



The American Hungarian Federation

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February 16, 2012

The Honorable Dan Burton, Chairman
Subcommittee on Europe and Eurasia
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
The Honorable Gregory W. Meeks, Ranking Member
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Upcoming Trip to Central Europe

Dear Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Meeks:

The American Hungarian Federation (“AHF”), founded in 1906 as an umbrella organization, represents a broad cross-section of the Hungarian American community. From its founding, it has supported constitutional democracy, human and minority rights, and the rule of law in Central and Eastern Europe. AHF also supports good American/Hungarian relations and U.S. engagement in the region to advance security through promotion of democracy. AHF has submitted testimony before your Committee on these issues. Your upcoming trip to Hungary and Slovakia presents a timely opportunity to advance these goals and U.S. interests in this region. We are respectfully submitting two memoranda relating to current issues involving both countries for consideration by your delegation.

Hungary. Although Hungary is a democracy, a member of NATO and an important U.S. ally, it recently has been harshly and often unfairly criticized by some in the United States and international community. AHF writes not because it believes that no steps could be taken to strengthen democracy or that no mistakes have been made. Rather it believes that much of the criticism is either politically motivated (inspired by the opposition) or not evenhanded or based on facts but on generalizations and speculation, *i.e.*, what might happen as a result of the new laws as opposed to what has happened.

The perception of unfairness can be illustrated by Hungary’s recently enacted law on religions which has been criticized for being too restrictive. The Constitutional Court annulled parts of that law in December. And it appears that additional religions will also be recognized imminently. While further amendments may be in order, it is noteworthy that the latest State Department Report on Religious Freedom refers to similar restrictions in other European countries. The Report, for instance, notes that Austria only has 14 officially recognized religious societies. No one is averring, however, that democracy has been put at risk there or in other European countries.

While democracy and democratic institution building should be encouraged and discussed, they should be done based on facts, and in a fair, unbiased and even-handed manner bereft of partisanship and undertaken solely to promote Western values and in a manner that advances U.S. interests by strengthening relations with a valuable American ally.

Slovakia. An indispensable element of sustainable security in the region involves the respect for minority rights. Several of Slovakia’s laws, policies and practices discriminate against members of the Hungarian minority. These include: (1) a punitive citizenship law that deprives ethnic Hungarians of their Slovak citizenship if they become dual citizens; (2) refusal to exonerate Janos Esterhazy who was the only member of Slovakia’s parliament to vote against the deportation of Jews in 1942. He died in a communist Czechoslovak prison in 1957. On November 3, 2011, the Anti-Defamation League presented the Jan Karski Courage to Care Award posthumously to Esterhazy for saving persecuted Jews; (3) an oppressive language law that discriminates against Hungarians; and (4) the continuing effects of the Benes Decrees originally issued in 1945 that stripped ethnic Hungarians of their citizenship, virtually all of their rights – all on the unjustified basis of collective guilt.

A tolerant society that respects the human and minority rights of its minorities would promote genuine democracy, defuse tensions caused by discrimination and intolerance, and advance U.S. interests in a Europe that is whole, free, stable and secure.

Sincerely,

Frank Koszorus, Jr.,
President