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## Pompeo, activists meet in Hungary

by [Carol Morello](#)

BUDAPEST — Secretary of State Mike Pompeo began his re-engagement trip to central Europe by meeting with civil activists who have run afoul of the government and by taking a subtle swipe at the Obama administration.

Pompeo is the first U.S. secretary of state to visit Hungary in more than seven years, a point he and Hungarian officials raised repeatedly in public remarks. The Obama administration shunned Hungary in a reproach of the authoritarian leanings of populist right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

“When America’s absent, that won’t be in America’s best interest,” Pompeo said in a news conference with his Hungarian counterpart, Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto. “So we’ve taken a fundamentally different approach in the Trump administration. We’ve now had 14 senior-level U.S. visits to central Europe in just the first two years of this administration. I won’t tell you how many there were in the previous administration, but it starts with a Z.”

[Pompeo kicked off his time in Hungary](#), the first stop on a five-nation European trip, with a visit to a statue of President Ronald Reagan, erected in 2011.

“It’s very special, standing here and in front of this monument, near our embassy,” Pompeo said. “It’s a sign of the relationship we have and want to have and will have. We care deeply about this part of the world, too, and its freedom.”

Then Pompeo strolled into the U.S. Embassy, where he was photographed talking with three civil rights activists in a public display of support. Their meeting was in a room at the embassy where Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty, a Catholic leader who was vocal in the anti-communist movement after World War II, lived for 15 years after seeking refuge from Soviet troops who entered Hungary in 1956 to quash an anti-communist rebellion.



*Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited a statue of President Ronald Reagan in Budapest on Feb. 11, 2019. (Attila Kisbenedek/AFP/Getty Images)*

Two of the activists have been targeted during a crackdown by Orban, and a third was active in exposing cronyism within the Hungarian government.

In a statement afterward, the activists said they had discussed the rule of law in Hungary, attempts to stifle freedom of the press and government smear campaigns against them.

Pompeo said the United States is increasing people-to-people ties with Hungary, including exchange programs for high school students and programs for independent media outlets that have been a particular target of the Orban government.

In an impromptu news conference with reporters at the embassy, Pompeo said he would express U.S. concerns over human rights and democratic ideals when he talked privately with Hungarians.

“You can do it all,” he said. “You can walk and chew gum at the same time. We’ve never been bashful about that. We have NATO partners that we wish were doing better on these issues. We talk about it openly with them.”

And he said his mission had not been undercut by the administration’s reluctance so far to point blame at Saudi Arabia’s crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, who the U.S. [intelligence community](#) says ordered the killing of [journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#).

Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) said last week that the administration was “aiding in the coverup of a murder,” but Pompeo sharply rejected the accusation.

“Senator Kaine is just dead wrong,” he said. “America is not covering up for a murder.”

Pompeo said a U.S. investigation into Khashoggi’s killing will continue.

“We are working diligently on that,” he added. “The president has been very clear — couldn’t be more clear — as we get additional information, we will continue to hold all of those responsible accountable.”

In seeking to get the United States more engaged in “positive competition” in central Europe amid an onslaught of projects proposed by rivals China and Russia, Pompeo did not hesitate to go on the offensive.

He said he was sharing Washington’s concerns about the political and military ties of Huawei, a Chinese telecommunications company that has a huge advertising banner draped on a building across from his hotel. Pompeo said the firm’s expanding presence in central Europe could jeopardize U.S. cooperation and investment in the region.

“That is, if that equipment is co-located where we have important American systems, it makes it more difficult for us to partner alongside them,” he said. We want to make sure we identify [to] them the opportunities and the risks with using that equipment.”

Pompeo heads to Bratislava, Slovakia, on Tuesday, where he is expected to repeat many of the same themes.