely popular Solidarity movement in the 1980’s, which got a lot of international press). In the Chikes’ estimation, the bureaucracy for East European affairs had a strong Polish bias.

The budget and staffing considerations were based on that. So when I got to Budapest, the Polish government had already put the lid on [the Solidarity movement]; they were under martial law. So [the embassy in Poland] was extremely limited in what they could do. Meanwhile, I’m in Hungary...there wasn’t a whole lot of agitation there... the whole Hungarian thing, after ’56 it had all sort of gone to sleep. So I’m arguing, look, I can basically do anything here. Give me the money that you can’t use now in Poland. But that’s the last thing on earth they ever want to hear at headquarters... Of all the European posts, the only [European] ones smaller than mine in terms of funding and staffing were the Vatican and Luxembourg, and this was during a period when the sky was the limit, and I was so frustrated.

Chikes then discussed the repercussions he faced for attempting to influence the amount of resources coming from Washington:

No bureaucracy likes someone from out there in the field telling them how to reorder the universe. It was like pounding my head against the wall. It caused me a lot of problems career-wise, because I kept harping away at it... They said, ‘you have to live within your means.’ It was seen as a sign of bad management that I couldn’t make do with what I was given. I was saying ‘what you’re giving me is completely inadequate to the possibilities.’ And so I quickly put myself at odds with the powers that be because they just hate that. If you poke the beast in the eye, it will come lashing back, there’s no doubt about it.

Interestingly, Chikes was on the other end of this relationship from 1990-91, when he was working in Washington, overseeing the disbursement of funds to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. He came to understand that “it’s very tough to reallocate resources; it’s good to make cuts for everyone equally,” so as not to necessitate a complete reorganization. And while he was delighted to see more funding going to countries like

Bulgaria, he also understood that, in the long run, “the Bulgarian-U.S. relationship is never going to be of the nature of importance to us as the French-American relationship,” so it was perhaps not wise to pull resources out of Western Europe to expand Eastern European operations. (A similar trend seems to exist today, as many European embassies are losing staff to Iraq.) So in the end Chikes’ views on the matter of funding are complex and a bit ambivalent. It is important for him that Eastern European missions be funded adequately, but he is adamant in his view that America’s relationship with Western Europe should remain the priority. For Chikes, because of our shared values and long history of cooperation, these countries are our most important allies.

By the 1990’s people in Washington finally believed Chikes arguments about the need for more funding for Eastern Europe. According to Chikes, “it’s like turning a dirigible. It takes a long, long time.” Unfortunately, by the time people’s minds were changed, the region had become less of a priority for American foreign policy, since the Soviet Union had disintegrated. The United States was turning away from Eastern Europe as a focal point of our foreign policy, though some in the government felt that this was a big mistake. I spoke about this situation with a U.S. Government official who asked to remain anonymous. He started by emphasizing the significance of America’s defeat of the Soviet Union:

You could argue that Hungary is small, so who cares if we lose them. But if you look at the region as a whole, it’s a very important region. We fought a cold war over it for 35 years, and so now that it’s gone over to our side, we’re kind of frittering away a tremendous victory that we had after ’89. Nobody wants to put it like that because it sounds a little too triumphant and anti-Russian, but deep down, you know it’s true. Suddenly the whole balance of power shifted in Europe. A Europe that was divided, that ended at the Elbe, now stretches all the way to the Ukraine. That’s a huge advantage that we’ve gained.

This official then discussed the consequences of America’s turning away from the region:

If we don't keep up efforts in this area, we could lose this whole region again. I don't want to exaggerate and say they'll just go over to the Russian side. I can't imagine the Poles or the Hungarians, especially, doing that, but things could be Balkanized...or Finlandized... [with] Russian pressure, partly economic blackmail with gas and oil, forcing these countries to make tough choices. They will be thinking, 'Americans are distant and not interested anyway, so we better come to our own accommodations here, with the powers that really care about this area, like the Russians.' I'm not saying that's happening, but it is a potential and the way to avoid it is to be engaged in this region.

Recently Richard Haass, the former Director of Policy Planning for the State Department, gave a speech at the Fletcher school in which he noted that the United States has squandered a big opportunity in the twenty years since the Cold War ended, and that historians would not judge us kindly. At least in terms of public diplomacy, this seems to be the case.

## **Part II: Public Diplomacy in Hungary Today**

There are a variety of Public Diplomacy instruments being used in Hungary today. I will briefly go through the different positions within the Public Affairs section in Budapest and then explain the different instruments in use. The Public Affairs Officer, who is in charge of running the section, is Mr. Michael Hurley. I had the fortune to speak with Mr. Hurley on the phone and will elaborate on his remarks later. Underneath the Public Affairs umbrella are the Press Attaché, who runs the Press and Information office, and the Cultural Attaché, who runs the Cultural Affairs Office. There is normally a Regional English Language Officer as well, although this position is vacant at the moment; a replacement is slated to arrive in August. In addition, there are 15 Hungarians working in the Cultural Affairs Office as Foreign Service Nationals. It should also be noted that there are no U.S. consulates in Hungary, perhaps because of the country's small size, and that RFE and VOA no longer broadcast in Hungarian (RFE stopped its Hungarian service in 1993, and VOA in 2003, the latter the result of Broadcast Board of Governors reforms.)

### **Press and Information Office**

The Press and Information Office typically deals with the media on behalf of the ambassador and all sections of the embassy, as well as visitors to Hungary from the United States. According to the embassy's website, this office works "with members of the media to provide information on policies of the U.S. Administration, disseminate U.S. Government statements, and respond to queries from journalists regarding U.S. Government actions and positions."<sup>107</sup> The press attaché is responsible for monitoring

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<sup>107</sup> accessed at <http://hungary.usembassy.gov/press2.html>

local media, both print and electronic, and prepares a daily press briefing for the ambassador with the major news stories of the day. There is also a report sent to Washington, if necessary, of the major news events concerning the United States and the press reactions to them, though in relatively inward-focused Hungary, there is sometimes not much to do in the way of media reactions because the media doesn't react to news from America as much as the press does in other European countries.

### Cultural Affairs Office

The Cultural Affairs Office “focuses on academic and cultural exchanges, democracy and civil society projects, and American studies.<sup>108</sup>” There are many opportunities available for individuals interested in traveling to the United States. The Fulbright Program for “teachers, lecturers, researchers, and graduate students” is perhaps the most well known. A government official who I spoke with told me that the number of ‘Fulbrighters’ in the past three or four years has been around 25 per year from both the United States and Hungary. The Board of the Hungarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange, which decides on the Hungarian participants, consists of 10 people, appointed by the U.S. Embassy and the Hungarian Ministry of Education. “The governments of the U.S. and Hungary are represented by two members each; the others are university professors and representatives of the private sector.<sup>109</sup>”

Also well known is the International Visitor Leadership Program. An additional 25 Hungarian “future leaders” chosen by the embassy travel to the United States on this program each year; they typically stay for three or four weeks, meeting with their

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<sup>108</sup> accessed at <http://hungary.usembassy.gov/cultural.html>

<sup>109</sup> accessed at <http://www.fulbright.hu/boardtag.htm>

professional counterparts in such areas as media, politics, education, the environment, and economics, and they also normally get a chance to travel around the country. In addition, there are student-advising facilities in the Fulbright office, as well as a center for such tests as the GRE, the GMAT, and the TOEFL.

Another important entity in terms of exchanges is the Hungarian-American Enterprise Scholarship Fund, which seeks to “promote free enterprise and development in Hungary and to continue to strengthen ties between the United States and Hungary by creating opportunities for accomplished Hungarians and those of great promise to gain professional experience in the United States, thereby enhancing their contribution to Hungarian society.<sup>110</sup>” The origin of this fund traces back to 1989, when Congress enacted the “Support of Eastern European Democracy Act (SEED),” which sought to provide funds to the newly free countries in Eastern and Central Europe. The U.S. Agency for International Development oversaw the development of the Hungarian-American Enterprise Fund and similar such investment funds in neighboring countries. Some of the profits from the Enterprise Fund provide the resources for the Hungarian-American Enterprise Scholarship Fund, which pays for 20-30 annual one-year programs for Hungarian students and mid-level professionals to get Masters in economics, business management, or applied sciences at the graduate level in the United States. The fund also provides 6-12 month internships at leading American companies and organizations, and supports mid- and senior-level Hungarian professionals in “business, public

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<sup>110</sup> accessed at [http://www.haesf.org/about\\_haesf/index.html](http://www.haesf.org/about_haesf/index.html)

administration, non-profit organizations and academia enabling them to pursue individual independently organized projects in the United States<sup>111</sup>.”

The Cultural Affairs Office also works with the Soros Foundation in supporting a network of educational advising centers around the country, giving advice to Hungarian students who want to study in the United States. In addition, this office sends university professors and experts to “short-term programs such as U.S.-based winter and summer institutes on American Studies topics or conferences and meetings of U.S. scholarly associations.<sup>112</sup>”

The office also works with high schools to incorporate coursework “dealing with responsible citizenship in a democracy<sup>113</sup>,” and provides assistance to English teaching programs at universities in the form of teaching materials. Experts in academic and professional fields can also be provided for “workshops, training programs, or to act as consultants.<sup>114</sup>” An additional exchange opportunity worth mentioning, though it is not U.S. Government funded, is the Kellner Program, which sends seven Hungarian students per year to Bard College in New York or Trinity College in Connecticut, with all expenses paid.

Another section of the Cultural Affairs office, the Regional English Language Office (RELO) seeks to “ensure that there is an English-competent cadre of professionals and government officials who can participate directly in dialogues with their U.S. counterparts, participate in U.S. Government exchange programs, and work with U.S. companies and organizations that would like to do business with the host country. The

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<sup>111</sup> accessed at <http://www.haesf.org/index.html>

<sup>112</sup> accessed at <http://hungary.usembassy.gov/cultural.html>

<sup>113</sup> *ibid*

<sup>114</sup> *ibid*

RELO assists the English teaching community in the host country to develop the language competency of the professionals and the successor generation.<sup>115</sup> As I mentioned above, there is currently no Regional English Language Officer, although one is scheduled to arrive in August.

### Information Resource Center

There is also an “Information Resource Center” in the Budapest Embassy. According to the Embassy’s website, the Information Resource Center “assists both the general public and the Embassy’s official contacts. With our specialized knowledge of the United States, we can help you find a comprehensive answer to a U.S. related question or point you in the right direction for further information<sup>116</sup>.” The services offered by the center include:

- General information on the United States
- Accurate U.S. Government information (including statements, fact sheets, and transcripts),
- A comprehensive collection of news articles, which provides access to more than 10,000 sources
- Updates on legislation in the United States
- Newsletters in six subject areas
  - Economic
  - Defense, NATO and Response to Terrorism
  - Environment
  - Health
  - IT
  - U.S. Society and Values

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<sup>115</sup> accessed at <http://hungary.usembassy.gov/relo.html>

<sup>116</sup> accessed at <http://hungary.usembassy.gov/irc.html>

All of the newsletters are in English and run from around 20 to 50 pages. They contain mostly articles from U.S. think tanks and journals, as well as State Department publications.

### American Corners

The first American Corner was opened in Hungary in 2004, and there are currently four around the country. According to the Embassy website,

“American Corners” serve as regional resource centers for information and programs highlighting American culture, history, current events, and government. "American Corners" typically host discussion groups, seminars, digital video conferencing, poster exhibits, and meetings with U.S. and local specialists on a wide range of American-focused topics. They act as a regional repository for the use of American-themed books, videos, DVDs, and CD-ROMs and provide free Internet access and educational materials. Operated as partnerships, the U.S. provides equipment and materials while host institutions provide staffing and the free use of space.<sup>117</sup>

There are American Corners in Pecs, in the southwest; Veszprem, in the west; Debrecen, in the east; and Eger, in the northeast. The Corners were opened in the same order is listed, starting in 2004, with one opening each year through 2007. The partners for the different Corners include universities and local and county governments.

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<sup>117</sup> accessed at [http://hungary.usembassy.gov/american\\_corners2.html](http://hungary.usembassy.gov/american_corners2.html)

### Public Affairs Officer

According to Mr. Hurley, though there is a Mission Strategy Plan for public diplomacy efforts in Hungary, i.e. a document which attempts to tie resources to strategy,

quite a bit of the work that we do here in Hungary is necessarily unplanned. Since we have a fairly small budget, we don't invite big groups or performers over the way we used to. But they show up on our doorstep here. We had the New York Philharmonic come in, the Pittsburgh Symphony recently...these are not projects that are funded by the embassy, but we work with them to bring some publicity to them and also perhaps do a reception, so we get them together people they might not meet...a big part of what we do is facilitating those kinds of meetings.<sup>118</sup>

Mr. Hurley, when asked to identify the target audience for public diplomacy efforts in Hungary said "that's always a difficult question...but primarily, opinion-makers, people of influence we have contact with....our primary audience is not the masses of people who really don't care about foreign affairs, but rather those people that do." Such elites would include people working in think tanks, those involved in media, authors, and intellectuals. Though this is not to say that no effort is made to reach out to the average Hungarian. Recently, the Harlem Globetrotters were in Hungary. Mr. Hurley gave a speech to a crowd of 10,000 people at halftime, and presented a "Sports Diplomacy Award" to each of the players, while explaining to the audience how much they had contributed to American culture as African-Americans.

I asked Mr. Hurley to tell me why America's relationship with Hungary is important in today's world, and he offered the following:

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<sup>118</sup> this and subsequent quotes are taken from a phone interview with Mr. Hurley on 3/17/08.

It's important that we do public diplomacy because it helps us lay the context for having a dialogue. We speak to them directly through the media by telling and explaining what our policies are, but I've just spent the last three weeks going around the country talking about the U.S. election system because it's of interest and it's an exciting election. It's not that we're telling them 'this is how things should be done,' but rather 'this is how **we** do them...we also do cultural things which help people understand that we're not ten feet tall and we're not just about war in Iraq.'

According to Mr. Hurley, "The '56 thing comes up once in a while. Most people are conscious of it...They like to remind us of it. We like to remind them that we didn't have World War III either...[But] they don't rub our noses in it anymore, it's not a huge issue. Anti-Americanism is not huge here either."

Mr. Hurley also spoke about Russia's recent decision to back Southstream, Russia's planned pipeline across southeast Europe, which could 'threaten the prospects of Nabucco, a rival pipeline supported by the US and the European Union<sup>119</sup>.' According to Mr. Hurley, Russia "is a concern... He who holds the energy tap has the ability to influence policy. We encourage Hungarians to think about energy diversity, we encourage them to think about the Nabucco pipeline...rather than Southstream. But we have limited influence in a situation like this. It's a European issue."

One interesting effort that Mr. Hurley mentioned was a cooperative arrangement with Hungarian television crews, which travel to the United States and work with an American producer on a program exploring some aspect of American society. Themes such as racial tolerance, voluntarism, philanthropy, or women's empowerment are typically chosen, at the suggestion of the U.S. Embassy. These programs are valuable because "it's looking at the United States through the eyes of Hungarians...that gives it

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<sup>119</sup> "Hungary backs Russian pipeline," FT.com, 2/26/08, accessed at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7dc1daa6-e3f5-11dc-8799-0000779fd2ac.html>

greater credibility, because it's Hungarians talking to Hungarians, and there's less of a fear that it might be propaganda because it's an official source... They're free to say what they want, but most often these things turn out very well and they give very positive views."

When asked to identify the most important instrument of public diplomacy in Hungary, Mr. Hurley responded that public outreach is his most effective tool. Ambassador April Foley has visited more than 30 cities in Hungary. There are lots of presentations at high schools to encourage students to go to college in the United States, for example, and meetings with newspaper writers, where U.S.-Hungary relations are discussed, as well as frequent meetings with U.S. companies in Hungary. There are also links with the American Chamber of Commerce in Hungary. Most of these connections are through the Foreign Commercial Service, though Public Affairs has worked with AmCham in developing an audience for Karen Hughes to talk about Corporate Social Responsibility. Asked to sum up his job, Hurley emphasized the variable nature of his work:

It's a very interesting office... We work across the board... with all elements of the embassy... it's not just about media... we also are very much interested in the political situation, and we had a recent visitor, Colleen Graffy [Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy], and she had a very interesting meeting that the political section set up at my house which consisted primarily of young political party activists, and it's tough to get them together, because politics is kind of a rough game here. [It's hard to] get members of four or five political parties together in one room. It's quite instructive that they were **younger** party activists, rather than the more professional seniors, and they had quite a good discussion... so like I say, we work across the spectrum.

Another U.S. official with whom I spoke told me that in the past couple of years, the big events in the diplomatic relationship between Hungary and the United States have

been the handover of the Tancsics Prison complex to the Hungarians and the recent progress on the visa waiver status of Hungarian citizens who want to visit the United States.

The Tancsics prison can be thought of as Hungary's version of the Bastille. It is named after Mihaly Tancsics, "a luminary of the 1848 revolution...who was accused of sedition and held captive by the Hapsburgs, but set free when partisans stormed the place.<sup>120</sup>" The building was given to the United States after the Second World War, and since then it has been used for ceremonies and as a barracks for marines who guard the Embassy, but the Hungarian government and people wanted it back. During George W. Bush's visit marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 Revolution, Hungarian President Ferenc Gyurcsany took the opportunity to say the following: "Within a couple of months," the prime minister announced, the Tancsics prison will finally return to Hungarian ownership. "Let me tell you quite frankly," he added, "that the president showed much more understanding for the importance and the meaning of this issue. And just within this circle I can say that he promised, and if he did that, it will happen."<sup>121</sup> Some thought that Gyurcsany had been using "all his diplomatic skills to corner Mr. Bush during their brief appearance before the Hungarian and American news media,<sup>122</sup>" and that prior to his statement no promise had in fact been made. However it came about, terms were reached, and the United States will receive two buildings next to the U.S. Embassy. This will allow operations to be consolidated (currently the Public Affairs

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<sup>120</sup> "In Europe, Bush Hears a Tale of 2 Prisons," *The New York Times*, 6/25/06

<sup>121</sup> *ibid*

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*

section, the Foreign Commercial Service, one of the military attachés, and USAID all have their offices outside of the embassy proper).

The possibility of Hungary joining the Visa Waiver Program has been a recent effort of the Public Affairs section. According to one official with whom I spoke, the issue of Visas is often a “bilateral irritant,” so improving the situation has been the focus of a lot of recent effort. On March 18, 2008, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by both countries on this issue. In the last few months, there have been “numerous contacts with media, press round tables, interviews with the ambassador... And at least some of the myths have been cleared up about supposedly horrible things happening to you at the visa interview, about everyone getting turned down. Now expectations are on track with the visa waiver program (i.e. what the steps are). So if you put up enough of an effort in order to educate people, eventually you can see some improvement. Not overnight, but piecemeal, bit by bit.”

According to Mr. Hurley, “by and large, politics in Hungary is very intensely local and to the extent that people pay attention to foreign affairs at all, or what the United States is up to, is not quite the same as in Germany or France or other countries.” The main opposition party (the conservative Fidesz) and the party in power (the Hungarian Socialists) don’t have much to say to each other, though they agree more on foreign policy than on domestic issues. According to Hurley, “Hungarians are a lot like Americans. They’re much more concerned with pocketbook issues than they are with foreign affairs.” Another U.S. official with whom I spoke offered an insightful commentary on these unique features of Hungarian public opinion:

Hungarians don't have a great deal of interest for outside matters and politics. They're very inward focused, very concerned about domestic struggles...more so than others...they really don't focus on much outside their own borders, unless it's concerned with transborder Hungarians... This is unusual for a small country. Typical in Kansas.... But here, with neighbors literally an hour away by car, it's amazing how disinterested they are in foreign affairs.

This official then turned to implications for the United States-Hungarian relationship:

But to some extent it works to our advantage. They don't follow the ups and downs of what we're doing. There is still a lot of residual good will for the U.S., still a lot of traditional dismissal of the Russians. So I don't think there is a sort of Russophilic tradition as in the Czech Republic, where there was a strong pan-Slavic feeling about the Russians. I have never met anyone here who really admires Russia.... There is a general acknowledgment that 'hey, Russia is big, Russia provides us with 80% of our gas so we're going to have to live with them, we need them"...But it's not because they especially like Russia. They just recognize that their gas will be coming from Russia for the foreseeable future...They feel like they're part of the transatlantic western tradition and the Russian "iron rule" that Putin has reinstated is too foreign to them.

It seems from these statements that there is a unique and genuine potential for cultivating public opinion in Hungary, to an extent not being realized today.

### **Challenges to doing PD in Hungary**

#### The Language

A U.S. official I spoke with told me that one of the biggest challenges facing U.S. Public Diplomacy efforts in Hungary is the language, which is known as one of the most difficult in Europe and has few linguistic relatives:

The language is a nightmare. Very few people at the Embassy really speak it. There are maybe two officers that have decent enough Hungarian to be able to chitchat in it. We don't really have any officer that would have good enough Hungarian to interpret or translate. [This is] pathetic but understandable. The language really is very tough. And it's a medium-sized post with no other posts using the language, so there's very little use for someone who has the language, because they can't be recycled to other assignments in other posts where they can use it. If you have German, Russian, or Arabic you can go to other places. Even

with Japanese, which can only be used in one country, you can go to a bunch of consulates. So most languages have lots of different postings, or even different countries. Hungarian doesn't go anywhere; it's kind of useless in the sense that it's got no relatives; it doesn't help you get into another language.

This official went on to discuss the upshot of lacking true fluency:

It cuts us off somewhat. None of us can really thoroughly read the paper. I can kind of skim it and gist it, and when I see something that I think we should get a better read on, FSN's can translate it. But then you're getting a lot of stuff second-hand, not really direct. I can't pick up an editorial and get a real flavor for the tone, or know how seriously I should take a comment on President Bush. That's very hard to pick up. Yeah, it's an editorial on missile defense and it's critical of the US, but there's not much more can I say about it.

A related problem is one of cultural friction, which might be expected to arise given the linguistic and historical differences between the United States and Hungary.

Yet despite these barrier, rarely do officers get into situations with journalists in which there are fundamentally different way of looking at things, according to this official:

“With Hungarians, it doesn't come up that much. The need for a transatlantic relationship, for NATO, for close cooperation, all those things are pretty much given. No one's challenging that. The difference is in the details: Gauntanamo, torturing people, capital punishment. Those are not fundamental bilateral issues.”

But while there is fundamental agreement regarding these basic issues, Hungary may not see its relationship with the United States in the same way that it used to. Tamas Landes, a Hungarian student at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, told me that this relationship is no longer as significant to Hungarians as in the past. In the 1990's it was exceedingly important for Hungary to develop good relations with Washington because the country was focused on joining NATO (which it did in 1999). But now the priority has shifted to Hungary's relationship with the European Union, and the United States perhaps no longer has the influence it once did.

### Lack of Funding

Another problem, which I alluded to earlier, has been the reallocation of funding and personnel from Europe to other parts of the world, particularly the Middle East. The official I spoke with characterized this as “very foolish” and “overreacting”:

Why do we need a thousand people in Baghdad? What could they possibly accomplish there? We’re starting to take countries like Hungary that are still basically pro-American for granted and hope that they just stay that way. Well, they won’t stay that way unless you cultivate them a little bit. Simply barraging them with policy messages is not enough. It’s not going to make people change their minds. That requires people on the ground and the fostering of relationships...Fulbrights, for example. A life altering experience. It can create someone who understands the U.S. and sees things our way, who has a lifetime connection with the U.S. But that stuff costs money. Cut it and ship it to Iraq, where it’s probably not doing too much good anyway, because the conditions aren’t right for that sort of programming, and you really do lose out. [It’s] the biggest drawback here. Funding is really tight. By a certain point in the fiscal year, you realize you can’t really do much else. No more programs, no more speakers, no more IVs, everything has been used up.

This official then went on to discuss the ramifications of the United States’ policy of cutting down on the amount of resources going to posts in Europe:

Once you start taking entire regions for granted, as we are doing in Eastern Europe, you’ll start losing them. The new generation will not remember our support for dissidents in the 70’s or 80’s or VOA broadcasts or the Marshall Plan or food relief after World War Two. That generation is retired or dead. The younger generation will know various unprovoked wars, rendition flights, torture...negative things, without any real tangible positive stuff from the U.S. We used to have a huge diplomacy effort in the Soviet bloc when we could get away with it, and that had a huge impact, creating a whole generation that grew up liking U.S. Jazz and other American art forms and so forth. All that is disappearing because we can’t provide that, so all they’re getting is trashy movies from Hollywood

### The Bureaucracy

And finally, the bureaucracy of the State Department can create obstacles, as mentioned earlier in my discussion of Mr. Chikes' work during the 1980's. The U.S. official I spoke with told me that the bureaucracy of the U.S. Government can be an impediment:

Obviously if it was a much smaller operation, there'd be a faster response to things and we'd gain some speed and flexibility, but on the other hand, there is something to be said for checks and balances. Nobody should be a rogue element out there on their own mission doing whatever they want. It's a bit slow and cumbersome, and when a journalist says "can you get me the policy in two hours so I can meet the deadline?" it's probably not going to happen unless something is already out there that's been cleared and is ready to go that I can just email him.

This official then went on to suggest that the bureaucracy not only hinders the *speed* of operations; it can also hurt the State Department's actual *output*:

Sometimes there are suggested Op-Eds from Washington that have either been so worked over by the committee process that by the end it's kind of a bland mish-mash that's too dull to read even in English, or it's a good message, but it's too late already. This was my pet peeve for years: every year we went through the process of asking for a nice op-ed from the Secretary that we could place in newspapers on the anniversary of 9/11. 9/11 would come around, and [the papers] needed it by 9/11 because by 9/13 they don't want to print it anymore. Sure enough, the approved statement would arrive around 9/13.

Clearly, the bureaucracy at times inhibits the effectiveness of public diplomacy operations, and efforts to streamline could be helpful in this regard.

### **Public Opinion in Hungary Today**

According to a series of polls commissioned by the State Department's Office of Research, and carried out by the research firm Tarki in Budapest, the current public opinion towards the United States is somewhat mixed.

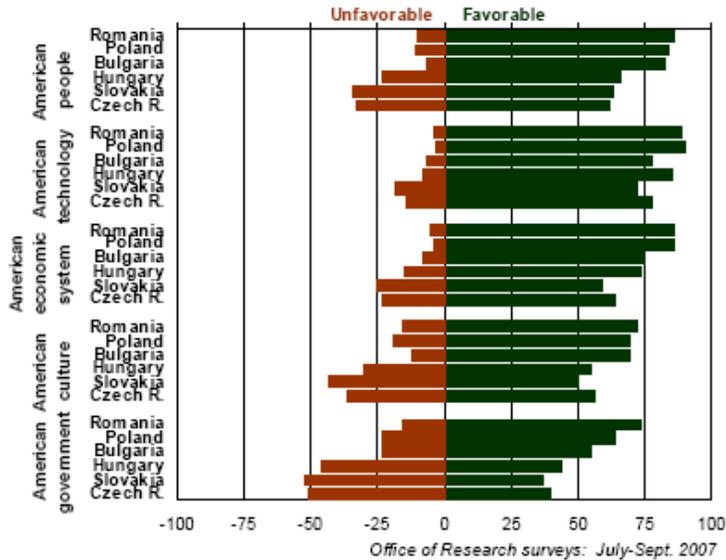
#### **Graph 1**

Take graph 1, for example, which disaggregates opinions of the United States in 2007. It is "based on data from face-to-face interviews conducted July 18-29, 2007 with a nationally representative sample of 1,033 adults age 18 and older in Hungary<sup>123</sup>." On the one hand, America's people, technology, economic system and culture are all viewed very positively by Hungarians. However, more people in Hungary view the United States government unfavorably than favorably.

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<sup>123</sup> The number of subjects was slightly different in each country: 1,025 in the Czech Republic, 1,000 in Poland, 1,016 in Slovakia, 1,000 in Bulgaria, and 1,050 in Romania. Also, the company actually carrying out the interviews varied in each country. The survey questions were prepared by the Office of Research.

Central and East Europeans Favorable toward Aspects of American Life  
*In general, what is your opinion of the American people? Do you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of American people?*  
 And how about... (%)



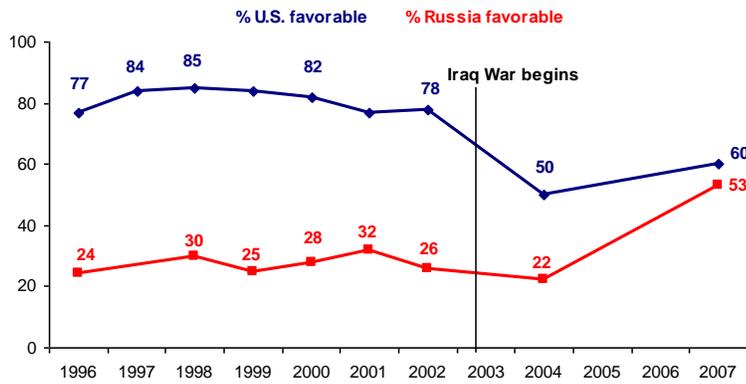
Graph 2

In this next graph, we can examine how the (aggregated) favorability of the United States has fared over the last decade. Until around 2002, this was quite high and relatively stable. However, in the run-up to the Iraq war and the subsequent invasion, favorability dropped almost 30 percentage points. Taken in conjunction with the previous graph, it seems likely that most of this stems from criticism of the U.S. Government policies rather than a dislike of American culture or people in general.

Favorability has shown some improvements since then however, and the most recent data shows the United States enjoying 60% favorability in Hungary. One disheartening note is the extent to which Russia's favorability has increased. In the period before 2004, this was mostly in the 20-30% range. But since '04 it has climbed steadily. Now 50% of Hungarians respond with favorable opinions of Russia. Perhaps this is related to a recognition that the future of Hungary to a large extent is tied to Russia's

energy supply, and perhaps also to a perception that the United States no longer enjoys the preeminence it once did.

**Figure 1. Favorable Opinion of the U.S., Russia among Hungarians Improves**  
 Q: Do you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of the United States/Russia?



Graph

3

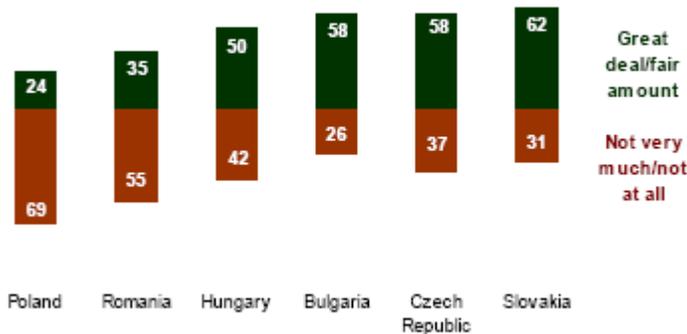
Source: Office of Research surveys, 1996-2007

The

next three graphs

deals specifically with the issue of Russia. Fifty percent of Hungarians feel that Russia is a reliable energy partner. This corresponds almost exactly with the 53% in the previous graph who have positive opinions of Russia.

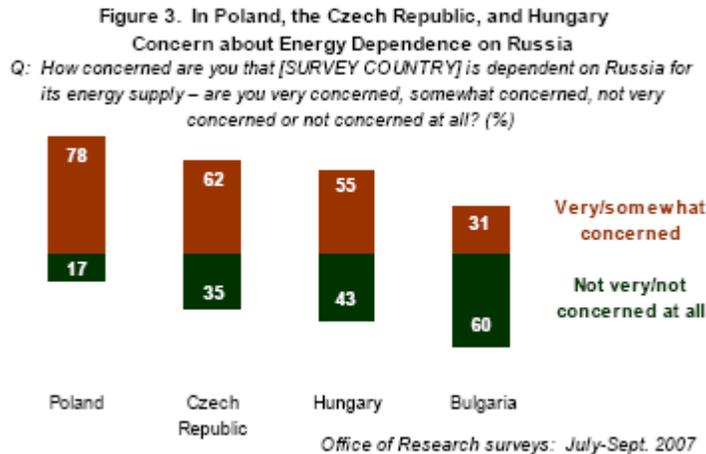
**Figure 4. Views Mixed on Russia as Reliable Energy Partner**  
 Q: Now I would like to ask you about the role of Russia in the world. Using this card, please tell me to what extent you think Russia...is a reliable energy partner to [SURVEY COUNTRY]: a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or not at all? (%)



Office of Research surveys: July-Sept. 2007

Graph 4

However, as evidenced by this graph, there does seem to be some real ambivalence about Hungary's dependence on Russian energy supplies. Fifty-five percent of Hungarians are concerned about this issue.

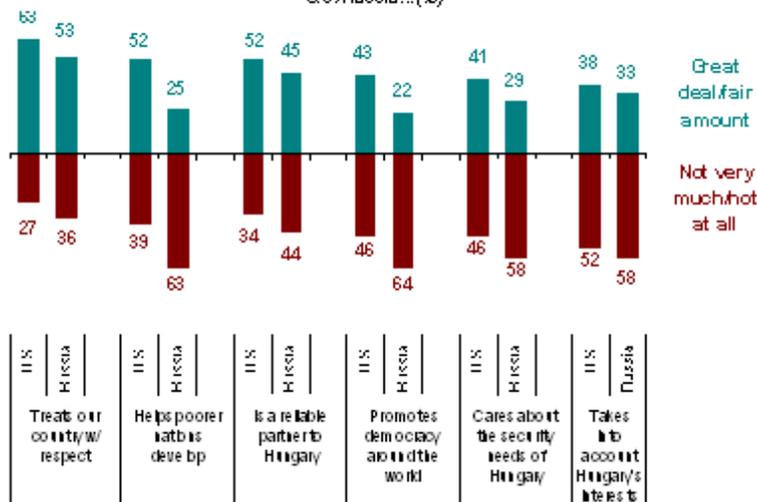


### Graph 5

As evidenced by this final diagram, America still enjoys a significant advantage over Russia in terms of public opinion in Hungary. In this graph, for each subtopic, the percentage pertaining to the U.S. is on the left and the percentage pertaining to Russia is on the right. The United States enjoys significant advantages in terms of helping poor nations to develop and promoting democracy. Our advantage is smaller but still significant with regard to the security needs of Hungary. And our leads with regard to treating Hungary with respect, being a reliable partner, and taking into account Hungary's interests are quite small and perhaps reason for concern. There seems to be a real need for public diplomacy work in Hungary so that the United States can continue to enjoy its advantage over Russia.

**Figure 2. Hungarians More Positive toward U.S. than Russia Role in World**

Q: Now I would like to ask you about the role of the U.S./Russia in the world. Using this card, please tell me to what extent you think the U.S./Russia treats our country with respect: a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or not at all? And to what extent do you think the U.S./Russia... (%)



Source: Office of Research survey, July 2007

## Recommendations

The public diplomacy operations which currently exist in Hungary are working well.

However, in my view there are some clear areas for improvement, in descending order of importance.

### 1) Increase funding for operations

It is essential that the United States proactively engage the people of Hungary.

Obviously, resources are necessary to make this happen. With more funding, increased exchanges and programming will be possible.

### 2) Resume VOA broadcasting in Hungarian

The decision by the Broadcast Board of Governors was misguided and needs to be corrected. Cultivating positive views of America on the part of Hungarians is

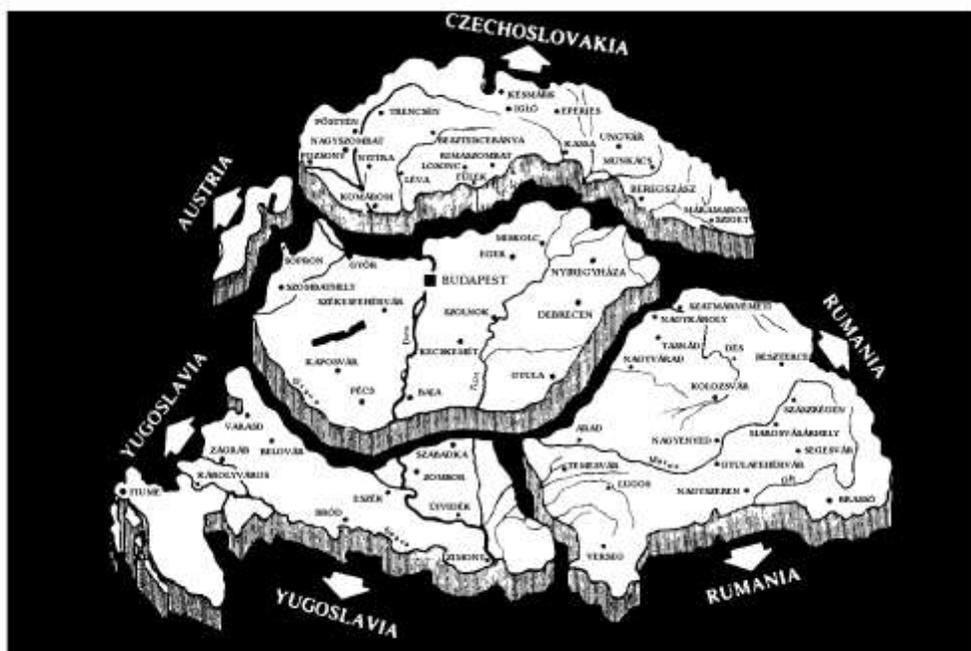
important, and resuming VOA broadcasting in Hungarian would be an important and necessary step towards this goal.

3) Improve language training of Foreign Service Officers

In order to function effectively in country, it is essential to be able to speak and read the language fluently. To this end, there should be a concerted effort towards improving the level of Hungarian among Foreign Service Officers. Perhaps a re-evaluation of the 'clientitis' rules is in order, as well, since such regulations inhibit those who have spent years in a country from actually being able to use their experience and language skills.

4) Streamline the bureaucracy to the extent possible, to give officers on the ground more leeway to use their local expertise.

**Map 1: Hungary after the Treaty of Trianon**



**The Dismemberment of the Kingdom of Hungary in Trianon, 1921**

**Map 2: Present Day Hungary**

