



**Prime Minister's Office
Hungary
State Secretary**

Mr. Miroslav Macura
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

My being asked to make this conference address clearly stems from my chairmanship of the government working party to produce and present for public debate the Hungarian Government's draft population policy programme. The chief general objective of this work was to make the way for rational discussion of demographic issues that have long been a taboo area in politics, and to formulate programmes that can be undertaken with integrity. This is a problem we share with every country, an issue that constantly perplexes politicians and disturbs public life: how is it possible to draw up public policy and government measures for social and economic affairs that involve people's individual, private and intimate decisions and moral convictions, questions like:

- when and why people should have children, and how many,
- the importance people should attach to health in their eating habits, their spare time exercise, or their smoking and alcohol consumption habits,
- why and when people should leave home and try their fortunes elsewhere.

These issues are not new areas of concern for academics and politicians engaged with the formation of society and with the interaction of social and economic processes. However, it has always been difficult to talk about them in a broader context, beyond professional demographic circles.

It is still difficult today, but at least an attempt is being made. Our own efforts in Hungary have led, for example, to the drafting and release for debate of the Demographic Government Programme. It no easier to talk about these issues at the international level, but here we are at this conference, and I will now try to share with you our Hungarian views and experiences.

To talk of migration is, for me, not a happy task. It is, after all, one of the hottest issues everywhere, but perhaps for that very reason it is worthwhile to share with you something of our history of trials and ambivalences, and the lessons we have learned.

For a long time, during the socialist period, migration affairs were considered a strictly criminal matter. Migration meant illicit border crossings and illegal activities. For many people, there still remains an ingrained feeling that migration, if no longer a criminal act, is some kind of undesirable phenomenon.

At the dawn of the 1990s, when Hungary was already clearly pursuing a policy of opening to the West, two crucial changes took place. Firstly, free movement over open borders greatly reduced the allure of emigration for Hungarians. If you could go out and come back again, it was unnecessary to think in terms of leaving for good. Secondly, for inhabitants of neighbouring countries, especially Romania under Ceausescu and Yugoslavia under Milosevic, Hungary became an attractive destination, and many people came over the border during that period. For the first time in several hundred years of the country's history, more people came to Hungary than left it. Hungary became a "net recipient" country. This change caught us unprepared in terms of both institutions and mentality.

It was partly due to this unpreparedness, and partly to the wretched situation of Hungarian ethnic minorities abroad, that immigration was initially dominated by Hungarian-speaking foreign citizens. They were received relatively smoothly, despite the lack of preparation, and their integration was greatly facilitated by a shared linguistic and cultural background. Secondly, the long insensitivity to the situation of ethnic Hungarians in other countries and the failure to assist them in any way caused many people in Hungary to view acceptance of ethnic-minority Hungarians as a kind of compensation for help formerly denied. (I should mention here that this bad-conscience-based attitude is similar to the stance of the former colonial countries regarding people arriving from territories formerly in their possession.) All the same, migration also became a political issue leading to the revival of a kind of futile nationalism that generates conflicts with other countries.

Another sharp lesson for us came at the outbreak of the Yugoslavian civil war, when in a short time we had to accept nearly 70,000 war refugees. Experience from the earlier ethnic Hungarian migration proved very useful in this. In circumstances of poverty, where six people live in one room, another two could always squeezed in somewhere, maybe in the kitchen, at least temporarily. It was a cathartic experience to find that Hungarians, despite the taboos and prevarication that had long beset the issue of migration, had the sense of honour to know what they must do in times of trouble. This was also the period when we were coming to realise the absurdity of migration on the international scale. At the same time as the member states of the European Union were showing great international solidarity in accepting 5000 Albanians who turned up in the port of Bari, they sent back every one of the 70,000 refugees trying to get in from Hungary, on the grounds that Hungary was a safe place. Thankfully, this was true, and it still is. But we learned a sad lesson in the meantime. Then there was the phenomenon of Balkan solidarity staying alive in Hungary even during the war. Hungary dreaded the thought that the flood of refugees would bring with it guerrillas trying to set up bases in our country, but what actually happened was just the reverse. Even during the war, Serbs fleeing compulsory military service and Croats or Bosnians escaping from the war lived together peacefully under the same roof.

In the war situation, nearly everybody regarded refugees as a short-term, temporary problem. They would soon move on, or go back, somehow or other. This is not what happened. There is a steady flow back, but it is much slower than expected. But it should be added that the handling of refugees has gone much more smoothly and with much less conflict than was expected, even though the institutions of reception and integration have still to be properly established.

With retrospect, the process of accession to the European Union can be seen to have hampered rather than assisted the process of setting up institutions to receive and integrate refugees. For one thing, accession preparations were accompanied by the strengthening of the

view that Hungary would be the EU's "eastern fort", with the Schengen frontier stretching along Hungary's eastern and southern flanks. Migration once again somewhat regressed into the category of "policing of foreigners", "security policy" and the prevention of assumed criminality.

Where we stand today is in many ways different, and in many ways contradictory to the historical precedents, although the inward character of migration has persisted and strengthened, and is likely to strengthen even more after accession.

What is different about the present situation is that the inflow is no longer made up of war refugees. In line with international trends we are seeing more and more people migrating for economic and employment reasons.

The situation is also different in that the prominence of ethnic Hungarians is an ever decreasing factor in migration. The opening of the borders and the consistent political consolidation of relations with neighbouring countries have had the same effect as opening the Hungarian borders to the West fifteen years ago. If it is possible to cross the border – to shop, to study, or for whatever purpose – and then go home again, then fewer people feel the desire to settle here and leave their birthplace for good. (However, it should not be forgotten that a familiarity with the Hungarian language and culture is still an advantage for people coming here, and this naturally makes the country more attractive to the Hungarian minorities than to non-Hungarian speaking Slovaks, Romanians, Serbs, etc.)

Another development of recent years and partly the result of diplomatic efforts by the Hungarian government is that Hungarian minorities now act as a bridge between the Balkans and Hungary, and via us to the European Union. If young people from Hungarian ethnic minorities learn new technologies and working cultures by working for foreign companies with operations in Hungary, and then take these skills to Transylvania, Subcarpathia or the Voivodina, then this could greatly smooth the path for Romania, the Ukraine or Serbia to enter into international economic integration. This serves Hungary's interests, the interests of neighbouring countries and their majority populations, and indeed the interests of the European Union. Thus by involving Hungarian minorities from neighbouring countries, Hungary is increasingly well placed to serve as a kind of economic, cultural, academic and innovative gateway for the European Union and the West opening out to the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

If I am to sum up the lessons we have learned, then I must first mention the mental aspect. The experiences of previous decades, sometimes absurd, sometimes plain sad, have taught us that we have nothing to fear from migration. This could be expressed as a kind of "negative experience." No greater shocks and dramas can be in store for us than we have gone through in the last decade, and gone through without major upset, all the time retaining good order and our sense of honour. Then there is the "positive experience." If we are a "good place", then of course a lot of people will come here, but we Hungarians are surely the main beneficiaries of an improving situation. I could also say that economic prosperity and dynamism also imply mobility, and are necessarily accompanied by movements of people. If you will permit a little detour: the prospect of an influx from new member countries of the European Union has been a cause of worry in many present member countries. I would be very happy if these fears were well-grounded, because it would mean that Hungarian labour was highly mobile. Unfortunately this is not the case. Even within Hungary, the widening gaps between more and less advanced regions has not at all boosted the internal mobility of Hungarian labour. My

hopes are much more that influx into Hungary will stimulate internal geographical and social mobility, and I might add, with some regret, that I have no serious fears of a surge in emigration. There may be a “brain drain,” and this does arouse some apprehension, but there is no danger of a mass exodus.

On the subject of fears and ambivalences, there is a phenomenon giving much greater cause for concern, and demanding serious political attention. It is the fact that the steep increase in the rate of labour inflow, drawn in by the labour market demand, is set against a rate of employment among the Hungarian population that is among the lowest in Europe. The labour market supply represented by the potential labour pool of non-working Hungarians of active age is thus largely unsuited to the labour market demand. This is the symptom of a problem that has to be addressed by education reforms, employment service measures and tax and social policies that apply the principle of incentive to work. I also speak on behalf of the Government when I say we are well aware that there is no more stupid and dishonourable course than to make scapegoats out of migrants. Problems are there to be solved, and not to be passed on in a search for scapegoats.

In formulating our approach to the future, there are two conclusions I consider it most important to draw from the lessons we have learned:

1. We have to concentrate our every effort on being a really attractive, good place, so that we can live in a dynamic and accommodating society under improving economic circumstances. If Hungary is to be a “good place” (and, believe me, it already is) more and more people will come and go, making the country an even better place, and we are the ones who will benefit first of all. Of course we must proceed with caution and with due heed to security, but the primary aim is social and economic dynamism and prosperity.
2. Hungarian history has been beset by convulsions, fears and bad experiences, and by tensions between the Hungarian population and foreigners. This is all understandable and difficult to change. For this reason, education and other child institutions have a crucial place in strengthening the institutions of openness and acceptance. Not just because people usually open up more easily where children are involved, and not just because support for integration of incoming children is a key humanitarian and social duty. The primary purpose is to serve the direct interests of our children and grandchildren. They will have to be open to the world and to others, to be capable of accepting new values and experiences, of being people who are dynamic and progressive, while being tolerant and understanding of other people.

After all, whatever demographic problem we are dealing with, be it on the academic or political level, we are always thinking about the future, about the lives of our children, our grandchildren, and beyond. It is for them we are working

It is this purpose I have attempted to serve by speaking to you today, and by sharing with you what we have experienced in Hungary.

Thank you.

Dr. Imre Szekeres
President of the Organisational Committee
of the Demography Conference

