# **Brunch Event**

# **on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the „2004 EU enlargement” speech by Zsolt Németh**

# (8 May 2024, Embassy of Poland, Budapest)

I am delighted that we are able to discuss the 20th anniversary of our accession to the EU here at the Embassy of Poland.

***1. Joint Hungarian-Polish(-Lithuanian) anniversaries***

We can also consider it symbolic that the EU accession is not the only joint anniversary we have with Poland this year.

It is 25 years since Pope John Paul II canonised King Kinga, daughter of King Béla IV of Hungary, who, as Queen of Poland, played a leading role in the reconstruction and modernisation of Poland - we would say today in making it competitive, for example by opening salt mines - after the Tatar invasion. For example, she opened the famous Wieliczka salt mine near Krakow.

But it is not only her canonisation that we are commemorating this year, it was also **the 800th anniversary of her birth** in March this year.

In addition, in February we commemorated the 650th anniversary of **the birth of another of our common female saints, St Hedwig**. (Jadwiga Jagiellonka) She was the daughter of our King Louis the Great of Anjou (Ludwik Węgierski), who shared the throne with the Poles, and inherited the Polish throne from her father to become Queen of Poland.

And because she married the Prince of Lithuania, Jagelló Ulászló, Władysław Jagiełło, as Queen of Poland, she is a saint not only of the Poles but also of the Lithuanians.

But we can regard her as a saint not only of the three nations, but also of the whole of Europe, and not just because of his French-Italian (Anjou) origin, but also because Hedvig and her marriage to a Jagielló had a pan-European, strategic importance in two ways.

* On the one hand, with their marriage, they converted the hitherto pagan Lithuania to Christianity *in a peaceful way* – which was already a target for violent converts. (Pro domo: The Teutonic Knights had previously been expelled from Hungary due to their violence.) So, in contrast to the strategy of a "violent Christian Europe", Hedvig and Jagielló implemented the concept of a "peaceful Christian Europe" – **the concept of a Europe that peacefully represents and patiently spreads its own values**.
* On the other hand, their marriage created one of the strongest and most functional state formations of their time at the eastern ends of Europe. They knew that **Europe could only be protected from the east if it had strong, sovereign states on its eastern borders, successfully cooperating with each other**. This is still an important lesson today.

But beyond these political aspects, Kinga and Hedvig were two very exemplary figures in terms of modern human rights. Both of them became the object of religious worship as active women with very strong personalities shortly after their deaths, many hundreds of years ago. So, based on the **history of their cult, we can say that human rights – or at least women's equality – is not a modern invention in our region**.

We stand on firm common historical basis! Especially us, here, in the – as it is now called – Three Seas region (which, by the way, is almost identical in territorial terms to the empire of Hedwig's father, Louis the Great), but **we share these spiritual foundations with the whole of Europe**.

1. ***The balance sheet of the last 20 years***

20 years ago, we were given a historic opportunity to build on this common foundation something that is good for the nations living here, good for Central Europe, good for Europe and good for the world.

When we assess the last 20 years, we must ask: how well have we seized this opportunity? How successful has the joint construction been?

***2.1. Europe's charm – How attractive are we?***

One of the most relevant measures is how we are perceived by those who look at us from the outside. De they want to belong to us? Do they want to be associated with us? Do they want to join us?

Measured against this, we have to see that a multitude of **candidate states in the Balkans and the EU's eastern neighbourhood are waiting to finally join us**. All of them have had to make a serious struggle for candidate status in themselves.

**In Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of people sacrifice their lives to belong here.** They see belonging to us as a guarantee of national independence and of remaining an independent nation. And let no one be misled by the fact that they are now looking for soldiers by force. This only shows the tragedy of the situation: that the number of people who voluntarily agreed to sacrifice their lives to belong to us is decreasing. This is a very important lesson for Europe: **the entire enlargement process must be considered while thinking about the victims**.

Here, I would like to note that – contrary to the popular belief, perhaps resulting from not always successful communication – **Hungary supports Ukraine's EU membership**. In fact, we are one of the oldest supporters. This is why, during our previous EU presidency, we did everything we could – hand in hand with Poland – to establish the Eastern Partnership. **What we do not support is lifting the accession criteria.** This would not only be bad for us and for the EU, but would also force the Ukrainians into a kind of second-class European status.

We are in favour of the accession of all candidate members – but in favour of their successful accession in both the short and long term!

Outsiders know us: they know that those of us inside the EU – both those who joined in 2004 and those who joined before – have our own set of headaches. Taking this into account, they still want to get in. Because even with all internal contradictions, it is better inside than outside.

Overall, as far as **the EU’s charm is concerned, we can say that it has not decreased at least in the last 20 years, which shows the success of the EU.** **It is important, however, not to waste this success** and for the candidate countries to feel that the actual fulfilment of the criteria will lead to real progress in their EU accession process. Hungary - and in general the "club" of friends of enlargement in the EU - is pushing for this in every possible forum.

***2.2 Europe's internal cohesion***

Another measure of success is how do those who are already inside the EU feel?

From this point of view, the Brexit referendum was quite shocking. This was not just a public opinion poll: a stakeless, "mental military exercise", but "sharpshooting". The majority of Britons felt sufficiently uncomfortable in the EU to decide to leave.

Perhaps most Britons now want to go back, because there are many signs that they are better off inside than outside. Even so, the Brexit referendum was a failure of EU cohesion - there is no way to sugarcoat it.

Fortunately, for the current member states, we can only rely on opinion polls in this regard. On the basis of the public opinion polls, we can say that this internal cohesion is, as a general rule, a cause for some concern among the pre-2004 member states. In the case of the member states that joined after 2004, however, the popularity of EU membership is relatively convincing for the time being.

In Hungary, among others, support for EU membership is convincing (77% in the latest survey). If you don't believe it, look it up: in all opinion polls, Hungary is far above average in terms of social support for EU membership! *The* Hungary that for 14 years now has been governed by the government most critical of the EU institutions - and most criticised by the EU institutions!

Well, take that into account when evaluating the last 20 years! One of the most pro-EU public opinion re-elects one of the most anti-EU government majorities in a row!

There is, of course, so much coincidence that the public opinion that otherwise supports the country's EU membership is also critical of the EU in Hungary: polls show a below-average perception of the EU's common political achievements.

So the interesting thing is that **Hungarians are EU-critical, but they really like being in the EU**.

Since the member states are very diverse, it would obviously be a brave thing to take the Hungarian situation as a general model and to say that the government's brave and critical action towards EU institutions necessarily strengthens the popularity of EU membership.

However, this has been the situation in Hungary for the past 20 years. Right after the country joined the EU (before the world crisis, in 2006-2010, it plunged into a deep crisis), and **the post-2010 government, going against the policies dictated by the EU institutions, successfully led the Hungarians out of the crisis.** **So this is possible in the EU**, so the EU is a good thing – approx. this belief has been formed in Hungarians over the past 20 years.

On the basis of this experience, we, on the Hungarian side, propose that we should not have to go up against the common institutions of the EU to succeed. **Brussels should help the Member States, instead of controlling them. The model of European integration should not be based on a ruling Brussels, but on a Brussels that provides services!**

This would be the ideal in economic policy as well as in green policy or even in terms of rule of law.

These are not EU interests, in which the member states have a counter-interest. On the contrary: successful economy, a livable environment and the rule of law are primarily the interests of the member states and only through this are also the interests of the EU as a whole.

So we put the cart before the horse when we ideologically hold each other to account. **We run into situations like the recent police action against the NatCon conference in Brussels, which which had no legal basis whatsoever.**

Thanks to the Prime Minister of Belgium, Mr. Croo and other democratically committed politicians, who were very quick to take a stand against the violation, we managed to put a limit to it.

However, the fact that an unlawful action by a violent body on political grounds could take place **shows how the ideologicalisation of the rule of law and the prejudices that this fosters can become a real undermining of the rule of law in Europe**.

**All this is destroying the EU's internal coherence.** From this point of view, there are indeed contradictions in the EU performance of the last 20 years! This must be improved in the coming years.

1. ***Let's build on the experiences of the past!***

The Hungarian Presidency priorities reflect on critical problems of the EU. In all these- competitiveness, defence, demography, expansion - Europe has a chance to achieve good results if it makes the best possible use of the experience of the past 20 years. Both good and bad experiences!

And the experiences of the past 650 years, and the experiences of the past 800 years – just to refer back to the joint Hungarian-Polish (-Lithuanian) anniversaries.

On the occasion of the joint anniversaries, the representatives of the Hungarian, Slovak, Polish and Lithuanian Catholic churches summarized the lessons from these experiences in a joint statement in March this year as follows: "Our future can only be based on the Christian love and solidarity of the people and nations living in our region. "

Love and solidarity! Let's strive to make this the basis of the European future! In the spirit of these, it is worth discussing our common issues.

\* \* \* \* \*