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Foreign Policy Challenges

László Csaba, Géza Jeszenszky, János Martonyi and Lajos Péter Kovács ed., *Helyünk a világban. A magyar külpolitika útja a 21. században* (Our Place in the World. The Path of Hungarian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century). Manréza Papers 8. Budapest: Éghajlat, 2009, 216 pp

Few would dispute that Hungary and the world have changed dramatically since state socialism dissolved. Regimes collapsed and new ones have taken their place. Whole social and economic systems—systems which had stood firm until the end of the 1980s—were reconfigured. With the hindsight of twenty years, it is clear that the end of the 1990s marked the irrevocable conclusion of an era. The future, it now appears, will be no less provoking. *Our Place in the World. The Path of Hungarian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* assesses the post-Communist upheaval and looks ahead. The book offers more than yet another academic study, and its tone is informal. Lajos Péter Kovács, its editor, talked to László Csaba, Professor of Economics at the Central European University and the Corvinus University in Budapest and at the University of Debrecen, the historian Géza Jeszenszky (foreign minister, 1990–94 and Washington ambassador, 1998–2002), and János Martonyi, who had a distinguished diplomatic career and, among other important posts, was foreign minister during that latter period. Martonyi is reprising his role in the new government of the Fidesz–Christian Democratic alliance. The conversations situate Hungary in the context of Europe and, more narrowly, in Central and Eastern Europe. They discuss the two decades since the democratic transition as well as new challenges and opportunities lying in wait in the new century.

The exchange of views is introduced by the family histories of the participants, detailing not only their personal background but also illuminating Hungary's recent and more distant past. Their own lives show how manifold the links are that tie Hungary to the region, and not only to territories inhabited by ethnic Hungarians. A shared element of the three family histories is a western and European orientation which backs a many centuries old traditional wish to be considered part of the West.

It is hardly surprising that a whole chapter is devoted to Trianon, a traumatic peripeteia for Hungarians. It continues to cast a long shadow ninety years after the peace treaty that forced Hungary to give up two thirds of its territory. Here, Géza Jeszenszky takes the lead. A historian and diplomat, Jeszenszky has confronted the costs of Trianon on many occasions. He brings into focus Hungary's negative image abroad at the start of the 20th century¹ and the role this picture played in the period leading up to Trianon. In itself, this provides a useful lesson for the present day. László Csaba approaches this sensitive question from a different angle, discussing the discrepancies between the often emotional reactions of people and the views of historians. In the subsequent chapter, "Desires and Dead Ends", Martonyi and Jeszenszky discuss the dangers posed by a misleading national identity and revisionist "national daydreaming". Csaba stresses that Hungarians are bad at facing up to the past and the scarcity of public debate is lamentable; a clear-eyed view would help Hungarians surmount the obstacles of such odd catchphrases as "the sinful nation."² Martonyi offers an outline of ideas about how Hungarian communities outside Hungary's borders can survive while leaving them the freedom to live life however they please.

The fate of Hungarian communities beyond the borders is a central subject which returns over several chapters. This fate is important not only to Hungarian national identity and public thinking. It also has an impact on Hungary's relationship with its neighbours, as well as being a seminal feature of cooperation in Central Europe. However, the situation of Hungarian minorities—despite all the achievements of Euro-Atlantic integration—is strongly dependent on the political setup in the mother country. Hungary is sometimes an initiator in this area (an example is the Act of 2001 on Hungarians Living in Neighbouring Countries). But usually it is the other way round, and Hungarian diplomacy is forced to react to measures taken by neighbours. As far as Hungarian–Slovak relations are concerned, Martonyi insists that "they have been shaped by Bratislava for the past 20 years."³

The issue of Hungarian minorities is also addressed in the chapter "Autonomy or Regionalism?" For the Hungarian intelligentsia, the inadequacy of concepts related to autonomy has underpinned disillusionment with the transition to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. Hungary and the Hungarian elites abroad regard self-governance—which has worked well in several places in western Europe—as the best way to serve Hungarian minorities and the region's stability. The majority populations of neighbouring countries on their part see it as an infringement on sovereignty and an attack on their interests. Csaba sees

little hope for autonomy; it would be more pragmatic to work towards economic integration while restoring transport and other types of cooperation between regions now divided by frontiers.

Jeszenszky mentions that despite initial high hopes and aspirations at the start of the 1990s, support for strivings for autonomy on the part of the European Union, too, has lost priority status. He confronts autonomy-based-on-separation with multiculturalism, citing several negative examples as to why the latter has proven illusory in resolving ethnic conflict. In his opinion, autonomy should be the way forward in our region, even if western European attitudes are often controversial, something that János Martonyi also emphasizes. Csaba, too, highlights the ambiguous results of multiculturalism, calling attention to the dangers in stalling real integration. In addition to foreign examples, Csaba also refers to the colossal task of integrating the Roma, a problem particularly acute in north and eastern Hungary, and generally in the countryside.

Under the heading “Hopes and Realities after the Regime Change”, talk centres on the global political implications of the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Central and Eastern Europe. Jeszenszky and Martonyi give particularly interesting insights into the West’s ambiguous reception of the transition to democracy. Mention is made of the global political role of the US, too, while Csaba focuses more on the conflicts and problems which emerged after the Cold War. Csaba holds that we must face up to the fact that many events and processes in the world are beyond our control, often even unpredictable. The emergence of this more unpredictable, multipolar world has triggered the appearance of new challenges, such as transnational crime and disease, terrorist networks and the danger of internet abuse. In the chapters “Changing Power Relations” and “A Dangerous World” he adds to the list demographic problems and value system crises.

Present-day Hungarian society is examined through the prism of its past tribulations, but instead of dwelling on loss, an examination of how possible future breakdowns can be averted follows. Csaba offers glaring facts and figures as the backdrop to past tragedies, but Hungarian society, he argues, should get over the emotional blow of such losses which cloud its mentality. He draws a startling comparison between post-civil-war Greece or Spain and Hungary after the change of regime.⁴ After the transition Hungary did not experience armed conflict but, he insists, divisions here are greater than in those countries after their civil wars. The last three chapters feature separate tête-à-têtes between the editor and contributors. First,

János Martonyi expresses his view that during Hungary's Socialist-Liberal coalition in 2002–2010, a consensus on foreign policy built up over the preceding ten years disintegrated, and now a new national strategy is needed. The Gabčíkovo dam and EU accession are mentioned as well. Csaba recalls the regime change from an economic point of view, focusing on the “double game” of the West and the International Monetary Fund targeting the thawing of the Hungarian regime in the 1980s⁵. Jeszenszky highlights the minority question, while touching on another intriguing problem—chances for a potential revision of borders after 1990. To show how unrealistic this is he brings forth objective arguments: Hungary's limited opportunities and the changed ethnic composition since Trianon, but he also points out a “total lack of inclination on Hungary's part to fight any kind of battle since 1990.”⁶ For all the above reasons the Hungarian government has not taken up the issue of border revision despite receiving plenty of criticism in this respect, both from Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries and within Hungary. Much attention is devoted to the personality and politics of József Antall, Hungary's late first prime minister, to whom the book is dedicated. The book covers several further themes, as the conversation of participants— all of whom possess wideranging knowledge and rich professional and life experiences—wanders off in all directions. However, the discussion does not fall apart. The dangers of using an informal genre are alleviated partly thanks to the superb editing and partly to the clarity of argumentation demonstrated by the participants, as they illustrate their thoughts with clear examples and related experiences throughout. The message is thus easily absorbed and makes the text an enjoyable read. Another welcome factor not to be overlooked is that the guests, owing to their dissenting political and world views, often assess or criticize, but they do this in a reserved style and with a sense of proportion at all times.

Our Place in the World makes interesting reading. Its aim is not to dazzle the reader with new theories or revolutionary proposals, but to provoke thinking on the events of past and present, while illuminating interconnections and context. It does not strive to teach, but there is much here to learn from.

¹ Jeszenszky has written a book on the topic: *Az elveszett presztízs. Magyarország megítélésének változása 1894–1918* [Lost Prestige. Changes in the Image of Hungary 1894–1918]. Budapest: Magyar Szemle Alapítvány, 1994.

² p. 52.

³ p. 163.

⁴ p. 77.

⁵ p. 188.

⁶ p. 207.