

# Hungary's Foreign Policy Dilemmas

## After Regaining Sovereignty

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### Abstract

Hungary seems to have almost perennial predicaments about the course to be taken in its foreign policy. Attempts by powerful great powers (the German, the Habsburg, the Ottoman and the Russian empires) to dominate the country led to loss of independence from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and full sovereignty was regained only in 1991 with the departure of Soviet occupying forces. The relations with the peoples living next to or intermingled with the Hungarians have also been difficult because of the conflicting claims to identical territories. Following the collapse of Communism there was the danger of the renewal of hostilities with

those neighbours, either by opening the issue of border change, or over the (mis)treatment of close to three million ethnic Hungarians who were detached from Hungary by the Peace Treaty imposed in 1920. The restraint of the Hungarian government led by J. Antall, the creation of cooperative mechanisms exemplified by the Visegrád association, and the conduct of the Euro-Atlantic partners including measures adopted for the protection of national minorities explain why Central Europe did not become the scene of violence which characterized the Balkans in the 1990s.

Key-words:

Hungary, foreign policy, national minorities, bilateral treaties, Visegrád Cooperation

Fourteen years ago I gave the first “József Eötvös Memorial Lecture” at the Europa Institut Budapest with a similar title, with emphasis on the pre-Communist past (Jeszenszky 1993). In that I recalled a talk I delivered in 1985 at Indiana University in Bloomington, upon the invitation of the first holder of the Hungarian Chair, Professor György Ránki, on how few options Hungary had in its modern history. I ended on an optimistically sounding note, that Hungarians should prepare for the times when they would again become free to pursue an active foreign policy and to weigh the alternatives. That moment came much sooner than anyone had imagined, and I had the honour to play an active role in that policy.

The dilemmas, the tasks facing Hungary in the international arena were quite similar throughout the centuries: staving off foreign invasions (Germans, Mongols, Ottoman Turks, Russians); preventing a dangerous combination involving hostile neighbours; and finding supporters, allies among the richer, more advanced western and northern (often Protestant) powers in the fights for the rights of the nation. With the rise of nationalism in the 1830s, a new task was added: to preserve the territorial integrity of the kingdom in face of the non-Hungarian nationalities and their co-nationals beyond the borders. Since the 1920 Peace Treaty the latter has taken the form of trying to maintain peaceful relations with the neighbouring states while giving support to the millions of Hungarians who were detached from Hungary and became ill-treated national minorities.

When the last Soviet soldier left Hungary in June, 1991, I welcomed that in speeches and an article as “Real Independence after 450 Years.” Indeed, as a result of the tragic Battle of Mohács in 1526 the medieval Kingdom of Hungary fell under foreign domination, and most of present-day Hungary, including the capital, Buda, was annexed by the Ottoman Empire. When at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century an international Christian army expelled the Ottomans, the Habsburg kings came to govern the country as a conquered province of their Empire, and did not respect its laws. Several uprisings by the Hungarians failed to restore independence, and an army of occupation remained stationed in Hungary until the Settlement of 1867. That established the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, giving autonomy, “Home Rule” to Hungary. Foreign policy and defence became common affairs, and the Emperor-King retained extensive prerogatives. Full independence came only at the end of World War I, but at the price of the break-up of the historic kingdom, only one third of its territory was left to the rump state. Inter-war Hungary was surrounded by a hostile alliance, the so-called Little Entente of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, leaving Hungary very little room for movement. Their grip was broken by Nazi Germany in World War II, and Hungary became Hitler’s ally,

but an unwilling and unreliable one, so in March 19, 1944 Germany overran and occupied its ally, in order to prevent its defection to the Allies. It was only then that the “final solution,” the extermination of a large part of the 800,000 strong Jewish community could be carried out. Hungary was delivered from the Nazis and their Hungarian puppets in 1945 by the Soviet Red Army, amid widespread looting, raping and kidnapping of civilians into slavery in the Soviet Union, and the Soviet occupation continued until 1991.

The absence of options facing Hungarian foreign policy after 1945 was not initially apparent. On March 20, 1947, in a debate on foreign relations in the National Assembly the majority of the speakers took the position that the country should avoid any one-sided orientation, while the Communist Party maintained that Hungary should join the bloc being created by the Soviet Union. “If we miss that we’ll be isolated from the truly democratic countries, [...] and facilitate Hungary becoming a base for the Anglo-American imperialist circles.”<sup>1</sup> By 1948 a monolithic, communist-controlled system was imposed upon every country under the occupation of the Red Army, and Hungary, too, became “a captive nation,” a satellite of the Soviet Union. The Red Army did not leave Hungary, so it was able to crush the democratic revolution in 1956, and the withdrawal of the Soviet troops “provisionally stationed in Hungary” could be negotiated only in 1990, with the collapse of the Communist system. Until then Hungary was only nominally sovereign, in reality it was a Soviet dependency. Even in the later, milder phase of Communism, when Hungary was called “the happiest barrack,” total subservience to the Soviet Union in foreign policy was the price paid for the modest economic reforms, for travel outside Hungary, and for a freer atmosphere. It was only in the 1980s that Hungary established more cordial ties with the capitalist world, joined the IMF and the World Bank, and within the framework of the Helsinki process (the CSCE) started to speak out for the rights of national minorities – with an eye on the increasingly chauvinistic policies of the Romanian dictator Ceausescu. But Moscow still had a veto over Hungary’s actions. A good example was that Hungary, which had participated in all the Olympic Games (except in 1920 when following the war she was banned) and showed outstanding performance, in 1984 joined the Soviet Union and other satellites in boycotting the Games held in Los Angeles.

### The foundations

In the first free elections since 1945, held in the spring of 1990, the six parties elected to Parliament showed agreement on the basic tenets of foreign policy, set forth in the program of the Antall-government. The main objective of a democratic Hungary was the restoration of sovereignty and the re-orientation of its foreign-policy. It required the development of a relationship of trust with the Western democracies, involvement in the institutions of European integration, but the precondition was ending Soviet military occupation and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, preferably by way of its negotiated termination. At the same time we declared a policy of extending the hand of friendship to all our neighbours, the Soviet Union included. We hoped that on the basis of the common suffering under the dictatorships, the acceptance of the Western system of values, and the obvious community of interests, a new solidarity would emerge, and “the New Europe” would follow the example of post second world war Western Europe by putting aside all old quarrels, concentrating on political, economic, environmental and cultural recovery and reconstruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Position taken by the Political Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party on March 20, 1947. Quoted by Sándor Balogh: *Magyarország külpolitikája, 1945-1950* [The foreign policy of Hungary, 1945-1950]. Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1988. pp. 256-257. Cf. Fülöp-Sipos, p. 347.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was a politically very sensitive institution under the Communists. Political loyalty was doubly mandatory for people whose job involved regular contact with the capitalist world, with the “imperialist powers,” who may spend years “in hostile environment,” who might be approached by western intelligence services, or who could easily defect, betraying their bosses and their schemes. Apart from professional intelligence officers under diplomatic cover most career diplomats were expected, or rather compelled to spy also on their colleagues, their bosses included. In spite of being a very exposed position, an assignment in a western country was much coveted, because financially it was very advantageous, even when somebody kept all the financial rules and regulations. Psychologically a Communist mission in a western capital had a ghetto atmosphere, as often the whole staff had to live on the same premises. As a result alcoholism was often a problem, and easy-going, balanced diplomats were difficult to find in any Communist diplomatic service.

I had no intention to introduce a massive purge in the *corps*, partly because I knew from my former students who joined the Ministry that rigid belief in the Communist doctrines was no longer a feature even among diplomats trained in Moscow. I accepted the line expressed by many diplomats that they, too, were happy to see the end of Communism, the end of the age of lies and fear, and they were eager to serve at last the national interests of their own country. I offered a *carte blanche* to the old guard, except for those seriously compromised by their previous (political or professional) conduct. Nevertheless it was only natural that in major NATO countries the new Hungary could not be represented by people who had only recently been their avowed enemies and had worked against them. So I asked a few academics, people who were recognized experts in the culture of a given country, to suspend their scholarly career and serve as ambassadors or as senior diplomats. Those people had good credentials as believers and supporters of democracy and the market economy even during Communism. I also invited younger people – including those close to the opposition - to join the Ministry, provided they met the professional criteria. In line with the aim of the Prime Minister, I wanted a consolidated, dedicated, professional and permanent civil service, and certainly not party hacks. I chose as the permanent head of the Foreign Service, Ferenc Somogyi, a younger, capable member of the inherited “old guard.” He served well until his loyalty to that very old guard proved stronger than carrying out the programme of the government. (Fifteen years later, for a short period, he became foreign minister in a Socialist-led government.) I found the new recruits very capable, dedicated and hard-working, much like the pre-Communist Hungarian Foreign Service was, but many diplomats of the old regime also fitted very well into the new democracy and were appointed to top positions by me. I regret that after the 1994 election political considerations and party affiliations again superseded professionalism.

Nobody questioned the foreign policy platform of the coalition government of Antall. There were some lingering thoughts about closer association with the neighbouring states, so as to realize the federalist or “Danubian” ideas of Kossuth, Jászai, and the dreamers of the 1930s and 1940s, even as an alternative to European integration, but such unrealistic, impractical ideas had no support whatsoever among the neighbours. Likewise neutrality had an appeal, mainly among those who recalled how much that status was coveted in 1956 and after, how many of us dreamed about the “Finlandization” of Hungary until 1990. But with the ending of the Cold War neutrality, primarily a status one may assume in a war, lost its reason. The restoration of full sovereignty made it a natural aspiration to make the changes irreversible by integrating Hungary with the West.

The foreign political program presented to Parliament was not so easy to realize as it looks by hindsight. The Soviets made troop withdrawal dependent on excessive payment for the assets (buildings, airfields etc) they left behind. After very tough negotiations we managed to reach agreement on mutually renouncing claims accruing from the military occupation. Former Soviet bases were left in awful conditions, leaving also much damage to the environment, not to mention the destruction caused by the military intervention in 1956. Hungary, personally Prime Minister Antall, took the initiative in dismantling the Warsaw Pact, and that involuntary alliance was dissolved on July 1, 1991. By giving immediate and strong support to Yeltsin in the days of the August 1991 coup, we established very cordial relations both with the Russian Federation, and the other states which emerged with the break-up of the Soviet Union. It is a charge without any foundation that the centre-right government of Hungary was responsible for the almost total collapse of trade relations with the Soviet Union and its successor states because of ideological reservations. By 1990 the Soviets went practically bankrupt, and accumulated a huge debt towards all their trade partners. Notwithstanding that, Hungary signed a bilateral treaty with Russia in December 1991 (the first the new State concluded), and several other agreements in next November, when President Yeltsin paid a state visit to Hungary. It was much appreciated when he called the intervention of 1956 “an indelible disgrace in the history of the Soviet system.”

The settlement of the close to two million ruble (1,7 million \$) Soviet debt was less successful. Russia refused to use its oil and gas deliveries as payment – in case of all its creditors. The offer was military equipment – for countries which needed everything but army hardware. Eventually, already after the death of Antall, upon the recommendation of Minister Kádár, Prime Minister Boross convinced the cabinet to buy 28 MIG-29 fighter planes, for \$ 800,000. The rest led to a number of dubious financial deals during the next governments, ending in scandals (“Oil-gate,” Postabank being the most talked about), but hardly any money for the treasury.

In 1989 Hungary, and also the last Communist leaders, were very popular in the western media, and consequently also in the public. Nevertheless the over-cautious Western capitals could hardly believe that the Communist menace was gone and that the new leaders were as much committed to democratic values as themselves. When Hungary made clear that it was ready to honour international obligations inherited from the previous regime, also servicing the huge (20 billion \$) debt, and was determined to settle property relations by way of compensation and privatization, Prime Minister Antall became a much respected international leader. He was welcomed most warmly in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Italy, in the European Community, in the Council of Europe, and at NATO Headquarters. His foreign minister toured the rest, with special attention to the neighbouring countries and the multinational forums including the UN. The first tangible results were membership in the Council of Europe (November 6, 1990, ahead of any other new democracy), and the signing of Antall’s initiative, the “Visegrád” cooperation of the three “companions in historical distress:” Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary on February 15, 1991. That association greatly facilitated the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and also the conclusion of the “Europe Agreement” with the Community on December 16, 1991.

The Visegrád idea – cooperation rather than rivalry – deserves special recognition as an instrument that eliminated potential animosities. After the bliss of 1989, quite a few observers in Europe and America feared the revival of old conflicts in Central Europe. By establishing this triangular relationship we made sure such conflicts became unthinkable between us. Visegrad was the alternative to earlier, bad arrangements for the region, such as direct foreign

domination (the Russian Empire absorbing most of Poland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Habsburg Empire between 1526 and 1867, and, in a far more brutal version, Hitler's Third Reich), the attempt at non-democratic integration (the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, 1867-1918), or nations ganging up against another and seeking support from selfish great powers (the so-called Little Entente in 1921-1938 and the alliance of Austria, Hungary and Italy in the mid-1930s). The "Visegrád policy" was an ideal balance between two traditional, but failed foreign political orientations, an exclusively eastern (relying on Russia, later on the Soviet Union) and a one-sided and illusionary western one (expecting "the West" to protect or liberate Central Europe from Turkish, Russian or German aggression). Since 1991 the close cooperation of the core Central European countries has been a cornerstone for stability in the post-Cold War period. The Central European Free Trade Agreement of December 1992 was a logical concomitant of Visegrád. Political cooperation never stopped, but occasionally weakened, due to the attitude of certain leaders, then it gained new momentum, like in 1998, when elections in Hungary and Slovakia returned governments committed to fusing new life into the collaboration. Although often buried by the media, Visegrád can, should serve as a model for other groups of states. It is also the proof of Hungary's stance on the issue of borders and national minorities.

#### Hungarians beyond the border

Compared to other trouble spots, Central Europe today is a tranquil place, nevertheless one should keep in mind that both world wars broke out here and were caused partly by the national aspirations and border disputes that go back primarily to the varied ethnic composition of this region. Eighty-seven years ago the 1920 peace settlement signed at the Trianon palace near Paris tried to reorganize Central Europe along ethnic lines, but that caused more problems than it solved, it proved to become a true *Apple of Eris*. While uniting the Czechs with the Slovaks, the Serbs with the Croats and Slovenes, as well as the Romanians of Transylvania with their co-nationals beyond the Carpathians, Hungary suffered the most drastic reduction of a country in history (apart from the partition and temporary obliteration from the map of Poland in 1795). Ignoring President Wilson's principle of self-determination, the victors assigned 3,5 million ethnic Hungarians, a third of the nation, and two-thirds of the country's total territory to the newly-created or enlarged neighbouring states, where they became victims of all forms of discrimination, including expulsion. Hungary signed the peace treaty but openly demanded the peaceful revision of its terms by the League of Nations and the Great Powers. Between 1938 and 1941, helped by Germany and Italy, she regained some of the lost territories, where most of the detached Hungarians lived, only to lose them again following World War II.

Despite or because of decades of mistreatment, the Hungarians torn from Hungary (and their descendants) have never ceased to regard themselves as part of the Hungarian nation. The imposition of Communism following the Second World War worsened their lot considerably. Close to half a million were expelled from Czechoslovakia or induced to leave Romania. Those who were allowed to remain in the land of their ancestors faced the expropriation of their properties and the banning of their schools and associations. They suffered under double oppression: while everyone felt the iron hand of dictatorship, anti-minority policies and practices added to the plight of the Hungarians, who could not even protest, as all political expressions were stifled.

Bearing the above in mind it was not unrealistic to think in 1990 that in the exuberant atmosphere of restored freedom Hungary, having regained its sovereignty, would renew its demand for the rectification of its borders. The Hungarian minorities detached from their kin

might also feel that they are entitled to decide not only who should represent them in Parliament but also which country they want to belong to. Can the principle of self-determination be applied only selectively?

The Hungarian electorate, and even more their representatives, were fully aware that since the end of the Second World War the international community, fearing new wars, regarded the European borders as sacrosanct, but the concept of human rights included the rights of national minorities to preserve their identity. The 1990 Copenhagen Conference on the Human Dimension, attended by thirty-five Foreign Ministers, reaffirmed – among others – that “respect for the rights of persons belonging to national minorities as part of universally recognized human rights is an essential factor for peace, justice, stability and democracy,” and recommended a large number of measures for their protection, including “appropriate local or autonomous administrations corresponding to the specific historical and territorial circumstances.”<sup>2</sup> It was the belief that the governments of Europe and North America are united in their firm support for the rights of national minorities, including their self-government in the form of autonomous administration, that made Hungary acquiesce in the situation where millions of Hungarians, a very substantial part of the nation, remain citizens of the neighbouring states. That was in line with the position of István Bibó, a highly respected political scientist, a member of Imre Nagy’s revolutionary government in 1956, expressed upon learning the terms of the peace Hungary was expected to sign in 1947: “Hungary will faithfully respect and carry out the peace treaty, once it is signed. It would be insincere to pretend that she has become an enthusiastic adherent of the grave dispositions of the treaty. But Hungary will not create an ideology or organize political campaigns for changing the borders, and will not pursue a policy which speculates in international crises or catastrophes, so that her territorial grievances could be remedied. Hungary will comply with the conditions created by the peace treaty without any reservations, except one: she cannot give up her political interest in the fate of the Hungarian minorities [living in the states surrounding Hungary].” (Bibó 1946)

Prime Minister Antall and his collaborators were confident that democracy and European integration would provide the framework for a fair settlement of that issue. Presenting his government's program to Parliament Antall stated: "The changes in Central and Eastern Europe have given us a great opportunity to end or at least to alleviate the conflicts that traditionally turned the peoples of this region against each other. Free nations ought to develop free contacts with each other; borders should not obstruct the free movement of persons, information and ideas. We are confident than none of our neighbours will feel the need to using the Hungarians as the image of the foe, in order to keep themselves together. European cooperation goes hand-in-hand with intensive regional cooperation, and it is that what we seek to achieve with all our neighbours. At the same time in a federalizing Europe regionalism is the best guarantee for the preservation national characteristics and serving national interests, free of intolerant nationalism. [...] We have to start a new chapter in our history, the era of understanding and tolerance between our people, who suffered so much, and our neighbours, who struggle with a similar legacy. [...] We all belong to Europe. Brotherly coexistence and cooperation is the command of history for all of us, and history has proven that we should not allow ourselves rancour against each other, as that could be utilized against us." (Antall 1994, II. 64.)

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<sup>2</sup> Document of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, Copenhagen, 29 June 1990, <http://www.ena.lu/europe/organisation-security-cooperation-europe/conference-human-dimension-csce-copenhagen-1990.htm>

But it is mistaken to think that the legacy of Central European history is all conflict. The idea to stand up jointly to aggression, to defend one's territory and heritage against aggressors is very old in Central Europe. It is enough to refer to the common struggles against the Ottoman onslaught from the 14th to the 18th centuries, to the many non-Hungarian volunteers in the Hungarian War of Independence of 1848-49, and to the strong sympathy shown in all the Central European countries for the various efforts to change the inhuman and irrational dictatorship imposed and maintained by the Soviet Union since the Second World War. The drama in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, in Poland several times but particularly in 1980-81, and finally in Romania in 1989 showed how strong attachment people in the eastern half of Europe showed towards freedom and democracy, the corner-stones of Euro-Atlantic values and principles, and how much they sympathized with each other in times of crisis. Even on the issue of national minorities there is a positive tradition: the idea that the mutual minorities could act as bridges, linking neighbours. Presenting his programme Antall also said: "It is time that the national minorities truly formed the most important bridge of friendship between countries, but this can only be done by communities who have regained their rights and sense of dignity. In this honest endeavour of ours, we are counting on the support of the governments and public opinion of democratic states." (Antall 1994, II. 65.) In line with the above Antall and his foreign minister regularly raised the problem of the Hungarian minorities at the appropriate multinational diplomatic forums, like the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the CSCE meetings, or when other crises offered obvious opportunities to do so, to present the issue as an essential element of international stability. Critics (mainly at home) often said this was counter-productive (apart from the statements of politicians who belonged to the opposition the most prolific such author was Pál Dunay, see esp. Dunay 2004), but I maintain that the only way to break the wall of ignorance and indifference, and to give a chance for improving the lot of the minorities is to call attention to the problem and to the contrast between the pious declarations and the reality.

Antall created an uproar in the ranks of the opposition and even more abroad by a statement he made on June 2, 1990, at the Third Congress of his party. "In a legal sense, in accordance with the Constitution, I want to act as the head of the government of all the citizens of this 10 million strong country, but in spirit and sentiment as the Prime Minister of 15 million Hungarians." A few observers feared that the statement prepared the ground for territorial claims against the neighbouring states, while most Hungarians, especially those who lived outside the borders of Hungary, either in the neighbouring states or in western countries, welcomed that reversion of communist policies with enthusiasm. Today many remember the leader of the transformation most warmly for having espoused the cause of the Hungarian minorities. It was simply a memorable paraphrase of Article 5 of the Constitution, which states:

*"(3) The Republic of Hungary bears a sense of responsibility for what happens to Hungarians living outside of its borders and promotes the fostering of their relations with Hungary."* (Hungary, 1989) It was only malice which interpreted Hungary's policy as potentially disturbing the peace of Europe.

The world know very little about how much the Hungarian minorities have suffered under discriminating and intolerant, undemocratic regimes, (Brunner 1996; Cadzow etc. 1983; Illyés 1982; Joó-Ludányi 1994; Macartney 1937; Mandelbaum 2000; Várdy and Tooley 2003), and that their very survival was in jeopardy. As soon as the dictatorships were overthrown they formed their own parties and set forth their demands, concentrating on language rights and local self-government. It is worth noting that there has been not one instance of violence



committed by them, let alone terrorist methods. It was only natural that the Antall Government, knowing only too well both the past and the aspirations of the Hungarians beyond the borders, gave full support to their endeavours, in accordance with the declarations and recommendations of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the CSCE. (Chaszar 1999; Kovács 2000) It is not true that Hungary made its policy towards its neighbours dependent on the treatment of the Hungarians by the governments of the neighbouring states. Such “an informal Antall-doctrine” was never enunciated, nor did it exist in the minds. On the other hand it would have been impossible to speak of genuinely good neighbourly relations with countries who mistreated their Hungarians. We were also against accepting the principle of “reciprocity” between national minorities very different in size, traditions and aspirations. When Hungary passed its much acclaimed Law 77 of 1993, conferring cultural autonomy and other extensive rights upon its own few thousand strong German, Slovak, Croat, Romanian, Serb, Slovene and other national minorities, this was not done in the naïve hope that it would be automatically reciprocated or imitated by the neighbouring states, the law simply expressed a conviction that European norms and practises (like South Tyrol, the Aland Islands, the position of the Germans in Belgium or in Denmark) as well as the very survival of those minorities required that.

Quite apart from the issue of minorities a whole network of bilateral treaties was created in the early 1990s, in the hope of stabilizing inter-state relations in the absence of alliances and membership in NATO or the European Community. The Antall Government signed treaties of cooperation and/or friendship with Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Russia and Ukraine (in 1991), followed by similar ones with Croatia, Slovenia, the Baltic States, Spain and others. In those treaties there was usually a commitment to uphold the basic international norms and principles (contained in the UN Charter and the OSCE documents) in bilateral relations. Mutual support for each other's integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures also figured prominently in the treaties. The will to co-operate in various fields (economy, transportation, culture, environment, military etc.) formed the main body of these agreements. But since those treaties were expected to settle all contested issues between the contracting powers, guaranteeing the rights of the minorities was naturally an important element in them. Those rights were amply covered by special arrangements like the “*Hungarian-Ukrainian Declaration on the Principles ... in Guaranteeing the Rights of National Minorities*” signed on 31 March 1991, the “*Agreement on Ensuring Special Rights for the Slovenian National Minority Living in Hungary and the Hungarian National Community Living in Slovenia*” signed on 6 November 1992, or the Hungarian-Russian declaration of 11 November 1992 on the rights of national minorities. There was a late addition to these enlightened and promising agreements: a convention between Hungary and Croatia on the mutual protection of each other's minorities, signed on 5 April 1995. The other bilateral “basic treaties,” the Slovak one signed on 19 March 1995 and the Romanian one signed on 16 September 1996, were signed by a different government, under different circumstances, and are treated in my other writings. (Jeszenszky 1996; Jeszenszky 2000)

The agreements Hungary concluded with its neighbours ensured different levels of minority rights. Some of them exceed the so-called “minimal European standards” (the treaties with Slovenia and Croatia), others fall short of them. The Convention between Hungary and Slovenia can be regarded as one of the best commitments to safeguard minority rights in Europe. It declares that the parties endeavour to ensure the legal protection, preservation and development of the identities of the minorities at as high a level as possible and that they are convinced that the equality of the Hungarian and Slovenian national minorities could be achieved by granting special individual and group (collective) rights for them. The

Hungarian-Croatian Convention also ensures cultural autonomy for the Hungarian minority living in Croatia; the Hungarian-Slovenian Convention guarantees not only individual but also group rights for the minorities. In both cases the subjects of the rights are the minorities as communities, while in the cases of the treaties with Slovakia and Romania the subject of the rights are only the "persons belonging to the national minorities."

#### The quest for security

With the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact Hungary became again a completely free agent, but also found itself in a security vacuum. Despite the Visegrad Cooperation our neighbourhood was far from safe, and the impact of the wars and crises in the Balkans weighed heavily upon Hungary. The obvious solution was NATO membership and thus to anchor the ship of the Hungarian state to the bedrock of the most successful military and political alliance of history. (Jeszenszky 1997/b) Prime Minister Antall addressed the Ministerial Council of NATO on 28 October, 1991 and expressed his thanks for NATO having preserved the freedom of Western Europe and thus holding out the prospect of liberation for the eastern half of the continent. "We knew that if Western Europe could not remain stable, if North American presence would cease in Europe, then there wouldn't be any solid ground left for us to base our hopes upon." He also emphasized that Central Europe represented a strategically very important space, a link towards the southern arm of the Alliance and an essential hinterland. Antall called for an active role to be played by NATO in consolidating the changes in Europe and in solving the crisis in Yugoslavia - which was only emerging then. (Antall 1994, II. 348.) We were fortunate in having a man as Secretary General who not only sympathized with the nations emerging from Soviet captivity but had an intimate knowledge of their concerns. Manfred Wörner made a great contribution to NATO rising to the challenges of the post-communist world and many of us preserve his memory most fondly.

Contrary to fears, Hungary and the Hungarian minorities did not create any headache to the international community by questioning the borders and undermining European stability. It was the three (at least nominally) federal states which emerged in the wake of World War I, that did not prove lasting. But while the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and that of Czechoslovakia (1992-93) went on remarkably peacefully ("velvet separations"), Yugoslavia, for long the darling of the western world, became the scene of wars and brutal war crimes (often euphemistically called "ethnic cleansing") while it broke into six (perhaps eventually into seven) independent, sovereign states.

In 1990 nobody thought that anything like that may happen, but in the free elections held in April in Slovenia and Croatia victory went to those who were dissatisfied with the existing division of political power and economic expenditure, and wanted to assert their nation's rights embodied in the federal Constitution. At the same time the majority of Serbs supported Slobodan Milosevic and his nationalist Communism, saying no to political change. Still no one thought that the second Yugoslavia was nearing its end. The decision to sell a small consignment of rifles for the Zagreb police from the stocks of the disbanded Hungarian (Communist) Workers' Guard was given great publicity (months later) by the Serb authorities in January, 1991, trying to implicate a new coalition of "anti-Serb countries" dating back to World War II. But even when on June 25 1991 Slovenia and Croatia made a declaration of independence (perfectly legal under the Yugoslav Constitution) Hungary thought that a looser association, perhaps a confederation, might save the unity of the South Slavs. Following smaller-scale incidents, all-out war was started by the federal Yugoslav "People's Army," led mainly by Serb officers, at the end of September against Croatia. That put Hungary, too, in a most awkward position. The Serbian attack was directed at the north-eastern corner of

Croatia, where thousands of Hungarians lived in a few Hungarian-inhabited villages. Hungary as a neighbouring country, with close to half a million Hungarians living in the old Yugoslavia, had a strong interest to prevent and later to stop violence, also to see a solution for the peaceful co-existence of various ethnic/religious groups living side-by-side.

In the neighbouring nominally autonomous province called Vojvodina (before 1920 an integral part of Hungary), almost four hundred thousand Hungarians lived together with Serbs, Croats, Slovaks and other nationalities. The young Hungarian conscripts from there were used as cannon-fodder in a war they had nothing to do with. To add to the predicament, the Yugoslav army violated Hungarian airspace almost routinely, hoping to involve Hungary, too, in the war. Hungary was also flooded by refugees, mainly Croats and Hungarians, but soon also by Bosnian Muslims, when, following a referendum voting for independence, Serbia extended the war to that religious mosaic. Prime Minister Antall and the present author made many suggestions in word and in writing to all the interested parties and leaders, supporting the solutions proposed by the European Community, and drawing attention to the likely consequences, like adding an Islamic or Slavic solidarity dimension to the crisis.<sup>3</sup> We constantly warned about the wider implications, too. "In case the international community is unable to facilitate the democratic solution of the recent crisis it would send a negative message for the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, which liberated themselves and restored democracy, or at least move towards it. At the same time such a failure would give encouragement to the supporters of the old, totalitarian regime, who still exist. It is also obvious that the situation in Yugoslavia has a decisive impact on the outcome of the ongoing transition in the Soviet nuclear superpower. Therefore Yugoslavia is likely to serve as a precedent, it will show whether international cooperation can or cannot solve such a crisis."<sup>4</sup>

Hungary exercised great restraint in keeping away from the armed conflict, giving much humanitarian aid, sharing its assessment of the situation with interested governments, but keeping a line open to Belgrade, too, in order to prevent ethnic persecution spreading to the Hungarians of the Vojvodina. Both in the West European capitals and in Washington, we played an active and constructive role in the numerous discussions about the successive Balkan crises, putting the case of the Vojvodina Hungarians in the wider context of ethnic strife, preventive diplomacy, and practical involvement on the spot, like deploying observers and international peacekeepers, or enforcing no-fly zones.

It is worth noting that the Serbs – at least in their public statements – did not deny the right of the Croats to secede, but demanded the right of the half million Serbs of Croatia (who lived in several ethnic islands) to remain within Yugoslavia, saying that “all Serbs must live in one state.” On the territories overrun by the Serb army diminutive states called *krajina* were created, terrorizing their non-Serb population. The European Community appointed Lord Carrington, a former Secretary-General of NATO, to bring about a solution. He proposed a “special status,” very wide autonomy for the *krajinas*, but keeping them within the existing borders. The same treatment for the Albanians and the Hungarians of Serbia should have looked obvious, but since that was vehemently opposed by Serbia, Lord Carrington restricted that status for the contested areas of Croatia and (later) of Bosnia. Unfortunately the claim of

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<sup>3</sup>Minister for Foreign Affairs G. Jeszenszky to H. van den Broek, Foreign Minister of the Netherlands and Chairman of the EC, November 15, 1991

<sup>4</sup>Prime Minister J. Antall to President G. Bush, October 28, 1991

the Vojvodina Hungarians for autonomy (territorial and personal), supported by Hungary but unsupported by violence, went unheeded. It is a sad observation that the international community has never appreciated and supported peaceful demands for substantial minority rights, like that of the various Hungarian communities in the states around Hungary; it starts to listen only when violence and dead bodies already make the situation grave and far more difficult to defuse.

Seeing that Serbia was unable to overrun Croatia the EC – after extensive debates, in which Hungary could participate on the sidelines - accepted the *fait accompli*, and in January, 1992 recognized Slovenia and Croatia, once they fulfilled the five conditions set by a committee headed by Badinter, the former Head of the Constitutional Court of France. It is often heard even today that “the early recognition” of those two states was a mistake, but I don’t see why. Anyhow, Hungary gained two new neighbours, and good ones, who were also ready to treat their not very numerous Hungarian minorities in a fair way. Hungary pursued an active policy also in the subsequent crises of the Balkans, spoke out for peaceful settlements, the return of the refugees, putting war criminals on trial, and enforcing the rights of all national minorities, Serbs included. By that eventually we earned the gratitude and goodwill also of the Bosnians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Albanians. At the same time, thanks to our careful diplomacy, the Serbs no longer blame Hungary for the misfortunes they caused to themselves.

Hungary became a most active member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council created in 1991, and the program “Partnership for Peace” was announced simultaneously in Germany and Hungary in October 1993. In 1992, with Russia in disarray, Hungary very consciously adopted a tone towards that country and towards NATO which was based on the awareness of the high stakes. Hungary was eager to see close cooperation between NATO and the new Russia, that is why we did not bang on the door at Brussels for immediate admission. The frequent violations of Hungarian airspace by Yugoslav planes compelled Hungary to seek support from its western friends. NATO understood our predicament and several times expressed what could be interpreted as a verbal guarantee: in carrying out international obligations under the UN sanctions and in making Hungarian airspace available for AWACS planes monitoring the observance of UN resolutions, we could count on the support of the Alliance. By welcoming the Partnership for Peace programme Hungary tried to prepare the country for eventual membership in NATO. Following NATO's decision to intervene in the war in Bosnia in order to bring it to an end, and with the new government elected in 1994 offering the territory and air space of Hungary for the Bosnian peace mission (supported by the opposition parties), Hungary, together with Poland and the Czech Republic, was invited to join NATO in 1997.

#### Difficulties in neighbourhood policy

The Antall (and later the Orbán) Government received quite much criticism in the press (both at home and abroad) for espousing the cause of the Hungarians severed from Hungary by the post-war peace treaties in a too laud, too active way (Dunay 2004), and an author even called Antall “an irredentist in spirit” (Révész 1995). Hungarians on the political Right, especially lately on various internet sites

(e.g.

<http://www.mariaorszaga.hu/index.php?menu=bovebben&tipus=&kod=1283&kat=6&PHPSESSID=bc85d2e089492c7c12c2db539230a5>),

deplore (and blame Antall and myself) that Hungary did not put forward claims for revising the borders of Hungary. In a somewhat muted form the charge runs that while so many states neighbouring Hungary broke up and so borders changed, the Antall Government missed the opportunity to get back the regions just over our borders, where the population is still predominantly Hungarian. (Gecse 2002, esp. pp. 54-74.) Anybody with a little understanding of present-day realities in international relations, or just weighing the political and military power relations in Central Europe, knows that raising the issue of changing the borders would have been futile and counter-productive. Apart from the well-known position of the international community against any such claim, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act (signed by Hungary along 34 other states) stipulates that borders may change peacefully by mutual consent. None of the neighbours of Hungary are ready to consider even the cession of one village. If Hungary raised the issue by proposing negotiations the answer would have been general condemnation, hopes for Euro-Atlantic integration dashed, and the Hungarian minorities would have become victims of various forms of hostile actions. It is not by accident that since 1990 none of the parties that represent the Hungarians beyond the borders has come forward with the program of secession, while they are all adamant that they want some form of autonomy. And that is what all Hungarian governments have supported and will continue to do so.

Having said that, the border issue has become a subject of serious debates twice since 1990. The hydroelectric project Gabčíkovo [Bős] – Nagymaros on the Danube was to divert the main navigation course of the river, which was set by the 1920 Peace as the border between Czechoslovakia and Hungary on a long stretch, into a newly built canal on Czechoslovak territory, and to build two dams (and two series of locks) at Gabčíkovo/Bős in Czechoslovakia and at Nagymaros in Hungary for producing energy. Due to serious concerns about the impact of the project on the environment and water quality Hungary unilaterally suspended and eventually abandoned the project, while Czechoslovakia responded by the unilateral diversion of the Danube below Bratislava, still on Czechoslovak territory. That was opposed by Hungary on many grounds, including the opinion that it changed the international border. The major concern, however, was not about the border but about “the stealing” of 90 per cent of the water and the consequent damage done to Szigetköz, the area south of the main riverbed, also the likely adverse impact on the whole ecosystem affected by the barrage system. An addition concern was how the ethnic Hungarian population of that area would suffer from the consequences, both economically and politically. Many courses of action were proposed by the public and various NGOs in Hungary, including the prevention of the diverting of the Danube by applying force. When the crisis culminated, in October 1992, Slovakia had a government led by the nationalist Vladimir Mečiar, who negotiated the separation of the Slovaks from the Czechs, and who never hid his anti-Hungarian dispositions. His bias was also translated into laws concerning language use and other measures which were much resented by the 600,000 strong Hungarian minority, forming then 11 per cent of the population of Slovakia, and living in a narrow strip along the border with Hungary. What started as a technical and ecological debate was escalating to a political conflict. The European Community was aware of the gravity of the situation and repeatedly called upon both countries to refrain from unilateral action. Slovakia did exactly that, and it was only due to the moderation of Hungary that drastic steps were not taken. Hungary took the case to the International Court of Justice in The Hague (in April, 1993), which, after long and expensive deliberations decided “that both Parties committed internationally wrongful acts”: Hungary was not entitled to terminate the original Agreement concluded in 1977, and Slovakia was not entitled to carry out the diversion, both owed compensation to each other, but none were obliged to change the new regime, to undo the diversion or to build a dam at Nagymaros. In

my view the Hungarian Parliament of the day did not size up the situation correctly: many M.P.-s were misled by “experts” into believing that the Slovak plan of unilateral diversion was technically impossible, and so a compromise solution, tentatively suggested by the Hungarian government’s special commissioner, Gy. Sámsondi-Kiss, was dropped. Sadly, the technical and financial settlement of the issue is still a long way off, even a new round at The Hague is not entirely out of question, but at least the conflict was resolved peacefully, and “the damned dam” is no longer the main point of debate between the two neighbours. Even the Visegrád Cooperation survived and has contributed to many positive developments since.

The split of Czechoslovakia resulted in the need for the two successor states to re-apply for membership in the Council of Europe. Since that institution is the main guardian of democracy and human rights in Europe, and the Hungarians of Slovakia gave publicity to their complaints against the anti-minority policies of the Meciar Government, Slovakia’s admission to the Council in 1993 was not a foregone conclusion. Catherine Lalumière, the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, insisted that resolution of the minority question was a precondition for that. The Hungarian Government supported Slovakia’s admission, but was of the opinion that it should take place only after Slovakia met the concerns of the minority, which the rapporteurs of the Council also found justified. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council and the member states, however, were ready to give the benefit of the doubt to Slovakia by admitting it and pledging the monitoring of Slovakia’s conduct most closely. Facing that unanimous opinion Hungary decided not to delay Slovakia’s entry by voting against it; by abstaining we recorded our reservations, without giving rise to another political conflict. (On Hungary’s concerns see the Non-Paper of June 18, 1993, in my possession) It is again the radical Right which occasionally brings up this story, suggesting that Hungary should have blocked Slovakia’s (and later in that year Romania’s) admission in the Council of Europe. Apart from the fact that by voting “no” we could only have delayed but not prevented those admissions, it is again the negative impact on bilateral relations, on Hungary’s foreign image, and last but not least upon the treatment of the very Hungarian minorities in their host states, that precluded different action than what we took.

Hungary’s relations with Romania were at least as tense in the early 1990s as those with Slovakia. An agreement signed between the two anti-Communist oppositions on June 16, 1989, when Imre Nagy and the other martyrs of 1956 were given a spectacular reburial, which set forth mutually acceptable proposals for a settlement of most hot issues concerning the almost two million strong Hungarian population of Transylvania, was rejected by the post-Communist government headed by Iliescu. Anti-Hungarian violence and several campaigns in the Romanian media directed both at Hungary and the Hungarian minority in Romania, made any dialogue very difficult. (Schöpflin 1993) It was again the restraint of the Hungarian government and the patient but principled conduct of the Democratic Alliance of the Hungarians of Romania which prevented the deterioration of the situation. When Romania’s entry into the Council of Europe was put on the agenda, and a more soft-speaking minister, T. Melescanu took over the direction of Romanian foreign policy, an official visit by the Hungarian foreign minister in September 1993 brought about a kind of *détente*.

It has already been mentioned what the considerations were which guided the Antall Government in signing so-called basic treaties with our neighbours, how the interests and indeed the very future of the Hungarian communities of those states we tried to guarantee by them. When the treaty concluded with Ukraine in December 1991 came up for ratification in 1992, Gyula Horn, the foreign minister of the last Communist government and then the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Parliament objected to the clause which stated

that the contracting parties “have no territorial claims against each other and will not raise such claims in the future.” He proposed that the Government should renegotiate the treaty and remove the clause relating to the renunciation of territorial claims. He must have known only too well how impossible the idea was; but it was a perfect way to cause tensions in the ranks of the parliamentary majority. That indeed happened, and a wing of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, led by István Csurka, started a campaign denouncing his own government for having “given up” that region of Ukraine which had been part of Hungary before 1920 and between 1939 and 1944. The more naïve members of that group, including a few M.P.-s, readily believed that not only the 200,000 Hungarians living in Subcarpathia (seen from Kiev Transcarpathia) can join Hungary if Budapest agrees, but its one million Slavs (Rusyns) are also eager to do so, and Kiev will have no objections. In a heated debate in the Hungarian Parliament in May, 1993 Prime Minister Antall emphasised that Ukraine had no internationally recognised borders and Hungary was eager to support the new state, its biggest neighbour. His foreign minister repeatedly stated that since Hungary recognised the borders drawn by the peace treaties signed after the two world wars he saw no obstacle in expressing that fact in bilateral treaties, but those treaties must also contain due provisions for the protection of the rights of the Hungarian minorities. (Jeszenszky 1996, Jeszenszky 2000) It shows the common sense of the coalition M.P.-s that they were not swayed by demagoguery and they provided enough votes to ratify the treaty in its original wording; it is to the credit of the opposition (the Free Democrats, the Socialists and Fidesz, the Young Democrats) that they, too voted for the treaty.

Horrified by the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, and determined to prevent the erupting of similar events, in 1993 French Prime Minister Edouard Balladur launched, with the support of European Community, the "Stability Pact in Europe" project. This concept aimed to reduce and eliminate any potential ethnic tensions in Central and Eastern Europe. Countries who expressed their wish to become member of Euro-Atlantic structures were required to settle all problems concerning ethnic minorities and national borders, so as not to import them into the organization. At the beginning Balladur mentioned the possibility of “minor frontier rectifications,” but that was almost immediately dropped. Bilateral treaties or good neighbourhood arrangements were expected from all applicant countries, guaranteeing minority rights and reconfirming the existing borders. Contrary to expectations Hungary did not jump at the idea of border “rectifications,” but gave full support to the linkage between minority rights and borders. It reminded me on the one hand of the 1925 Locarno Treaty, where Germany voluntarily accepted the imposed western border in exchange for admission into the League of Nations and its Council. More topical the comparison was with Israeli Prime Minister Rabin’s idea of “territory for peace.” For Hungary it seemed obvious that since the whole issue of stability centred around the treatment of national minorities, they, too, should participate in the negotiations leading to the final Pact. A proposal for that was, however, turned down, ostensibly for practical reasons: there were too many minorities, and too many parties and politicians claiming to speak for them.

The opening conference of the proposed Pact was held in Paris on May 20-21, 1994. Since the Hungarian and other minorities were not represented at the conference which was to a large degree about them, Hungary issued an “Interpretative Statement.” That was a summary of our hopes for a fair settlement of the problem of national minorities and our illusions that our European and Transatlantic partners will give substantial support for their cause.

“The Hungarian government cannot formally represent the citizens of other countries who belong to a Hungarian national minority, but it considers it an essential

requirement that the representatives of the minorities concerned should be able to present their opinions during the process and state their views on the agreements that are reached. This is in accordance with the interests of the minorities, of the governments concerned, and of all participants in the conference alike, since only an agreement that is also accepted by the minorities can establish permanent stability.

Hungary is prepared to discuss the above questions in a bilateral framework within the frames of the process, and it welcomes the acceptance by the European Union of an active role, and the fact that the Union is prepared to assist the sides concerned as a moderator at all stages in the negotiations.” (Paper in my possession)

#### A lasting dilemma

Presenting and explaining that statement was one of my last acts as Foreign Minister, as at the general elections held in April my party was defeated by the Socialist Party. The dilemmas facing Hungary were left to my successors. To my great satisfaction membership in NATO was realized relatively soon, in 1999, and I could participate in the formal ceremonies in the United States as the representative of my country as Ambassador. In 2004 Hungary, with eight other countries formerly under Soviet Communist domination, became members of the European Union. Those two decisions were the fulfilment of the programme set forth by Antall in 1990. Sadly he did not live to see the realization of what he had worked so hard for. Our erstwhile adversaries, the neighbours with a large Hungarian population, became our allies. That is very reassuring for the future, but, alas, that has not brought the problem of the Hungarian and other national minorities to rest.

Today, seventeen years after the historic changes, the most hotly debated foreign policy issue in Hungary still appears to be the line to be taken towards the Hungarians in the neighbouring states, and towards their “host nations,” the dominant majorities. Despite the bilateral treaties, the charters and conventions by the Council of Europe, as well as many fine declarations, and although the Hungarian parties were occasionally members of government coalitions in Romania, Slovakia, and in a minor position also in Serbia, their number and even more their proportion is falling, and their primary demand, one form of self government (cultural, personal or territorial autonomy) continues to be denied by the majority nations. One political camp in Hungary, the Socialist and the Free Democrats (now often referred to as Liberals) tends to believe that the most Hungary, as a small, weak and poor country can do for those Hungarians, is to befriend the neighbouring majority nations by further nice words and gestures, in the hope that in return they will be more considerate towards their Hungarians. That school of thought is of the opinion that voicing grievances, bringing them up internationally, regularly bringing up such positive examples like autonomy in South Tyrol, and even more to take a tougher line, to confront the neighbours is hopeless, even counter-productive, smacking of incompetence. The opposite school continues to believe that the principles and practical solutions which seem to work in many western European states, from devolution in the United Kingdom, to federalism in Spain and Belgium, and the cantonal system in Switzerland, should serve as reference, and Hungary should never give up pursuing active diplomacy for helping the Hungarian minorities in their demands, particularly for autonomy. Both political groups advocate stronger economic ties with the neighbours and economic policies for the benefit of the Hungarian minorities. If there were agreement and common action, and consequently



continuity in foreign policy between the rival political parties, Hungary's hand were much stronger.

Looking beyond the narrower horizon: today Hungary no longer faces terrible dilemmas, issues pertaining life and death, which were characteristic of the previous century. Nevertheless very important decisions are to be made about the internal development of the European Union, about its structure, procedures and policies. Hungary should take a firm stand also on its attitudes towards the United States and on how to react to Russia's new overtures. Energy policy also requires hard decisions, preferably by national consensus. Since the geographical and geopolitical position of Hungary has hardly changed since World War I, and our international partners are also similar, in weighing the alternatives and making decisions the knowledge and understanding of the past (both older and more recent) is helpful, because history illuminates the background of many difficult decisions, and the study of comparable and dissimilar situations can prevent the repetition of the mistakes of the past.

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