

INTERVIEW WITH BENCE ARANY

Interviewed by: Nera Meštrović ¹

Bence Arany, an economist, alumnus of Mathias Corvinus Collegium, founder of Mindset Psychology, a Hungarian psychological magazine and therapy center; publisher of the Hungarian Conservative, a Hungarian bimonthly on politics, history and culture, and the chief advisor of The European Conservative, a quarterly journal on European politics and philosophy.



Has your country seen more benefits or harm from joining the European Union from today's perspective?

Hungary has definitely benefited from EU membership in many ways. The free movement of people and goods has translated into economic development as well as unprecedented chances for people to study and work in other member states. The Hungarian people are overwhelmingly pro-EU, as evidenced by numerous polls. Scientific and academic synergies within the EU have also benefited Hungary. At the same time, there have been some negative repercussions of the accession, at least initially, such as EU quotas in agriculture, which resulted in the substantial shrinking of the food processing and other industries as well as job losses. Also, the subsidies that Hungarian farmers received were inferior to the

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ones that had benefited their Western counterparts, resulting in a competitive disadvantage. Western products filled the shelves of also Western-owned food retail chains for many years, until the Orbán governments introduced legislation and incentives that encouraged retailers to also sell Hungarian-made products.

How important do you consider the principle of subsidiarity, i.e. keeping the autonomy of the jurisdiction over internal affairs for the Member States (e.g., education, culture, freedom of the media, etc.) for the future of the European Union?

The principle of subsidiarity is of key importance for the future of the European Union. The EU treaties are absolutely clear on what is and what is not within the purview of EU institutions. The way I see it, education, culture and media are and should remain the internal affairs of member states as the realities in those countries are historically different, and are impacted by the negative legacy of Communism. There are no blanket solutions to education or media related issues, as EU members states have dissimilar cultural heritages.

What is your personal preference: the European Union as a federal state or as a confederation of sovereign nation-states, and why?

The Hungarian government has never had issues with EU membership per se, it is the undemocratic processes we see today in terms of EU institutions overreaching that it objects to. Hungary needs the EU and the EU needs Hungary, but instead of deeper integration and federalism, the majority of Hungarians prefers the EU to be based on strong nation states keeping their full sovereignty.

Can the European Union be an equal power to Russia, China, and the United States in the future?

Currently, the EU seems to be losing in the race for global leadership against Russia, China and the United States. It undoubtedly needs to dramatically improve its economic competitiveness and align its long-term objectives across EU members states, otherwise it will be no match for the other global powers.

How well does the European Union articulate a common foreign policy today? Are you in favour of creating an EU army?

In my opinion, while the EU does tend to articulate a common foreign policy in many cases, the problem is that a number of member states, especially the Central-Eastern European ones, and in particular Hungary, do not support those foreign policy positions. The most obvious example is the EU's overwhelmingly anti-Israel stance, which is not shared by Hungary. On the other hand, regarding matters such as migration, the rights of ethnic minorities and the persecution of Christians, there is no willingness on the part of EU institutions to come up with a clear-cut, consensus-based common policy.

Given that the European Court of Justice may give a different judgement than the entire legal order of a Member State, is the judicial sovereignty of the Member States lost in this respect?

It is a very dangerous path to go down on for member states to surrender their legal sovereignty to the EU. The legal traditions and systems of member states differ, which should be respected, rather than disregarded. The way I see it, EU law should not be superimposed on the fundamental legal systems of members states, such as the individual states' constitutions, as that threatens the identity of the member states.

Is the common currency suitable for all EU members, and how has the introduction of the EURO affected your country's economy?

The introduction of the Euro has not necessarily been a success everywhere. It seems now that it is the strongest and most powerful EU countries, especially Germany, that have benefited from it, whereas some more peripheral countries are losing out. The Euro has not been adopted in Hungary yet, although all Hungarian governments have pledged to introduce the common currency. I agree with the Monetary Council of the Hungarian National Bank that has said that a rushed adoption of the euro that ignores differences in the levels of economic development between Hungary and the euro zone could sacrifice Hungary's growth and even pose risks to its stability.

What are most resources coming from the European funds used for in your country?

Most resources were used for infrastructural projects, but significant funds were channelled to agricultural development as well as to SMEs.

How was the migration crisis perceived in your country, and do you think the EU had an appropriate political and legal response to the situation?

The 2015 migration crisis was a traumatizing experience in Hungary, with tens of thousand of migrants marching across the country towards the Austrian border after tumultuous scenes at railway stations and other public locations. Brussels did not respond adequately to the crisis, and did not offer tangible assistance to Hungary which is a Schengen border and therefore has the obligation of defending the EU from illegal immigration. The 2015 crisis prompted the building of the border fence in Hungary which was

harshly criticized initially but has since become a commonly used tool across the Union.

Given the migration trends and population growth in Africa and the Middle East, do you believe there may be a substitution of the domicile population in Europe, and how has your country approached the issue of migration from those parts?

The Hungarian government has a policy of zero tolerance towards illegal immigration and migration and has made it clear that it would not tolerate massive influxes of migrants/refugees into the country. The government's philosophy and policy is that help should be provided where it is most needed, locally, outside the EU, in order to assist the populations of the source countries of migration so that they can remain in their native lands, rather than facilitate the mass exodus of desperate people. As long as the current conservative government is in power, Hungary will not subscribe to compulsory refugee quotas and will not allow in large numbers of economic migrants, so a population substitution is for the time being inconceivable.

In his book *Understanding Europe*, Christopher Dawson argued that as Europe became less Christian, its influence in international relations also declined. In your opinion, is Europe's Christian identity important for its political future, and should its place be regulated at the European level, as in, say, the Hungarian constitution?

I believe that Christianity is an essential element of European identity, and it was a mistake not to have included reference to it in the European Constitution. I approve of the fact that Hungary's Basic Law recognizes Christianity as a fundamental value that has preserved the nation and declares that it is the Hungar-

ian state's duty to protect Christian culture. I am not convinced the same should be done in all countries, as the various member states have differing realities and exist in differing historical context. However, I believe that the primacy of the Judeo-Christian traditions over other traditions should be recognized by the EU in some form.

Did the Brussels administration have a good or bad response to the corona crisis, and how did your country position itself on this issue?

Brussels was initially slow in launching its joint vaccine procurement program and the delays led to the EU lagging behind several Western countries regarding vaccination rates. I also think the discrimination against Eastern vaccines by EMA and the Commission is a mistake, and the Hungarian government did the right thing when purchasing Russian and Chinese vaccines to speed up vaccinations in the country. The WHO recognition of the Sinopharm vaccine and the most recent scientific opinions stating that the Sputnik vaccine is most likely to be safe and effective have proven that the Hungarian government was right. The introduction of EU vaccine passports and of the Hungarian immunity certificates are controversial in my opinion, raising rule of law questions, but I understand that they were necessitated by the requirements imposed on travellers by other Western nations and imposed on the basis of legitimate epidemiological considerations.

What does Europe mean to you in the broadest context of the term?

Europe is one of the most important elements of my broader identity. I am human, Christian, Hungarian and European, and these sub-identities complement each other. Europe is where I feel at home, where I know what to expect in personal interactions. As a

Hungarian, I have Slavic and German forebears as well, so I have roots in many European countries. Of course for me Europe is not just the EU, but also Russia, with its unique contributions to European culture, and countries like Serbia, parts of which have been parts of greater Hungary, as well as the UK, despite Brexit. Europe for me is also Bach and Leonardo, Shakespeare and Tchaikovsky, Martin Luther and the Toy Dolls.