



INTERVIEW WITH MS JUDIT VARGA, THE CHAIR OF THE COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN AFFAIRS OF THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

The issue of Georgia’s accession to the European Union should be resolved shortly. Could you share with us your vision of what Georgia should do? What is the scope of the European Union’s foreign policy at the moment?

Hungary has traditionally been one of the most committed supporters of the EU enlargement process. We firmly believe that this process is of strategic importance, but it must be merit-based. We will strive to accelerate the process for every candidate country during the Hungarian EU Council Presidency in 2024.

We welcome the Commission’s latest enlargement package and consequently, we are delighted that the European Council of December 2023 granted candidate status to Georgia, because your country deserved this upgrade with your achievements.

Hungary and the Hungarian National Assembly supports the European integration process of Georgia. Regarding the domestic preparation, I am convinced that achieving EU membership is the most complex task and challenge for a candidate country. The internal preparation of the candidate country is an extremely diverse task, affecting many areas of life. These tasks include *inter alia* the fulfilment of political criteria, the legal approximation tasks, the further development of the law enforcement institutions as well as the professional training of civil servants and judges.

The EU’s joint foreign and security policy, designed to resolve conflicts and foster international understanding, is based on diplomacy and respect for international rules. Trade, humanitarian aid, and development cooperation also play an important role in the EU’s international role.

During the past eighteen months, the EU has imposed massive and unprecedented sanctions against Russia in response to the war of aggression against Ukraine. They add to existing measures imposed on Russia since 2014 following the annexation of Crimea. Sanctions include targeted restrictive measures (individual sanctions), economic sanctions and visa measures.

The European Parliament’s supervisory power is a crucial part of democratic governance. Could you tell us a little more about exactly what this mandate implies?

The European Parliament (EP), the only directly elected EU institution, has gained

increased competences by the modifications of the EU Treaties during the past thirty years. The European Parliament's supervisory power includes several procedures and possible instruments with regard to the European Commission, such as the hearings of Commissioners or Commissioner-designates or the – so far theoretic – motion of censure against the college of the European Commission.

As regards the Council, the most important supervisory power of the EP is to table written and oral questions to the Council by the individual MEPs.

In addition, an MEP is entitled to draw up a non-binding report or resolution on any particular issue considered to be politically relevant, including the state-of-play in candidate, potential candidate or other third country. The EP Committee on Foreign Affairs every year discusses the annual enlargement package of the European Commission in the presentation of the responsible Commissionaire.

The participation of the European Parliament in enlargement process is ensured via the so-called Parliamentary Association Committees set up by the relevant Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements. This joint parliamentary institution provides regular exchange of views and dialogue between the Delegations of the EP and the MPs of the respective country.

Major tasks of Parliamentary Association Committee, from the EP perspective are the consideration of all aspects of relations between the EU and the accession country as well as monitoring of the implementation of the Association Agreement and the accession negotiations. This joint institution provides political input to the accession process by adopting joint recommendations (joint statements), addressed to the parliament and government of the candidate country as well as the European Commission and the Council.

An approximation of legislation within the European Union is essential. How do you see the importance of harmonization of law, and what are challenges that the European Union experiences in this regard?

In the pre-accession period in Hungary, the legal approximation activity was directed towards the fulfilment of obligations deriving from the Association Agreement and the legal preparation for EU accession. Similarly, the current EU candidate countries perform the tasks of legal approximation for the same purposes.

The amount of duties is obviously different before and after the EU accession, since before the accession the transposition and implementation of the whole EU *acquis* had to be ensured. In Hungary before 2004, we had to approximate our laws to almost 1800 directives, 6000 decisions, to almost 10 000 legal texts of secondary legislation.

In Hungary, the legal approximation was not a spontaneous activity, but it was based on law approximation programs. Government – as driving force of the process – had decisive



tasks in the approximation: it elaborated and approved the approximation program, because the quantity of tasks in itself justifies the thorough and careful examination of the EU *acquis* and planning its execution. Moreover, the Government ensured the theoretical and methodological uniformity of legal approximation.

The EU law does not determine the method of legal approximation, neither the legal form, nor the state institutions that proceed with the implementation. Generally, it is the Government, which has primarily responsibility for approximation of laws. The Government determines the co-ordination mechanism in the integration process as well as clearly specifies the responsibilities for the ministries. In Hungary, it was the obligation of the line ministry in its scope of activity to ensure the conformity of the proposed draft bill with the EU law.

It is worth mentioning, that during the pre-accession period the candidate country has certain room for manoeuvring in determining the pace, the structure and the phases of the legal approximation. This process should be coordinated, based on a structured legal approximation program, and with clear responsibilities in the government and the parliament. Legal approximation does not mean an automatic transposition of the EU *acquis* by the candidate country, but it is a systematic implementation, since the EU legislation has to be implemented fully in all policy fields from the date of accession. Special attention should be paid to strengthening the administrative, law enforcement capacities, which are essential, to proper application of the EU legislation.

Regarding the challenges, I wish to emphasize that the candidate country is following a moving target, because the EU law is constantly changing. Therefore, regular parliamentary and government control should be exercised over the legal approximation process. In the national parliament, it is inevitable to create standard procedure to verify the EU compliance of the amendments submitted by MPs or committees.

In the context of the promotion of democratic values and European integration in Eastern Europe, how would you assess the state of play in parliamentary cooperation in this region?

Since 1990, the Euro-Atlantic integration path was considered to be the strategic direction for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The historic fifth enlargement of EU took place in 2004 by welcoming eight new countries as full members. Nowadays, the EU has altogether 11 member states from the Eastern part of Europe. The starting point for parliamentary cooperation in this region was the adoption of the necessary bilateral agreements and the viable settlement of any open issues. In the early 1990's new forms of regional parliamentary cooperation were set up like the Visegrád Cooperation or the Central European Initiative. It should be added that other forms of parliamentary cooperation like friendship groups on political level and parliamentary official programs on staff level could also be taken into account in this respect.

How would you assess the cooperation between Georgia and Hungary in regards to European integration? What more can be done to further deepen partnership?

The cooperation between Georgia and Hungary are strategic in nature characterized by the regular visits and joint cabinet meetings. I have also had the privilege to visit Tbilisi this year twice as Minister of Justice. In my new capacity as the Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the Hungarian National Assembly, I have recently received several high-ranking delegations from Georgia. During these meetings, I highlighted the Hungarian position regarding Georgian European ambitions: Hungary strongly supports the EU candidate status of Georgia and its European integration path. I also express this position on inter-parliamentary conferences like COSAC, which collects representatives of all EU national parliaments, candidate countries and the European Parliament. Regarding further opportunities, I may recall the capacity building activities and so-called Twinning programs carried out by the Hungarian National Assembly in cooperation with other EU partners, which has strengthened the functioning of the parliaments of several EU candidate countries.