

Gordon Bajnai, Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary: With Joint Responsibility

My generation started to do politics in the faith that we can exploit the opportunities opened by the change of regimes to the benefit of our nations. We could join NATO and the EU helping each other. We Hungarians were happy, albeit slightly envious, when Slovakia, after some initial isolation, could pass us by in many regards through bold reforms. We could overcome the energy crisis together earlier this year. We fight together in Brussels for the special interests of new Member States.

Although originally we had some illusions, we know today that Euro-Atlantic integration does not mean that all disputes would be immediately eliminated between our countries. However, it does suggest the norms along which we are supposed to solve any problems we face. I am convinced that we should aim for joint solutions instead of just triumphing over the other party. This is the only way to handle problems within the larger family of the European Union, and Europe will look at us curiously if we fail to do so.

The almost free fall of the economies of the world, the jump in the rate of unemployment and the corrupted security of our existence face our countries with difficult and painful crisis management decisions and place heavy burdens on our societies. In Hungary, party feuds have infiltrated the deepest layers of society; in Slovakia, tensions between the political representatives of the national majority and Hungarians living in Slovakia make crisis management efforts even more difficult. These tensions poison the public discourse, the atmosphere of our lives, and continue to weaken the social capital of our respective countries.

In the light of the events of the last weeks and months it is particularly important that anyone who supports constructive cooperation should let their voices be heard stronger than ever before. Our common history has taught us a painful lesson: we have got something to loose.

Hungary is playing with open cards. We have no deceitful intentions with regard to any of our neighbors. If we make a mistake, or should we be ambiguous about something, we correct the mistake and apologize in good European fashion, and hope to see our gestures reciprocated.

Even trivial axioms need to be restated in the current state of relations: Hungary does not have any territorial claims against any country. We have respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Slovakia under all circumstances. We signed the Paris Peace Treaty, we are members of the EU, NATO, the Council of Europe and OSCE. There are stupid people and groups that support extremist views who will question this in every country. However, there is not a single party in the Parliament of Hungary that would refuse to accept these fundamental principles. Consequently there is no justification for anyone in our neighborhood to instigate fears and then to limit the free use of the language on these grounds, to infringe on the rights of minority communities, and, in an unprecedented incident, expel the president of a neighboring country, another member of the Schengen zone.

It is a great thing if a nation makes intensive efforts to safeguard and maintain its national language and culture. We as members of the modern Hungarian nation bow our heads to the great historical figures of the Slovak nation. We must not surrender our history that we lived in the framework of joint sovereignty to provocateurs and instigators of nationalistic feuds. It would be time to get to the idea and concrete gestures of reconciliation, apologies and the signs of joint respect also in matters of dispute and conflict.

Slovakia is an allied, friendly country, but there is an extremist power in its government representing an old-fashioned attitude from the 19th and 20th centuries that poisons the political life of Slovakia, sometimes even dragging down a part of the political elite with itself. We could even call this 'subsistence nationalism'. This is detrimental to our joint interests, to Hungarians living in Slovakia, the relations of Slovakia and Hungary and the members of the majority of the Slovak society, too. It is unacceptable for me and all democratic parties in Hungary if the extremist Jobbik, the Hungarian counterpart of SNS gets a place in any government in Hungary.

As a result of the events in 1989, the relationship of Slovakia and Hungary is that of two allied sovereign states. However, our autonomies and liberties are burdened by a twofold fear. This is the fear for the geographical integrity of the state in Slovakia, and the fear for the individual and community identities of Hungarians living in Slovakia. It is our joint responsibility to resolve this mistrust.

The relationship of Slovaks and Hungarians living in Slovakia can be characterized as the unbalanced relationship of a sovereign nation and a community of 500,000 people that represent 10% of the population but essentially has no community status, with various integration and assimilation strategies that create a field of tension. Hungary is prepared to provide assistance to the normalization of this relationship. Namely, due to the practice of European national policy, Slovakia and Hungary are constitutionally obliged to take care of Slovaks and Hungarians living beyond the borders respectively. There can be no good neighborhood policy without trust. So, for a start, I suggest to draw one of the fangs in this feud, so that Slovakia, hand in hand with the representatives of political organizations of Hungarians living in Slovakia, other minorities and the civil society, can elevate the contested law on the state language onto the level of European norms.

And then we should not be afraid of concrete agreements that involve mutual undertakings and rigorous deadlines. We need additional packages of proposals beyond those already accepted, and we primarily need true intentions, will and tools to implement these. We should speed up the publication of joint history course books. We should construct the four-lane bridge over the Danube to connect to the M1 motorway next to Komárom, and the bridges over the river Ipoly. We should agree on the completion date of the road between Kosice and Miskolc. We strengthen our relations in the energy sector and of small and medium sized businesses. We should cooperate in restraining militant nationalism, anti-Roma sentiments and anti-Semitism that are gaining foothold in both of our countries. Through the gradual strengthening of trust we should come to the point when Hungary and Slovakia can hold joint government meetings similar to the successful Hungarian practice already established with Austria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia. Our sovereignty is protected and guaranteed by a robust and strong web of alliances, so that we should not use rhetoric towards each other to demonstrate this, but rather we should apply continuous detail work to demonstrate our ability to cooperate and to solve problems. That is the only way to preserve the integrity of our self-esteem and dignity.

As for the strengthening of civil relations, I suggest to establish the Council of Cooperation between Hungary and Slovakia, which would be created from notable public personalities of our two countries. The Hungarian-Slovakian Cooperation Fund could finance cooperation projects.

It is in the spirit of these proposals and with the objective of problem solving, the elimination of obstacles and progress that the prime ministers of Slovakia and Hungary should meet.

The interest of all citizens of Hungary and Slovakia is the mitigation of tensions that have been the nourishing soil for the disquieting incidents of the last days and have diverted our energy from the primary objective of managing the economic crisis. I am convinced that by quarantining extremists and ridding ourselves of the dead weight of nationalist diatribes, the relations of our countries could see a new momentum. I would like to use also this opportunity to extend my hand to the nation of Slovakia for a friendly handshake in the spirit of our joint future and the intention to implement our mutual interests in partnership.