

# HUNGARIAN FRIENDS, STICK WITH US!

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Despite the challenges it faces, the U.S. is still the

best option to help maintain the age-old balance of national identity and power.

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As Hungary commemorates the 1956 uprising that made an indelible impact on the world, I offer a confession I never thought I would make: I am guilty of *privilege*. In the vogue parlance of our decade, this usually relates to some form of identity. But I'm not talking about that. No, my privilege is geopolitical. I haven't had to worry much about alliances or national preservation. The United States is a large nation sandwiched by oceans; it can—and sometimes does—work unilaterally. I was relatively blind to this difference between our countries before I came to Hungary.

A nation of just 10 million people, speaking a unique language, surrounded by ethnic Slavs and Germans, and buffeted by great powers, Hungary has grown used to carving out a place in the world. The difficult balance of national preservation and 'great power' competition is foremost in the minds of Hungarian decision-makers. Even Poland, battered similarly by history and surrounded by often-hostile powers, is large enough to throw its weight around on the European, if not the global, stage. Hungary, at just over a quarter of Poland's size, must always have allies if it wants to thrive.

Sadly, the United States is not acting like Hungary's best 'great power' ally right now. As a candidate, Joe Biden lumped Hungary together with "totalitarian regimes" and "thugs of the world," ostensibly in the same category as Belarus. His new administration has not even bothered to send an ambassador to Budapest. Meanwhile, leading U.S. publications and media pundits are keen to attack the Central European country.

Additionally, the United States is not at its best right now. The forementioned president is

often absent—and when he isn't, he seems incapable of remembering world leaders' names. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was an international embarrassment, especially among NATO allies (of which Hungary is one). Instead of focusing on more urgent matters, our societal elites rant about "preferred pronouns" and "menstruating people." And who knows if our southern border can be considered a border at all?

Despite all this, Hungarian friends, I implore you—stick with us.

The United States has demonstrated its resiliency throughout its history. In the last century alone, the Great Depression, the Vietnam War, and the 'malaise' of the late 1970s failed to spell the end of American greatness. Internet- and space-age innovations have proliferated in recent decades, and America has led the charge.

While it is true that the fierce, ongoing debate over vaccinations is tremendously complex, the widespread hesitancy over relatively untested, government-sanctioned jabs showcases a self-reliant individualism that in previous decades spurred the nation to the heights of global power. This simply doesn't exist in the same way in other leading world powers.

To be sure, there are other growing world powers vying to be an ally of Hungary. Regimes will change, and global economies will grow and contract; but the United States promises to remain a force—and, in general, a force for good—in the coming generations.

That last part—being "a force for good"—cannot be said of China, which exemplifies most of the great evils associated with the previous century: concentration camps, religious discrimination, colonialism, state surveillance, state-sponsored violations of intellectual property rights, and the general absence of human rights. Irrespective of the origins of COVID-19, the Chinese government shackled the world with a pandemic that might have been contained if not for China's lies and deceit. China offers wealth and power, but it certainly does not offer a place on the right side of history. Hungary, punished tremendously by victorious powers after both world wars, understands this concept acutely.

Historical experience also informs Hungary's approach to Russia. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956, when Soviet tanks crushed the national uprising, is arguably the most significant moment in 20th-century Hungarian history.

A historic photograph during the 1956 uprising taken by Gabor Racz, a young medical student who fled persecution in Budapest at the hands of the Soviets.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF ATSE, LICENSED UNDER CCA-SA 4.0 INTERNATIONAL.

The uniforms and government rhetoric have changed, and Russian citizens enjoy more freedoms than they did in Soviet times, but Russia is still no friend of Central Europe. Crimea, the Donbas, and Georgia all offer prime examples of Russian irredentism in our young century. The poisoning of Alexei Navalny and the use of chemical weapons in another poisoning in the UK show how an actual thug regime behaves. This oligarchic petro-state hasn't the power or the resources of either China or the United States, which otherwise might lead one to overlook these deficiencies. But Central Europeans understand well that a healthy distance is sensible, as it has been through much of European history.

If we consider the European Union as just the latest in a series of hegemonic European empires, Hungary should always be naturally skeptical of the power-grabs of Brussels. The EU will increasingly exert a more implicit kind of power, one characterized by carrot, not stick; checkbook, not tank. Recent years have seen the Union employ bureaucratic pressure to prevent Hungary from managing its own demographics, the education of children, and crisis-response provisions. "Get in line, or the money will dry up," says Brussels. If the wrong ally—usually Poland—disappears at the wrong time, Hungary could be nearly powerless in the face of the EU. It is a complex geopolitical game for a nation intent on preserving an especially unique identity.

Another painting by István Görgényi, depicting some of the heroic Hungarians who dared to resist Soviet oppression.

PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN.

So I stand before the Hungarian people, with my privilege and all, and humbly ask them not to give up on the United States. We're not perfect and never have been. We won't meet all of Hungary's national needs. But, among its potential 'great power' allies, we're still the best option to help maintain that age-old balance of national identity and power. *Egészségedre* and *cheers* to celebrations of a laudable national holiday—and to a long, healthy U.S.-Hungary alliance!